Claiming selfhood: three black South African women writers under apartheid

Jeanette A. Dean
University of Wollongong

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Jeanette A. Dean

Department of English

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Declaration

I certify that this dissertation does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma at any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed:

Jeanette A. Dean

25 February 1994
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Abstract

This dissertation is a study of the works of Miriam Tlali, Ellen Kuzwayo and Emma Mashinini, three Black South African Women Writers who wrote while living under the Apartheid System. The study focusses on the life narratives that are revealed in both fiction and non-fiction.

The first chapter provides information showing the difficulties involved in the writing, printing, publishing and marketing of their works.

The rest of the study discusses how their texts are at the service of their communities and how the communities contribute to the individual identities developed in the writing. Black, female, selfhood needs to be retrieved from counter-history and counter-truths with special emphasis on gender issues. The study reveals that the authors are no longer willing to be marginalised for their race or their gender and the act of writing is part of their desire to provide voice and freedom to Black South African women.
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Introduction

The International Year of Indigenous People highlighted the achievements of indigenous cultures worldwide during 1993. One of the cultural areas where there has been notable achievement is in literature. During the last ten years there has been a marked increase in the output of published writing from former European colonies and an increase in the awareness of these writings. Indigenous people from these colonies have been making contributions to literature written in English. This literature is revealing that both settler and indigenous people are beginning to realise the importance of acknowledging the disjunctions that colonisation caused. I have chosen to research the writing of three indigenous South African women writers: Miriam Tlali, Ellen Kuzwayo and Emma Mashinini. The first works of Kuzwayo and Mashinini are autobiographies. Although Tlali has not written an autobiography, her first work is autobiographical fiction and several chapters of her third work are also autobiographical. All three authors have similar themes and purposes for writing which facilitates a suitable comparative study.

My interest in indigenous women's writing led me to investigate the writing of these women. In 1990, when I first began this research, there were several successful authors such as Bessie Head and Noni Jabavu who were writing and publishing in exile. I chose not to include these writers because they wrote from an enriched and encouraged political, social and economic environment. There were however, very few women writers working, writing and publishing while still living within South Africa. These few women have limited publicity locally and internationally and their
works are generally difficult to obtain. I am fortunate that the only work that I have not been able to purchase, because it is out of print, is available from the Wollongong University Library.

The three authors, Miriam Tlali, Ellen Kuzwayo and Emma Mashinini, are representative of the early generation of indigenous South African women writers. Miriam Tlali was born in Doornfontein, Johannesburg, in 1930. She is the most prolific writer of the three and has published two novels and two volumes of short stories. Ellen Kuzwayo was born in 1914 and spent her early years in the country before moving to the city to work as a teacher and then a social worker. She has published her autobiography and a volume of short stories. Emma Mashinini was born in 1929 in Rosettenville, south Johannesburg, and has to date only published her autobiography about her life involved in the trade union movement.

Their works speak out about what life is like for African people under the Apartheid government. The conditions for women and children are highlighted in much of their writing. My aim in focusing on their works in my research is to continue the process of increasing recognition for indigenous writing and thereby more firmly establish these works in the tradition of African literature from South Africa. This tradition goes back over one hundred and seventy years to the 1820’s when Ntsikana wrote

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his first poetry composition. Early writing was encouraged by the missionaries. As time progressed, writing was done in English as well as different African languages. In the early twentieth century Africans began writing imaginatively and turned to "historical prose fiction to give the nation a sense of pride and identity". With the advent of official Apartheid, many writers went into exile during the 1960's and 1970's. African writing suffered severe setbacks from which it is only recently beginning to recover.

Too often the contributions made by women are not recognised in major studies. Jane Watts admits in her preface to Black Writers from South Africa that she did not deal sufficiently with women writers. There are women writers represented in most genres, but she only covers Tlali's *Amandla*. There are poets such as Zindzi Mandela, Gcina Mhlope and many others. Gcina Mhlope and Miriam Tlali are beginning to contribute to the field of drama. Besides Tlali, Kuzwayo, Gladys Thomas and Mhlope, there are short story writers represented in recently published

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3 Tlali, *Soweto*, p.xi.


collections of short stories. In a 1990 book review Dorothy Driver mentions nine indigenous women writers most of whom live in South Africa.  

The South African writer and critic, Ezekiel Mphahlele, cautions against using western standards when reading African works. He responded to criticism of his unorthodox evaluations of texts by saying that “a novel may be badly written by Western standards, in terms of language, and still portray life vividly and meaningfully for us.” Lewis Nkosi, another South African writing in exile, spoke similarly about “white academicians” using a “European canon of criticism”. 

Anne McClintock points out that there is a danger of becoming “implicated in the politics of interpretation” when western women like myself analyze the works of indigenous African women. In my attempts to avoid this, I do not approach these works from a western feminist position. I endeavour to present the works in the light of the goals stated by the authors themselves. 

It is important to keep in mind that writers often respond to the needs in the community in which they live and work. In many cases, African writers in South

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Africa do not have the luxury of creating literature purely for art's sake. Tlali, Kuzwayo and Mashinini are crying aloud with a message. They are voicing this message on behalf of the many women in their communities. They are pioneers in the field of establishing a body of work by indigenous South African women. Establishing a firm voice, creating a substantial body of work and carrying a message about life under Apartheid to an ever-widening readership are some of the aims of this literature. By using life narratives in the way they do, these authors place their identity in the South African community as a whole, not only in the Black community. They refuse to be marginalised and claim citizenship and ownership of South Africa alongside the White community.

Miriam Tlali is a writer from Soweto and her first novel, *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1975), was the first novel written in English to be published by a black woman living in South Africa. She has had three other works published since: *Amandla* (1980), *Mihloti* (1984), and *Footsteps in the Quag* (1989) which is also published under the title *Soweto Stories*.

In a Profile on Tlali which was featured in 1980 soon after the banning of the second printing of *Muriel*, she discusses her goals as a writer:

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She believes that writers have an important function in South Africa. The aspirations of the people must be articulated, and fiction has a more lasting impact than articles in journals or newspapers.

“Our youth must know what they are up against”, she declares. Writers can raise the consciousness of the people by sharpening their awareness of the prevailing situation and its problems.\(^{12}\)

In a subsequent interview in 1988 with Cecily Lockett, Tlali again uses similar language to describe her writing. She wants it to reflect reality because of the extreme political situation in the country. Apartheid does not give artists time to talk and dream “about ideal situations”, but rather they use their skills to expose “what we feel inside”.\(^{13}\) From Tlali therefore, we see a literature that reveals the anger, pain and suffering that results from the clash between the races. The struggle for political liberation by the indigenous people is closely linked to the struggle by their women to escape oppression inflicted by the government and the patriarchal society of both cultures.\(^{14}\)

Ellen Kuzwayo has stated that one of the motives behind writing Call Me Woman was to record the contributions that black women made to the development of South Africa. These contributions have not been properly recognised and therefore


\(^{14}\) MacKenzie, p.75.
she used "authorship as a way of giving people a voice". In this first published work (1985) she tells her own story while simultaneously recording the stories of many other women.

In the introduction to her second work, *Sit Down and Listen*, Kuzwayo mentions that the oral stories of her people have been one of the few things that they were allowed to claim ownership to. They are therefore very important to her and she wished to "trap some of them on paper before they vanished for ever." Converting the oral traditions to a written tradition would preserve the stories and benefit her people by upholding their culture and their values.

In the ICA video interview with Hilda Bernstein, Kuzwayo makes her goals very clear. She believes everyone in the country needs to make a contribution towards working for freedom from the oppression of Apartheid. Everyone needs to "stand up and be counted". She has chosen a non-violent method; that of speaking and writing to tell the world exactly what the situation is like in South Africa.

Emma Mashinini is somewhat different to Tlali and Kuzwayo because she considers herself a speaker rather than a professional writer. Her autobiography, * Strikes

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18 Mashinini, p.xvi.
Have Followed Me All My Life, is largely a public and professional account of the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers’ Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA). Because the story is told from a personal viewpoint the reader becomes familiar with many aspects of the hardships imposed on the black women workers. Those personal details that are covered in the work corroborate the difficulties that Kuzwayo mentions in her autobiography. These problems are those associated with women working while trying to raise a family and the problems encountered with the divorce process for black women.

As early as 1975, Morris Kagan, a colleague of Mashinini, helped her to formulate her goals in writing this work: “he urged me to write about my role in founding it (CCAWUSA), and especially to show how, in spite of suffering, our lives are enriched by the struggle to uphold human rights and in the fight for the dignity of individuals.”

That goal of making the readers within South Africa and the world at large recognise the black women of South Africa as individuals shines through the works of all three of these writers.

19 Mashinini, p.xv.
Indigenous women like Tlali, Kuzwayo and Mashinini experience difficulties in the writing, publishing and marketing of their works. This chapter investigates several of the more trying problems confronting them.

The first barrier to writing is the poor availability of education for indigenous South Africans. Kuzwayo mentions the deterioration of African education from the time her grandfather received his education (before 1900) down to the present time.\(^{20}\) Many black children start school later in age than their white counterparts and leave school much earlier.\(^{21}\)

Mashinini speaks about how lucky she was to start school by the age of six because at that time her parents were both working and could afford to send the children to school. Unfortunately her parents' marriage broke up when she was fifteen. Shortage of money and other circumstances meant she had to leave school and find employment.\(^{22}\) Her level of education never embarrassed her or stopped her from fulfilling her goals, but it meant her friends and editors needed to provide extra support which she gratefully acknowledges in her preface.

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\(^{21}\) Mashinini, p.3.

\(^{22}\) Mashinini, p.6.
Miriam Tlali was able to pursue her education past the high school level, but not without hard work and sacrifice. Her father was a school teacher, but unfortunately he died while Miriam and her two older sisters were still young. Her mother went to work and the grandmother played a key role in caring for the children. After high school, her mother encouraged her to place her name on the waiting list to be admitted to medical school. Not many black students were accepted each year. When her application was rejected she began an arts degree at the University of the Witwatersrand. One of her greatest joys at this time was the freedom of the university library. Not until 1974 were South Africans, other than the white South Africans, able to use the community libraries. The University Bill of 1959 enforced the segregation of university education and meant Tlali could not complete her degree there. During this year Tlali turned twenty-nine, an age when most white South Africans would have completed their undergraduate education and would have already spent several years at a career.

Miriam moved to Lesotho where she began studying medicine at Roma University. By this time she was married with her first child, Moshe. When her second child was born it became too difficult to continue. The family moved back to Soweto and she began clerical work in a Johannesburg furniture store, which provided the autobiographical material for Muriel at Metropolitan (1975)\(^\text{24}\)

\(^{23}\) Marquard, p.31.

During a quiet political and cultural period prior to the Soweto Riots of 1976, Miriam was inspired to begin her writing.\textsuperscript{25} Many of the ANC political leaders were in prison or in exile and there didn’t seem to be any advancements in the political situation for black South Africans. She believed her writing could contribute to the struggle for freedom from oppression. However, to find a suitable means of expressing herself was a difficult task. When she looked into literature there was no reflection of herself or her situation. There was only a “void”.\textsuperscript{26} There were no previous black South African women novelists in the English language that she could draw upon for encouragement. To gain much needed confidence she “retraced her steps” and discovered that a branch of her family had been in the writing business before. Tlale and Co. had run a printing press in Lesotho for decades and published a local newspaper. She describes this experience:

Because I had no base, I had to change and find inspiration from within myself. I could not divorce myself from my peculiar status in an artificial society which refuses to recognise even my existence. It was while in this dilemma that I found myself: that I finally drew the line and retraced my steps. Only then could I come to terms with myself and walk upright again.\textsuperscript{27}


We can see from these experiences that gaining literacy is the first hurdle to overcome for aspiring writers from the African communities. Finding a position in literary tradition is the second obstacle and the third one is even more fundamental than these. Finding the physical time and space for writing is extremely difficult.

Writers need space to develop, and leisure in which to write, and these things are almost by definition, denied to black women in South Africa. The average black woman has no rights: not even those which are considered basic throughout the world, that is the right to live with her own husband, the right to bring up and care for her own children, the right to lead any normal kind of family life.\(^\text{28}\)

Rural women will seldom contemplate writing because they are more likely to lack sufficient education. They are also often left with the responsibility to bring up the children while the fathers are away working on the mines or in the cities. Leisure time is minimal and the facilities of desks and lighting for night work most likely too expensive.\(^\text{29}\)

Women who do live in the cities and perhaps have adequate education work very long hours. Travel into the industrial areas from Soweto or into the white suburbs for domestic work requires leaving home well before six o’clock in the morning and arriving back after dark at night. Mashinini’s description of her experience is typical:

\(^{28}\) Edmands, p.19.

So if you had to be at your machine at seven-thirty you would have to be at your work-place by seven, and you would have to be ready to take the train at five. For some it could be about four.

I would leave my children sleeping, and the night before I would have made my preparations for the coming day, because I had to leave everything - bread, uniform, everything - lined up for my neighbour, who would come and wake my children for school.

I would get home about seven - and in winter, you know, that was pretty dark. When I got home I'd start making a fire on my coal stove.\(^{30}\)

It is not surprising therefore, that Kuzwayo and Mashinini were both older with fewer family commitments before they began writing their autobiographies. Both these women took time off from their work and community involvement to complete their writing.

Kuzwayo found two private sponsors which enabled her to manage financially and the University of Witwatersrand provided free office space that she could use for her writing.\(^{31}\)

In answer to the question why there weren't more black women writing, Tlali replied:

\(\footnotesize{\text{\textsuperscript{30}}\text{Mashinini, p.15.}}\)

\(\footnotesize{\text{\textsuperscript{31}}\text{Kuzwayo, Call, p.ix, x.}}\)
For a black woman I don’t think it is easy unless you have complete peace inside, which is something that I strive very much to get. You have to analyse situations, and all that needs peace of mind and time. It needs a long time and you have to think about it. And you have to dream about it and black women do not have time to dream.32

The time and space of most Africans is crowded by the daily struggle for existence under the Apartheid system. Until the political situation improves the number of African women writers will only increase slowly. As Trinh T. Minh-ha points out, this time and space will only come when the average women’s wage is sufficient to provide “leisure and living conditions that do not require that writing be incessantly interrupted, deferred, denied, at any rate subordinated to family responsibilities.”33

Achieving publication is difficult for writers from all countries, but perhaps even more so for those in South Africa. Early African writing was hampered because many of the presses were controlled by the missionaries. Censorship was first imposed unofficially in South Africa by the different religions as mentioned by Lauretta Ngcobo: “There are innumerable accounts of religious censorship in the past that are not based on the quality of writing but on the choice of views and themes expressed.”34 Censorship became an official policy of the National Party once it came to power in 1948 and any writing that was deemed undesirable could

32Mackenzie, p.71.
34Tlali, Soweto, p.x.
be banned. (Publications and Entertainment Act of 1963.\textsuperscript{35}) This led to the exile of many talented African writers because works were often banned as soon as they were published. Obviously publishing houses became reluctant to risk publishing material that contained criticisms of the Apartheid government as their publishing costs might not be recouped through sales.

It was left to special-interest presses to create a market for the works in their field regardless of the difficulties involved. The women’s presses in London have shown a particular interest in publishing works by unknown authors. Pandora Press is the branch of Allen and Unwin (Unwin Hyman:London) that specialises in Women’s writing. The Women’s Press Ltd., London is another press that showed interest in indigenous women’s writing. (They published autobiographies by Mashinini and Caesarina Kona Makhoere.) Their stated publishing and selection policies are:

...to make women’s voices heard; to publish feminist, issue-based fiction and non-fiction. We prioritise the work of black writers, lesbians, disabled writers and so on.\textsuperscript{36}

Multiculturalism in Britain is firmly established and this must be recognised as one of the reasons why these three authors were more readily accepted by publishers in London.

\textsuperscript{35} Watts, p.3.

\textsuperscript{36} Correspondence dated 28 June 1993 from Kathy Gale, Publishing Director, The Women’s Press: London.
Different local presses interested in furthering African publications have also been helpful to Kuzwayo and Tlali. Examples of these are David Philip of South Africa, Ravan Press of Johannesburg and the black publishing house, Skotaville Publishers of Johannesburg.

A look at the history of Muriel at Metropolitan is interesting in the light of publishing difficulties. Tlali completed the novel in 1969, but was unable to publish it until Ravan Press accepted it in 1975. Ravan now also publishes the African literary journal Staffrider which Tlali helped to found in 1978.\(^37\)

In the mid-seventies the South African publishers Ravan Press began to produce novels by black South Africans. The aim was to produce literature by South Africans for South Africans. Ravan Press aims at as wide a readership as possible and tries to keep prices low. They and other publishers of works by black writers, face the financial loss brought by bannings with courage, and will make no concessions by exercising censorship themselves.\(^38\)

Later a more complete version of Muriel was published in 1979 by Longmans in London for their Longman Drumbeat Series,\(^39\) but this version was embargoed (and banned) locally. Johannesburg booksellers became confused and upon being


\(^{38}\) Barnett, p.157.

\(^{39}\) Barbara Ludman, “An Angry writer mellows - but still fights the silencers”, *Weekly Mail*, Johannesburg: Weekly Mail, 10.3.89-16.3.89 v. 5, p.28.
approached, the Directorate of the Publications Appeal Board banned the Ravan version as well, with the following reply:

While this publication does not contain all the parts that were found to be objectionable in the Longman version it is considered to be undesirable within the meaning of section 47(2)(c) and (d) of the Publications Act in that the author refers to Mrs Stein who is Afrikaans speaking as a ‘lousy Boer’ (page 12, bottom); also on pages 14 and 29 derogatory remarks about Afrikaners are made.

S.F. Du Toit, Director of Publications, Sept. 1979.⁴⁰

Tlali’s second novel, Amandla, was first published in 1980, again by Ravan Press. It quickly sold 5,000 copies, but was soon banned.⁴¹

During Tlali’s 1984 trip to the United States she was very disturbed to find “that many of her works had been published without her consent. Copyright had simply been ignored and she had received no payment from the publishers.”⁴² She decided to become more closely involved with publishing her works in an attempt to make a living from her writing. She was appointed to the board of directors of Skotaville Publishers which was established in 1983. This publisher handled her third work, Mihloti (1984).

⁴⁰Marquard, p.31.
⁴¹Chloe Rolfes, p.66.
⁴²Mosotho, p.38.
Tlali met Buchi Emecheta in Stockholm in 1986, who further encouraged her. She then re-published *Amandla* in 1986 after it had been unbanned in 1985. This new edition simply states in the front that it was published by Miriam Tlali with her postal address listed. She took the opportunity to advertise all her other works at the back of the book. By 1989 however, she had decided that she did not want to spend the extra time and effort it took to become involved in publishing her work.

Her fourth work, *Soweto Stories*, was published by Pandora Press in London and the South African version, *Footprints in the Quag* (1989), was licensed to David Philip. By this time banning restrictions were lessened in South Africa and a freer atmosphere in printing and publishing was developing in the country. Many of the exiled writers were beginning to return. In my correspondence with Dr A Coetzee, Director of Publications, he summarised the events that led to the lifting of restrictions:

Particularly since 1980 when a new chairman was appointed to the Publications Appeal Board and a change also came about in the post of Director of Publications, there was a deliberate move not to allow the political situation to determine findings in terms of the Publications Act. There can be no doubt that the interpretation of the Act as far as “political” material was concerned became progressively more liberal and free and by the time of the “unbanning” of all political organizations on 2nd February 1990, the stream had slowed down to a trickle and then stopped. The developments of the last 10 years did not come about as a result of

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43 Mosotho, p.38.

44 Ludman, p.28.
amendments to the Publications Act, but rather because of a more objective, unbiased and fair interpretation of the Act.\textsuperscript{45}

It is interesting to notice the packaging of Tlali's works. Three of the titles are rather obscure to foreign readers, although accessible to the local readership: Mihloti (tears), Amandla (power), Footprints in the Quag. She has stated that she writes mainly for her own people although she hopes at the same time to reach a wider readership. English is the medium she has chosen as she feels this is a unifying language to work in. English is accessible to more people than Sotho, Zulu or the other African languages.

"I write in English because I'm trying to reach as many people as possible," she says.

"Sotho is the one language I can command very well. But I'm aware that if you write in a language that can be understood only by one racial group, you are likely to fall into the trap of the government, the system of divide and rule."\textsuperscript{46}

When Pandora Press published Footprints they considered the title unsuitable for the European readership and felt Soweto Stories would more easily conjure up the correct context of South Africa. Tlali calls the African experience in the townships "this quagmire of existence in the townships where you are forever at loggerheads...

\textsuperscript{45} Correspondence from Dr A Coetzee, Director of Publications, 17 September 1993.

\textsuperscript{46} Ludman, p.28.
with the system.” Her preferred title is the more accurate one as not all the short stories are set in Soweto, but all deal with township life.

