

# *Goodbye Lena, Goodbye Poppie: Post-Apartheid Black Women's Writing*

MARGARET LENTA

“FOR ME, THE question ‘Who should speak?’ is less crucial than ‘Who will listen?’” says Gayatri Spivak, in a discussion of the rights of the oppressed to produce literary texts (59). Both questions are crucial for South Africa as a post-Apartheid country, where the rights and wrongs of “speaking for,” as opposed to attending to the efforts of the oppressed to speak, have in the past been obscured by the insistence of the authorities that we listen only to members of our own group. In the 1990s, however, memories of the Apartheid era are fading fast, and charges of appropriation are being brought against South Africans who have imagined and represented the “voices” of other groups.

In 1992, the magazine *Staffrider* published a polemical piece by Desiree Lewis, in which she gives an account of a conference on “Women and Gender” held in January 1991, at the University of Natal. Lewis attacks the tendency, as she sees it, of white academics to establish “restrictively normative boundaries for interpreting ‘women and gender in Southern Africa.’” Black women, she claims, are constructed “primarily as subject matter,” while “a large representation of a very small group of the women of Southern Africa as well as a sizeable contingent of women from abroad were unproblematically speaking for . . . the majority of women of the region” (16-17). She argues that white women academics, themselves insecure because they only recently have been accredited, have a vested interest in the silence of black women, but that black and white experience differs to the extent that the commentary of a group member on the experience of that group cannot be substituted by that of an outsider.

Lewis observes that whilst black expression of experience is cultivated, black analysis and interpretation is discredited. Her statement belongs discernibly to the early 1990s, when a considerable number of black women had already published autobiographies, but there were few established black women academics in South Africa to offer critiques. Her intention to claim for black women the right to analyze and comment on the texts of other black women marks her as standing close to the end of a long struggle to claim the right to "voice." The enormous achievement of black women who have already, in the seventies and eighties, written their lives is not her subject. The phrase "speaking for," used in a pejorative sense, is common throughout the piece.

Dated as it is by reference to the 1991 conference, Lewis no doubt feels that her article requires no qualification related to history. But because I believe that the history of "speaking for" is more complex than she recognized, I shall attempt here to offer an account and an evaluation of the decision to and process of "speaking for" under Apartheid. I shall argue that it was a flawed but essentially honourable literary process, and will show that it was gradually and properly superseded by the subject's speaking for herself. The division between "interpretation and expression" (20) which Lewis deplores is one I shall argue against: the woman who voices her own experience in an autobiography has interpreted it, though the question of whether black academics are available to examine and accredit that analysis is another matter, and one with which I shall not here concern myself—and which I believe was proper for Lewis to take up.

"Speaking for" is the term which is often applied to a mediation in which the intervener has not only the power to record and the access to the publishing process denied to the autobiographical subject, but also where he or she acquires a degree of authority over the text. A "speaking for" which is devoid of the kind of guilt which Lewis implies is a political mediation in circumstances where custom, or the law, denies a particular group a hearing. In the period from 1948 until the 1970s, the use of an intermediary for the oppressed obtained a hearing in South Africa, or at least for that version of their plight which was offered

by the intermediary. "Speaking for" has however a number of possibilities of meaning, or rather of emphasis, since the dominance of one meaning in a literary act is unlikely totally to exclude others. "Speaking for" must be representation: that is to say, it must present an individual other than the intermediary as the subject of a text. Representation, on the other hand, is not necessarily "speaking for," which implies that the intermediary author's text supplies a lack resulting from the subject's inability or failure to offer her own text.

It is likely that some degree of cultural translation will be involved, so that the imagined audience may be offered, by a process of linguistic and/or cultural transformation of what is incomprehensible to it—access to individuals previously unknown. The degree of distortion in this process of cultural translation will vary according to the circumstances of the subject relative to those of the imagined audience, and the degree of coincidence between the purposes of the autobiographical subject and the intermediary. Moreover, when an intermediary converts a spoken and episodic narrative into a text, he or she is likely to embed in that text principles of order and selection which will relate to its new status as a written document as well as to the process of cultural translation for an imagined audience. For the greater part of the period of which I am writing, the 1960s until the present day, that audience, especially for a text published in English, was largely composed of whites.

