

LONGING, BELONGING, AND SELF-MAKING IN WHITE ZIMBABWEAN LIFE WRITING:

Peter Godwin's *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun*

But at the end of the journey one finds oneself recalling those famous words uttered by the original Mr. Kurtz – ‘the horror, the horror’ – and then wondering whether this is forever to be Africa’s literary fate, at least from the perspective of white writers: darkness and more darkness.

(Alexander McCall Smith 40).

Africa belongs to the Africans; the sooner they take it the better. But a country also belongs to those who feel at home in it.

(Doris Lessing Going Home 10).

This essay engages with the focus on ‘generations’ adopted in this issue of *LiNQ* by exploring how the private story of self so often will take on the quality of a cultural document that captures the complex social and political history of a place and a time. In this way, it is concerned with the way “the ‘I’ as an enunciatory site is a point of convergence of autobiographical politics and the politics of memory” (37), in Sidonie Smith’s words, but also of the politics of the postcolonial nation and of the literary representation of Africa. That, in a sense, is the double bind McCall Smith refers to in the first of the above epigraphs.

In *White Writing* (1988) J.M. Coetzee proposes that for the white African person the idea of Africa as homeland often is conceived in parental terms, and in this context perhaps it should not surprise that the relationship is fraught with its psychosis. Indeed, this Africa is a nurturing mother only too ready and willing to betray her offspring. In her childhood memoir, *Rainbow’s End: A Memoir of Childhood, War and African Farm* (2007), Lauren St. John writes à propos the death of a loved family dog, bitten by a black mamba snake: “For me it was the first lesson in how Africa gives and snatches away” (69). This constant fear is the hallmark of much white writing, Mother Africa an unpredictable, loving, treacherous self symbolised by all that is non-human so that the indigenous human in Africa—the black self—in turn becomes synonymous with danger and untrustworthiness but also innocence. That is in part the point both Coetzee and McCall Smith make. White writing, both in its colonial manifestation and as it emerges in the post-independence period, is characterised by a constant fear that Africa will revert to type, as it were, swallowing up a white self who identifies as African yet fears what that might actually signify.

Thus, as I want to show through a reading of white Zimbabwean Peter Godwin's *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun*, there is much in Coetzee's study that resonates with the growing body of writing by white authors that has emerged in southern Africa since the end of white rule. Concerned this time explicitly with loss of belonging, and then with articulating the distress of exilic longing, much of this work remains aligned with a view of Africa as uncaring and unfit parent. In *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* (2006), Peter Godwin tells of a conversation with his English wife in which

[s]he compares [Zimbabwe] up, to the First World, where privileges are treated as rights. I compare down, the apocalyptic Africa that presses around us, where rights are only for the privileged. After covering wars in Mozambique, Angola, Uganda, Somalia, Sudan, Zimbabwe feels to me like Switzerland. (33)

Godwin does not mean this way, but I cannot help seeing in his simile the most apt illustration of McCall Smith's comments. In the white African's mind, Africa is *Switzerland*, a monochrome world where women did not get the vote until 1967, though even there a black man recently made it into Parliament, the Angolan Ricardo Lumengo.

In his study, Coetzee identifies in the white South African writer a quasi-psychotic 'burden of consciousness', the phrase used to convey the difficulties associated with articulating belonging to and in Africa while forever haunted by the memory of another place, generally Europe. In this estranged and alienating relationship to place and time, the white African balances the desire to belong and to be embraced by this new place with a nostalgic, frequently sorrowful, longing for another place and another time. Godwin notes that "The Zulu people sometimes call us white ones *inkonjane*, the swallows, because we arrived from overseas, just as migrating birds do" (33). And while yet again he is too rushed to reflect on its implications, the trope betrays the complex interaction of the 'white ones' with Africa, perhaps really an Africa in their mind – they are here, but they are also, already and always elsewhere. Reflecting in *Crocodile* on the growing HIV-AIDS crisis in southern Africa, and specifically on the myriad of miracle cures that it generated, Godwin concludes that the idea of progress is much overrated when applied to the continent.

Ironically, too, this is work often produced by white liberals, however peculiar the category's parameters might be in southern Africa. These are the minority within a minority who dared to speak up for a different way of treating their fellow black Africans, at times at considerable personal risk. Thus Anthony Chennells, himself a white Zimbabwean, has argued for the need for greater nuance in discussions of white subjectivities in colonial Rhodesia: '[i]n Zimbabwe, where a short twenty-four years has reduced an arrogant and all powerful white elite to an anxious and embattled minority, the idea of a stable colonial identity is untenable' (2005 135). Chennells may not intend his work to do such ideological work, to borrow Gilmore's quirky wording, but in former settler societies such as Zimbabwe this kind of thinking falls prey to a problematic "memoro-politics" (Hacking) of a white minority struggling to come to terms

with their role in the recent history of their country. The point is not that all white people are to blame for colonial or imperial legacies, but rather that they embody in the colour of their skin the stigmata of that history, as Godwin himself suggests.