An important factor in the publishing of the autobiographies of Kuzwayo and Mashinini was the help and intervention of Elizabeth Wolpert. She is a South African film-maker living in London. Mrs Wolpert has dedicated much of her time and money to helping African women establish their identities because of the great love and affection that she had for Maggie Magaba, the African woman who nursed her as a child. Kuzwayo became involved with her in making films: Awake from Mourning (1980) and ‘Tsiamelo’ - A Place of Goodness (1983). This encouragement continued when Kuzwayo began her writing project. Mrs Wolpert is mentioned in her acknowledgements as providing support and a home base during her stay in England in 1984 while she completed her autobiography and waited for it to be accepted by the publishers.

It was the following year in 1985 that Emma Mashinini and Betty Wolpert were introduced. Mashinini took part in the film Mama, I’m Crying and during the filming Betty persuaded Mashinini to tell her story.

During the shooting of the film, she interviewed me and recorded my story on every possible occasion...With time I gained confidence and got into the groove of writing chapters myself.

47 Mackenzie, p.76.

48 Mashinini, p.xv.

49 Kuzwayo, Call, pp.233,234.
It was Betty who took my manuscript to The Women's Press, and it was at her house in London that I completed the final draft.\(^{50}\)

The production of these two autobiographical texts can be better understood in the light of the empowerment that working on the film projects gave the women. They received validation for their lives and their efforts which gave them encouragement to share their stories with the public.

The sale of the works by African writers in South Africa is influenced mainly by two factors. The first is that the African readership is predominantly in the lower income bracket and spending money on books is not often possible. The second is that a significant proportion of the white South African population who are more financially able to buy books are not necessarily interested in reading about the lives of Africans.

Penny van Toorn discusses the patronage of discourses from minority cultures where she emphasises that changes take place over time.\(^{51}\) With their first works Kuzwayo and Mashinini were provided with a certain amount of patronage by established writers or cultural agents from the dominant culture (Wolpert, Gordimer, Wits University) and yet in subsequent works this patronage was no longer sought or needed. [Interviews - Appendix B, C, pp.117,143-144] At present,

\(^{50}\) Mashinini, p.xvi.

publishing and marketing in South Africa is a complex issue and as Monica Seeber from Ravan Press stated it is also “subject to the shifts in cultural emphasis which are following social and political change in this country.”

52 Personal correspondence with Monica Seeber dated 22 July 1992.
Chapter 2

Narrative Style

The styles in which the texts of Mashinini, Kuzwayo and Tlali are written serve a functional purpose, just as their content does. None of the texts are highly experimental, presenting information and making political observations in a documentary style that is grounded in realism to make them socially useful. Tlali viewed her function as a writer as a “vehicle for change”\(^53\); a very practical purpose which all the authors share and which their writing style reflects.

As Angela Carter mentions in *On Gender and Writing*, language can be used as an instrument of domination or liberation.\(^54\) In the past English was used to dominate the colonised people in South Africa, but now these same people are appropriating the language to increase their reading audience and protest about the gender, class and racial inequality. Tlali would actually like to translate some of her works into Sotho, which is her mother tongue.\(^55\) Unfortunately because of publishing and marketing difficulties mentioned in the first chapter, projects like this are not yet practical.

\(^{53}\) MacKenzie, p.77.


\(^{55}\) MacKenzie, p.84.
Afrikaans is the main language of the Apartheid government and therefore was viewed by many Africans as the language of oppression and as such was to be avoided. The policy of enforcing Afrikaans as the language to be used by the Bantu Education Department was the main reason for the 1976 Soweto riots. English was, therefore, for a time preferred by many African writers as the language of political convenience. In some areas of the country, particularly in the Cape Province, Afrikaans is the first language of many African families and has been appropriated and any political connections discarded.[See Appendix D - Interview with Zoë Wicomb] p. 148.

Tlali, Kuzwayo and Mashinini have used the autobiographical form from the western tradition to express their experiences. Both Tlali and Kuzwayo have also experimented with the short story form to find a suitable modern equivalent for African traditional oral story telling.

Mashinini

In Part I of Strikes, the domestic details of growing up and married life are quickly covered in the first chapter before Mashinini begins documenting her working life in the Henochsberg factory and then her union involvement. Her public image that is revealed in this section obscures her personal self. Part II is perhaps not as documentary as Part I, but Mashinini introduces this section with documentary details from newspaper reports and letters. This distances the personal note that the following chapters contain. In her closing chapter of this section she once again
returns to details of facts and figures. The large portion that contains the narrative of her detention is written very unselfconsciously. Her thoughts and feelings are written frankly as they return to her memory.

This account of Mashinini’s life is written in colloquial language. The emphasis of using a very correct and formal, educated English that is apparent in much of Tlali’s and Kuzwayo’s work is absent, instead language is used idiomatically. She uses personal details in a confidential manner to create a tone that is warmly intimate.

Of course, we had no bathroom or running water in the house, but there was a tap in the yard, and we used a tin tub to bathe in. When it was raining, because of my tonsillitis, my mother would not allow me to wash myself but lovingly would rub me down. (p.5)

Mashinini gives attention to details from her childhood and the grinding day-to-day difficulties of the working lives of Africans. The exception to this frank display occurs in the situations that she finds too personally painful to discuss, such as her marriage-breakup and the death of her daughter, Penny. This event she calls “a situation which is not in my power to describe”. (p.128) Even though the details are not described, she is able to mention the painful matter to her readers because by this time in the narrative she has increased her personal involvement in the text by sharing the emotional impact of her detention.

The detailed description of her imprisonment and subsequent post-traumatic stress disorder becomes quite confessional.
Those six months brought about a great change in me. I tried to get it all out at the time, all the bad feelings and memories, but I could not, and even now there are things that come up, and I remember. These are long-term effects. I have had long-term physical effects, and long-term mental effects. (p.105)

In analysing the ways in which Mashinini uses description in the text it is helpful to apply Georg Lukacs’ methods that he outlines in his essay “Narrate or Describe?”. Much of the more impersonal information is described in the past tense and keeps the reader as a distant observer. Most of the first section is described in this way. With events that Mashinini felt very strongly about she often changes to the present tense using a dramatic narration to engage the reader directly with the action. This occurs often in the second section dealing with her detention. In the following passage the reader is able to experience Mashinini’s anxiety when she shifts to the present tense.

One day, two policemen came, together with a policewoman, and they said, ‘Come on, come out of the cell.’ Nothing like, ‘Get yourself ready to go’ or whatever. It was just ‘Out’ and out I went.

There was this very long corridor that I had to walk through....And we were walking, walking, and to me this is Pretoria Central Prison, where people are executed or sentenced, hanged or whatever. I am isolated, and now I am just taken from my cell and being made to walk through this very long corridor people are burying their faces on the ground. (p.64)

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57 Lukacs, p.116.
This spontaneous and unselfconscious style of recording her life events occurs in much of the later narrative. Different situations overlap and/or quickly follow each other in a stream of consciousness manner. Chapter 9, titled “Dudu” is an example of this style of writing (p. 79). It begins with Neil Aggett’s death in detention and moves into how Mashinini was able to acquire newspapers. Because she flushed the torn newspapers down the toilet, that thought sparked another about the dirty conditions in her cell which she began to change. Writing about cleaning the cell made her think of the hot water situation which reminded her that it was difficult to get hot enough water for the hot-water bottle that her husband had sent her. From this matter she shifts back to the topic of Neil Aggett. All through this chapter her thoughts are recorded as they shift from one topic to another, but all related to her time in this particular cell.

Kuzwayo

Kuzwayo’s style of writing does not reveal similar patterns of unselfconscious recording. She uses a more structured and selfconscious style. Her training as a school-teacher is revealed in her formal use of the English language as she lectures on one subject and then another. This manner of writing could impose a ‘cool’ distance between reader and the text, but Kuzwayo also creates a tone that is
friendly and conversational which allows the reader to feel an intimacy with the narrative.\textsuperscript{58}

This is illustrated in chapter 3, “Violence in the Community”. While the content focuses on the events that took place in Soweto in 1976, she ‘speaks’ directly to us as narrator, and dramatises events as her subjective response to them:

In the previous chapter I talked about...

Let me go back a little further to what happened in Soweto on 16 June 1976 - a date which events have marked as a national day of mourning for the black community of South Africa... After dropping off my last passenger, I drove past every check-point, telling myself that I would stop only when I was stopped, and not before. I was terrified, and drove straight home under great pressure. (p.40-42)

Nonetheless, the personal note is subordinated to the public/historical voice of “a date which.....” so that the text overall is a functional communication of a content-driven message. The documentation of events and the explanation of the causes behind many of these events becomes a priority in the text.

But in this present chapter I have been anxious to show how circumstances conspired to drive women in the townships to illegal and underground activities. (p.38)

As Keith Shear has noted, Kuzwayo uses linear time in an interesting way to bridge the gap between generations.\textsuperscript{59} In the section where she discusses the history of the

\textsuperscript{58} “She Tells the Story of Blacks in SA”, Sowetan, 8 July, 1985, (Argus Printing and Publishing Co.: Johannesburg).

\textsuperscript{59}
Skokian Queens (p.24-35) from their beginnings in Johannesburg before 1900 to the present, she slides smoothly across this long time period. Her own experiences with them in Pimville around 1939, when she lived with her father, are commented on in the same section. This gives her a part in history and a place in the present. A similar situation is created with what Dorothy Driver calls “the elision of a chronological gap”. Her son is detained in 1971 and this information is closely followed by the events of her own detention in 1977. In fact these details are brought into the narrating present by Kuzwayo’s introduction to chapter 14, where she mentions that she writes as she looks out upon Robben Island where other political prisoners are held. This way of writing about the events emphasises the fact that imprisonment occurs across all generations in the struggle for freedom and not only with the younger activists. It links the different generations in their common struggles and common goals.

The manner in which Kuzwayo covers her detention is quite different to Tlali’s or Mashinini’s. The account is very descriptive and chronicles details about the campaigning for improved bathroom conditions and other events (p.201). There is some sharing between prisoners, but the prison experience is revealed to the reader only through the one voice. Even though the whole experience left Kuzwayo

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“overwhelmed with conflicting emotions”, the text does not reveal the depths that these emotions would have led her to. (p.214) Once the detention is over the narrative moves on without further reference to the matter. Mashinini kept referring back to the harm and the hurts that the detention caused her, but Kuzwayo’s writing style is more controlled and contained.

Kuzwayo intended *Sit Down and Listen* to fulfill the practical purpose of being a cultural and moral guide to the reader. This is reflected by the use of her teaching style in the construction of this text. In the dedication to her grandchildren she instructs them to “commit themselves to an education... and to value their heritage...”. At the beginning of each part of the text Kuzwayo has an introduction to the stories where she plainly states the lessons and/or the morals that the reader should learn from the stories in that section. Not only is her intention to leave the younger generation a record of some of their oral narratives, but also clear values that she believes will help them establish a just and liberated nation. The text is meant to serve as a cultural teaching aid.

**Tlali**

Tlali uses her fictional works in the same way that Mashinini and Kuzwayo use non-fiction to inform their readers. There is emphasis on description and providing the reader with background information to allow clearer judgements about the gender and racial issues presented.
Tlali was one of the early contributors to Staffrider, a magazine for the reading public of the townships and her style conforms fairly well to the magazine’s aims. As Michael Vaughan comments on the writing in Staffrider:

It is an...activity of the transposition of the material of documentation - of the conditions of oppression of the people of the townships - into a material of the imagination. It focuses upon the way in which individuals experience conditions of oppression: the way in which individuals encounter imaginatively these conditions.\(^{61}\)

Even though Tlali follows these general guidelines, she does not stick to any strict ‘recipe’, but has a fairly varied style depending on the particular project. In Muriel\(^{62}\) the tone is gently didactic, with the narrator using a middle-class english and occasionally falling into different vernaculars to illustrate the way the people would speak. As Barnett says, her “dialogue is faultless. Tlali has an ear for the intonation of the black characters, both the educated and those who know little English, for the Afrikaans-speaking women and for the Jewish boss.”\(^{63}\)

Adam, the older African worker:

He say he wanto tek you to kot fess, baas.(p.47)

Mr. Bloch, the Jewish owner:


\(^{62}\) Miriam Tlali, Muriel At Metropolitan, Longman: Harlow, 1987. All quotations are from this edition.

\(^{63}\) Barnett, p.161.
Oh, man, you know, this Agrippa is a bloody nuisance, man. He hasn't even turned up yet, man, and I've promised people deliveries....I'm going to take my keys and lorry from him and "trow" him out! (p.50)

Mrs Stein, one of the white, women employees:

Mrs Stein only nodded her head and went on adding loudly, ‘....vyf, elf, agtien - Een honderd, agt- en-twintig Rand, tien sent.’ She always added figures in Afrikaans. (p.92)

In Amandla the language is not as suited to the common people represented in the novel. The tone becomes heavily didactic and the language more obviously borrowed from a 'foreign' culture. Many of the words and phrases that Tlali employs are no longer commonly used, but are words that might be remembered from English or biology classes at school.

...been timeously rescued...(p.62)

...safe distance from one's olfactory nerves. (p.62)

They force too much of this "tikkie-draai" music down our eustachian tubes. (p.137)

Many of these words could be read as far too studied or pedantic, but it is interesting to notice this use of language in the context of what one of the characters in the novel has to say:

Most of the African middle class got its prestige through education and not commercial or industrial enterprise. (p.217)
According to this text then, it is not by the use of money that Africans can enter an equal position to that of the white middle class population, but more likely by the use of an educated language. This language then becomes a major vehicle for claiming equality with the rest of society outside the restricted African communities. The language also functions in a practical way to assert control of a ‘white’ medium as a claim for cultural recognition.

Tlali employs a good mixture of the words and phrases from all the cultures in South Africa that have become widely known across racial and cultural barriers. She takes for granted that these expressions would be familiar to the reader and she does not provide a glossary, but occasionally translates an African word in the text. Examples of these are:

- tikkie-draai music - traditional Boer dancing music (p.137)
- motsoetse (nursing mother) (p.35)

Many of the characters give long didactic monologues to reveal the political development of the different age groups within the Soweto community. Pholoso, one of the chief youth leaders speaks on behalf of the younger generation:

Go out and educate the people. Our girls and women can accomplish a lot if we let them. Let us avoid the pitfalls of the past when women were confined to the kitchen, and were never allowed to read. Literature is for everybody, not for men only. When you go to the library, take your sister, your aunt, even your mother with you. The women were brainwashed into believing that the only thing they could do was to wait on us and be at our disposal....(p.89)
In the text when the people from the older generation gather they take it in turns to
give long speeches rehearsing their history, current events or political views. Killer,
one of the very vocal older men tried to get his friends politically motivated:

I just want to shake up people who think like you, T, and
bring you back to your senses. Fellows who labour under your
kind of accommodating complacency are a potential threat to
humanity. It seems to me that you would put up with any kind
of sugar-coated poison. In order to understand anyone's
actions you have to know the motivating force behind his
actions. You must not just look at the smile on his face and
accept any filth he hands you without inspecting it first. People
who are happy to receive a few concessions here and there
from their enemies. We of the Unity Movement want nothing
short of full democratic rights, not ping-pong. I want to make
you think....(p.221)

Cecily Lockett calls these interchanges between the characters a means of allowing
"social commentary to enter into her narrative. These aspects of Tlali’s technique
are important, for Amandla serves as a record of the debates and dialogues of the
period."\textsuperscript{64} It is perhaps because of the relevance to the times of these lengthily
perspectives that this text was praised above other accounts of the 1976 riots by the
critic Njabulo Ndebele.\textsuperscript{65} Ndebele emphasises the importance attached to the
functional, documentary value of texts within the African community in South
Africa.

\textsuperscript{64}Lockett, "The Fabric...", p.280.

\textsuperscript{65}Njabulo Ndebele, "Turkish Tales, and some thoughts on South African Fiction", \textit{Staffrider}, 6, 1,
Most of the narratives in Mihloti are told in the first person as Tlali uses her personal experiences and interviews to give the reader a sense of what it is like being a black South African. The narratives are drawn together by the common thread of hardship placed on Africans, which caused Tlali to explain in the preface: “The tears burn my eyes and drip down on to the paper before me”.\textsuperscript{66}

Once again, as in Amandla, the language is often formal and stilted compared to modern usage: “raised my eyes towards the yonder Drakensberg Range”, (p.60) or, “keeping my astonishment and demur to myself” (p.83).

In this text Tlali includes sections under various titles with correspondingly different styles. The first section “New Journalism” contains the story of her own detention, titled “Detour Into Detention”. The narrative is structured in a dramatic way and is told from a Christian, individualistic position. In the text the story is narrated by Tlali to someone who comes to visit her at her home. Once the introductions and general greetings are covered, the story begins and after a few prompting questions the listener has no further part in the narrative. Unlike Mashinini’s and Kuzwayo’s accounts of detention, Tlali unfolds the narrative through the different characters that take part in the event.

Different circumstances are revealed through the characterisation of Flora, Mabel, Mma-Frans and the other prisoners. An immediate sense of the action is conveyed

\textsuperscript{66} Miriam Tlali, Mihloti, Skotaville Publishers: Johannesburg, 1989, p.xv.
to the reader by the narrator being an active participant, often moving from past
tense description to present tense presentation of unfolding events.

The police, with torches in their hands, were ushering in five women who were each given their ration of two ‘donkey’ blankets.
-I have just had a terrible dream.
I gasped, feeling for Mabel’s arm. She raised her head to look over the rows of grey bundles on the floor to see the ‘newcomers’.
-What was the dream? (p.31)

The second section includes two interviews. One with Lilian Ngoyi, the people’s patriot and the other with Leah Koae, a township mother who made a meagre living by dressmaking. The interview with Leah is structured more like a one-act play rather than a formal interview. The different people present during the interview are all given a voice and comments are made in the ‘script’ about actions that occurred. The reader is therefore given a fuller picture of what took place.

The third section is titled “Travelogues”. It contains three narratives on local and overseas trips that Tlali herself undertook. These past tense documentational narratives highlight the difficulties associated with travel and holidaying for black South Africans. Even time spent in Egypt draws the comparative comment from Tlali: “Imagine that kind of encroachment into the lives of the respectable citizens (in Europe) unable to enjoy the peace and quiet of their apartments! I realised that I was now in ‘familiar’ ground. I was in Africa; dear beloved, deprived, marauded Africa.” (p.94) Tlali records her personal experiences combined with political and
cultural documentation to once again serve a practical purpose of informing the reader.

Tlali’s *Soweto Stories* are largely socio-historical narratives. The many changes of voice that she employs are not merely for artistic effect so much as offering a complete overview of the social spectrum. As Lauretta Ngcobo mentions in her Introduction, Tlali is “recording the experiences and the collective responses of our society to all the changes.”

In “Mm’a - Lithoto” the narrating voice shifts between that of Paballo, an abused wife, and her niece, Mahali. The two women worry about their responsibilities towards their traditional customs and the changing society in which they live. Tlali provides social documentation in this narrative through the characters. This is achieved when African dialects and idioms are used to emphasize the traditional.

Paballo tries to encourage Mahali to be loyal to their family customs:

> The word is not the finger, it does not go and come back, it stays... “Lentsoe ha se monoana, ha le e e le khutla”, you know that, don’t you. Just like I am telling you all these things, ‘tomorrow’ you’ll be telling your children, those who come after you. If we throw away our rituals we are as good as dead. No one can succeed in destroying us if we know ourselves and those “laws” that our ancestors have left us with. (p.15)

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"Throughout the text the language of tradition, the attempted assertion of a communal voice, is signified by the use of Sotho whereas Afrikaans is used to depict the language of white officialdom."\textsuperscript{68} The language used by the characters in this text is more realistic. The reader can readily understand the social/class position of the characters in society. The narratives are recorded in colloquial English interspersed with words and phrases from Afrikaans and the other local languages. As in Muriel, Tlali's use of language in this text is functional; it serves as a social reflection.

All three writers placed little importance on abiding by western literary rules of genre. More important to them was broadening the mode of communication for and from women in their community.

Chapter 3

Historical Re-Positioning

In making themselves ‘the subject of the language’ post-colonial and feminist writers are appropriating and recording it in order to rewrite their history or, to put it another way, to reclaim their beginnings.69

Many post-colonial cultures are concerned with retrieving history that has been lost with colonisation and the biased Euro-centric education.70 African writers in South African also have this as one of their focal points. They are concerned about mentioning historical events from an African perspective and not from the colonising master who recorded the events originally. Particular emphasis is placed on accurate recording of current events so that future generations can read their analysis of the changing times they have lived through. Kuzwayo, Mashinini and Tlali approach their writing with an enthusiasm for historical details and current information.

