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"I AM COLOURED": THE MEMOIR AS A DECOLONIAL METHODOLOGY

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This paper explores the shift from a "definitive" to a "descriptive" approach in the context of the coloured identity narrative. It reflects on the challenges of critiquing and redefining coloured culture and identity while still using language that reinforces existing tropes. The author argues for a move towards the descriptive, which allows for a decolonial perspective and self-articulation. The text discusses the use of autoethnography and the creation of a production called (Un)becoming, where personal narratives were explored. It also suggests that published memoirs, such as *Sorry, Not Sorry*, *Because I Couldn't Kill You*, and *Ougat*, contribute to disrupting normative cultural constraints and offer a decolonizing perspective.

Language: From the "Definitive" towards the "Descriptive"

Reviewing the socio-political performance of coloured identity, I discover in the seminal texts engaging with the coloured identity narrative a trend of naming, re-naming, reclarifying of definitions, and explaining exactly what is meant when one declares: "I am coloured." I reflect on the difficulty of proceeding when the very words one must use to critique the creation of a coloured culture or identity narrative disarm the intention of the critique and reinforce the common tropes in the current and historical lexicon. In revisiting the coloured identity narrative through the use of individual and collective memory, I considered disregarding racialised language altogether, but to refuse certain words and their semantics rendered me mute, and thus unable to engage at any level. This is evidence of the "idiosyncratic over-hang from apartheid [...] that the definite words of race still hold such potent and striking symbolic power that their mention calls up immediate and particular meaning. The fact that such language is still so embedded in our vocabulary is a testament to how much racial dismantling still needs to be pursued" (Wentworth 2019a, 7–8).

The obsession with renaming to redefine the concept of "coloured" as an identity has something to do with creating culture (anew) in order to induce a sense of belonging. This pursuit is very different from, and far more complex than, a declaration for/of homogeneity. In fact, it is the direct opposite. It is within heterogeneity that the coloured identity narrative thrives and liberates itself from apartheid-imposed definitions of colouredness. But the term 'heterogenous' has often been too easily invoked by those writing about the coloured identity narrative to refer to something or anything that did not adhere to the accepted definition. In this regard, the term becomes singular, and as such, it is unproductive and dangerous for the coloured identity narrative. It is not the solution to the "caught-between-blackness-and-whiteness" plight. Such a solution should rather afford access to the descriptive, which has the potential to loosen the noose of the definitive. If the categorisation or definition that made classification possible is part and parcel of an apartheid lexicon, socially, politically and historically inherited from colonialism, then any attempt to re-define may do more to cement the status quo than liberate one from it. To re-classify is to operate within the confines established by the conceptual architecture of apartheid. To re-name, even in an attempt to correct, is a reactive form of knowledge production. Bhambra elaborates on Homi K. Bhabha's view of postcolonialism: "This issue is more about re-inscribing 'other' cultural traditions into narratives of modernity and thus transforming those narratives – both historical terms and theoretical ones – rather than simply re-naming or re-evaluating the content of these other 'inheritances'" (Bhambra 2014, 116). I believe that a proactive form of knowledge production is to shift away from the definitive towards the descriptive using a decolonial perspective sought through an autoethnographic lens. An autoethnographic lens provides room for self-articulation as well as a productive contribution to the design of culture.

In 2019, as part of my MA thesis about the coloured identity narrative, I created a production called *(Un)becoming* in my practice-as-research course at the University of Cape Town. My intention was to "break open the narrative by exposing a diversity of lived experiences within the heterogeneous coloured frame that call up the contradictions of a fixed position; and allowing their irrefutable presence to carry the function of penetrative discourse rather than attempting to neatly draw lines of logic in rebuttal of the single narrative of the cultural superstructure" (Wentworth 2019a, 38). I interviewed and video-recorded people who could be considered well-known (although not officially documented) stereotypes of "coloured people":

- The grandmother, often conservative and always judgmental
- The pretty girl who is probably a dancer, the one with straight hair
- The homeless man, often viewed as dangerous
- The drunk promiscuous woman with more children than she can look after.