The two writers whom I shall consider as representative in the 1960s and 1970s—in their different ways—of the intermediaries for the silent are Athol Fugard and Elsa Joubert. Their two texts, *Boesman and Lena*, first produced in South Africa in 1969, and *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*, published in Afrikaans in 1978 and translated by the author into English in 1980, suggest the changing meaning of, and the limitations on the value of "speaking for." My choice of texts has been determined by the fact that the former belongs to the most silent period—in a literary sense—of Apartheid, and the latter to the post-Black Consciousness period, immediately before writing by black women began to appear in sufficient volume to render their texts considerable as a body. Neither of the texts is biographical,

though several of the black women's texts that I shall discuss in the latter part of this essay are autobiographical. Both offer (with a different emphasis on authenticity of utterance) the fictional figure of a woman speaking in her own voice, and the authors of both have made it clear that their purpose was to supply literary speech to individuals who were forced to remain in a public sense silent.

A text which claims to offer an authentic story of another's life may, if that other is unable or forbidden to tell her own story, be seen as a substitute for an autobiography. Both Fugard's *Notebooks* and Joubert's published statements about *Poppie Nongena* show that they wished their work to function as substitute testimony. In Fugard's case, the emphasis nevertheless is on the imaginative process of literary creation; in Joubert's, it is on the authenticity of the record of which, she claims, she is only the mediator.

Unsatisfactory though it may be to compare fiction, dramatic or narrative, with autobiography, it is likely to be a necessary condition of any comparison between "speaking for" another and speaking for oneself. The creation of the voice of the silent other is in itself a fiction-making process; in response (when the response eventually comes) the individual who speaks for herself will be likely to produce autobiography, where the understanding between writer and reader is that the text is offered as authentic record.

In 1965, when he was planning to write *Boesman and Lena*, Fugard recorded in his *Notebooks* several encounters with destitute or extremely poor coloured women, most of whom, though their circumstances were obviously extreme, could not, he believed, tell their stories to him. He writes of an old woman on the road from Cradock whom he picks up in a car. She has "been chased off a farm after her husband's death about three days previously" and is walking to another farm, far away. She plans to sleep the night in a stormwater drain. She cries frequently, he writes; when she indicates where the car must stop, he helps her out and puts her bundle on her head. "I suppose she stopped to cry a little and then went on, cried again later and went on, went on and on" (124).

The encounter is followed by others: "Fishing on the banks of the Swartkops River: saw her as we were leaving our spot on the canal wall. Lena . . . Barefoot . . . A face shrivelled and distorted by dissipation, resentment, regrets. Bloated stomach" (*Notebooks* 166). He later recalls the "young Boesman and Lena who passed in front of the car one night when I was waiting at a traffic light. A shared life in the beginning—at the end each other's jailer" (167). He recollects a woman who had worked for his family two years previously, and who "might have been Lena" who feels a "sense of appalling physical and spiritual destitution, of servility. Did the housework without a word or sound, without the slightest flicker of her 'self'" (166).

In all these cases, Fugard's efforts to "read" the faces and behaviour of the women, who cannot, he believes, convey the experience of their miserable lives, are what strike one. At one stage he refers to the play as *Lena and Boesman*, and it was presumably iron custom which fixed its title as *Boesman and Lena*, since it is largely on the predicament of coloured women that he meditates. He has already, in *The Blood Knot* (first produced in 1962), investigated an area of coloured men's suffering, and in this later period he is intrigued by the deeper silence of coloured women. He is responding to what is later to be called the triple oppression of race, class, and gender.