Call Me Woman

Back in 1981 Kuzwayo mentioned to a reporter from The Star that she felt history had power and that was why preserving the African history and culture was so


vitaly important in the overall task of empowerment for black South Africans.\textsuperscript{71}

Even though \textit{Call Me Woman} is an autobiography, it is plain Kuzwayo "is more concerned to trace a representative history"\textsuperscript{72} of her people and her fellow African women. Many reviews described the work as "more than an autobiography", "an overview of South African socio-political history”, “a history of some of the unsung heroines”, “a shadowy history”, and “a miniature history”.\textsuperscript{73}

Mrs Kuzwayo herself mentions historical documentation as one of the primary reasons for undertaking the task.

I suppose much of my input has been that I have lived through history with an acute awareness. It is a history that has largely been covered up or rewritten for our children today, and for many years I felt the need to document the reality.\textsuperscript{74}

She hopes that by reaching back into history and seeing the strength and achievements of those who went before, the present generation can take courage. They can use these examples to show them how to rise above being the exploited to being a free generation leading the way towards a brighter future. Kuzwayo points her readers towards this vision by recounting the leadership of men like her

\textsuperscript{71} Jean Waite, \textit{The Star}, 15 May 1981, Johannesburg, South Africa.


\textsuperscript{74} Kate McKinnell, \textit{The Star}, April 9 1987, Johannesburg, South Africa.
grandfather, Jeremiah Makgothi, who was secretary of the First Native Convention in 1909. Her role as the only woman appointed to the Soweto Committee of ten in 1976 is also meant to inspire other women to be available in times of political need.

Before the first chapter there are two lists of dates and events. The first is recorded under the title “Ellen Kuzwayo’s career”. There follows a list of fifty dates on which the major events in her life occurred. The second list deals with “Principal legislation affecting the black community, and chronology of major events”. The text closes with the lists of the names of the qualified women doctors and lawyers. By enclosing the text within this factual framework of success, Kuzwayo is representing herself and her people as capable and empowered in spite of the legislation enacted to hamper their efforts.

Part one of the text deals with Soweto township and how it came to be peopled during the last hundred years. The problems created by the colonists with African land ownership, poll-tax and employment are all documented. Because men left the rural areas to find work on the gold mines, women soon followed. Finding employment was more difficult for them and they had to use ingenuity. One of the methods they used was to become brewers and sellers of home-made liquor. An interesting account of the history of the ‘Skokian Queens’ (liquor sellers) is recorded. (p.30-35) Tlali covers the same subject in her short story “Gone are Those Days” where she records the story of Aunt Lizzy, a former Shebeen Queen.75

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75 Tlali, Soweto, p.93.
In Part Three, "Patterns Behind the Struggle", Kuzwayo deals with the different organisations that she worked with or helped to found which enable the Soweto women to cope with their hardships. Two of these are the Zamani Soweto Sisters Council and the Maggie Magaba Trust. She also gives a short history of several women who proved to have outstanding courage in the face of apartheid oppressions.

**Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life**

Mashinini undertook a similar historical task to that of Kuzwayo. Instead of highlighting issues of social work, the efforts of the unions are identified. A careful history of the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union of South Africa is recorded. Mashinini was aware that she was participating in matters of historical importance with her work in establishing basic requirements for women workers. Throughout the text attention is paid to all details of names, places and dates.

As a result of her detention and the traumatic stress it produced, Mashinini includes details of the work done by the Detainees' Parents Support Committee. Appendix B at the back of the text is the minutes of the meeting between the Delegation from Detainees' Parents Support Committee and Colonel H. Muller of Security Police.  

76Mashinini, p.139.
A profile of the women in the African communities emerges in this text. It is not only an identity of domestic workers, but one involving factory work, work in the cities, social work in the townships and professional positions. All these situations involve the allied deprivations that the apartheid system imposed upon the people. These deprivations often culminated in detention for individuals that were seen by the government to be taking leadership positions in the task of advancement for the African people.

Mashinini's family was part of the population that was forcibly removed from Sophiatown for resettlement by whites. A short history of the town is recorded with these sentiments written by a black South African poet, Don Mattera:

Memory is a weapon. I knew deep down inside me, in that place where laws and guns cannot reach nor jackboots trample, that there had been no defeat. In another day, another time, we would emerge to reclaim our dignity and our land. It was only a matter of time and Sophiatown would be reborn. (p.4)

Before black consciousness began to have an effect many of the Africans tried to identify themselves with "white" characteristics in the hope that this would give them the same privileges and benefits. Mashinini describes the attempts at lightening skin and the wearing of wigs and the harmful affects these had. She footnotes the medical details and government's attitude towards the bleaching substance. (p.9)

Footnotes are often used throughout the text to include particular facts that Mashinini felt were too important to omit, but which she did not want to include in the flow of the narrative. In these sections of the text Mashinini combines different
'genres' and does not feel compelled to record her life according to any 'standard' western autobiographical form. Life narrative and academic journalism are blended to create a functional text to suit her particular aims.

This attention to factual detail is part of the process of gaining authentication and legitimisation for the African people in their ancestral land. The contribution of the efforts in the work force of the African population to enable South Africa to become a major economic and technological nation in the African continent is largely effaced in official records. Mashinini and Kuzwayo go a long way in recording this lack by their accounts of the contributions of the black women towards society.

Amandla

In this novel about the 1976 student riots in Soweto, Miriam Tlali uses the same attention to historical and factual detail that is obvious in the works of Kuzwayo and Mashinini. Because of this historical focus, narrative flow and character development are not as strongly evident as in her earlier work, Muriel at Metropolitan. She has been accused of incorporating “too much historical and political material in her framework.”

The novel concentrates on the people of Soweto during the time period of April 1975 and June 1977. It serves as a valuable “record of the debates and dialogues of

77 Watts, p.223.
the period” 78. Even though this novel is not strictly autobiographical I feel justified in using it in the context of this dissertation because as Tlali says (p.122 - Appendix A) her characters are largely based on relatives, neighbours and even herself. The text portrays the narratives of people from that time and place in a fictional setting.

Specific dates are emphasized throughout. The first chapter starts with the date 29th April, 1975. Chapter fifteen also is clearly given the date of 5th January, 1977. Chapter 23 is a flashback to 31st December, 1976. The reader is constantly aware of the time period of the two years in which events are set.

The plot develops around the younger generation of Pholoso and his friends. The adult characters are used to remind the reader of historical dates and events and they comment on the political situation as it unfolds. Early in the plot the parents are recorded discussing the development of the unrest in the schools amongst the students and teachers about the government policy of enforcing education in the Afrikaans language (p.24-27).

Chapter eight is an insert chapter about the life story of old man, Makalo Magong. It tells how he fled the unjust farm boss in the Free State and arrived in Soweto in 1913 as a young man. His dying mother had prophesied that her children would see the demise of the Boer power during their life time. He felt that the burning of the government buildings in Soweto was the beginning of that fall. By telling the story

of the Soweto riots in this way, Tlali gives them a position of importance in the sequence of historical events that comprise the breakdown of the apartheid system.

The young lawyer who gives a speech at the mass funeral for riot victims mentions several key Boer historical occasions. The Boer aims at the battles of Majuba and Slachtersnek are appropriated and used as the aims for the Africans in their fight for freedom. The Boers believed they were fighting for truth and just as they refused to lay down their arms until they won the battle at Slachtersnek, so the Africans will continue to fight until justice and truth prevails in the land.

At the wake after the funeral there are very long dialogues recounting the history of the Acts passed by the British government and then later those passed by the Nationalist government. All were used to suppress and oppress the African people. In contrast to this a young person gives the aims of the new generation in regards to many topics and history in particular;

    We all take an active part in running the FIYOH (freedom in your own hand) projects and making them succeed. Time and again, we approach experts in such fields as yoga, body-building exercises, history - our true history, undistorted - ...(p.257)

Tlali uses this young woman, Phokeng, to express the ideal of working for the betterment of the African community and rising above the oppressions that have taken place throughout colonial history.

Tlali wanted this text to work as a motivational tool in the political protests of the time. She mentions that in contrast to Muriel she did not deal with this text in a
detached manner, but rather in an angry, involved way, wanting to have a "forceful
effect on the reader's mind".\textsuperscript{79} It is, like all her writing, based on reality, but unlike
an objective historian she uses her position as a narrator to be "creatively subjective"
about the political events.\textsuperscript{80} As she mentions in Appendix A of this dissertation
(p.102) she created a platform for her characters to speak from. In this same
interview Tlali emphasises the importance that history has for her because, up to the
present much of the African history has been wrongly presented and clashes with
modern archeological facts (Appendix A, p 120).

In time the texts by these authors will be valued for their sociological and historical
record from an African, female perspective during a time when most records were
written from a white, male, Apartheid point of view.

\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Tribute}, p.38.

\textsuperscript{80} Barnett, p.162.
Chapter 4:  

Gender Positioning; Black Women As Minors  

The girl who contracted a marriage - which the entire weight of nineteenth-century ideology put forward as being the culminating point of a woman’s life - lost at one stroke all her rights as a ‘femme sole’, that is to say a free and independent individual.  

The position of women in the Western world, in the early nineteenth century before the emancipation of women began, is comparable to the position for African women in South Africa under the Apartheid system. Unfortunately black women are more severely oppressed than their male counterparts. They lost any gains made by the reforms introduced by the early feminist movement such as the 1870 Married Woman’s Property Act. The position of African women reverted to that under the Roman law which stated that the male was the head of the family and women thus had an inferior physical, mental and legal status. Legally the black women could be described as being non-existent. They could not sign contracts or apply for passports. This was exactly the situation for women in England in 1850 and for African women in South Africa when Tlali, Kuzwayo and Mashinini were writing.  

“The silencing, subjugation and invisibility experienced by the Victorian woman is exacerbated in the South African context when the black woman, having left her  

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82 Basch, p.16.
rural home, experiences the shock of a different culture.83 African women living in tribal communities were sustained by their efforts with their crops, livestock owned by the family and/or traditional crafts. Their emotional needs were fulfilled by the extended family living within the same community. Once women moved to the urban areas they found that they were alienated from traditional lifestyles, from the support provided by their families and above all removed from traditional sources of livelihood.

Hilda Bernstein actually states that African women suffer from a three-fold oppression: as blacks, as women, and as the lowest paid and sometimes unpaid labour force in the country. “Sexual and racial discrimination condemn them to the bottom of the pile.”84 Kuzwayo, Mashinini and Tlali explore these exploitations and oppressions in their works. All three writers hesitate to challenge black patriarchy head on, although they do reveal that sexual harassment is intertwined with racial harassment. Their foremost aim remains the struggle for liberation from Apartheid. As part of this, however, they do reveal and critique the conscious and unconscious efforts by society to give black women the equivalent position to that of children.

**Mashinini**

Emma Mashinini states clearly her philosophy towards relationships with people:

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84 Bernstein, *For Their*, p.7.
I have always resented being dominated. I resent being dominated by a man, and I resent being dominated by white people, be they man or woman. I don’t know if that is being politicised. It is just trying to say, “I am human. I exist. I am a complete person.” (p.24)

Her principal struggle, as we have seen, is defined in terms of a Marxist-oriented class movement centred around her roles as factory worker and union organiser. Obviously, given the South African situation, this entails some assertion of racial identity as well, especially as many of her co-workers are white. While she is theoretically on a par with other workers and unionists as a breadwinner for her family, she is also forced to engage in a gender struggle as part of the wider liberationist activity. The negotiations in this struggle are often complex:

Most interestingly, Mashinini’s entry into the question of women’s subordination is through being positioned as black. In one instance she sees her (first) husband acting like a ‘white boss’ to her. In another, she hits hard at the official attitude towards women expressed by the CCAWUSA and COSATU leadership: just as she had been used by white employers as a token, so too she finds herself used by male trade unionists: a safety valve ‘just to patch up what (they) have done wrong’.  

In Mashinini’s first marriage the oppression from the Apartheid system was exacerbated by the oppression from her husband. This experience meant that her rights, freedom and independence became very important to her. As she became active in the union she came to realise that there were certain oppressions that could

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be fought, little by little. It was through her union involvement that she met Tom Mashinini. In him she found a man that would respect her independence and give her the freedom to maintain her individual rights. He was also actively supportive during her time in detention and afterwards when she suffered memory lapses and other health problems. By telling these events she is showing her readers that it is possible to have a marriage without oppression even under very stressful circumstances. The loyalty she expected and got from Tom towards her and her children she also extended to him and his daughter, Nomsa.

So much of Mashinini’s union work dealt with the ‘double bind’ of being black and a woman. As Driver points out she recognises herself as part of the minority culture as well as her marginalisation as a woman. One battle that she recounts deals with the strip searches of black women workers by the white women employees of certain stores. In extreme cases even their vaginal and anal areas were examined. In 1983 six women employed by the PEP Stores refused to strip and were dismissed. The CCAWUSA decided to take action and first went to the press about the matter. “We said we regarded body searching as degrading to anybody, but that we felt even more angry that only black women were subjected to it.” (p.116) PEP management met with the Union and the six women gave evidence to the meeting. The male executives were disgusted by what they were told and the women were reinstated and alternative security measures were adopted.

In her personal life Mashinini took a stand for herself and for other women when she bought a car. In the 1980’s in South Africa it was still illegal for a black woman to
sign legal documents, but Mashinini had her husband's support in her quest for independence which was once again illustrated when she refused to buy the car with his signature.

According to the rules and regulations in South Africa, if you buy a car under hire purchase you have to use your husband's name. But I refused to use my husband's name and said this car was my car and therefore it had to be in my name. And I insisted on this until the car dealer really did give in and said it would be in my name, even though it was not supposed to be so. (p. 94)

Mashinini writes about the local women support groups that were called *stokvels* and she says the work that they did was empowering financially and emotionally to all who took part in them. The *stokvels* were neighbourhood support groups. Women met regularly in someone's home for meetings. All members would donate small amounts of money so the group could save to help each member in turn to purchase needed household items. The meetings also provided social occasions for sharing. Mashinini described their efforts: "And so we sustained each other, woman to woman - a woman to woman sustaining." (p. 17) Mashinini proves throughout the text that sustaining and supporting individuals can overcome oppression of race and gender; it is possible to live without being dominated if one is willing to pay the price.

Even to this day Mashinini feels that as a woman she is often a token woman at official meetings and constantly needs to remind people about gender issues. (Appendix B p. 126) As she says "it is still a man's world" and for women to
gain political representation in the New South Africa women like her need to be constantly reminding the politicians of their needs.

**Kuzwayo**

Kuzwayo does not try to escape from the gender role of wife, mother and nurturer. She positions herself and the women she writes about firmly within that role. She adds the responsibility of being strong leaders of the youth, quite capable of being at the forefront of any political activities, just as the youth are. She makes it clear that when the men leave, the women are strong enough to take on any task that they need to: "Women somehow seem to cope with the pressures more successfully than men." (p.51) However, her emphasis is often on wives remaining as loyal supports to their husbands and their children. "Whenever she refers to a successful woman, that is, one who has been educated, she hastens to note that they still became married and had a family (pp.94, 99)."^86

Kuzwayo's social work took her to the rural areas and it was here that she really came to understand the heavy weight of responsibility that was left to the African women. It was this experience that made her determined to include so many of the stories of other women in her autobiography.

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The black woman, who through the centuries had been viewed by the white state as unproductive in industry, as totally dependent on her male counterpart, as helpless, unintelligent to the point of being useless and stupid - the woman who much against her will had resigned herself to being labelled a ‘minor’ by the state - was suddenly plunged into a situation of accepting numerous roles of responsibility. (p.13)

She was not willing to accept the role of ‘minor’ and nor did she want others to be so passive. Any attempts to break out of this mould are recorded in her works to further encourage such action. During interviews she is quick to draw attention to this labelling and stereotyping. In her interview with Adeola James she describes the situation for black women as “a double exclusion” and an “extra burden, as a black and as a woman”. This exclusion has limited their education possibilities and lessened their likelihood of being employed in certain fields.

The responsibility for this double burden is not only placed on the white ruling government, but also on the men from the African communities. In a section where Kuzwayo extols the efforts by black women who worked in the Southern African Association of Youth Clubs she again mentions the sources of this oppression.

These were the efforts of some of the women of the black community who have been given the humiliating and degrading tag of ‘Minors’ by both their menfolk and the government of this country - and sometimes also by other communities over the colour line. (p.151)

Some time after her release from prison, Ellen was asked to plead in court on behalf of some youths accused of political crimes. The defence lawyer asked for her representation because of her renowned contributions to youth work and her
excellent reputation. He felt that she could make the judge understand about the
conditions which contribute to the political behaviour of the youth in Soweto. The
ironic compliment paid to her by one of the fathers after the case was: “You are no
ordinary woman, you pleaded like a man, only a man could speak the way you did.”
In an interview with The Star (15 May 1981) Kuzwayo said that the “tag of minor
placed on women, particularly black women pulls down a curtain and people seem
to think that black women are just parcels that are carried around”. To dispel this
opinion, to draw back the curtain, Kuzwayo illustrates the active role played by so
many ordinary women in the black communities. One such an example is that of Mrs
Esther Seokelo, a taxi driver by trade. (p.51) During a time when violence and
aggression was widespread amongst members of the Taxi Association she made her
presence felt by advocating calm negotiation instead of displays of power. Murders,
for a time at least, decreased.

Chapter sixteen of Call Me Woman appears under the title “‘Minors’ are Heroines”.
The first incident that is recounted is the story about how she was treated as a minor
in 1969 when she applied for a passport to travel to New York to attend a YWCA
conference. Her son, who was still living under her care at the time, had to sign the
form for her. She mentions that this practice has been abandoned recently, but that
there are many others that are still extant.

In her second work, Sit Down and Listen, Kuzwayo deals mainly with how the
Western culture and the Apartheid system has broken down the traditional laws and
way of life of the African people. The first three short stories do, however, have as
their foremost theme the neglect and betrayal of the wives in the narratives. Even though Apartheid can be seen as the beginning of the troubles, Kuzwayo shows that the men leave the women to face the brunt of the situations; an illustration that they are at the “bottom of the pile” as Kuzwayo so often maintains.

The narratives reveal a dichotomy between traditional values and Christian interests. In most cases the colonial system is blamed for the breakdown of the African value system because the traditional way of life and teaching was disrupted. In part three - What is a family? - “The reward of waiting” is an interesting contrast. The wife in the story holds Christian beliefs and the husband retains traditional beliefs. The couple have two daughters, but the husband dearly wants a son. They decide to follow the accepted practice in their community of polygamy. The second wife is carefully chosen to suit the needs in their family structure. Unfortunately it is not the young second wife who becomes pregnant and has a son, but the original wife. The new wife is emotionally traumatised and eventually leaves to return to her family. In the conclusion of the narrative the husband takes on the Christian faith because of the patience and loyalty of his first wife. He makes this declaration with more than a hint of the Biblical Ruth’s words:

From today, your faith will be my faith, your God my God, your hopes my hopes, your trust my trust. You have been the pillar, strength, support and guide of this family. Let it always be so. (p.82)

So we are informed that it is not actually the traditional woman who wins out, but a Christian woman who leads the family with her value system. This once again
illustrates Kuzwayo's shift between traditional and western cultures. When traditional values uphold women's rights and provide benefits for women and their families she favours them; and yet when western or Christian values benefit women she supports them instead.

In the introduction to this work Kuzwayo claims on behalf of women the role of storyteller.

Having coaxed her listeners into attention, the narrator would fall silent for a moment and adjust her position slightly, moving her stool forward or back...Meanwhile, the storyteller reached for her shawl, moved her stool, enjoying the full knowledge that her audience was in the palm of her hand. [my emphasis]

Storytelling was often traditionally done by the women. By writing these stories Kuzwayo asserts herself and advocates transferring this role into the written form; subtly claiming the right for women to be writers as well. In the modern African context, there are far fewer women writers than men. Kuzwayo is showing that it is time that women moved into this field. It is in this role of storyteller that a unity of purpose is revealed. It conforms to the traditional gender role of women, it does not contradict the Christian faith which Kuzwayo supports and it also sustains her aims of improving the position of women in the community.
Tlali talks about liberating women simultaneously as the people are liberated from Apartheid, but in her writing, especially in earlier works, preference is given to the national struggle rather than the female one.

We cannot isolate the problems of women from the general struggle. The two have got to go together, simultaneously. You cannot speak of the one without the other. And people like Samora Machel were very correct in analysing the situation and advising that the revolution can never come about without liberating the woman. And people like Mugabe have always talked about the involvement of women in the whole process of liberation.⁸⁷

Cecily Lockett traces a progression in Tlali’s works in relation to the gender position that the women in the narratives are given.⁸⁸ In Tlali’s first work, Muriel is given the traditional black attitude of a woman towards men. One of the men in the shop offered to do an errand for her, but she declined because: “According to our custom a woman does not send a man. We reserve a place, an elevated place, for our men.” (p.27) In this work her primary purpose was to reveal the racial oppression and no real attention is given to sexual oppression.