I asked them about their lives, memories from their childhood, the games they played and who their friends were, what they remember about where they grew up, their experiences of run-ins with the law, etc. I essentially asked open-ended questions that elicited personal narratives and allowed the conversation to meander as much as they wanted it to. It was not primarily the content of their narratives that I was interested in (although the content was fascinating). Rather, I was attentive to the person, how they perceived themselves and what their opinion is/was of the world they inhabited at the various times their memory would allow them to recall and describe. This encouraged a descriptive narrative rather than a definitive one and respected the agency of the narrator. Although not knowing it at the time, I was asking them to engage in an autoethnographic practice.

An Autoethnographic Lens

Loosely defined, 'autoethnography' is a description and analysis of one's experience of one's own culture (Ellis et al. 2011). Closer to the agenda of this study is the description of autoethnography by Gringrich-Philbrook: "The term 'autoethnography' designates a wide array of textual practices [...]. Though sometimes thought of as a 'method,' autoethnography strikes me more as a broad orientation towards scholarship than a specific procedure" (2005, 298). Or again, autoethnography makes a concerted effort to offer "a critique of *self and society, self in society, and self as resistant and transformative force of society*" (Alexander 2005, emphasis in original). In this way, self-narratives are capable of offering a decolonial perspective on culture and the construction of it.

In *(Un)becoming*, I took the transcribed interviews into a rehearsal room with four actors, who all self-identify as coloured (to varying degrees). Their familiarity with the material was palpable. While the rehearsal process and a full analysis of the production are beyond the scope of this paper, what is important to note is that the actors chose the interviewees they wanted to engage with and portray. The actors contributed to the creative process and had the opportunity to insert themselves into the work by sharing their personal memories and experiences. They were asked to respond physically to the source material. What emerged was a production in fragments. As I wrote, "[i]n the staging, the work will consider the linearity of theme before concerning itself with linear timelines, layering identity narratives that are diverse and that portray images that are non-static in their representation" (Wentworth 2019, 40). While some have critiqued self-narrative as self-indulgent and narcissistic (Gentile, 1989, cited in Alexander 2005) – an accusation perhaps sometimes justified – it is, more importantly, a form of cultural performance. Françoise Liannet (1989) claims that autoethnography "transcends pedestrian notions of referentiality, for the staging of the event is part of the process of 'passing on', of elaborating cultural forms, which are not static and inviolable but dynamically involved in the creation of culture itself" (102, cited in Alexander 2005, 422). The self and culture exist symbiotically (De Munck 2000, cited in Chang 2008), and it is in this interface that meaning is created. Applying autoethnography as praxis offers autonomy over narrative from personally lived experience. Lived experience operates through the body in the capture and examination of memory, which is inevitably a fragmented process. The nonlinearity of memory, as demonstrated in *(Un)becoming*, could be seen as critical self-authorship. The description of self and community refutes 'box-

ing' and is counter-definitive, steering language away from the constraints of definition and towards description, both creatively and critically. The coloured identity narrative has already gone to battle with definition in so many ways. One needs only to think back to the absurdity of the "pencil test" to know how arbitrary yet violent definition can be in the hands of those who entrench epistemological violence for their own benefit. In the context of the coloured identity narrative, critical self-authorship can be an act of decolonisation.

The Memoir

With the understanding that all self-narratives, in all their iterations, are productive, I propose that the literary genre of memoir productively assume an autoethnographic lens for the coloured identity narrative. Liberated from the definitive, authors describe their lives, communities, parents and cultural experiences while engaging with identity. At the beginning of Shana Fife's memoir, *Ougat* (2021), she declares that the events that she describes in the memoir are told from her memory and her perspective. Making clear that "memory and truth are subjective" (2021), Fife insists on acceptance of the fact that perspective will always be at play. Because the memoirist has the control to remember freely and choose the events, situations, contexts, and moments for inclusion, there is relief from the elitist discrimination that Mbembe believes the 'archive' is implicated in. In his essay, "The Power of the Archive and its Limits" (2002), Mbembe asserts that the state is responsible for judging what contents make up 'the archive' and what is discarded. In the memoir, the author herself decides. This process inevitably begins to subvert the power and authority of the archive, a subversion which holds the potential to liberate the narrative from the centre of authority. A personal narrative is not more substantial, but more particular, able to escape the homogenising reach of general commentary. The coloured identity narrative is placed in the hands of those who experience and choose to engage with the narrative, giving *them* power through self-authorship.