The literary act which created *Lena* can be seen as a complex one: there can be no doubt that Fugard saw the play as political mediation, as indeed the laws and social customs of the Apartheid era compelled him to. Related to this intention to mediate was the obligation of translation: to reach the audience which Fugard envisaged, *Lena* had not only to speak some form of English, which must nevertheless indicate that she spoke a dialect of Afrikaans, but since the models which he cites in the *Notebooks* were characteristically silent, Fugard had imaginatively to create a view of life and a related pattern of action for her. It is notable that not one of the women whom he mentions shows the aggression, the bawdiness or, obviously, the powers of self-analysis which distinguish *Lena*. Of the self-analysis, we might say cynically that the man must have a play: *Lena* must learn something of herself if we are to know her. To say this, however, is to

admit that the literary act of "speaking for" may breach, not only the politically-imposed silence of the oppressed, but the elected reticence of the individual, which in the eighties and nineties had been perceived as important areas of the autobiographical selves offered by black South African women. Further, the Lena who says, "*Jou moer*" to the seagull, who dances the *vastrap* on the mudflats, who calls herself "a *Hotnot meid*"—these facets of Lena do not derive from Fugard's recorded observations, but from his knowledge of the stereotype of the "coloured" woman, and ultimately from the tradition which produced Katje Kekkelbek (Chapman 51-2).<sup>1</sup> Fugard has used what is generally assumed by whites to be the truth of silent individuals to lead them to what he believes to be a deeper truth. His act is therefore only in a political sense intermediary; its mimetic element is much less than the *Notebooks* suggest.

He writes of his sense that *Boesman and Lena* is the third part of a trilogy, which might be called *The Family*, and of which *The Blood Knot* and *Hello and Goodbye* are the other parts. "In biographical terms, myself and Royal; myself and father (or mother); myself and Sheila" (*Notebooks* 174). This is only one of the reminders of the effects of "speaking for," that the speaker has his own interests to serve in the speech which he believes to be an articulation of the position of another. R. L. Amato has pointed out that the play, as well as being "a model in little of the specific relationships of modern South African racist and sexist capitalism," is *Every-couple* (qtd. in Daymond 209). Amato has further indicated that Fugard was strongly influenced by Camus in his conception of the play; Beckett's is another influence which is evident. None of this is to the discredit of either Fugard or his play, but it indicates that "speaking for" others, a highly moral activity when silence is forced onto sufferers, must always and simultaneously involve speaking for oneself.

By the time *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* appeared at the end of the 1970s, its author felt it necessary to precede the narrative with a notice "To the Reader":

This novel is based on the actual life story of a black woman living in South Africa today. Only her name, Poppie Rachel Nongena, born Matati, is invented. The facts were related to me not only by Poppie

herself, but by members of her immediate family and her extended family or clan, and they cover one family's experience over the past forty years. (N. pag.)

Joubert describes her own role in the writing of the novel as that of "a tape recorder, a mouthpiece" (Grutter)—a description strangely at odds with the term "novel" which she uses—and after the novel's first publication in Afrikaans, gave an account of her experiments in narrative whilst she was working on the book. The scrupulousness with which she explains the origins of the text and its relationship to the actual words of a black woman, tells its own story of the change in attitudes to the activity of "speaking for," so long unproblematically seen as empowering to the silenced. There is in *Poppie Nongena* a narrator who uses the same register of Afrikaans as does Poppie herself, but who must nevertheless function for the reader as a reminder that if this is autobiography, it is mediated and finally another's version of a black woman's life. *Boesman and Lena* contains no such reminder, no visible, dramatized narrator, and the difference is one related to period, not to genre, since there have been plenty of plays which identified the characters within them as mediated representations. But genre is important, no doubt: a theatre, whatever its nature, serves a comparable function to the "says Poppie" of Joubert's narrator, in that both are reminders of literariness, of the author and the artefact.

Reviewers of *Poppie Nongena* pointed out that this particular form of Afrikaans had never previously been used in print (Brink; du Plessis), and identified the writing of a text in the language of "the brown Afrikaner" as a valid political act.<sup>2</sup> But as early as 1979, there was a voice which dissented from the general sense of the value of Joubert's novel: Ampie Coetzee asked (with a telling confusion of gender) whether it was "possible for a white Afrikaans writer . . . to write significant revolutionary literature about the struggle of a suppressed people, whom he doesn't really know?" (29).

The answer to this question is one which must alter over time. As I have already suggested in Fugard's case in the sixties, and which I reaffirm with less confidence about Joubert at the end of the seventies, when the alternative for the subject to her case's

being imperfectly articulated by another is silence and oblivion, there can be little doubt about the value of the act of "speaking for." *Boesman and Lena* and *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* reached not only thousands of South Africans but a large number of residents of other lands.