One of the reasons that Tlali became more conscious of recording events that detailed the treatment of women as minors was the difficulties that she encountered when she began publishing her first novel. As she explains:

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⁸⁷ MacKenzie, p.75.

Legally among other restrictions to her personal freedom, the African woman has no contractual rights. This was the position when I completed writing my first book in 1969. In 1975, after six long years, I had succeeded at last in finding someone who was willing to accept it for publication. The publishers - Ravan Press - were faced with the question of how they were to draw up a contract of agreement with me because I was considered a minor. My husband would not sign the contract because he had not written the book and did not see why he should do it for me when I was in full control of all my mental faculties and could read and write. Finally the publishers and I decided to go ahead and draw up the agreement anyway and face the consequences.  

In *Amandla* we see that women's roles in relation to the men are slightly more progressive than they were in *Muriel*, verifying Lockett's observation that Tlali increases her attention to gender issues in each successive work published. The struggle is again focussed on political liberation, but space is given in the narrative to explore ways to decrease the oppression of women. The male protagonist, Pholoso, encourages women to take a prominent role in the liberation struggle and also to increase their level of education. He tells the underground movement, "Our girls and women can accomplish a lot if we let them." (p. 89) The role of women is still largely a supportive one however.

*Mihloti* and *Soweto Stories* concentrate more on the difficulties in the lives of black women. Sexual oppression by both black and white men is clearly revealed and generally more emphasized than the racial oppressions. There is the attempted rape

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89 Worsfold, "The Theme of Apartheid...", p.325.
of a teenager by a black policeman in a crowded van in “Detour into Detention” and the assaults on women travellers in “Fud-u-u-a!”.

The short story that best exemplifies Tlali’s position on gender issues and the situation where black women are regarded as ‘minors’ is “‘Masechaba’s Erring ‘Child’”. A long debate takes place between three women. The protagonist is Tholoana, a single mother with a lover who is a political leader. Her single friend, Lindiwe, accompanied her to visit another friend, ‘Masechaba, a widow. The discussion centers around the male chauvinistic attitudes that ‘Masechaba’s dead husband had. Tholoana could not believe the selfishness of ‘Masechaba, that she was willing to allow her husband to use girls as ‘objects’ simply to protect her own physical benefits. Another point of annoyance to Tholoana was the fact that ‘Masechaba kept putting herself in the role of minor by referring to her husband as ‘Ntate’ (father), “especially because she seemed to obey him - not as a loving companion, but as a daughter would do.”(p.158) Tlali makes an interesting connection between the enslavement of women by this ‘Ntate’ and “this vicious system which manacles people.” (p.160)

In “Mm’a - Lithoto” Tlali explores what it means to be an African woman in a changing society; in a society where the traditional culture has been disrupted. Paballo was tired of being treated like a stone without feelings, but “where would

\begin{itemize}
\item Tlali, Soweto, p.138.
\item Tlali, Soweto, p.12.
\end{itemize}
she have escaped to”. In this story we see that Tlali has progressed from where Muriel in her first work was treated as an insect by the white oppressors and here Paballo is treated inhumanly by her own black husband. She returns to her family to get help from them with her marriage problems because that was the traditional way. Unfortunately because of changing ways and the tiredness of the elders this help was never received. (p.25) Through these narratives Tlali gives “voice to the unheard women who sustain against enormous odds the fabric of black community life”. 92

Critics have mentioned that Tlali’s female characters remain trapped in a traditional role of wife and mother, supporting the male characters. 93 Tlali prefers to write in a realist form, trying to reflect society and therefore agrees with this reading of her texts. As she says:

They play a supportive role because they are not allowed to come to the forefront. If they were allowed by the system - and by the men - they would. Many women protect their husband’s egos by playing up to the fact that they are merely supportive, and they really know they are the very ones who are behind the forceful nature of the men. 94

Tlali believes, just as Mashinini and Kuzwayo do, that one way the African women can cope with the many oppressions is through a supportive and loyal commitment

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93 Dorothy Driver, ADA Magazine, p.52.

94 MacKenzie, p.75.
towards each other by the women in the communities. The main deterrent to combatting sexual oppression is the conflicting loyalties of race and gender.\textsuperscript{95} As Wicomb points out, Tlali often conceals the perpetrators of this oppression by leaving them nameless and faceless in the narratives. Although there has been some progression in her works, the major focus in Tlali's works thus remains the exploration of the exploitation of race and class.

In my interview with Tlali I raised the issue of how she deals with gender in her texts. The reason for foregrounding the racial struggle was that she did not want to divide women against the men in the struggle for liberation. She mentioned that as South Africa was now at the crossroads she felt it was time for her to speak out more strongly about women's issues.(Appendix A, p.113)

\textsuperscript{95} Zoë Wicomb, "To Hear the Variety of Discourse", \textit{Current Writing}, 2, 1990, Durban: University of Natal, p.41.
Chapter 5

The Entrance Into Autobiography

Identity emerges from a community of experience, rather than from a transcendent unity of being.\(^6\)

In autobiographical works the authors shape a narrative from the many events that have occurred to present the reader with a life story of some significance. There are many different ways to do this and therefore Don Grant has called autobiography an "unruly beast" which is difficult to describe within a given set of conventions.\(^7\) I want to illustrate how Tlali, Kuzwayo and Mashinini have chosen to create meaning from their lives by representation of their own people instead of allowing themselves to be portrayed by the political "other". In the context of South Africa's Apartheid system their writing takes on political significance. As McClintock points out:

The entry into autobiography, particularly, is seen to be the entry into the political authority of self-representation.\(^8\)

This representation is vitally important to understand meaning and truth for African women because "African women have always been defined by others, whites and

\(^6\) McClintock, p.213.


\(^8\) McClintock, p.198.
The works by these women belong to a recently emerging body of work where the African women are defining themselves in English. In many cases it is the preferred language, apart from the writer’s original African language, because it is not the first language of the Apartheid government.

Autobiographical writers from the first world are somewhat different in their approach to those from the third world. Third world writers are more likely to emphasize the community rather than the self. As Ngugi points out they need to “seize back their creative initiative through a real control....of communal self-definition in time and space.”

This communal definition has also been noted as a feature of women’s autobiographies. The creation of the identity of the oppressed people is foregrounded instead of the creation of a personal identity. Trinh points out that in her personal experience as part of the Asian minority in the United States, the personal and collective personae are integral elements of the same identity.

A writing for the people, by the people, and from the people is, literally, a multipolar reflecting reflection that remains free from the conditions of subjectivity and objectivity and yet reveals them both. I write to show myself showing people who show me my own showing... neither I nor you come first... “T” is, itself, infinite layers. The line dividing I and Not-

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The three main texts to be covered in this chapter all focus on the oppressed communities of the African women in South Africa. This idea of an individual's identity being connected with the people in the community is strongly evident in all three texts. The African idiom "a person is a person because of other people" is quoted by Tlali (in "Dimomona") and Kuzwayo. This idiom is central to analysis of how the three writers define themselves. They define themselves within a community of people, in relation to the people with whom they come in contact and not as an isolated or intrinsic self.

Under the impact of Black Consciousness, the personal, individuated "I" becomes replaced by a focus on community, and a desire to find one's self-definition within the black, rather than the white, community.

M.J. Daymond has put together studies by Sommer and Olney and has come to similar conclusions about self definition which she calls the “collective selfhood” that is evident in South African writing.

102 Trinh T. Minh-ha, p.22, 94.
103 Tlali, Soweto, p.56.
104 Kuzwayo, Call, p.16.
It also gives us a way of understanding that the autonomy implied in the ‘heroic’, singular selfhood of Western autobiographers may not, in South Africa, come to usurp the black autobiographer’s sense of collective selfhood. 

In Miriam Tlali’s Mihloti she talks about her time in detention. She describes the agony the detainees faced because they did not know if their loved ones knew where they were. Miriam felt great relief as soon as she knew that someone from her community had traced her;

‘Miriam...Miriam from Rockville!’

Yet I was happy to answer the call - I had been claimed. I belong! My heart called out from the dark wilderness of utter loss and uncertainty I had been silently groping in. (p.32)

She felt safe and well once she had been acknowledged by someone from her community, even though she was still securely locked in prison.

Emma Mashinini had some trouble adjusting to who she was after her imprisonment, but came to grips with the situation because of other people. She stated the matter succinctly some time after she was released:

And then there were all my friends, who were all so strong for me and who worked so hard to make me see that I was still a person whom they accepted, despite all my fears and shame at having been a prisoner. (p.98)

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In the chapter “Unfolding Horizons”, Ellen Kuzwayo mentions many people who influenced her when she was a young woman; Faith Calluza, her music teacher, Mrs Matthews who taught her many values and Miss Mama, the domestic science teacher who taught her subject as a way of life. (pp. 85-91) It is clear from this chapter that Kuzwayo recognises that she is the person she is because of these other people in her life.

The autobiographical writing of these authors is therefore not of a psychological nature, delving into the inner being. As a result of their oppression under Apartheid and patriarchal systems, portraying the ‘self’ for these writers has a changed significance. “The focus on self is in such cases seen less as a striving after the unique ‘truth’ of the individual than as an assertion of this self’s humanity.”

It is closer to the western form of the memoir. Many western memoirs have been written by persons of notoriety or high political authority featuring their public connections with people in society. Women memoir writers have frequently been pioneers in their careers and their texts have given them eminence within the female realm of letters and politics even though they were not always recognised in the patriarchal system. Tlali, Kuzwayo and Mashinini have no political authority, but they are pioneers in their careers and certainly can be considered women of pre-eminence. Their texts can also be viewed as memoirs because the public self is defined more clearly and in more detail than the private self.

In Muriel Tlali gives the reader very little insight into what she does at home, whereas her life at work is covered in great detail. In an interview with Cherry Clayton Tlali mentions that she deliberately wrote this way to protect her family. She did not want to reveal too many intimate autobiographical details. Kuzwayo reveals more about her family matters, but in her text she keeps the reader at a distance when discussing personal and private matters. However, when dealing with her career or her public image she is more willing to expose herself. There were many heartbreaking moments in her life and yet the one time that she allows her emotions to be completely recorded is in a situation dealing with a terminally ill fellow social worker (p. 161, Call). Emma Mashinini has a similar style in that she avoids discussing family matters that touched her deeply and yet she is very open about her emotions and feelings in relation to her detention because that was as a result of her public self, her work in the unions.

**Call Me Woman**

In Kuzwayo’s autobiography there are three main focal areas. The first of these, and perhaps the most important to her, is the identity of the female self. This is drawn to the reader’s attention by the title: *Call Me Woman*. It is not singular ‘Call me a Woman’ or personal, ‘Call me Ellen’, but the collective generic form. The second

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108 MacKenzie, p. 82.
area of focus is what Kuzwayo calls the “extra burden, as a black and as a woman”\textsuperscript{109} What it means to be a woman in the black communities in South Africa is highlighted throughout. The meaning of life under the laws of the Apartheid government is explored in great detail. The third area of emphasis is that of her own professional and public life.

Kuzwayo carefully controls the construction of her text which she organises into three sections: ‘Soweto’, ‘My Road to Soweto’ and ‘Patterns Behind the Struggle’. Thus for readers to enter and exit from the narrative of her life story they need to read the stories of other women told in the first and the last sections. These sections cover personal and historical information about black women and their communities. The framing of the text within a list of Kuzwayo’s career dates at the beginning and the list of Black women doctors and lawyers at the back place this life narrative in the category of memoir/public record.

One of the functions of this structure is its use as a distancing device by Kuzwayo. As Patricia Meyer Spacks points out, “women, for obvious social reasons, have traditionally had more difficulty than men about making public claims for their own importance”\textsuperscript{110} By speaking on behalf of many other women, Kuzwayo has as her overt reason the desire to make public the needs of other women and to show their


contributions to society. This strategy of placing her deeds amongst those of others is possibly a political motivation to have herself portrayed as one contributor to a movement. Another reason, perhaps an unconscious one, is to efface herself and to avoid excess vanity and the feeling of self importance that writing about herself could generate. Her strong Christian upbringing would have informed her that unless one is confessing, dwelling on the self becomes a point of pride and vanity. Being a woman and a Christian would have doubled this inclination for self-effacement.

The longer middle section contains Kuzwayo’s own story beginning with her childhood through to her release from imprisonment. The placement of her personal information in this way both effaces and centralises her story at the same time. Her assertion of self takes place in the wider context of her family and their customs, and her people and their customs. She covers many interesting details about her childhood amongst her extended family in her grandfather’s Christian home. He had received a good education at Lovedale Institution and encouraged education in the family by establishing a small farm school on his property. Eventually she trained as a teacher because that profession and nursing seemed the only choices available for young girls in the 1920’s and 1930’s (p.87).

The conflict between the culture given to her family by the colonising missionaries and the traditional African culture still adhered to by many of their neighbours, becomes apparent. Her loyalty shifts between the two. As a young girl and later as a youth worker she is grateful for the knowledge about the Lebollo (initiation schools
p.70). When her sister married the son of a chief she was then thankful that he was an educated man and liberated from many of his restrictive taboos (p.117). The meaning of life for her is informed by both cultures and the representation of herself shifts between her affinity with one or the other.

There are two tragic periods in her early adult life that she speaks of: the time her aunt Blanche forced her to leave her family home in the country and when she decided to leave her marriage for her own physical and mental well-being. The first traumatic departure led to introspection and a desire to understand her roots (p.122). The second trauma meant even deeper analysis of who she was (p.181). As Daymond mentions this reflection would have contributed to her later successful attempt at autobiography even if the omission of many of the details leaves the western reader wanting more.

Ellen Kuzwayo’s own capacity for self-examination seems to have had its origin in, the self-doubt caused by intense suffering...
As Ellen Kuzwayo herself records, the first crisis was enough to lead her to the introspection from which autobiography may be born.111

One accepted view of autobiography is the notion that “authenticity lies in the specificity of detail, in what could only be told by the narrator”.112 Since Kuzwayo’s project is rooted in community rather than in personal confession, it is not surprising

112 Daymond, “Going into Print…”, p.21.
that she does not mention the "unspeakable" horrors that led to her unhappiness, her illness and termination of her third pregnancy and her flight from her married home. Instead of specificity to validate and authenticate her details she uses textual devices which are common to many other South African autobiographies including Mashinini's, and those are photographs as well as journalistic details of names, dates and places. As Coullie points out these devices are used as part of their "insistence on verifiability".

After these tragedies, Kuzwayo moved back to Johannesburg and returned to teaching for a few years. When her third son, from her second marriage was a few years old she changed professions. She trained as a social worker and it was in this field that she really found her identity. Helping her people, and especially the younger generation, was very important to her. This gave her the sense of worth that had been knocked out of her. As Trinh points out in an earlier quotation, the public collective can confirm the private singular.

Patricia Meyer Spacks speaks of the autobiographies of famous women such as Emmeline Pankhurst, Dorothy Day, Eleanor Roosevelt and Golda Meir. She says "all have written accounts of their lives in which they describe themselves, implicitly or explicitly, as gaining identity from their chosen work." It would appear that

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114 Spacks, p.113.
Ellen Kuzwayo did the same. Before her social work began she had doubts about herself and the directions she was taking. Once she began working for her people in the Young Women’s Christian Association her sense of self and the meaning of life crystallised. She developed the goal of remaining determined in the struggle for improvements just like the women from previous generations that she mentions (p.243-263). She worked for improvements in the daily lives of women and children and also in the greater political struggle for change “in the country so that the coming generations can enjoy a better life in their ancestor’s country.”(p.263)

Kuzwayo defines herself and other women as activists, strong and capable leaders in community affairs and clearly able to manage their family commitments as well as community roles. To emphasize this point, the text finishes with lists containing the names of South African Black Women Medical Doctors qualified between 1947 and 1981 and the South African Black Women Lawyers qualified between 1967 and 1982.

**Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life**

As I mentioned in the introduction, Emma Mashinini’s main aim in her text, *Strikes Have Followed Me All Life*, is to uphold the dignity of the individual. This might appear to contradict the claim that her writing is community based and non-individual. However, one must remember that the aim is politically oriented towards

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establishing that the Africans are a race - comprised of individuals. She advocates upholding the individual dignity by dealing with three areas of her life. She promotes upholding a women’s personal dignity in her private family life, upholding the dignity of the African women in the workplace and working towards political dignity for Africans in South Africa.

On the surface Mashinini’s writing could be viewed as individualistic, if the reader does not remember the collective experience of Africans. They are often regarded stereotypically as a race and not as individuals. As Barbara Christian points out, stereotypes reduce humanness and thus individuality; “stereotype, whether positive or negative, is a byproduct of racism, is one of the vehicles through which racism tries to reduce the human being to a nonhuman level.”\(^\text{116}\) It is, therefore, Mashinini’s project to act as an individual to help solve a group dilemma.\(^\text{117}\)

As Mashinini explains, the African tradition for women means that once they are married they belong “body and soul to the family”\(^\text{118}\) of their husbands. This tradition therefore, made it very difficult in her own case, for her to extricate herself from her marriage. She mentions that her husband mistreated her and would selfishly spend more money on his clothes than they could afford. She had been taught “never to expose the dirty linen in public” and since “wife-battering was regarded as


\(^\text{117}\) Christian, p.69.

\(^\text{118}\) Mashinini, p.12.
dirty linen" she could not get help or counselling without revealing what was taking place. This attitude towards private marital matters also meant that Mashinini did not write about the details of the offenses. Similar reticence has been found in the fiction and non-fiction writing of Tlali and Kuzwayo. TL Tlali explains this reticence as a characteristic of black societies:

[Buchi Emecheta is] very open, which is so rare in black societies. Like I said before, you tend to protect your family.

Mashinini mentions that these situations have now been recognised by the community and there are refuge centres in the townships to help women (p. 12). The more people of Kuzwayo’s and Mashinini’s standing who make public their actions in the face of such domestic crises, the more women will feel confident to uphold their right to safety and dignity in the home.

The strength of character and leadership that Mashinini developed through the difficulties that faced her early in adult life was used when she began work in the garment factories in Johannesburg in 1956. Within a few years she was elected a shop steward. It must be remembered that unions are, by their very nature, associated with socialism no matter what their political allegiance. Communism was banned by law in South Africa for many years and therefore any union activity was

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120 MacKenzie, p. 82.
scrutinised by the authorities. This is why Mashinini was apprehended by the police later in the narrative.

The chapters two through five are historically based, dealing with the information about her background in the unions. This section once again illustrates that in autobiographies that are written as memoirs the public identity is clearly established. Connections with other people in society that have contact with Mashinini are covered in these chapters.

Because the text is written by a union worker one would expect it to be written from a strongly left-wing point of view. This is not wholly the case. She does not claim to be speaking for the working class, but rather for black women in general. Her sense of 'self' is more informed by those things associated with the middle class because these are symbolic of the freedom and possessions denied to Africans by Apartheid. Mashinini speaks of her longing for beautiful things because her mother taught her to appreciate them (p.5).

So I like to think it is for this reason - this love of beautiful things - that I have one special possession - a BMW. I wanted it because it is beautiful, and also, I think, because I have been so deprived of beauty. Deprivation does a lot to a person. The more you are deprived, the more you are envious of things. (p.98)

Michael Vaughan mentions that the emphasis on the racial struggle against Apartheid in writing can "actually obscure certain very important dimensions of social experience and social struggle." The ideological struggle between the capitalist system and the working class becomes hidden in texts such as *Strikes*.

Having been freed from the desire to be "white" by the black consciousness movement (p. 9) Mashinini focusses on the need for racial and gender equality in all aspects of life.

> The whole life of a worker needs trade union involvement. And together with that goes the whole question of equality between men and women. (p. 119)

These are the main issues that Mashinini kept coming back to even during the greater part of the text where her detention is recorded. There is no escaping the fact that the writing is done by an activist, but by not formally writing from a feminist or a classist stance she refuses to be co-opted into "hierarchising the evils" of the South African society.

Mashinini's growing prominence in the union movement and her negotiations with multinationals during large labour strikes brought her to the attention of the government. As she points out, in her estimation union work and politics could not be separated:

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122 Vaughan, p. 198.

123 Wicomb, p. 42.
I insisted that the trade unions have got to be very much involved in politics, and that even if trade unions anywhere else in the world are not involved politically, in South Africa they must be, because this is a country where everything around us is politics. As they say, touch a black person and it's politics. So we cannot simply say we want to fight for our rights as workers, because politically we are not even recognised as workers. The Industrial Conciliation Act excluded us from its machinery because we weren't regarded as workers. (p.43)

In 1979 the government allowed the black trade unions to apply for registration. During the next few years while registration was being processed, activity and organisation on the part of the union leaders was increased. The government began a campaign to instill fear and uncertainty amongst the unions by arresting many of the leaders, black and white alike. Alan Fine, a white co-worker and friend of Mashinini's was arrested in September, 1981. Her arrest followed on 27 November, 1981 and unbeknown to her there were also others arrested on the same day.