Literary Case Studies

I offer a brief overview of three memoirs to demonstrate the productivity of the descriptive in the context of the coloured identity narrative. The memoirs are *Sorry, Not Sorry: Experiences of a Brown Woman in a White South Africa* (2018), by Haji Mohamed Dawjee; *Because I Couldn't Kill You* (2019), by Kelly-Eve Koopman; and *Ougat: From a Hoe into a Housewife and Then Some* (2021), by Shana Fife. All were written by women, each of whom, in their unique way, declares "I am coloured." My aim is to demonstrate that these texts, and others like them, create a canon of work where culture is located, and actively do so from a decolonising perspective. After all, "decolonization is a process by which Indigenous people dismantle and deconstruct Eurocentric ideologies that impose superiority and privilege over Indigenous communities while honoring the Indigenous ways of knowing and being" (Cull et al. 2018, cited in Pham & Gothberg, 2020: 4096).

The narratives in these memoirs do not purport to define or even redefine the coloured identity narrative, but through descriptions of their lived experience (as in *(Un)becoming*, Wentworth 2019b) contribute to disrupting normative ideological and cultural constraints.

In *Sorry, Not Sorry* (2018), Haji Mohamed Dawjee has a chapter titled: "Begging to be white?" Here she reveals her relationship to whiteness growing up in Cape Town in the early 1990s:

> The global map suffocates me, and not by accident. It is an intentional asphyxiation. We can move from place to place to avoid the white privilege that surrounds us, but our strangulation is inevitable. It encloses. It meets us at the bank, it seats us at restaurants, it talks to us on the radio, it plays in front of us on television and it stares at us in print. The 'whites only' signs have been removed, but destroying physical evidence means nothing when the ideologies have stayed behind and continue to be recycled.
>
> They're a constant reminder of a race we're meant to run, every day. Our lane is filled with hurdles. White people compete too, but in their lane it's a relay. Each one of them runs a shorter distance and leans on a system of support to guarantee consecutive wins. We've been subjected to a crippling variety of disadvantages from the beginning. And the race remains challenging. Mostly because equality is inconceivable and discrimination doesn't need a lot of imagination. It never has.
>
> In her book *Americanah*, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes about the difference in racial awareness between white people and black people: 'Race doesn't really exist for you because it has never been a barrier. Black folks don't have that choice.' There is so much truth in this. When last did you live a day without thinking about the colour of your skin and how you would be treated because of it at any moment? This is not a comment on a lack of pride or ownership of identity. Just because this awareness lingers in the back of our minds does not mean we're not proud of who we are. (37–38)

Dawjee goes on to describe, in careful detail, what she would do if she were white. This is not an aspirational tract, but an appraisal of the larger racial and socio-political system. Later in the book, Dawjee writes a letter of resignation to whiteness and comments on a relationship that is dependent on skirting the boundary between colouredness and whiteness. This aspirational myth is critiqued throughout her chapters.

In the same vein, in *Because I Couldn't Kill You* (2019) Kelly-Eve Koopman employs memories of Christmas to craft metaphors of popular baked goods to describe coloured traditions and the inscription of whiteness on them.