I must at this point bring up a short passage from a work of the same period as *Poppie Nongena* which focuses mainly on the plight of whites:

Remember our crippled brothers and sisters who have been disabled deliberately by people who have been trained to disrespect and disregard a black man as a human being? Remember the blood that flowed continuously caused by the wounds inflicted by Vorster's gangsters upon the innocent mass demonstrating peacefully? What about the bodies of our dead colleagues which were dragged into those monstrous and horrible looking riot squad vehicles called hippos? We the students shall continue to shoulder the wagon of liberation irrespective of these racist manoeuvres to delay the inevitable liberation of the Black masses. June the 16th will never be erased in our minds. (Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* 346-47)

The statement by the Soweto Students Council of which this is a part, quoted by Nadine Gordimer in *Burger's Daughter*, has the function in the novel of showing the extent to which leadership of the revolutionary movement has passed out of the hands of whites into those of blacks. It may well serve at the same time as an indicator of Gordimer's understanding that she must not drown out the literary speech of blacks. She does not claim that whites ought not to represent blacks or vice versa, nor even that they may not speculate on the inner life of blacks: she has indicated in interviews since the publication of *Burger's Daughter* that she has reached no final answer on this matter. In 1982, she explained, implicitly, the presence in *Burger's Daughter* of the statement above: "Take the Soweto Riots of 1976, the uprising of young blacks. If I were to sit down tomorrow and write a novel from the point of view of a 15- or 16-year old boy or girl who lived through that experience, it would be false . . . I know I couldn't write about those particular children because they experienced the kind of childhood and adolescence I haven't experienced" (Bazin 211). Later, in 1983, she told of "a young black playwright called Moise Maponya" who spoke bitterly of how "whites take our lives and



make their books out of them, and these books are published and everybody reads them and nobody wants to publish my play" (Bazin 222). Gordimer's answer to this is that blacks can also write about whites, that they know about whites what whites do not know about themselves. Despite the diffidence she has expressed, she has explored the consciousness of a man of mixed race in her novel *My Son's Story* (1990), and in several of her short stories, notably "A City of the Dead, A City of the Living" (1984), where the attempt to portray the physical conditions of black life and the way in which they shape mental processes may be compared to that of *Poppie Nongena*.

There is a sense in which almost all imaginative writing may be regarded as a "speaking for." Yet the assumption behind the act must be that the silent subject cannot be empowered to speak in her own voice, at least to the audience imagined by the writer. And the value of the mediation must be conditional on the usefulness and acceptability of the cultural translation to the subject "spoken for," as well as to the imagined audience. It is for this reason that the cultural translation involved in editing the work of a second-language autobiographer can produce a text which is authentic in the sense that *Boesman and Lena* can never be: the version of the autobiographer's self produced by the editor is one to which the autobiographer has assented; it represents, unless the editor is irresponsible, the version of the autobiographical self desired by the author.

It follows, therefore, that the answer to the question of the adequacy and usefulness of "speaking for" others is one which is likely to change over time, as the subject approaches the possibility of speaking for herself. Brink's and du Plessis's praise for *Poppie Nongena* was closely related to the fact that the text's version of Afrikaans brought into literature a group of people whose existence readers had formerly been able to deny. Coetzee's challenge to the work came from his knowledge that Black Consciousness had become a political, and therefore a literary force within this country to the extent of rendering questionable any act of "speaking for." He denied, in fact, the morality in his period of mediated autobiography.

History was on Coetzee's side: the slogan "Black man, you are on your own," was already acquiring literary, as well as political

meaning. Yet although the Black Consciousness movement insisted that blacks must speak for themselves, it also advocated a kind of unity—a unanimity—which assumed that the black man, always referred to as such, and represented by masculine pronouns, could speak for all the people, who were equally, if not identically oppressed. It cannot therefore be claimed that Black Consciousness deliberately provided a sympathetic climate for black women who wish to “speak for” themselves. Black “tradition,” although usually, in the context of urban life in the 1970s and 1980s, a reconstruction rather than a continuously observed set of precedents, has been invoked to insist that women ought to be silent and ancillary to men. The answer of women writers to this has frequently, especially in the case of Ellen Kuzwayo, been to emphasize the traditional authority of the mother, and to point to the fact that the term is used in black society to mean women of the age and group of biological mothers. The debate about the value and limitations of the “mother” image is not one which I wish to enter: Driver, Hunter, and Christensen have pursued it elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> The traditional figure of the woman storyteller has also been evoked to legitimize the literary voices of women, and texts like Kuzwayo’s *Sit Down and Listen* (1990) and Magona’s *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night* (1991) draw on the traditional respect for the narrating voice of a woman.