The sudden pre-dawn raid on Mashinini's home made her shiver with shock and fear. The intrusion left her exposed and vulnerable. This feeling intensified by the time she was left in her cell in Pretoria Central Prison.

I was cold. Everything was taken... I sat in that place with nothing to read. Just myself. The bare me.

It was a prison where there seemed to be whites only.

I had no visits, no interrogation, no word from anybody whatsoever. (p.61)
The Influence of Imprisonment on Writing

Mashinini’s writing about this six-month detention without trial gives the reader valuable insight into how the self is reflected during imprisonment and solitary confinement in particular. Many of the cultural leaders and literary figures have devoted texts or portions of their texts to describe their prison experiences: Nelson Mandela, Alan Hendrikse, Frank Chikane, Ruth First, Albie Sachs, Hugh Lewin, Moses Dlamini and many more have contributed to the prison memoir and helped establish this genre as a significant form in South African writing. As Cherry Clayton contends, prison seems to turn even the most reluctant writer to writing. This act of writing from prison shows the reader that “boundaries exist and that individual identity, whether personal or national is always fought for and maintained at a price”.

She had been stripped of her personal dignity, denied access to her family and friends and incarcerated away from her race in a prison which she knew was used for people who had been sentenced to death. The result of all this was a loss of her identity as she had previously imagined it. In the beginning she was detained under Section 22 which was a temporary detention of fourteen days, but then it was changed to Section 6 which was the indefinite detention. Once she found out about


this worsening of her situation she felt utterly hopeless and couldn't even see the need to eat, for as she said: "now I'd had my chips".

An erosion of the way Mashinini thought about herself took place to the degree that she questioned her sense of self. "There were times when I would believe them, that with all that manpower I must be a very dangerous person" (p.74). During her solitary confinement the reader perceives a fading of the self image. There were no other people to provide a reflection of herself or to use the African proverb; there were no other people to help her be a person.

After a period of interrogations suddenly ended, this self image reaches a particularly low point:

I didn't think I knew myself any longer. There was no mirror. It's odd what happens when you don't see yourself in a mirror for such a long time. You don't recognise your- self. You think, who am I? All I had to recognise was a jersey which was sent to me by a friend. It was her jersey and I could recognise it. But I didn't know any longer how to recognise myself (p.87).

Later she was allowed access to communication with the community at large through a radio brought to her by her husband and newspapers smuggled to her by black police in her new place of imprisonment, Jeppe Police Station. This change began to alter her self perception again. In the text we begin to get a stronger image and she was able to be more forceful in her dealings with the police.

And I started realising that there were many of us inside here. It made me feel braver. I all of a sudden just gained strength. (p.80)
Now for the first time, I was making my demands. I was demanding Bishop Tutu and Holy Communion. (p. 82)

She gained inner fortitude and began to take care of herself and her cell. The knowledge that her husband was asserting himself on her behalf gave her courage and so did the knowledge that there were other people being held at the same time that she was. To perceive herself in a clear way she needed to have a perception of other people as well.

Foster, Davis and Sandler have researched political imprisonments in other countries and made an empirical study of the situation in South Africa. Physical and psychological symptoms are often present after detention as in any other post-traumatic stress disorder. In fact the disorder can be more severe when the stress is induced by human design as in detentions. The details that this study reveal confirm all accounts that we find in literature. Many of those released from prison complain of health and psychological problems and Emma Mashinini is no exception. At times while still imprisoned, the stress and fear was so great that Mashinini had difficulty recalling her one daughter’s name. This added to her pain and suffering.

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I could see my youngest daughter's face and I wanted to call her by her name. I struggled to call out the name, the name I always called her, and I just could not recall what the name was. I struggled and struggled. I would fall down and actually weep with the effort of remembering the name of my daughter. (p.86)

This prison experience was so overpowering in her life that throughout the life narrative Mashinini keeps returning to express more of her feelings on the subject (pp.104,111). The chapter dealing with her release from prison is called ‘A Kind of Freedom’ because in hindsight she realises that the whole experience kept her a “condemned person” by the many psychological difficulties that plagued her even after her release (p.108).

Soon after her release, Mashinini went to Denmark to receive treatment at a clinic set up to help detainees and victims of torture. She found the experience very helpful, although difficult at first because the doctor was a white woman. White people had so often been the instigators of her problems that she found it hard to trust this “new white woman”. Even though it was therapeutic interrogation, it was interrogation nevertheless.

I had to dig it out. I forgot some of the things, but she was so patient. She wanted me to dig and dig and speak about everything. (p.92)

It took a long time before Mashinini was really comfortable talking about her experiences. This encouragement to verbalise all the unpleasant experiences proved beneficial not only to recover from the post-traumatic stress disorder, but helpful in
recalling events for written records. Writing the material for her autobiography also became part of the healing process.

Mashinini found that she enjoyed writing down information during interrogation sessions in preference to being harassed for verbal answers.

I would sit and write, and write, and this was better for me. Maybe it was a way of being able to think what to say without for once anyone pushing me and going on -"Come on, come on, now. Speak." And being rough about it. (p.76)

Speaking and writing about difficult situations is a known psycho-therapy method which both Mashinini and Kuzwayo used to advantage in their autobiographies. Speaking about her writing as a solution to her emotional pain, Kuzwayo commented during an interview: “when I was writing the tension floated onto the pen and it has released me.”127

The writing of this book has offered me an opportunity to relive these past experiences with a certain amount of objectivity and maturity, as I struggle to understand analytically why what happened, happened. Talking about such experiences in a way I have never done before will hopefully air them and expel them from my whole system. (p.181)

No doubt because of her background in social work Kuzwayo was easily able to recognise the value of releasing the tensions caused by the way she was treated.

127 James, p.55.
I have anger and bitterness, but they do not become destructive because I always express what I am feeling. In that respect writing this book has been valuable therapy.\textsuperscript{128}

As Bill McGaw mentions in his introduction to \textit{Inventing Countries}, post-colonial writers “in rehabilitating their identities... are reshaping their own destinies. It is, first, an act of defiance, but ultimately, it is an act of survival.”\textsuperscript{129} Pain and suffering has caused a breakdown of the African world, but as these texts illustrate, there is a reconstruction taking place. This is being done by people who have come through the oppressions, rehabilitated their identities and worked on with continuing hope. Mashinini leaves the reader with the thought of achieving that freedom one day and closes her text with a vision of this future world: “Now that we’ve achieved justice - now that we’ve attained that - now may I not rest in peace.”(p.135)

In contrast to Mashinini, Kuzwayo’s five-month detention did not seem to alter her self image. One of the reasons for this was that she was detained under section 10 which did not include solitary confinement or interrogation. After the 1976 unrest in Soweto concerned citizens had met and formed The Committee of Ten to study the systems of the local authority. She and the other nine male members were all arrested and detained on 19 October 1977. She was allowed plenty of contact with other prisoners and outside visitors. This contact with other people helped her to

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128 Kate McKinnell, “Downtrodden but determined: how world will see black mothers of SA”, \textit{The Star}, 23rd July 1984, (Johannesburg: South Africa).

\end{flushright}
perceive her own image more clearly throughout her detention. Even though she was frightened and disoriented upon her release she received "outstanding support and acceptance on my return from detention and I survived and thrived on that". (p.218)

Kuzwayo’s perception of herself remained positive and constant as did the perception of her by her people. This was reflected back to her even while she was imprisoned. It was only the government forces that perceived her as a threat and a danger to stability, but she did not allow this to influence her own perception. The chapter dealing with her detention is thus accurately titled “How the State Sees Me”. Kuzwayo never saw herself as a prisoner or a political terrorist, but rather as a community leader working for improvements in Soweto.

The prison experience is recorded by Kuzwayo in a self-conscious manner. All of the events that she writes about are only accessible through layers of the present and her personal value system.

After they had taken my fingerprints, my hands were soiled with the tar-like liquid they use, and there were no facilities provided to wash my hands. I lost my temper again and demanded soap, water and a towel, all of which were provided. I see the lack of these facilities as another tactic by those in authority to degrade and insult black people in prison. To this day I see their quick response on that occasion not as a simple answer to my request or demand, but much more as a means to save themselves more embarrassment in front of the new arrivals. (p.216)

Miriam Tlali includes the story of her imprisonment in the volume, Mihloti under the title of “Detour Into Detention”. She begins the narrative by telling her experiences
to a kindly neighbour who welcomes her home from prison. As Richard Rive mentions in the introduction, it is an “impressive account” and a “graphic description” of the arrest and detention of ninety-two people who were waiting at the Zenzele YWCA in Dube to board buses to attend the funeral of Steve Biko in the distant town of Kingwilliamstown.¹³⁰

It is more a group account of the feelings and reactions of the men and particularly the women and girls who were arrested. A clear picture emerges from the text of the solidarity of prisoners towards each other and solidarity from the community in Soweto.

Those who had ‘lost’ all their possessions and purses would also be provided for. ‘After all we are all one family’, we all agreed. (p.21)

We had all our people - the people of Soweto - behind us, ‘with us’. And that was all the moral support we needed. (p.37)

Against the loud background of our freedom song, we each filed out of the majestic gates of the Meadowlands police station into the free air and the open arms of our loved ones - the people of Soweto - who were already there in their hundreds, waiting to receive us and nurse us back to health. (p.39)

This detention in 1977 no doubt greatly influenced Tlali’s subsequent writing. Her second work Amandla is far more politically aggressive and aware, not only of the

¹³⁰ Tlali, Mihloti, p.xii.
problems caused by Apartheid which she covers in *Muriel*, but also the problems caused by corrupt and harsh police methods. This firsthand experience in the company of several youths helped her identify even more strongly with the aims of the Black Consciousness Movement and the young people of Soweto.

Throughout my life, I had tried by all means to avoid any confrontation with the police. For a so-called second class citizen who had lived all her life in the city of Johannesburg, I had really been fortunate enough to have achieved that unique distinction in a place where it was almost impossible not to be a criminal. I had obeyed almost all the laws of this Republic. All the many unjust laws I had often felt that I was under no moral obligation to honour. Yet there I was. (p.15)

**Muriel At Metropolitan**

Miriam Tlali has used fiction to explore the autobiographical self in *Muriel at Metropolitan*. She exposes similar themes and concerns as Kuzwayo and Mashinini. Tlali is not investigating the truth of 'self' with the Muriel character. She is claiming the right to humanity of this individual and all other black individuals in the text. The second emphasis, but one which is closely allied is the voice for freedom. The Africans are politically voiceless (pp.163, 178) and so Muriel is used to speak on their behalf to vocalize their lack of freedom in many areas of life. This novel is set in the early 1960's and as such has the earliest time setting of the three autobiographical texts. Tlali used her personal experiences as a clerk in a furniture store to write this novel. The central character, Muriel, reveals her public self. The text can be read as a journey towards self assertion as Muriel refuses to be inscribed as the political 'other' wants her to be.
Muriel, the protagonist, calls much of the writing about Africans written by non-African experts, "trash". She believes they have not been accurately portrayed and this accuracy is what she wants to emphasize in the telling of her story even though she is not a writer or an authority. Because she is an African she can properly represent their "feelings, hopes, desires and aspirations". This self-representation can therefore be viewed as political protest. Similar to the personae of Mashinini and Kuzwayo, Muriel is shown to receive definition from others in the workplace. She resists the image that the white women want to give her, but defines herself with and by the other African workers especially Adam.

Thanks to Adam's wisdom and moral support, I was able to drag on during this very trying period. Whenever I complained to him, he would calmly console me by saying "You just sit there and do your work, never mind those two women. This is not their shop. It is Baas Bloch's shop. You have already proved your value to him and he will never drive you away because of them". (p 67)

Tlali did not choose a bitter tone, but one that is gently didactic and firmly revealing. It does not as obviously belong to the same category as her later protest writings, in that the messages are more subtly presented. To her white readers, the message is that they need to learn what life really is like for Africans in their work places. She hopes her black readers would learn from Muriel to make choices that support freedom for Africans and not choices that would further suppress their people.

131 Tlali, Muriel, p.10.
Getting to know her work mates and work routine at Metropolitan left Muriel trembling, uneasy and lonely. "How was I going to work with people who were not even prepared to give me a chance and who were squeezing as much money as they could out of my own fellow workers?" (p.17). As Tlali explores how the different relationships developed in the work place this theme on the treatment of the African customers is continued. Muriel’s guilt increased as time passed because she felt compromised by working for a company that charged higher interest rates to Africans than other companies.

By the end of the novel Muriel’s relationships with the white women workers had changed. They no longer thought of her as a “danger”, but a “co-worker”. Mrs Stein had grown to tolerate her and could exchange pleasantries with her quite easily. Muriel had “almost forgiven Mrs Kuhn for all the past atrocities against” her (p.173). She could even see many of Mrs Kuhn’s good qualities. Some understanding had been developed between the different races. Muriel no longer viewed the whites as “inhuman” or “downright cruel” (p.174), but her relationship with them was not enough to change their attitude to the rest of Muriel’s people. They still had this “fear of us” and when a new African woman came to work at Metropolitan she was treated the same way that Muriel had first been treated.

The understanding by the white women of the true political position of the Africans was very limited. The women were willing to have political discussions with Muriel on race issues, but could not understand the lack of freedom and voiceless situation that the Africans lived under. The improvements to her personal comforts and
relationships on the job did not blind Muriel to the continuing hardships of her people as a whole and this knowledge led her to the decision to resign.

I had a last decided to free myself of the shackles which had bound not only my hands, but also my soul.

All I knew was that I could not be part of the web that has been woven to entangle a people whom I love and am part of. I would never again place myself in a position in which I had to ask for pass-books or be 'loyal to the firm' at my people's expense. My conscience would be clear. (p. 190)

Through Muriel, Tlali insists on speaking out as an individual and as a human being (pp.70,71). She often tries to make the point that Africans are not goggas (insects), but humans (p.175).

In writing life narratives these authors have claimed selfhood for African women, emphasising the reflection of personal identity from the community, and secondly, emphasising the humanity of this personal identity.
Conclusion

...women fighting their way out of silence to project more authentic images of how women feel and what they do...

In their works, Tlali, Kuzwayo and Mashinini, have shown that they are able to adjust autobiographical writing to fulfill their needs. They have appropriated the coloniser's language to express themselves; to define themselves and their individual experiences. Their position in South Africa has been a marginalised one, but through their writing they are re-creating the image of black women in a more central role in their culture. They are refusing to be inscribed in a voiceless, marginal position.

To evaluate the contribution of these women, it is not only important to see them as contributors to the post-1976 revival of black literature, as, of course, they are; but also and perhaps more importantly to recognise that they are pioneers in a completely new field. In becoming writers and in speaking about their experiences as black women, they have, in the first instance, overcome the barriers erected against the advancement of all black women by a society which appears to deny their very existence.

All three women have made sure that they have not been ignored in their occupations of writer, social worker and union leader. In recording women's lives in

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133 Edmands, p.18.
the texts they have further ensured that women’s existence and women’s efforts can no longer be denied. By writing their life narratives they are,

...altering discursive practice by setting new limits regarding what may be said and by whom. These women are altering material practice, too, in that they have engaged in the production of a text which is a consumable product demonstrating the worth of women.\(^{134}\)

In one of her poems Zindzi Mandela talks about the black woman using her chief possession: her body, herself.\(^ {135}\) This “chief possession” of women and the stories that Kuzwayo says they can claim, are practically all Apartheid has allowed the black woman. Tlali, Kuzwayo and Mashinini have used themselves and their stories to open up space and freedom for black women to find expression, especially in the transitional revolutionary society that has existed in South Africa, where there has been a need for writers to document the events taking place and point towards the issues that need changing.\(^ {136}\) These texts have clearly fulfilled that role.

One common feature found in these texts is the hope and faith that the writing points towards in a post-Apartheid society. Even though injustice and cruelty is revealed, the general tone is not morbid and despairing.

\(^{134}\) Coullie, p.11.


\(^{136}\) Lenta, p.11.
Kuzwayo: I fight with all the means I have at my disposal for change in my country so that the coming generations can enjoy a better life in their ancestor’s country. (Call p.263)

Mashinini: I close the manuscript with a surge of elation, hope and happiness. (Strike p.xvii)

Tlali: I did not know what the future held in store for me. I did not care. I had no regrets. All I knew was that I could not continue to be part of the web that has been woven to entangle a people whom I love and am part of. (Muriel p.190)

From Muriel, the first of these texts to be written, we see Tlali desiring mutual understanding between women across the racial barriers. Muriel tries to see Mrs Stein, Mrs Kuhn, and the other white women as individuals instead of merely part of the different “other”. Mashinini records the occasions when she is able to develop genuine friendships with white women, as she did with Liz Floyd, who grieved with her over Neil Aggett’s death.

By the grave I said a prayer. I said a prayer and told Neil how much I cared for him, how much I loved him. Here we were two women together: myself, a black woman, and Liz Floyd, a white woman I’ve always respected and honoured. But with this friend, we became as one. (p.105)

Kuzwayo goes further by calling for a “chain of sisterhood” in South Africa and across to other nations.

...we agreed that we should keep our link as women from two different racial groups who need to work together so as to know one another with less prejudice and suspicion and, hopefully, to explore the possibilities of a better South Africa. (Call p.239)
The writing by these authors has pointed to a hopeful co-operation between women which seems to be taken up by the younger generation of women writers. As Cherry Clayton mentions, these younger writers have recently been working in a “non-racial spirit ... to extend their sense of female oppression to include white women”. This type of trust and lack of bitterness towards each other is what gives these texts the hope of a better future embodied by a poem by Gcina Mhlope, “We are at War”.

One of the five stanzas is quoted below:

Women of my country
Young and old
Black and white
we are at war
The winds are blowing
against us
We are at war
But do not despair
We are the winning type
Let us fight on
Forward ever
Backward never

In this dissertation I have shown that the works by Mashinini, Tlali and Kuzwayo are essentially at the service of the wider community and not entirely self-interested. The literature, whether fiction or non-fiction, is historically and culturally engaged to present the reader with counter truths and counter identities of Black South African

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women. The three authors had their youth and education before the Nationalist government took power in 1948 and passed the Bantu Education Act of 1953. This pre-Apartheid view enabled them to focus on post-Apartheid aims for their country and for their countrywomen. Just as their writing has been greatly influenced by the particular political times they live in, any subsequent writers building on this foundation will adjust and adapt literary genres as these authors have done. Perhaps the next generation of South African black women writers can look forward to being welcomed into the writing community without comments in their prefaces by established writers saying “although she is not a writer…” 139

With the advent of a New South Africa in 1994 I would hope that democracy will bring the freedom that these and other women have worked towards. As Wicomb and Tlali both mention in their interviews, [Appendix A p.108, Appendix D, p.159,160] if the new government introduces an equal and democratic education system it will automatically open up opportunities for the development of a new and younger generation of black women writers to build on the foundation of these authors. The role of story teller might once again be reclaimed within the altered cultural definition of black South African women.

139 Kuzwayo, Call, p.xi.
Appendix A

Interview With Miriam Tlali

This interview took place in the offices of Ravan Press, Standard House, De Korte Street, Braamfontein, Johannesburg, 9 November 1993.

JD: Your two children are grown up aren't they?

MT: Yes.

JD: Do you see them often?

MT: Well yes now, because my daughter is just back from Canada. She is studying for her PHD in Canada, in demography - population studies. She did her research for her Masters in Lesotho.

JD: Is she married?

MT: Just recently. At first she told me she didn’t want to get married at all and then last year she changed her mind. He is South African.

JD: Your other child is a son?

MT: Yes. Both my children were educated in Lesotho.

JD: Was it freer there?
**MT:** Not really, but it wasn’t Bantu education. Because I didn’t want them to be involved in the Bantu education system here. It was forced down our throats you know. Because my mother was in Lesotho I had the ability to send them away to her.

**JD:** Education was always important to you?

**MT:** Of course, because my father was an educated man. In my time it wasn’t big to educate daughters. Somebody would come and pay Lebolo and take care of them. My father was already an enlightened person. He was secretary for the ANC in the Orange Free State. My mother herself was also a person who was keen on education. In spite of all the problems she wanted me educated.

**JD:** Is education becoming more expensive lately?

**MT:** In South Africa parents have always had to pay heavily.

**JD:** Next year after the elections where do you think education will go?

**MT:** There is so much to education. So much has happened because of the inferior education. There is definitely pressure on anyone who has got the interests of South Africa at heart to bring in compulsory education for the Africans.