Perhaps intentionally, such writing memorialises a past that is slowly being eradicated from the postcolonial nation's historical books through what Terence Ranger (2005) calls Mugabe's 'patriotic history'. In her memoir of a Rhodesian-Zimbabwean, *Casting with a Fragile Thread: A Story of Sisters in Africa* (2006) says that the book was in part a response to her fear that people in the USA did not know her and her self because they have no grasp of the part of Africa she comes from. Significantly, in this setting the stories told in the life writing of white Africans reverse agency models and dichotomies in the post-independence period, for in a society where even the black majority has been reduced to a voiceless mass, these memoirs emerge as work capable of challenging Mugabe's oppressive rule. More than that, these writings exemplify the white Africans' struggle to negotiate an identity in the context of rapidly shifting political allegiances (Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, 2002; Simoes da Silva, 2002; 2005; 2007). Indeed, the unique dynamic that surrounds the production and circulation of this new generation of white writing seems on the cusp of creating its own poetics, one where Africa returns *essentially* as a recycling of dated images and insidious stereotypes seen through an *essentially* white viewpoint. Pace Chennells, they confirm the *core self* of white Africans, a web of conflicting emotions that betrays a fraught relationship with Africa where belonging and longing across generations, one brought into play by the writers themselves. As Godwin's sister puts it, in the memoir, "I so miss my life in Africa. I want it" (33). Indeed, both Godwin and Alexandra Fuller have taken up the memoir as a form of political action in ways that are not reflected in either Kann's or St. John's work.

Moreover, for a readership now so consciously engaged in the debunking of Orientalist constructions of Other places, these narratives actually offer nothing new. What they allow for, however, is precisely the phoney engagement with Africa as representation in the sense rehearsed in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) or *Sheltering Sky* (1990) and invoked by McCall Smith. The fact that these narratives are written by white people born in Africa and that the purpose of the work often is to stage a claim to their Africanness mean that they are both less and more believable. Less, because white people have long stopped to be able to write about Africa in an objective way; more, insofar as the distancing between text and reality that obtains as an "autobiographical effect" (Gilmore, 1995) is intrinsic to this kind of life writing. Liberated from the limitations of the "autobiographical pact" Lejeune (1982) speaks of the reader is able to delve freely into the fantasy or the nightmare world work such as Fuller's, Slovo's, Lessing's or Godwin convey. Gilmore (1995) argues that much criticism of autobiography fails to account for the textuality of self-writing, a comment particularly relevant in the case of white Zimbabwean writing. I would qualify this assertion by suggesting that even the critic who privileges such a belief in the made-up self that a text concerned with self-making sets out to create, works on the assumption that behind the façade and all the artifice there is a real self. Hence the playfulness and the array of grammatical, linguistic or rhetorical tools is designed to endow the text with greater authenticity; as are the self-knowing ways in which

some writers confront the well-worn tropes of white Africa. In a sense, then, want to propose that in a postcolonial setting the autobiographical narrative by a white person is marked by such a raft of ideological, political and historical caveats that the reader is free to engage with as escapist truths – or ‘truthful escapism’. In a round about way we come full circle to the Orientalist fantasy, an invented Africa – that, McCall Smith points out, is Africa’s fate when caught in the white imaginary.

Personal memoirs such as Peter Godwin’s *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* (2006) illustrate the complex ideological work of memoir, as Gilmore has argued in her study of the genre and of its popularity in recent years. According to Gilmore, writing in *The Limits of Autobiography*:

Thus political and social movements, the forces of popular culture, developments in academe, and the market all contribute to and are shaped by the current hothouse of ideas about telling the story of the self. From the newly ubiquitous literary memoir to first person accounts of trauma, and a range of autobiographical projects beyond these, the current emphasis is on a person telling his or her story. (17)

Thus Godwin’s memoir is typical of a genre “that can personalise history and historicise the personal, place the self in relation to public history and culture” (Whitlock, 2007 20). Quoting Helen Buss (2001), Gillian Whitlock proposes that ‘the first question we should ask of a memoir is not “why is this person’s life an important or distinguished one?” but “what is the place of this writer in this culture...?” (595)’” She goes on: “In contemporary autobiography, memoir is the prerogative of those who possess cultural capital...” (20-21).