> Christmases in our household were filled with recycled glass coffee jars of home-baked biscuits and tons and tons of Hertzoggies, cheap, sweet, a favourite of the oldies and easy to make. If you didn't grow up in a traditional coloured or Malay household, Hertzoggies are little jam and coconut tarts for special occasions, named after Boer War General JBM Hertzog, famous for his views advocating the minority rights of poor, oppressed Afrikaners and protecting the priceless, endangered vestiges of Afrikaans culture. [...] There's a lot going on in the [above] brief, somewhat historical anecdote. For one it shows the long heritage my people have had of expressing emotion with baked goods, and the equally long legacy of conservative Afrikaners handing out saccharine promises to the coloured community, holding out the sweet dangling carrot cake of white proximity, always in front of the slender noses of those of us bred with the right kind of mixed blood, to keep us galloping after their dark horses for generations. An inheritance the DA is all too happy to ride to death. And if I haven't already beat enough symbolism into the delicate pastry shells of these special-occasion fancies, there is also the unfortunate reminder that it is not only in the recent history that we custard-coloured colonial subjects, we who worked in the kitchens and bedrooms of *die baas*, would forsake our darker brothers and sisters, in tragic displays of betrayal and self-loathing, to get a little taste of the just desserts of whiteness, which in this context is of course milk tart. Another sturdy traditional dessert is the fruit cake.... (98–99)

The memoir offers an opportunity to speak back to social issues on a broad spectrum, from a personal vantage point. Shana Fife, author of *Ougat* (2021), employs anecdotes and weaves stories together to comment on abuse under the guise of discipline for the coloured child. In so doing, she calls up what is common or known to other members of the community, requesting review on the subject matter, as well as on the self.

> In the Coloured community I grew up in, all of my friends and acquaintances got hidings from their parents. Being grounded was for white children. We didn't come from families who could afford to give us an allowance, never mind withhold it from us as punishment. Coloured laaities were moered (at least, those of us from respectable homes). We would be so desensitized to violence that we would all share the stories of how our parents hit us and laugh at whoever's story was the most erg. Besides, we saw people die in the roads we lived in more often that we should have. Complaining about a few warme, deserved klappe was childish; and the last thing a Coloured child wanted to be was 'like a laaitie'. 'Remember that day your taani moered you with a bag of rollers?' I would ask my friend and laugh. 'Yoh, […] You were kak cross.' And my friend would laugh with me, because the offences were just part of our lives. (21–22)

In the popular imagination, coloured people are associated with violence, whether through gangsterism, alcoholism, poverty, or gender-based violence (GBV). Fife offers a critique of this by describing how she was raised, providing some context on how close to violence the coloured child lives. Here, parents and child-raising are questioned within the community, by describing violence from a perspective also within the community. There is no stereotype, only familiarity.

When one tells personal stories, the community is ineluctably implicated. On a macro scale, all members who engage with the coloured identity narrative can place themselves in the situations described because they are familiar. They mirror what is known, but with enough distance for critique. Chang purports that "although self-narratives focus on the author, self-stories often contain more than self. The irony of self-narratives is that they are of self but not self alone. Others often enter self-narratives as persons intimately and remotely connect to self" (2008, 33). By describing family members with nuanced sensitivity, they too are inscribed into a common history. Dawjee evokes her father thus:

> My dad is a tough man. His life has made him resilient. His is a typical zero-to-hero story, but it's not run-of-the-mill. A boy from the slums of Marabastad managing to become a professor of orthodontics at the University of Pretoria is not an average narrative. It's the opposite. It's a plot thick with struggle and adversity. Each sentence heavy with overcoming: overcoming race, economics and social power. All these variables and more have made him a hard man. There are many intermissions in the course of a life, and it's usually in those intermissions that we take a step back to collect our thoughts and compose ourselves. […] In Islam, death is not the end; it is only the beginning. Life in the world, with all its material inclusions, is a borrowed experience. It is an exam a Muslim must write for the reward of eternal life. This world ends. The next goes on forever. This is an important theme in Islamic theology. If a Muslim lives well, and has used their one chance on earth to prepare for an eternal life to come, death is only a transition. A bridge between the seen and the unseen universe. Death is nothing to fear, especially to the faithful and the righteous. […] In 2015 my dad was diagnosed with a brain tumour. He told us on Mother's Day. (12–14)

Here Dawjee, through describing her father invokes the Muslim ethos of living and the role religion played in her upbringing. Religion is part and parcel of the coloured identity narrative. Dawjee reveals that religion is not incidental to the coloured experience, but rather something ingrained in all aspects of the self.