**JD:** I was speaking to Zoë Wicomb in Cape Town and she was saying it is very difficult to teach at a University standard. It is very hard for her as a lecturer to teach
the students that have come through the Bantu Education System because it is an inferior education.

**MT:** I was in the same position myself when I went to Wits as a student.

**JD:** So you needed extra help with the language?

**MT:** Yes, our English wasn't as good. It was quite a big step to jump from Native education as it was then to university standard. Do you have any difficulty reading my writing? Sometimes when a reader isn't conversant with the South African idioms they have trouble. Certain parts of the books are difficult to understand when they have been translated, especially in Muriel. For one thing it was published by Longman and I was not there at the time and there were quite a lot of errors. One lady has been highlighting these errors in her research in the German translation of the book because like you, she was South African and understood the book better. Here and there I do use Afrikaans expressions.

**JD:** I think that adds to it. I enjoyed Muriel the most of all your Works, from the point of view of a novel. Let us go back to when you were young, can you remember wanting to write stories?

**MT:** No, no, it would have been preposterous to even have mentioned it to anyone. Black writers, African writers were so few, but story telling was the custom. It was still very much done during my childhood. Grandmothers would tell their grandchildren stories. Most of us however, grew up in the Urban areas and our
grandmothers were too busy. The situation in the townships is not conducive to story telling. They come home so tired from work at night. In the olden days the old ladies had their own rooms, rondavels, where they slept and they took the grandchildren to sleep with them and that was when they told them the stories. Now the setup, especially in Sophiatown where I grew up was so crowded. The breadwinner would want to go to sleep and perhaps there would be only one room and no space for this story telling.

**JD:** Do you think the story telling will come back. Is there a possibility of that?

**MT:** There are people like Gcina Mlophe who tell stories in the public. It will come back in that form, not in the old way. Story telling will become one of the cultural engagements. I attended some of her story telling sessions and they were very good.

**JD:** When you did begin to write, how did you start?

**MT:** When I was at school I was three years behind my sister. At that time they used to promote children and let them jump. They let me jump Standard Two and jump Standard Four. When I was in Standard Six I had caught up to her. My teachers would encourage me to write. They would read my stories to the whole class. Very early I learnt to write, mainly to impress my teachers and also I used to read a lot, whatever I could come across. In those days there were very few African writers. Even Black American writers were few. Even when Mphahlele and others wrote we used to know their names but we would never see their books around.
There was the matter of having no money to go and buy these books even if I wanted to do so. Girls at that stage were encouraged to do the sweeping and not to read books. I didn’t live with my mother at the time but with other family and I was encouraged to do the housework. I was not allowed to sit around and read. Even the libraries in the townships were hopeless. It was only at Wits that I began to read. I had my text books to read and poetry because we had to recite poetry for one of the classes. Shakespeare and the different plays we also had to do. I really spent a lot of time reading there. When I studied African Administration I found it was dealing with myself, with tangible material, it wasn’t like trying to visualise the book *Vanity Fair*. Much later when I got to London and I saw all these places I was so fascinated. It was like walking into my text books. It was beautiful, I enjoyed it very much. At Wits one of my professors really encouraged me to read and the times demanded that we find ourselves. Having grown up in Sophiatown when there were always a lot of strikes in Joburg, and we sometimes met Tambo and other political leaders. We saw these people come to the Freedom Square to address the people.

**JD:** So you became politically aware at this time?

**MT:** Yes, very much so. This was in the 50’s. In “Dimomona” I talk about these things. So much happened to people with their passbooks that we became aware of problems between black and white. When I was little I can remember being taken to a shoe store and told not to touch anything when the white children were touching them, so we came to realise that there was something different about being black.
These experiences usually happened when we went into town and then when there were strikes in town they spread into the townships. I grew up in an atmosphere where I had to be conscious that I was black. On the pavement there was always a scuffle between the blacks and the whites. They told us to walk that way or walk this way. We had to be careful not to get in their way.

**JD:** Has your reading changed much over the years, what sort of reading do you do now?

**MT:** I read stories and I also read Afrikaans magazines. I want to devote my life to writing, not academic writing but writing fiction so I read a lot. Now and again I have to write papers like I'm doing at the moment. I feel really deprived when I cannot read novels.

**JD:** Which are some of the novels that you read?

**MT:** Just now I read novels by black writers. When I go to conferences I meet these writers personally, particularly women writers. I try to read African writers. Nadine Gordimer's books for instance are too expensive for me.

**JD:** What are the libraries like in the townships now, have they improved?

**MT:** For instance the library in my area was burnt down. Some of the young people are very reactionary and that's why they do these things. They are so bitter and frustrated because of Bantu education. Even the post office was burnt down.
JD: What do you think can be done about this?

MT: You can only change this if you change the whole system. Change the whole education system and it will filter through. They must see things to be happening. Even the school nearby us was taken apart. It is so difficult, you stand there and watch them take it apart brick by brick.

JD: Going back to your childhood is there any one thing that helped you to become a successful writer?

MT: Definitely my father, the image of my father haunted me. Because he was a teacher and wanted me to become something, especially because he had no sons. When I was born I was already the third daughter, you can imagine my father was quite depressed. When my mother told me this I was quite depressed, but then it became a challenge. I always say now his name lives on, even though I’m a girl. Another thing is the family publishing house, Moriga Publishing House. That also made me feel very proud and want to write. I felt this was my world and I had to write. This was my world, the world where I belonged, the world of books. It was an old publishing house, I think established by the French missionaries. Another thing that has influenced me to write is my own anger and bitterness, in fact it drove me to write. I kept saying, one day I would write but I am a poor woman with a husband and children and also I had to look after my mother-in-law and my father-in-law so I had all these obligations and I had to work as well. I realised it would become an endless intention. I had all these things in my mind that I wanted to write.
When I was sick I would get a chance to write a short story or something. This is how I began.

My husband would bring home Afrikaans magazines like *Die Huisgenoot* and I would read them and I would feel I could write stories like I read in there. They would just end up being pieces of paper lying around. When we first came back from Lesotho we were far from town with no electricity. A lot of time was spent trying to overcome these difficulties. I still don't have this space - I only have what I call my matchbox to live in. The books in my bedroom are about to drive me out. When my friends from Europe come to visit me they wonder how I can produce under these circumstances. It is not the material things only, it is also the extended family obligations. When you are a daughter-in-law it has its own commitments.

Some people have had to shrug off a marriage to be able to write. I realised I would have to have electricity because the housework took so long, cleaning the house, doing the washing, doing the ironing and the cooking, all these things took up all my time. I could hardly find time to read let alone write. My in-laws were people in their 90's so it took a lot of my time. My mother-in-law had a terminal illness and the hospital wouldn't take her in so we had to look after her at home.

At this time I used to take my son to Lesotho for my mother to take care of. He didn’t have a passport. When I applied for a passport they would ask why he needed one and when I said it was so that he could attend school in Lesotho they said there were schools here. So I had to overcome this problem and the only way was to
cross the rivers into Lesotho. This way we used to avoid the check points. There were quite a few of us doing this same thing at the time. We had to pay money to get people to help us over. I said the number one priority should be electricity so I started saving to get the house electrified. At that time I was already working at the shop and I was able to buy some of the second hand goods that came back to the store. In this way I bought things like a toaster from Mr. Block and later also a washing machine. When I stopped work I had these things to help me cope. My husband came across an old Remington typewriter which he bought for me and I've still got it. It was on that typewriter that I wrote Muriel.

JD: So, do you think you need perseverance to become a writer?

MT: Yes, especially as a black woman. You have to fight not physically, but everything, you fight the system and circumstances. You go about dodging everybody. You have to write so they don't realise you are writing because it will offend them. During the day when the in-laws heard the typewriter they would want to know what I was making a noise for. Our daughters will have things much better because they have us who have gone before them.

JD: Your husband Steven, has he always been supportive?

MT: Not always, but he at least understood what I was about. The problem that I have had up to now is that I live in the townships and the neighbours don't understand what I'm about, that I need privacy. They don't understand why I can't
sit around and talk. My friends say “why are you always so busy and don’t have time for us”. Of course at times I have to be with them which is something I haven’t stopped doing - being with them and being part of the community. It is the way I was brought up, our home has always been open. Communication with people is important, they don’t regard me as something out of the ordinary. They joke about me being someone they see in the papers, they don’t push me away or become afraid of me, but they don’t know what writing requires. They think that writing is a gift from God, something mystical. They don’t realise that writing is 99% hard work. I usually tell them that when you are fast asleep I am sitting at my typewriter so when people come to the door at 9 o’clock and want to know if they have woken me up, I have to explain that I was up most of the night working.

JD: So what made you become a writer and not one of your neighbours for example?

MT: It is that 1% of talent and also the education- that I could read and write. I can analyse situations, and a lot of luck to be able to do it.

JD: In some of your later writings, especially Soweto Stories you seem to be bringing out more politics and gender issues.

MT: Yes, I’m consciously doing that. When I started writing it gnawed into my soul that I should write something. After the 60’s when I came back from Roma we were very politically active. We had heard politicians like Sobukwe and Helen
Suzman, people who were out to get us to become aware. Many of our leaders were thrust into jail and we were left wondering what to do with the situation. I found I still craved to fight for our rights. Many of us did not want to go to the tribal universities. There was an uneasy quiet, it was too quiet for me and people were afraid to speak out. The restlessness that I felt drove me to write and I did not even mind if the book was published at all. I did not want to respect all the rules of writing, I just wrote as though I was on a platform. If you have read *Murie* you will know that I preach. At the end of some chapters I preach, that is a deviation from the normal novel. I do a lot of that. I try to create my own platforms because we had Bantu education and all these restrictive laws, censorship laws, all these disadvantages. I just created my own platform and started preaching about these things. I wanted to reach out and find someone to listen to me.

**JD:** *Murie* read like a novel to me, but *Amandla* did not as much.

**MT:** Almost the whole of that book is preaching. Real protest writing. I was creating characters in this book brave enough to speak out.

**JD:** Now what about the oppression of women?

**MT:** In *Amandla* the women are more in the background, they don’t really come forward. Gramsy fights her own battle. In *Soweto Stories* there are more women who are saying “look”. The uneasy quiet that was here in South Africa when I first returned from Lesotho is no longer here. People are now speaking out, there are so
many of us devoting a lot of time to the national situation that I feel I can talk about
women's oppression more now. Also I didn’t want to divide women against men in
the struggle. At first I didn’t want to elaborate about the kinds of problems women
have as a group. To me the most important thing was that we should struggle with
the national struggle as a united people. Not from different platforms. I realised that
we are now at a crossroads and this is now the time to speak about women's issues.

Another thing is I wanted to put it forward so that when we come to negotiation for
a New Order that the question of women's problems, sexism, has got to be put on
the table - has got to be dealt with. We do not want to create a South Africa where
only the men are liberated and not the women - it has to be everybody. The women
need to bear the fruits of liberation as well. Learning from other African states, I
could see that the tendency was to leave them out, their problems were not
addressed. Another thing which bothered me was that the white women were not
very enthusiastic about the problems that the African women were facing. An
example of this was that in 1987 when a certain law was changed, it was only
changed in regard to Coloured, Indian and White women and they left out the Black
women. I used to attend these meetings where women of all races got together to
change the matrimonial laws. I was co-opted into a group to contact women to find
out what their views were on the matrimonial laws. We were to liaise with the Law
Commission. We were very disappointed when the change in the laws left out the
African women. The White, Coloured and Indian women did not say anything about
this, they did not refuse to accept the changes on our behalf. The logical thing would have been for them to reject it until the changes applied to everybody. I was so disappointed that I withdrew from that project. Since Mandela’s release we have a new dispensation that says the law has to be the same for everybody so the thing just changed itself. We can no longer have laws for this group or that group. Now we have the National Women’s Coalition. I have not attended the meetings but I am with them. There are many women who can do this fighting, but there are not many writers so I get away to Lesotho because we need to have women who are recording our struggle and lives as they are. That is why I don’t have the time to attend all these meetings.

**JD:** Do you have hopes that White women would come and negotiate with Black women and fight together?

**MT:** They have to now. No longer will legislation be against Black women only. We are going to be all in the same boat and if it sinks it will sink for all of us. If it doesn’t happen, woe betide the cause of women, but I think it will bring about improvements that is why I am hopeful. In fact I am trying to arrange a meeting with the Black Sash to see what they feel about this. I will try to get an interview with Helen Suzman also.

**JD:** Sometimes you have intimated that you are not a supporter of the feminist movement.
MT: There are so many forms of feminism that it confuses me. If it implies confrontation between male and female then I don’t - we were brought into this world as male and female and we had better learn to live together.

JD: In principal you do support many feminist views don’t you?

MT: Yes, women have to do something about their situation. Even though I don’t call myself a feminist because I don’t always know what it actually means. But, I am a fighter for women’s rights. One thing I remember my grandmother saying to me “I don’t have sons so what am I busy working for”, so if you have a daughter she is nothing. It gave me the feeling that women are struggling with their attitudes. I have been wondering is it not possible for us to convert them (men) and make them come onto our side. There are already men who call themselves feminists - not so much in South Africa - in Europe. I feel very strongly about our rights and my husband knows this. He doesn’t object because what would it help him, I would still stick to my point of view. I maintain we are all human beings made in exactly the same way, why should someone claim to be better. Women sometimes have to take the blame for what is happening to us because they have allowed it. When you have a girl you insist she makes her bed and does the housework, but you would not necessarily insist with a boy and this stays in people’s minds.

JD: How do you think women’s writing is different from men’s writing?

MT: They give more attention to certain things.
JD: When you go to writer’s conferences do you experience any discrimination because you are a woman?

MT: I have in my mind that they take special effort to put us on the platform and give us as much publicity as possible. Perhaps it is because as South African writers there is a curiosity about us because of apartheid. I would always be much busier than some of the writers from other countries.

JD: With the present situation with regard to censorship laws do you feel more freedom in your writing now?

MT: With me I have never worried about the censorship laws, that’s why my works have always been banned, most of the time I tell myself that I am going to write and if they want to ban my books they can. Like the time I wrote a *Amandla* the publisher suggested I change the title but I refused point blank, either you take it as it is or you leave it. Did you know that *Muriel* was not the first title - the first title was *Between Two Worlds*. The French and German translations have the original title. I have the rights to publish *Muriel* in South Africa but I am struggling to get the money together.

JD: When you get into writing a novel do you find you psychologically withdraw from your family and your friends?

MT: I think you have to do that to really live with your characters, to live their lives and their actions and their way of thinking. This is why I resorted to writing short
stories because so often I had to leave my manuscript, even now I am busy with a book of short stories which I hope to have out by the end of the year.

**JD:** Which publisher would you work with?

**MT:** I've had offers from several publishing houses so I don't think I will have trouble getting it printed.

**JD:** So the time when you had trouble getting your work published is over?

**MT:** Yes, definitely that one is over. Inside South Africa and in other countries. The only problem is to sit down and write.

**JD:** Did you find it cathartic to sit down and write, especially the chapter on your detour into detention?

**MT:** Oh, yes. I tell you I was busy, Mike kept on telling me to write it down. I said to Mike after I came back from jail I am going to write about this experience, then things got delayed, but Mike kept on pushing me. Mike Kirkwood used to work for Ravan Press but he left the country.

**JD:** Are your characters taken from real life or are they all fictitious?

**MT:** Not all of them, some of them are from real life, take Gramsy for instance, she reminds me of some of my relatives. Others are a whole lot of combination, not just one person. Some parts are even taken from myself. Some of my readers ask me
when is Philoso coming back. So I’ve been thinking of bringing him back in another work and tell what has been happening to him in the meantime. It will have to be a story of what is happening now after people have come back to South Africa with the hope of a new South Africa.

**JD:** Have any of the people you have met at Writers workshops influenced your writing?

**MT:** Many of them, they leave an indelible mark on my mind. For example Buchi Emecheta.

I spent a whole year at Yale in 1989 to 1990. We were researching subjects to do with the whole of Southern Africa, it was called the Southern African Research Programme. I am busy working on a paper that I will present for them in Capetown when we close the research next year in August.

**JD:** When you write do you keep your audience in mind and who is your audience?

**MT:** Now I write with everybody in mind, everybody that can read. When I first wrote I did not even consider anybody but my own people. I was always thinking of a black audience. It was done in an effort to reach out.

**JD:** Did you edit your work first and then let the editors read it?

**MT:** The editors would look at it. Longmans in London didn’t want it edited much although Ravan Press cut out quite a bit for the South African versions. I wrote
Muriel as a South African African without the holocaust in mind so there were sensitive areas for the European market especially with the German translation. I have an agent in London, Tony Peake, who handles my business over there. Many people ask me when Muriel will be printed again and I would like to see it done.

JD: What is the writing community like in South Africa? Do you communicate much with the other African writers?

MT: Sometimes we do but it is difficult. Most of the people involved in writing are engaged in other community work, they are busy with a whole lot of other things so whenever we want to meet, this one is busy or that one has gone to Europe. When we come together we greet each other as if we hadn’t seen each other for a long time. We are all in Joburg, but it is sometimes a year or more before we see each other. We have the African Writers Association but we don’t often meet because of the violence and the unrest. We have an office at Biccard Street, Hampstead House.

JD: Who are some of the popular African writers today?

MT: Almost all of them are popular, there are so few that they have to be popular.

JD: Remember I mentioned I was interested in asking about the way you use language. In Amandla some of the people speak with “a posh language”. Was there a particular purpose for this?
MT: My character Killer is someone that I know who really speaks like that, he speaks a very posh English, he is always arguing with my husband. He has read a lot and they have been involved in the struggle for a long time. Most people involved in the unity movement are like that, they are sometimes accused of being armchair politicians. They make it a point of reading about Marx and Lenin and all these people. They are real intellectual people. People have said my writing is didactic and I think they are correct. Because, as I told you, I am trying to create a platform with my writing. There is so little opportunity given to us to speak.

JD: I have written a chapter called “Historical Repositioning”. What can you tell me about your attitude towards history in your writing?

MT: History has been so distorted with us that I always try to rewrite history through my characters. For instance, it has been claimed that we arrived here only ten years before the whites came. This is not true and certain archeological excavations that have uncovered a human skull at Krugersdorp, have proved this, but this information has been hidden from both blacks and whites. People have tried to say that Africans are barbarians and don’t have a past history. The lawyer in Amandla that was speaking at the grave side mentioned some of this history. This issue of history is very important to us. Some of these findings that are coming out clash with the way our history has been presented.
Appendix B

Telephonic Interview With Emma Mashinini

The interview that had been arranged with Mashinini was unable to take place as she was asked to be part of a delegation to Switzerland at meetings of the International Labour Organisation. Instead this telephonic interview took place on the evening of 4 November 1993 before her departure the following day.

JD: In the preface to *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* you mentioned that in the beginning your story was recorded on tape. At what point in the book did you begin writing down information without pre-recording it?

EM: Because I had no confidence I never thought I could write so I recorded instead. This book was recorded on planes and even over the ocean. One time I was going over to France by boat and did recording while travelling. Whenever I found the time I spoke into the tape recorder. Eventually the repetition started to annoy me. When I read over what I had spoken there was a lot of repetition. Eventually I built confidence and by the time I got to the end of the book I was writing it. The section about my detention was still handled by taping.

JD: Do you think that your involvement with Betty Wolpert and your participation in the film *Mama, I'm Crying* gave you the courage to speak out about your life?
EM: Yes, that got me going. I would never have attempted the book if Betty had not encouraged me, without my involvement in the film the book would not have been written.

JD: What response have you had from your community to the publication of your book?

EM: There was very little response. The book came out during the time of great restrictions in South Africa, there was a State of Emergency. The bulk of the country was busy with this political upheaval. You know I have never had a launching of my book in this country.

JD: I would like to know whether you are considering publishing another work?

EM: Yes I am, I am. A book on survival. Having survived Apartheid I feel I have something to say on the subject. Some time ago I went to Cambodia for a conference for Survivors. There were survivors from many different places gathered together, some from Palestine, Cambodia and South Africa.

JD: On p.113 you mention that “Psychiatric treatment is a breather to the mind”. Do you still seek psychiatric advice from time to maintain your mental and emotional strength? Do the consequences of post-traumatic stress disorder still trouble you?
**EM:** I’m supposed to, but I’ve been irresponsible. I had an attack last March. At the time I had just flown out of South Africa. When I finished the journey I went to sleep and never woke up until after five days. When I woke up I never realised that I had been asleep that long. Nobody wanted to worry me so they didn’t tell me straight away. In 1991 it was 10 years since my detention. I think this last attack was brought on by exhaustion.

**JD:** I would like to understand your views on women’s issues. Dorothy Driver has written that you “do not care to claim feminism as a space for black South African women.” Would you care to comment on her statement and explain what role you feel feminism can play in the future of South Africa?