It is nevertheless significant that the line of black women’s writing in this country, from Tlali’s *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1975) down through Kuzwayo and Mashinini to Magona and Mhlope, has only become traceable in the mid to late 1980s, in the wake of the Black Consciousness movement.<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, women authors have been empowered by Black Consciousness, despite its cultural conservatism. Dorothy Driver has commented on it this way:

Feminism and Black Consciousness have each felt the need, then, for a community which will not consciously make them “other” with all the negativities that term implies, and which will let them speak in the absence of the constraining and degrading hand of patriarchy, in one situation, or of white domination on the other. (Trump 232)

It was perhaps a decade before the principles which insisted on the unique value of an individual’s analysing and articulating his

own position were successfully applied by black women to their own case. Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman* (1985) owes much of its inspiration to Black Consciousness, in the immediate sense that she advocates the unity of the people; its feminism may be seen as indirectly related to Black Consciousness in the way which Driver has suggested.

It is probably because of this complex relationship to a movement which at once empowered the black and insisted on the ancillary position of the woman that an important and recurrent feature of black women's writing in the eighties is the "severance scene" in which the woman author/narrator/protagonist separates herself from her husband and moves towards autonomy. The woman head of a family where there is no longer a male parent has of course been an observable phenomenon in South Africa for many decades, and from early in urban black writing, an almost untheorized observation has recurred that the position of black women in townships is not ancillary, but central: they are forced into decision-making and authoritative speech. Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* (1973 [1959]), as has been remarked (Manganyi 11-12), presents a family pattern of strong women in control of children, whilst fathers are shadowy or absent. Mphahlele offers at some length a painful scene of marital conflict, in which his parents become permanently estranged (28). From this point his mother and her female relatives take complete responsibility for the children of her marriage (28). Significantly, the conflict between husband and wife ends with Mphahlele's mother speaking in court against his father. Mphahlele records the recurrence of this pattern in the life of his sister.

In the writings of black women of the 1980s (although Kuzwayo and Mashinini especially are reticent about their sufferings at the hands of irresponsible men) a similar scene recurs. Kuzwayo, in *Call Me Woman*, explains that her first marriage was to some extent motivated by her longing for "a home my mind could turn to" (122), and says that she "sincerely looked forward to a peaceful, loving, family life" (123). The reality was different: "Day by day I realised I was being humiliated and degraded" (124). After six years of unhappiness, and the birth of two

children, she leaves in secret for Johannesburg, to save her life, she believes. Autonomy does not come to her at once, nor does she feel guiltless as she moves towards it, and it is clear that she is torn between her attachment to a "traditional" past, in her case the lifestyle of a Christian middle-class black rural family, and her recognition of the necessities of her circumstances. Her behaviour in the negotiations surrounding her divorce shows the conflict in her, still to an extent unresolved in her account written decades later. She asks her (white) lawyer to arrange an out-of-court settlement "for in spite of all the hurt and humiliation I had suffered at his [her husband's] hands, I was determined never to wash my dirty linen in public" (140). The lawyer to whom she has spoken does not turn up on the day of the divorce, but sends a shabby substitute: "I looked at him once, and immediately lost confidence in him. I there and then told myself, 'Ellen, take charge of this boat, whether you sink or swim'" (140). And she completes the negotiations herself. This crucial occasion of "speaking for" herself is also, and typically, a compromise: she does not contend for custody of her sons, but only for access to them.