In another chapter, Dawjee threads her ideas about feminism and patriarchy through an account of her mother:

> My mom is a tough woman. She's independent, she's feisty and she doesn't suffer fools. She can pack more into one day than I could accomplish in a week: run a household, manage my dad's office, throw in a yoga class and still have time to bake biscuits – if she feels like it.
>
> Call her a feminist, though, and she might just have a heart attack. Yet to me, she embodies a type of feminism we don't hear much about. She's strong. She's creative. But she's also a product of patriarchy and prejudice. She has not been subjected to the physical abuse a lot of women suffer, but because of the place that society carved out for her, she chose, in many ways, to be timid while I was growing up. In order to survive, she maintained a degree of invisibility and a reluctance to challenge authority.
>
> That's not considered politically progressive by our modern feminist standards. (111)

Koopman utilises story to relay details of her mother in the chapter titled "My Mother Wears a Secret Shade of Red":

> My mother and I are lying next to each other in her bed. We've spent a lazy day napping, eating pancakes, watching cooking shows, talking about books. My mother is slowly learning how to rest without feeling guilty about it. Over the years, I have seldom seen her truly relax. To be fair, doing nothing was never a ready option for her. She is a single mother who has supported three emotionally demanding children. She also has a doctorate and a master's degree from Harvard. My mother is beautiful, with an open oval face and a halo of beautifully greying natural curls; she has never worn even a smudge of make-up. She has problems with her knees and ankles and so can only wear Green Cross pumps or Crocs. She occupies a powerful position at a university and really enjoys her job. She owns her own property and is smart with her finances, she gives incredibly generously and I know for a fact that she's a mother/mentor figure to many of her students. My mother is also an ex-con. Well, rather an ex political prisoner. (54–55)

Fife makes her mother known by describing what it was like being raised by her.

> My mother was a staunch woman. She is still alive and has changed over the years, but when I was a child, the leash around my neck was very short and very limiting. She controlled everything, from the clothes I wore (well into my late teens), to the strict curfew I was given on the rare occasion that I was allowed out. I knew very little about her as a person, which I think was deliberate on her part. My opinion on 'boomers', the generation she is from, is that they didn't want children to be too familiar with them – it made them fallible. Their generation believes that familiarity breeds contempt, but I think their disconnect with the generation they birthed is perhaps the definition of what 'contempt' really is. I was raised at arm's length. (42–43)

I quote these authors at some length to demonstrate the power and subtlety of invoking the descriptive. It takes time and must be given space to breathe and craft itself to slowly echo, in my experience, in all its familiarity.

Conclusion

Each case study is so different and has little to do with any other. It is safe to say that the authors had different agendas when writing their memoirs. But when placed beside each other, not for comparison but for gradation, a canon of sorts begins to emerge. In this canon of work, form meets content in the decolonial project, and works towards productively advancing the coloured identity narrative.

It must be emphasised that this is not a comparative analysis. It is placing voices beside each other that might otherwise have been considered 'the same person' because they are all coloured females, of about the same age, and they live in Cape Town. They also identify as coloured and they, through placing their lived experiences in the public domain, have also placed "indigenous people at the *center* of the study, using the lens of Indigenous people and respecting the cultural values, beliefs, and teachings of the communities" (Pham & Gothberg 2020, 4095 [emphasis in original]). This is an act of decoloniality that promotes the coloured identity narrative through description, employing language that liberates itself from the definitive. The authors actively contribute to the coloured identity narrative by evoking lineage, historical pain and ritual. "It is unproductive to attempt to give absolute answers to the questions of what identifying as coloured might mean, especially in a post-apartheid, decolonised, South African setting, as the conclusive approach to reading identity, I suggest, is a fundamental part of the problem" (Wentworth 2019a, 9). I hope to have demonstrated that an autoethnographic lens operating in memoir shows itself as a promising decolonising methodology.

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