**EM:** Up to now most of our energy has been used on liberation and human rights because that is where the need has been. Yet now more and more women are often forgotten when delegates are chosen. It was due to our pressure as women in April that led to the Women’s involvement in the Multi-party talks in Kempton Park. More emphasis on women’s rights are imperative.

**JD:** With the dismantling of Apartheid taking place will the fight for women’s rights take on more importance in the future for more people?

**EM:** With a push it can be done. I fought very much for the ordination of women priests in the church. It was in August last year that the ordination of women was passed. We got this before Australia did.
JD: In the new South Africa will writing in English still have an important place or will people begin writing more and more in the African languages?

EM: I think people would still write in English because the audience would be greater. I would still prefer to write in English otherwise people like you would not be able to read what I wrote.

JD: Who is your audience?

EM: I want to reach people who don’t know or understand about Apartheid. Because of this I have sold my rights for America to Routledge in New York.

JD: What part did your editors play in producing your work? Did they want to change much?

EM: No not much. They just made corrections to the grammar and the language, but left the script to sound as if someone was talking, as I did into the tapes.

JD: What persons or events do you think most influenced you to persevere and achieve what you have in your life?

EM: The support of the workers I dealt with and the support of my family were the most important to me. I never received any discrimination for being a woman from the workers that I represented which encouraged me.
JD: I found the structure of your book very interesting. How was this planned or developed?

EM: It came about with consultation with the publisher and Betty. They helped me decide on the sequence of the information.

JD: How did you choose the title of the book?

EM: I had in mind to name the book Dudu after my daughter. We kept on talking about a title and because I had so often mentioned about the strikes following me everywhere that is what we decided on.

JD: Do you have much time for reading and if you do what do you read?

EM: I love exclusive elegant things, things that I did not have a chance to have. I love watching good relaxing films of beauty, love and riches. I do not watch war films and those on poverty. “Dynasty”, “Santa Barbara” and those kind of films. I am reading an American book written by Terry MacMillian titled, Waiting to Exhale and of course I always read newspapers to keep up with political events. I am also reading a book by Rich Makhondo reporting on South Africa.

JD: Who do you feel are the most influential black South African writers?

EM: There are very few women writers. The writers are all older. I am the youngest at sixty-five. We need young writers.
JD: Do you still experience much racial and gender discrimination in your dealings with the business world?

EM: In all the meetings where I'm involved I look like a token. I'm often the only woman. In all places I always speak out on sex and race because it is still a man's world.

JD: In literature from the new South Africa what themes and issues do you think will be covered by writers?

EM: The themes need to change, but they won't change immediately. People will still write to say, "these are our expectations". Sooner or later we will forget about Apartheid if it is not written about. In my next book I will be writing about surviving Apartheid. This means that I am moving on from Apartheid because I have survived it.

JD: On page 118 you mentioned that you were optimistic about a post-apartheid South Africa. Do you still feel optimistic about the future?

EM: Yes. I used to say that when Mandela came out of prison I was ready to die, but that was a bit sooner than I expected. But yes, I'm still optimistic.

JD: Would you care to tell me more about your day to day responsibilities in the Department of Justice and Reconciliation? Are your duties as the Deputy
Chairperson of the National Manpower Commission in addition to those responsibilities?

EM: I co-ordinate with those people working in the 21 diocese of the Church of the Province of South Africa. We concentrate on human rights issues. There are people working on the ground who get back to me. COSATU (wing of the ANC) and NACTU (wing of PAC) nominated me to represent them on the Manpower Commission and the minister of Manpower appointed me. We are an advisory body to Cabinet on matters of legislation on Labour Relations to be passed by Parliament. We had something to do with the recent labour relations act that was passed. This recognised that domestic workers needed to be included in this act.
Appendix C

Interview With Ellen K Kuzwayo

This interview began at the Jan Smuts Airport, Johannesburg, on the evening of 10 November, 1993. Mrs Kuzwayo was very busy with American delegates who were visiting her in relation to the Maggie Magaba Trust and the Zamani Soweto Sisters Centre and as a result the interview was completed by correspondence in December.

JD: I noticed in your short stories you cover the oppression of women in some detail. Is this still one of your major concerns?

EK: A great deal, yes. The Black Women in South Africa have always been at the bottom of the pile. They have been denied from a very early age and have been oppressed in very subtle ways at school by being told certain subjects are for men and not women. Sometimes even their own peer group have made them feel uncomfortable with certain things which has hampered the development of Black women. Later some of the women felt enough was enough and that is how we saw the emergence of the first Black female doctor in 1947. After that the doors started opening. From here we have not looked back.

JD: What is the attitude of young girls today, do they feel more able to go into any field?
EK: I tell you they are pushing their way in the field of economics, medicine and law. Some prefer administration. Many are trying new fields for women.

JD: What are some of the goals of the Maggie Magaba Trust?

EK: We try to develop the skills of our women. Our women are always the first to be dismissed from any employment and they are the people who earn the meanest wage. This group here with me are really in to it. One is a terrific dressmaker and another is a trustee on the board.

JD: I believe you are working on another book. Does it cover similar themes to your others?

EK: No, I have moved on to something else. It is on idioms. The power of idioms in different ethnic groups in South Africa. I give an idiom in my language, Setswana, then I give the literal translation in English, then I give its interpretation followed by an illustration of what it means. It is a very difficult thing to understand for people of other languages. It has gone to the publishers, Women's Press in London. They seem to be dragging their feet so I don’t know when it will be out.

JD: Has publishing been a difficult process for you?

EK: No, No. The woman who is editing this book for me was the same one who edited Call Me Woman. She did a beautiful job. I wanted her to look at this book, particularly because it is an unusual book with the idioms in another language with
the interpretations in English. It is very much linked with where we come from as a community. It covers Black theology and how it is viewed and how it has been passed on down the generations.

JD: Do you have a title for it?

EK: **IDIOMS: Our Culture Our Heritage.** I feel it is very important to keep these alive particularly for the youngsters. I have been fed on idioms. The pity is that when we get into other cultures we tend to look down upon our own culture. And when people become educated they think it is old fashioned. Believe you me, the very systems that are impacting on the culture are things that you cannot buy with money. I hope that when this book comes out the kids will get interested in it. I hope my audience will be the young people from South Africa and people from other cultures. When better and younger writers come along this book will be very useful for them to build on. It will provide historical background. I am trying to re-capture the language and the systems within that language.

*At this point Mrs Kuzwayo had to leave. She kindly answered the rest of the questions in her own time at home and mailed the typescript to me. The following are her answers to my written questions.*

JD: At the airport we discussed how you found it important to reveal in your writing that black women are at the bottom of the pile. Do you feel that with the
dismantling of Apartheid the struggle for the freedom of women will be over, or will there still be issues that need resolving?

EK: In addition to Apartheid, the Nationalist Party and to a greater extent the majority of the white people there was the Traditional law (which varied in its content within the different ethnic communities) which added restrictions on women of those ethnic communities. Women were marked with a tag of “MINOR” by all males; parents, siblings, sons, but much more by husbands. It is this tag of “MINOR” which has reduced political oppression of Black women to a subservient level.

It is for this reason that black women are very adamant and determined to be included from the beginning at the level of political negotiations to ensure that the issues of gender are part of the entire “Political Negotiation” package.

There is no way that the political oppression, discrimination or denial of Blacks in general, will disappear after the Democratic Government is put in place in South Africa. The scene and atmosphere will be set to address the imbalances which have prevailed since the arrival and take over of Government by whites from foreign countries. The addressing of gender issues will go hand in hand with addressing of political and economic imbalances which have all left South Africa in a mess to say the least.
The fact that political parties like African National Congress, PAC, and AZAPO have seen the need for 30% of the elected candidates to be women is encouraging. This lays a clear foundation to ensure that women themselves are there to address the burning gender issues which for generations have hindered developmental progress of Black Women in South Africa.

JD: Does the feminist movement influence you in any way with the work that you try to accomplish with the Maggie Magaba Trust and the Zamani Soweto Sisters Council?

EK: My community involvement through these organisations goes back fifteen years to 1978. As far back as 1938 back home in Thaba’Nchu in the Orange Free State, I had already been involved in women’s organisations like Home Improvement Clubs run under the auspices of the National Council of African Women which was established in 1937.

Perhaps in those early years the deprivation and plight of Black women was not clear in my mind. It may be because I was removed from the Urban scene of that denial and deprivation. In those years ownership of land and livestock protected me from the misery of many Black people who struggled under the “Pass System” in urban areas. Many Black farmers of that era, like my grandparents, were both industrious and prosperous.
The first job which exposed me to the hideous suffering of women was in 1962 when I accepted to work for World Affiliated Young Women's Christian Association as General Secretary in the Transvaal. One of my duties was to visit rural and urban Association Clubs. The plight of urban women centered around low wages at factories, in offices as cleaners and conveyers of errands, as maids for white families in affluent white suburbs. In all these varied places of employment these women could be hired and dismissed at will by their employers. Whether they earned R10.00 or R15.00 a month for ten, fifteen or twenty years, none of them enjoyed any form of pension fund when they terminated services. Some of these women lived with their husbands in Townships, places at least ten miles from their employment. If their husbands died they were ordered to return to their so called “Homeland” regardless of whether they had ever lived there or not. To save themselves the option of ending up homeless they were sometimes given the option of finding a husband willy nilly. Many women lost their homes in this way to the new husbands who kicked them out with the children from the first husband.

One of the problems for rural women was that the menfolk often joined the migrant labour force. They could not find employment near their homes and were compelled to accept labour contracts of 9 to 11 months of the year. They earned meagre wages which made it impossible to comfortably share their income with their families in the country. For obvious natural reasons others ended up starting new families in urban areas. In the process some developed a very cold link with the rural family while
others completely separated from those families. As many men lived in Men's Hostels, without fault of theirs, developed homo-sexual behaviours which estranged them from their wives.

Another problem faced by the rural mothers was the lack of money for basic food and hygiene. This situation ended in serious health deterioration of the children who often developed gastro-enteritis and/or kwashiorkor (protein malnutrition). I started work in the rural areas amidst very frightening drought where we had to fight on all fronts to maintain 'survival of life'. I could go on and on describing different situations I encountered with women and mothers. As I have never quite understood the meaning of "Feminist Movement" I felt the only way I could bring home to you my involvement with women of my community was to describe individual instances where I interacted with them. I feel although this involvement was not clearly defined at the time, in today's language in my country and community I can best describe it as "A Women's Self-help Movement".

**JD:** Do you feel that the feminist movement has a relevant role to play in the community where you live and work?

**EK:** To be honest; I have come across this expression at the International Feminist Book Fairs. Of the five Fairs since 1984, I have attended four. Some times during these Book Fairs authors from Africa, India and Arab countries have been put together as 'Women from the third World' whilst 'Women from the first World' have made another grouping. Topics like Lesbianism have been discussed by women
from the first world. One time the alleged third world women were severely criticised for allowing their menfolk to abuse them. Those of us in that group felt undermined, and we felt that the problem of our relationships with our men back home was our responsibility. Further, we felt that the women from the first world had no right to dictate to us how we should deal with our menfolk in our different situations back home. Those fairs have left me with many unanswered questions. Do the first world women see lesbianism as an answer to dealing with their menfolk in their countries? It might be a solution for their problem, but certainly not a universal solution for people of other countries and cultures. Is there any relationship between the Feminist Movement and Lesbianism? How does the Feminist Movement differ from the Women’s Movement?

If I can get a clear understanding of the meaning of the Feminist Movement as against the Women’s Movement I will begin to assess whether or not it has a role to play in my community. If the difference is a question of preference for terminology then I feel there is much more at stake in my country than to play around with words. Back in the years when I was involved with the Young Women’s Christian Association it created an awareness and involved women in issues pertaining to their rights. Some of these rights pertained to women’s property rights and individual rights for wage earners. Hard issues of life were addressed by women with women using the language and terminology common and accepted in the community.
JD: Do you feel that as a woman you write differently from men? Is women's writing more intimately written?

EK: There is no doubt that the writings of women have highlighted a number of issues about how women have been negatively affected. Issues which men's writing have not addressed in the past or in their present publications. Men in many cultures have abused their wives, daughters or other women and such incidents are superficially written about in men's writing. More often than not similar acts, when written about by women, are dealt with in detail. The women authors bring out the physical, emotional and traumatic pain the victims have suffered. In certain cultures women appear to be expected to accept torture as a way of life and a norm. Perhaps this is why men authors glance over some of the awesome experiences women suffer from men. Unless women writers from all cultures and communities expose and challenge some of this uncalled for suffering by women, men writers will not write about them except perhaps superficially. I feel consciously or unconsciously men tend to be biased and lack objectivity when they deal with matters relating to behaviour patterns prevalent between genders. Perhaps this image of the inferiority of women generates from the Biblical history of a woman being created from a portion of the man's body which has led to the stereotypes about women in all cultures. Though I am not sufficiently read to pass judgement on differences or similarities between men's and women's writing I am however, convinced that generalisations and stereotypes have had a great influence in this regard.
For myself, when it comes to addressing issues, I definitely deal with gender issues with dedication and commitment; much more than any male author can and will ever be able to do. Gender issues relating to women affect me personally because they are directly about me. They affect me as a person, as a woman. They are my very being. As an author, as a woman author, I am better qualified to address female gender issues than any male author can be.

**JD:** Your background was in teaching and social work. How did you teach yourself to write in a manner that would be interesting to your readers?

**EK:** I was exposed to a great deal of folk learning and teaching. Story telling was one of the daily activities I engaged in with children of my age-group. After an evening meal it was common practice for all children in the home to gather around the hearth to listen to a story told by an adult or by one of our age-group. As children we looked forward to that time with eagerness and interest. The one whose duty it was to wash dishes after supper carried out that task with agility and swiftness to ensure that it was done when the story-teller started with the popular announcement of “E Ne Ere” (once upon a time). The group response was “EE” (Yes). I shall never be able to assess the impact and influence those programmes of early years had on my life. Writing is very much part of my narrative aspect of sharing or communicating something.

**JD:** Have any other authors influenced your writing?
EK: All my books have been written through creating thoughts in my mind, through my pen on to paper. The person I have exchanged ideas with has been the editor. Those ideas I have scrutinised to ensure that they do not end up making my book her book. Once I had the publisher replace what was removed because I felt the change had altered the character and meaning of my book. Having said all that, I must add that I read other author's books with joy and admiration. My latest discovery is Aboriginal women writers. My eldest grand daughter returned from Australia with My Place last year and I have recently read The Moon Sleeps from New Zealand. I read with great interest and endless search for meaning of the kind of life these communities live in that part of the world. They arrested my emotions and worked on my imagination. Both these books confirm that all women at international level are out to share with the world their plight in their corner of the world. They all have that commitment to share that in writing.

JD: What qualities do you feel contribute to making a good writer?

EK: At the top of the list I place originality. Having a clearly defined topic and a command of the language to be used is important.

JD: Do you think you were born a writer or did circumstances play a bigger part in making you a writer?

EK: Because I was born in South Africa, a country of racial discrimination, of denial of opportunities I shall never be able to respond to this question freely and
uninhibitedly. Because I am a product of an abnormal country, politically, socially, educationally and economically the answer is unclear.

Looking back on my life, I believe circumstances played a bigger part in making me the writer I am today. I remember years back when I was in my teens how I often tried to capture the scenery of the setting sun and the mountains on paper. With the passing of time and the change of scenery and habitat my desire to capture nature gradually faded from my mind. Lo!! Like all those of my community with potential to achieve, like a flower in the desert, I faded and finally followed the one and only possible route to become a dull Native school teacher. Against my will I ended up up-rooted even from that seemingly unworthy calling; by the stringent discriminatory white man’s legislation which finally destined me to become a social worker in a community bedeviled by endlessly numerous social denials born out of racism of a special kind.

**JD:** Did you find writing *Call Me Woman* a cathartic experience? Many of the people who have been detained over the years take a long time to recover from the experience? Did this happen to you?

**EK:** Yes it ended up being a process of healing when I completed writing it. I had gone through several very painful hurting experiences in my life. For years depending on when such hurt occurred I had suffered in silence because I was either too ashamed to talk about them or I could not find someone to confide in. Or I just did not trust anyone as I always feared they would misunderstand my version of
such experiences or they would interpret them to suit themselves. Yes these experiences devoured me inside. Sometimes when I reflected on them in my lonely contemplation I would begin to wonder whether I was not building a mountain out of an anheap. My thoughts moved in circles about what to do next. I started to be suspicious of people around me. Looking back things changed when I returned from Rustenburg. The change was experienced at work where I met my teaching colleagues (women) who shared common problems of being abused by our husbands. This went a long way to see my problem as a problem of many married women. I still had many other problems which were peculiar to me and I could not share with anyone.

Later when I had qualified as a social worker I came into contact with wives of migrant workers. I began to realise the plight of these women was far worse than mine. I began to appreciate their tenacity to face their challenging incidents. All efforts and suggestions we put before them they put into practice. With their limited resources they bought and distributed bulk powdered milk and built latrines to reduce the flies. These efforts terminated the gastro-enteritis epidemic and brought Kwashiorkor to a halt!

The achievement of those mothers/women lived with me and haunted me. I was determined to find a writer to put this heroic story in book form.

Strange that you associate writing Call Me Woman with detention. It was seven or eight years after my detention that I reviewed some of my unfinished business that I
had set myself many years earlier, that I positioned myself to address it. This was when I sat down to write Call Me Woman, inspired by the women/mothers of the Gazankulu Region. Their fortitude, determination, resourcefulness, commitment to purpose, dedication to achievement, and their untiring application to duty, all these carried out amidst great humour earned them recognition and restoration of their children’s health and gaiety.

When I decided to write Call I realised I was one of those women. Their struggle was my struggle at many levels with very slight differences. Their suffering was my suffering, their pain my pain, their loss my loss, and their gain my gain. As I started to write the book, I found myself challenged to tell it like it is, with few reservations. Believe me, at the end of that achievement I was a new person. My anger, my bitterness, my apologetic appearance, my timid sharing sometimes even about seemingly sensitive issues, became the thing of the past. This way, the accomplishment of writing Call Me Woman was nothing less than a cathartic process and experience.

JD: What kind of feedback did you get from your community after publishing your works? Which of the first two was the most popular?

EK: Feedback from my community is generally rare and low key. I attribute this to the low % of literacy in my community. The books are all written in English which is another factor. Achievement at any level can be both a threat and a challenge to some people. The positive response has often come after several months or years. It
was more so with Call. In some circles there was surprise that I had written as an individual and not invited other people to participate. Others felt I should have asked permission to refer to certain issues.

My other interpretation of this low-key reaction is that writing in my community by women is still rare and it is probably seen as a novelty. It is for this reason among many others that it is not easily and extensively lauded and acclaimed.

Having said all that, the relatively few people who have expressed positive remarks about my work have done so with deep appreciation, admiration and a deep sense of regard for me as a person. Whilst I have often felt small and a little embarrassed (this is my nature) when I am complimented, later when I am on my own and recall those moments I always feel supported, appreciated and recognised for my humble contribution. In the end I am inspired to give more of myself in writing or in other areas of creation, be it alone or with other members of the group or community.

Call Me Woman received the CNA English section Literary Award in South Africa in 1986. When the announcement was made, for a split second, I was besides myself. I was confused with disbelief of the reality of that moment. I literally had to be assisted to stand up to go and receive the award. That was the most public announcement made. Although it was not stated I have wondered to what extent Call contributed to the Honorary Doctorate Degree in Law I received from the University Of Witwatersrand. My writings have been recognised at many gatherings.
Some important ones are in the pipeline as I compile this document. Perhaps my community still lacks the machinery through which to express itself in this regard.

Without any doubt Call is still the most popular. It has six translations at international level. They are in German, Dutch, French, Danish, Swedish and Finnish. I have recently heard from my publishers that the Spanish publishers are negotiating for the rights.

**JD:** With your busy schedule when did you find the time to write your third work? Did you get help or sponsorship like you did for Call?

**EK:** I made or forced myself to find time to write my third book. I cannot wait for it to be published. I wrote it single handed and without sponsorship. It is a book I had to write for posterity and for the benefit of the youth of my community. Idioms from all our ethnic groups are more than just expressions. They have been handed down to the youth of my era and to many other generations by word of mouth. I am thrilled as well as impressed to realise that idioms were not recorded in those early years. They were used as a form of Community Folk School Syllabus to instruct youth as well as wayward adults. They taught human relationships at all levels. None of us in those early years realised this was a form of guidance and instruction given to us by our elders; a form of instruction we gradually and fully internalised.

Years ago I started looking around for a book or books on Setswana Idioms. After finding no help from the best recommended places I sat down and resorted to my brain, which over the years has been one of the best storage places for important
information when I needed it. I recorded idiom after idiom as they rushed through my mind. When I had filled one page more idioms still rushed through my mind to be recorded. At that point I realised looking for a book on Setswana Idioms was a fuss rather than a need. I then became committed to writing that book myself. The amazing thing is when I was convinced I had exhausted the list of idioms I had in store, after the book was at the publishers, more and more of them keep flowing through my memory. How surprising!