Emma Mashinini records, with typical generosity, a similar breakdown of her first marriage: "I know that Roger felt very moody sometimes after work because they may have screamed and shouted at him for some mistake that anyone could have made" (11). But the family was poor, and he spent irresponsibly, and beat his wife. Like Kuzwayo, she uses the phrase "dirty linen" as a euphemism for testimony about marital abuse—she may even derive it from this earlier female text. Mashinini offers a scene which is one of recognition, of a personal emancipation, and of her understanding that the past will not immediately relinquish its hold on her.

I would say to the doctors, "I fell," or "I tripped myself." And his mother would be furious, and even when he'd calmed down and wanted me to come back she'd say, "No," but she didn't mention divorce. That wasn't the language we spoke. For her, the way to get away from him was to stay with her.

But one day we started arguing and I said to my husband, "I'm going to leave you. I'm going home."

And this man knew I cared about my family, my family unit, and he thought I would never leave him. So he just said, "If you want to go, why don't you?"

I took my bag—no clothes or suitcases—and I left. I walked to the bus stop and took a bus all the way to my father's place, and that's the last time I walked away from my husband.

My children came afterwards. My people had to go and fetch them. It was not possible to do it any other way. (12)

In the next chapter Mashinini discusses her married life as a full-time worker, a wife and the mother of young children: "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. . . . My husband would not be rushing to come home" (15). Since this passage follows the scene in which she leaves her husband, the inference is that their separation was a necessary preliminary to her embarking on an analysis of their relationship. So was the acquisition of a new kind of language: when she says of her sympathetic mother-in-law's inability to contemplate divorce, "That wasn't the language we spoke," she is remembering a reticence, which implied a refusal of the action that she herself had to take.

Kuzwayo, after writing of her "Lost Birthright, a traditional country life" (*Call Me Woman* 75), goes on to describe how this lifestyle was lost to her. Apartheid was undoubtedly a force: the farm where she grew up was declared a "black spot," but the more immediate cause was family breakdown: tradition deserted her, not she it. Her parents had divorced when she was an infant, though significantly, she says nothing about the reasons for their divorce—had she, perhaps, not the language for it in childhood? Did the act of writing in English significantly extend the subject matter available to Kuzwayo and Mashinini?

In the cases of both Kuzwayo and Mashinini, autonomous action—the one as a social worker and the other as a labour leader—preceded the decision to write, but as they commemorate the moment when they emerged from male dominance, the reader knows that they have understood that it was crucial to their whole career as well as to the autobiographical activity in which they are engaged. Both women feel pride in their lives: they intend them to be, as Daymond has shown that they are

in fact, indications to other black women of their possibilities (Daymond 32).

Sindiwe Magona's account of her emancipation from patriarchy contains more overt anger than the accounts of Kuzwayo and Mashinini. Her husband, knowing her to be pregnant with their third child, arranges for her to be dismissed from her job—"speaks for her" for the last time—and then leaves for a visit, which, as she says bitterly, lasts more than twenty years, to his parents in Transkei. No money comes via the post, and she is reduced to begging from a distant relative: "That is the day I divorced my husband. In my heart" (175).

Magona's anger and bitterness are increased by the arrival at the nursing home, the day after her son is born, of an enormous bunch of flowers, her husband's only sign of concern for his family. In the next volume of her autobiography, *Forced to Grow* (1992) she can, having painfully worked her way towards security for her family and autonomy for herself, eventually begin to understand that he was reacting to a terrible sense of powerlessness and inadequacy. But even this understanding is accompanied by the knowledge that his collapse as a father and a husband showed a weakness that she could not afford. Kuzwayo and Mashinini, also, whilst extending compassion to the broken men of their community, recognize that they themselves, under more than equal pressure, have not been broken.

Miriam Tlali's autobiographical fiction, *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1975), published long before the other black women writers began to write, and written before Black Consciousness became a force in this country, contains no such scene in which male authority is openly repudiated. It is, however, the account of a woman who faces the workaday world alone, without male support, and in this sense contains its author's recognition that women must address the world without intermediaries. In her stories written in the 1980s, however, the scene in which a woman identifies and speaks out against male oppression has figured: "Mm'a-Lithoto" (12-26) and "Masechaba's Erring Child" (*Footprints* 138-62) both contain such scenes.