JD: Do you have much contact with other writers in South Africa? Have you attended any of the Writer's Conferences?

EK: The contacts I have with other writers are mostly at a personal level. When I was about to work on my first book I dared to call Nadine Gordimer to seek her opinion. After asking me to read to her what I had written her remark to me was, "Keep to your way of writing, allow nobody to influence you". In addition to meeting at her book launchings we met at the Bessie Head Memorial Service where we both were on the programme. We both sit on the Trust that has no connection with writing and rarely "talk shop" there. Another writer I meet occasionally is Miriam Tlali. We have shared our individual experiences and several times exchanged our views on the insufficient benefits from royalties. I met Dr Njabulo Ndebele at an event when he was welcomed as the President of the South African Writers Association. I was formally invited to contribute to the programme of the evening. I had hoped I had made a break into the group and hoped I was on their
mailing list for future events, but that was the last time I was invited. Naturally I long to belong. As Dr Ndebele is not in Johannesburg I rarely see him and cannot draw him aside to discuss what the requirements are for membership.

Professor E’skia Mphahlele who now lives in Lebowa in the northern part of the Transvaal is another writer I interact with when there is a need in my writing work. He wrote the foreword to the manuscript *IDIOMS: Our Culture Our Heritage*.

In a way I am a lonely writer. I was invited to the International Writers Conference held in South Africa last year. The invitation I received did not specify the time of my assignment. Unfortunately I arrived at the conference the day after my assignment. I still don’t know how or why the mistake was made. I hope for an effective outreach one of these days because I am a lonely writer and would like to belong to some Writers Association. So far I have not attended ONE Writers Conference in South Africa. Now that I reflect on this question perhaps it explains why I am so much absorbed in Community projects and drew my inspiration for *Call* from working with and among women.

**JD:** Which of the South African writers do you most like to read?

**EK:** The following writers are not in order of priority, but as I remember them. Sindiwe Magona who wrote *To My Children’s Children* writes very serious stuff with rare humour. Govan Mbeki wrote *The Struggle for Liberation in South Africa* which was a short history, but very informative. Colleen Ryan wrote *Beyers Naude*.
Pilgrimage of Faith. Those of us who have come in touch with Beyers can see that any other writer attempting to write about him will have to work hard to give a better account of him than she did. Nokukhanya: Mother of Light was written by Rule, Aitken and Van Dyke. Dr A. Luthuli was one of my teachers that I deeply admired and highly respected. His wife Nokukhanya I first met in this book. South Africa: The Solution presented some interesting discussions which were similar to those dealt with at the Trade Centre for the creation and establishment of a Democratic South Africa.

JD: What are your views on writing in the different languages in South Africa? Do you feel it is important to write in English so that the work can be available to more people, or do you feel that more writers need to start writing in the African languages?

EK: My first consideration when I write a book, and I would expect it to be the same for all writers whether in South Africa or the rest of the world is: who do I expect to read this book? Who am I hoping to address through my writing? I must say Call Me Woman and Sit Down and Listen were primarily written for the white communities of South Africa; to make them aware of the injustices they shower on the Black inhabitants of the country. Any other African language used to write would have been a very wasted effort. There are at least nine spoken ethnic languages and generally speaking each of these groups has at the most a 3% literate population. Another consideration is the discriminatory economic position of those
small literate groups within the ethnic communities. If writers wrote in those languages their books would end up displayed on the bookshelves of the bookshops with no one benefitting from them.

I want to predict that with the learning problems in Black schools in South Africa unless the ruling government sets in motion one system of education for all children of this country the illiteracy rate is going to rise and rise fast.

At this point the need to target the white population about the political and economic plight of the Black people is a burning issue. It can be effectively addressed through writing by Black writers in this country using the medium of the English language. The main reason that I can see for writing in one of the ethnic languages would be to aim to have them read by children going to school in that ethnic community.
Appendix D

Interview With Zoë Wicomb

This interview took place in Ms Wicomb's office in the English Department at the University of Western Cape, Bellville, Cape Town on 4 November, 1993.

JD: 'Hierarchization of the evils' that exist in the Apartheid system and South African society has been discussed. Do you agree that you have to forget the gender issue because of the racial issues that need to be struggled with?

ZW: I think that is nonsense. I don't only think it is nonsense to want to forget the gender issue, but it's nonsense to hierarchize. On what basis would you do it. It seems to me that if you are going to think in terms of democracy and in terms of equal opportunities for all then you must address all those issues, race, class and gender all of the time. Feminism has an awful lot to teach the liberation movement; the very notion of hierarchy, for instance, is what feminists find problematic. The movement is patriarchal and since S.A. society is not so different from other Western societies, it places gender as the least important. But we need feminism, we need racial analysis, we need class analysis; we also need to be sensitive to the ways in which these interests intersect, which is to say where and how they conflict or conflate in particular contexts. I think a political activist when dealing with the
question of housing might want to foreground one of those issues, but I still don’t see how the other aspects could be ignored.

**JD:** What do you feel is your position then? In your work and as a feminist do you want to highlight certain issues as the part you want to play?

**ZW:** I don’t think of anything as grand as playing a part, but I have a job as a teacher and teachers do have important roles to play in the reconstruction of society. For me it is important in teaching to raise questions about race, class, gender and sexual orientation and to show students that literary texts can be interrogated from a variety of positions. Apartheid’s underdevelopment of our people should not be thought of in narrow economic terms, but also in terms of restrictions on the way people think - the limitedness of the social, moral, intellectual orders that something as vulgar as Apartheid imposes.

**JD:** In regards to your book, *You can’t get lost in Cape Town,* it didn’t strike me as a strongly feminist work.

**ZW:** I suppose I don’t write with ideology in mind. I’m not saying it is not ideological because everything is. And it is necessarily influenced by all sorts of personal beliefs, but I suppose I don’t have a message. In fact I don’t even have anything to say. I’m not surprised that you didn’t find a strong message. I think of writing more as a struggle with language, skirmishing with my own half-baked, inchoate thoughts.
JD: Are any of the characters from your life? Is it in any way autobiographical?

ZW: Not really. I suppose in a sense some of the characters are written from my experiences. None of the stories are in any way autobiographical.

JD: Is the character Frieda the narrator in all of the chapters? In one or two of the chapters I could not hear her voice.

ZW: I think she is, but sometimes she is displaced by someone else. Yes, in the chapter called “A Fair Exchange” the story is taken over by Skitterboud. Actually that was an interesting problem. I remember when I sent the manuscript to Women’s Press, to Virago and to Faber. Women’s Press was the first to reply. One of the things they said was that they had problems with that chapter because the male character was so dominant. So I didn’t bother to reply to them and Virago published it. Can I ask you a question? When you say you don’t see a feminist content, what do you mean by that?

JD: I have a background in social work so when I read I think of the people behind the books. I think who is writing this? The message I got wasn’t that the writer wanted to get too many feminist views across. Not that Frieda didn’t portray certain feminist qualities because she did. It was there, it just wasn’t heavily foregrounded.

ZW: I think you are right. Because it is not. It is just about the development of a girl, but from a particular point of view of course.
**JD:** With the dismantling of Apartheid what affect do you think this will have on women’s writing? Will the racial issues still be quite so common?

**ZW:** I think it will remain much the same. The difference might be that this notion that feminism has to somehow be subsumed in the national liberation movement, that will presumably go. That means that the some of the constraints on women writers will fall away. The whole idea of being critical of men, about not having a strong feminist message because you don’t want to fall foul of the liberation movement or somehow betray your race, that will go. Gender has after all become a respectable concern. I actually proposed that black women writers had to develop strategies of concealment. Where they write with a strong feminist slant, but where it is heavily concealed in the text, not in the narrative, but in the text, linguistically encoded and so recoverable if we pay close attention to their language. I have never felt that kind of constraint myself, so it is perhaps a bit cheeky of me to suggest that other people might feel constrained by ANC views on writing, but that is the way I have read some of these texts. There is much greater pressure on people like Miriam Tlali because of the communities they live in.

**JD:** What community do you then feel you belong to? Is it an international one because you have lived overseas?

**ZW:** I have never understood the term, international community; it doesn’t make sense to me. I suppose my community is here within this University, but I also feel strongly that one mustn’t be smothered by such nonsense as blind allegiance or buy
into the dominant hierarchization. No movement is above criticism and I feel no compunction in criticising a culture which bases itself on an unhealthy notion of nationalism. Or which fails to see how its National culture is slipping into Official culture. My views (expressed at Conferences abroad) have not always been popular but I am pleased to say that many radicals in South Africa have now broken away from the ANC Cultural Desk in the interests of the independence of the arts under a new dispensation.

**JD:** When you go to these conferences do you go more as an academic or more as a writer?

**ZW:** It depends. Sometimes I go as both. Sometimes I'm specifically asked to talk about writing and then other times on culture generally. I don't like reading which is what they often ask writers to do, but I will present a paper.

**JD:** I have a question on the languages in South Africa. It has been said that Afrikaans is the language of officialdom. Is that valid?

**ZW:** I don't think that it is as simple as that. People don't write in that language because it might be considered the language of officialdom. In 1976 Afrikaans became branded as the language of the oppressor. Later for the people in the Western Cape whose mother tongue it is, such a label became unacceptable. Language can't essentially be oppressive, there is no such thing. It is about usage. In the Cape for instance there was a little flurry of reappropriating the language and
using the varieties that are actually spoken within communities as a literary language. There is no need to use standard Afrikaans to write poetry or a novel. Since historiographic research has been done, the language was reclaimed as one that was developed by black slaves. Also the first Afrikaans script was in Arabic. With that kind of history it is easy to overturn the notion of a language of officialdom. Even so I don’t think there is much Black Afrikaans writing. I think it is to do with the fact that Black Afrikaans speaking people are mainly working class and have no access to higher education. So it has more to do with other factors than the ways in which Afrikaans is viewed.

**JD:** Do you think then that writing in Afrikaans will increase?

**ZW:** Oh it will have to. As more people become literate and of course you need more than basic education. You need higher education and you need time to write. Once those things change there will be an increase. It is interesting that there is currently a huge output of white Afrikaans writing which is oppositional, a lot of gay, lesbian and feminist writers and also writing about sex. This phenomenon of people from a very repressed Calvinist culture writing explicitly about sex. At the moment I am reading an Afrikaans novel written by someone who lives in Australia at the moment- Eben Venter. He doesn’t always write in standard Afrikaans. He uses a colloquial language which is orthographically represented, written as it is spoken. He grew up in the Eastern Cape. Lovely, interesting prose style but what shocks me is how the Afrikaner literary establishment remains blind to the sexism in
the text. Only the white man’s struggle with issues of race and his “traitor’s heart” seem to be worthy of comment.

**JD:** Is there now a desire by women to begin working across racial barriers?

**ZW:** I wouldn’t be able to predict that on the basis of the demise of Apartheid. Because of course so many structures would still be in place. I’m sure that some people have and have always had that desire, but I’m still quite shocked at how divided the country is. You know when you listen to the problems that the ANC Women’s League have with other groupings you realise that there is an awful lot of conflicting interests. One reason is the whole question of the distribution of wealth. Where you have incredible poverty and also incredible wealth you will continue to have conflict. These things will not change overnight. People who have been in power for so long do not learn overnight that they cannot take a dominant position or that their patronage is not welcome. Even utopian movements like feminism are subject to all kinds of specific conditions. In our divided society we have an awful lot to learn and unlearn before we can work together.

**JD:** When you had completed your novel were you happy with the way it had turned out? Was the whole publishing experience a positive one?

**ZW:** No it was such a hideous experience. Oh I found it so unspeakably horrible. Because I think when you write something you don’t have enough distance from it. What you actually need is an editor. Someone who is going to be very rigorous and
ask a lot of questions. It is also the technological thing; you know seeing something in typescript is very different to seeing it in print. There is definitely a difference in the way you read something that is in print. I am thinking about theories of the technologizing of the word. Where the difference is not only technological, but also conceptual. Print has some impact on the way we think and read. When I saw my manuscript in print I was horrified by it. I could not believe that I had so little judgement; once it was in print I just wanted to sit down and rewrite it. It hadn’t really been edited. I should have had more help from an editor, especially for an inexperienced writer like myself. Now because I am far enough away from it I could actually do much of the editing myself. I think you get to a point where you can’t see what is needed because you are too close. No, I found the publishing experience very fearsome. Any contact with the publishers made me quite depressed. I think it was to do with the fact that I never really believed that it was worth publishing. It seems to me, and what I found distressing, is that it was published because of what they now call affirmative action which is my most unfavoured notion. It was black South African fiction and there is very little of that. Then there is the view that all black South African women write autobiography whether or not it is written in the first person. I even played with the idea of autobiography because I anticipated such a response. To have a mother dead at the beginning and alive at the end can hardly be anyone’s experience, but there you are, it was reviewed as autobiography. I thought the reviews were over the top as well. It wasn’t reviewed here, but in Europe and the United States it was very well received. I came to realise how
valuable an editor could be when the rights were sold to Pantheon Books in the U.S.A. Diane Wachtell was so marvelous, she was absolutely wonderful, but it was too late really. It was to do with costs, they couldn’t make many changes. She just asked the right questions and she wasn’t pushy or interfering. She helped me to think whether it really was what I wanted to say. She helped clarify things. And she was very sensitive to my refusal or stubbornness about things I didn’t want to change. So she made me realise how important (and difficult) the work of an editor can be.

**JD:** Are you working on something else right now?

**ZW:** No, I can’t while I teach here. Teaching here is not like teaching anywhere else in the world. It is very hard. Primary and secondary education for blacks is so poor that our students are very weak. I spend hours with individuals helping them to come up to University standard. I’m taking next year off, unpaid so that I can do some writing and reading.

**JD:** Will you return to Britain during that year?

**ZW:** Yes, because I can’t afford to live here without an income. You see I still have structures in Britain - my partner and daughter live there. Britain also has an alternative economy where one can do all sorts of part-time jobs which don’t exist here.

**JD:** When you write do you psychologically withdraw from people around you?
ZW: I don't know, I'm very lazy. When I think of people like Andre Brink or John Coetzee who sit down diligently for every second of their lives I feel quite ashamed of myself. Then I realise I'm very lazy and that I also don't want to be a writer only. I like being a teacher and I like to play. The notion of physically withdrawing is abhorrent to me. Unfortunately I'm rather lacking in ambition. It's a great pity. I don't withdraw from people. I prefer people to writing. I remember when I was writing the other book my partner was rather shocked at how I allowed my friends to interrupt me. I used to write in the mornings, I wouldn't go out to play but if a friend came needing to talk I couldn't turn her away. But now after three years no-one will know I'm back in Britain and the English are very unfriendly so I should be able to keep to myself and work hard.

JD: Would you be able to complete a book in a year?

ZW: No I won't complete it. If I get to the point of an entire draft I will be able to snatch time to continue. I can't write in little gaps when I am still in the embryonic stage. I need more extended time for the early stage. I was working when I wrote the other book. I would write in the mornings and teach in the afternoon. The students didn't have the same needs or expectations of me there and marking was not such a chore. Marking is not just a grading here it is part of the learning because we don't see enough of the students. There is only one tutorial a week here, it is hopeless. Our students need more, but we have less resources than first-world universities. We use the marking as another way of communicating. We allow them
to write drafts which we annotate and to which they respond. It's a way of engaging
with them on a one to one basis in writing.

**JD:** What has the most influence on your writing, is there anything in particular?

**ZW:** Nothing in particular. I'm not influenced by any one particular person, but I do
have favourite writers. Like everyone else in South Africa I grew up on a diet of
British writing, so I'm influenced by everyone from Shakespeare to Joyce. I'm
particularly fond of Hardy, Austen and Eliot, the "Great Tradition". Then in South
African writing I'm interested in everybody. Everything that comes out of South
Africa interests me and influences me, I think. Even when I don't think it is very
good I still find it interesting.

**JD:** Which of the South African authors are your favourites?

**ZW:** Nadine Gordimer and Coetzee I really do like very much. I have great
problems with Gordimer, but I do love her writing. Her portrayal of black women
can be extremely offensive. She has not yet written about a black woman without
commenting on her heavy legs or big bum. I find it irritating that she refuses to
recognise feminism as a need or a social force. In an interview last year she said that
women's writing is just therapy which means that she doesn't think of herself as a
woman. Good writing has nothing to do with gender and besides, as an ANC
supporter, the modalities of race must take precedence. All that is extremely
irritating, nevertheless I am a great admirer and love her work. Another person I
find interesting is Bessie Head. She is almost the opposite to Gordimer who is such a careful user of language, ever syllable carefully chosen. Head can be quite a sloppy writer, but I find her work extremely interesting.

JD: Do you teach South African literature?

ZW: Yes I do teach some, but more about Popular Media. It is part of the broad education about language. I’m interested in the English language in all it’s material forms, not just literature. Popular magazines or televisual texts are all conductors of ideology and are all intellectually challenging to study.

JD: How important is it to the South African literary tradition to encourage more people to write?

ZW: I don’t think the point is to encourage people to write. If they want to write they will. The point is to make it possible for them to write if they want to. So the bottom line is literacy and a decent education system. If you provide the raw materials then if people want to write they will. It would be nice to have an Arts Council that supported writers. But an Arts Council can only support people who already write. Then I also do not mean to privilege the literary texts. There are a number of useful things people can do with writing skills.

JD: So we get back to one of the early question. Your career then is really quite important, providing literacy?
ZW: Yes, it’s very important. Not only basic literacy which I don’t provide, but linguistic competence and critical awareness that any writer needs. I call myself a teacher not a writer because it is a more useful and important job in our context.

JD: So why did you write then?

ZW: I always wrote as a child. Actually my father encouraged me to write verse, doggerel you know. When I went to University in England I decided I mustn’t write and stopped, because once you have studied the great tradition somehow you realise that you are too stupid or foolish to produce writing. I didn’t think of anything as grand as publishing. That is one of the problems of an education system and a pedagogy that does not set out to liberate people. That is why I am interested in teaching popular literature and popular media. Learning shouldn’t put people off, shouldn’t be about making value judgements. Anyone can write; as long as there is one person that wants to read it, fine. If you don’t want to read it you don’t have to. I find all writing interesting. If people can get away from value judgements and simply look at the material as products of a culture then it is interesting. One can develop an entirely different set of criteria by looking at something in terms of cultural output instead of value.

JD: Do you feel the publishing houses in South Africa are adequate and serve the writer’s needs?
ZW: I don't know really. I know there are lots of small presses. For instance there is a very nice poetry press called “Snail Press”. They put out very cheap works, for under R20 which is really quite wonderful. There are a number of new Afrikaans publishers. There seems to be flourishing Afrikaans production, but not much in English.

JD: Are there any other younger Black South African writers like Gcina Mhlope?

ZW: There are a number of poets you know, but not fiction writers. No, poetry is still the preferred medium in South Africa. I think people think it is easier. It is also fashionable now. It has had this other function as you know, it was used at political rallies and poetry readings. It had a special purpose as a weapon of the struggle. People now think of writing as poetry. The impulse towards indigenising the culture also encourages poetry. The notion of the mbongi (the traditional praise poet) is very popular and is being revised. There is much talk about more relevant oral literature which is odd since much of this literature is written. Gcina is, of course, a storyteller and performer and her work is exciting, but I'm not aware of anyone else like her.

I have just remembered Gladys Thomas the short story writer. She lives in Cape Town and still writes. I think she is in her late fifties. There is another younger woman called Joan Baker also a Coloured woman who writes short stories, they are dead interesting, very good. She calls herself a housewife and also lives in Cape
Town. Then there are young women like Mavis Smallberg and Lisa Combrinck in the Cape who are interesting poets.

**JD:** Could I ask you one last question about how you would define a feminist critic?

**ZW:** A feminist critic is one who looks at the ways in which gender is inscribed in a text and who deconstructs the power relations that operate both within a text and also between author and text. Feminism offers oppositional ways of reading which in itself is politically important for both men and women - I would agree that feminism is especially important for men - especially in a society where education has come to mean passive consumption of information. We are primarily concerned with the oppression of women in patriarchal society, but I am also concerned with the ways in which gender intersects with class and race. I would like to expand the definition of a feminist critic to one who is not narrowly and exclusively concerned with gender. If my heroine is fat - and fat is a feminist issue - a feminist critic would read her fatness in the specific socio-economic context of a black South African woman. The meaning of a woman being large and unattractive according to dominant definitions would be considered in such a context. Imagine then my disappointment and irritation when so-called feminists comment on my own size because you see black women can only write autobiography and so they had expected me to be large like my heroine.
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