The mediator's own sense of the possibilities of his subject now appear to have determined his representation. The conflicts

between Boesman and Lena, for example, end in a new stasis, not in any real emergence for Lena from gender-related oppression, and her protests are heard only by her husband, because Fugard, rather than his subject, believes that they are in their context insoluble. Like *Cry, the Beloved Country*, the text now appears elegiac, rather than revolutionary. And Poppie Nongena is fixed as a victim, forever unable to fight back.

A new note enters writing about women when it becomes writing by and not for, black women. Bessie Head, in praise of Khama the Great, speaks of his reform of the law to improve the condition of women, and she especially values the fact that he allowed them to speak in public:

But what was important was that he first gave women a feeling for the fact that they could talk for themselves. . . . [Previously if] beaten or ill-treated, the woman approached an uncle and said: "I can endure it no more, do something on my behalf." It depended on how the man was influenced. But now the woman no longer needed an intermediary. . . . This was a kind of beginning of independence for women. (Qtd. in Mackenzie and Clayton 16)

Head has put her finger on the essential limitation of "speaking for." However great the knowledge and sympathy of the intermediary, he can only offer to the woman whose words are interpreted and relayed the censored experience of speaking with permission. Where the intermediary regards his subject's statements as untrue, inadequate, or unjustified (and this judgement must to an extent be influenced by the intermediary's own experience and interests) there will be additions, corrections, and suppressions. What the intermediary must find most difficult to convey—even unbearable, since it brings into doubt the whole project of "speaking for"—is the distance that must exist between himself and his subject, and the ambivalence, to put it at its best, in the feelings of the silent subject for her intermediary.

This ambivalence will necessarily turn to anger if, as Lewis has alleged, the intermediary attempts, when it is no longer necessary, to continue in that role or to extend it. Her charge that the area of analysis and criticism is one from which black women continue to be excluded implies a legitimizing of a single, exclusively white viewpoint from which judgements may alone be made. Whilst seeing her essay as an extreme claim, I must agree

that in 1991-92, there was too little awareness of the absence from criticism of the voices of black South African women critics. In the late 1990s, though, inequalities in education and economic pressures of other kinds are making the process a slow one, but the number of black academics in South Africa is growing.

The intermediary's speech in the 1960s and 1970s on behalf of the black subject was flawed. To discard mediated representations on these grounds, to allow them to drop out of the list of texts in which black women are represented, would however be to leave a gap in South African history as well as in literature. Lena and Poppie in the 1960s and 1970s could only speak to us through intermediaries; the distortions now evident in this mediated speech are also part of the history of textual production in South Africa.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "Kaatje Kekkelbek" is the title of a poem written by the settler poet Andrew Geddes Bain in 1838. In it the eponymous speaker, a woman of mixed race, confesses to, and revels in, her drunkenness, thefts, and promiscuity. She has become the type of the licentious woman of colour.
- <sup>2</sup> On June 9, 1993, Connie Mulder of the South African Conservative Party was still denying, on the television programme *Agenda*, that such an identity as that of "the brown Afrikaner" existed.
- <sup>3</sup> See Sharon Christensen, Eva Hunter, and Martin Trump (for Dorothy Driver's comments on the subject).
- <sup>4</sup> Though a small number of South African black women's autobiographies already existed at this time, they did not substantially change the picture. It is difficult to argue that Bessie Head's literary success directly inspired black South African women to write, since it took place outside this country, and since she is so strongly associated by most of her readers with Botswana. She herself has claimed, however, of *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1974) that they derive as much from her experiences in South Africa as from her life in Botswana (Mackenzie and Clayton 26-29). Similarly, because Noni Jabavu wrote from Britain and with the advantage of a high degree of formal education, *The Ochre People* (1963) though it may well have influenced Kuzwayo in her account of her youth in *Call Me Woman* is unlikely to have been a strong influence on South African black women. Lauretta Ngcobo, whose work is also missing from this essay, is another case of a woman who wrote and published outside of this country.

#### WORKS CITED

- Amato, R. L. "Fugard's Confessional Analysis: 'Master Harold' . . . and the Boys." Ed. M. J. Daymond, J. U. Jacobs, and Margaret Lenta. *Momentum: On Recent South African Writing*. Pietermaritzburg: U of Natal P, 1984. 198-214.



- Bazin, Nancy Topping, and Marilyn Dallman Seymour. *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1990.
- Brink, Andre P. "Oor die stil pyn van die ander Afrikaner." *Rapport*. 3 Dec. 1978. [Trans. J. U. Jacobs for author. N. pag].
- Chapman, Michael, ed. *A Century of South African Poetry*. Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1981.
- Christensen, Sharon. "Women Write Back: The Literary Responses of Miriam Tlali and Ellen Kuzwayo to Black Consciousness." MA Thesis, University of Natal, 1992.
- Coetzee, Ampie. Review of *Die Swerffare van Poppie Nongena*. *Speak* 6 (1979): 28-30.
- Daymond, M. J. "On Retaining and Recognising Changes in the Genre 'Autobiography.'" *Current Writing* 3 (1991): 31-41.
- Driver, Dorothy. "M'a-Ngoana O Tsoare Thipa ka Bohaleng—The Child's Mother Grabs the Sharp End of the Knife: Women as Mothers, Women as Writers." *Rendering Things Visible*. Ed. Martin Trump. Johannesburg: Ravan, 1990.
- Du Plessis, Phil. "Die Passie van 'n swart Afrikanervrou." *Buurman* Dec. 1978. [Trans. J. U. Jacobs for author. N. pag].
- Fugard, Athol. "Boesman and Lena." *Three Port Elizabeth Plays*. Cape Town: Oxford UP, 1980. 165-222.
- . "The Blood Knot." *Three Port Elizabeth Plays*. Cape Town: Oxford UP, 1980. 1-98.
- . "Hello and Goodbye." *Three Port Elizabeth Plays*. Cape Town: Oxford UP, 1980. 99-164.
- . *Notebooks*. Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1983.
- Gordimer, Nadine. *Burger's Daughter*. 1979. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980.
- . "A City of the Dead, A City of the Living." *Something Out There*. Johannesburg: Ravan, 1984. 9-26.
- . *My Son's Story*. Claremont: David Philip, 1990.
- Grutter, Petra. "Wie is Poppie?" *Sarie*. Nov. 1978. [Trans. J. U. Jacobs for author. N. pag].
- Head, Bessie. *Maru*. 1971. London: Heinemann, 1972.
- . *A Question of Power*. London: Heinemann, 1974.
- Hunter, Eva. "A Mother is Nothing but a Backbone: Women, Tradition and Change in Miriam Tlali's *Footprints in the Quag*." *Current Writing* 5.1 (1993): 60-75.
- Jabavu, Noni. *The Ochre People*. London: John Murray, 1963.
- Joubert, Elsa. *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*. [*Die Swerffare van Poppie Nongena* (1978)] Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1980.
- Kuzwayo, Ellen. *Call Me Woman*. Johannesburg: Ravan, 1985.
- . *Sit Down and Listen*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1990.
- Lewis, Desiree. "The Politics of Feminism in South Africa." *Staffrider* 10.3 (1992): 15-34.
- Mackenzie, Craig, and Cherry Clayton, eds. *Between the Lines: Interviews with Bessie Head, Sheila Roberts, Ellen Kuzwayo and Miriam Tlali*. Grahamstown: NELM, 1989.
- Magona, Sindiwe. *To My Children's Children*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1990.
- . *Forced to Grow*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1992.

- Manganyi, N. Chabani. *Looking Through the Keyhole: Dissenting Essays on Black Experience*. Johannesburg: Ravan, 1981.
- Mashinini, Emma. *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*. London: The Woman's Press, 1989.
- Mphahlele, Ezekiel (Es'kia). *Down Second Avenue*. 1959. London: Faber, 1973.
- Spivak, Gayatri. "The Postcolonial Critic." *The Postcolonial Critic*. Ed. Sarah Harasym. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Tlali, Miriam. *Muriel at Metropolitan*. Johannesburg: Ravan, 1975.
- . *Footprints in the Quag*. Claremont: David Philip, 1989.
- Trump, Martin. *Rendering Things Visible*. Johannesburg: Ravan, 1990.