Whitlock is not writing about the kind of work I examine in this essay, but the qualifications she offers on memoir as genre and its place and role in the production of a kind of knowledge that draws its ‘truth’ from a deep personal(ised) writing position is useful here. The kind of subject position reflected in many of these narratives “arises from [a] situation as it comments on it” (Probyn, 98) and that is critical to the process of self-making. The story Peter Godwin tells in his various memoirs, but in the last two works in particular, is that of his family’s long association with Rhodesia first, then Rhodesia-Zimbabwe and more recently with Zimbabwe. But the story the book tells is also that of contemporary Zimbabwe, for the crocodile in the title of the work is Robert Mugabe. The crocodile ate the sun that rendered Zimbabwe beautiful and plentiful. The crocodile ate the sun that shone briefly on a multiracial, multicultural Zimbabwe where former settlers like the Godwins could transmogrify into *white Africans*. In this sense the memoir is indeed about the insertion of the personal self in history, as Whitlock argues via Buss (21, 135), but most of all it is premised on a narrative of futurity that requires that the past first ‘be processed’, in the language of pop psychology, but only so that it too should re-emerge as the sediment that authorises the new white African’s selfhood. In this way both of Godwin’s works long, too, for an end to the regime Mugabe brought about, though Godwin overreaches when he confidently and repeatedly predicts that the end is nigh. The latest issue of the book, out in 2011, is re-titled

The Fear: Robert Mugabe and the Martyrdom of Zimbabwe, wisely replacing triumphalism with melodrama (it is quite possible of course that Godwin's editors rather than the writer himself selected the first title for the book, though the triumphalist tone of his writing would suggest that he would have approved of it). While it is possible to read the constant risk-taking as an intrinsic aspect of his quest for the truth, and to the act of witnessing that as a journalist he is committed to and paid for, much too often they are redolent of the swash-buckling adventures of earlier, older 'Africa hands'.

I do not mean here to denigrate the commitment or the validity of the positions both Peter Godwin and his sister adopt; and in any case it is hard to see why anyone would bother to make a case in defence of Robert Mugabe's unspeakable nightmare. But writing as white people Peter Godwin and others such as fellow Zimbabweans Lauren St. John, Wendy Kann, Alexandra Fuller and Douglas Rogers cannot but be caught up in a web of ideological and emotional forces that aptly illustrates the intertwining of the story of self and nation. That they rely on life writing means that they are co-opted into the genre's own unruly energies, always personal story and collective history, self-making within constraining social frames. As Leigh Gilmore has noted, "Autobiography describes the textual space wherein the culturally constructed and historically changing epistemology of the self finds particular expression. Pressured all around by textuality, the autobiographical self owes its existence to the system of representation in which it evolves and finds expression" (85). As I have proposed above, that system of representation inflects the life writing of white Zimbabweans in the form of a raced power dynamics in which the story of the white speaker/s is always, inevitably, a story of their role in the present *status quo*. Often marked by a crudely graphic and confronting aesthetics that aims to dramatise on the page the gruesome quality of life in the last days of Rhodesia and during Mugabe's various bouts of violence against his own people, the writing evokes simultaneously a romantic picture of days gone by. As noted above, writers such as Godwin and Fuller both speak out of and to the past in an attempt to construe a narrative of futurity, a narrative that negotiates what Lauren St. John, in her Zimbabwean memoir, describes as the "quest for belonging in hostile lands" (250). Hence they negotiate, too, the form itself, engaging, however unwittingly, both older ways of writing of Africa and belonging, and the anxiety engendered by the present fluidity in social and political structures.

Writing about the trials and tribulations of the various generations of fellow white Africans, they foreground how their own generation is now adrift, exiled from an Africa that retains its powerful hold on their imagination. It is this hold that unites both generations, old and young in ways that often seem to privilege the past over the present. The present depicted in much of this writing is submerged in narratives of personal distress, of trauma, of death. Indeed, perhaps it is inevitable that the presence of death should impress the writing thus, the literal dying of elderly parents and friends a metaphor for the dying of an era. In this interregnum, as Nadine Gordimer noted so presciently when she quoted Antonio Gramsci in her 1981 novel, *July's People*, "the old is dying and the new cannot be born." Aesthetically framed by a limited set of ideological threads – Africa as home and as self, but always as void and threat to self, white southern Africans' life writing view the continent as life and living, but equally as death

and dying. Godwin remarks at one point that “[f]ate seems to have conspired to keep our family apart, especially at death.” (258). He goes on:

Dad was stranded in England while his mother and sister were killed. His father died in Poland, unable to get out to the West, and Dad was not able to be at his graveside. And after my mother’s father died – when she was eleven – she was kept from the funeral by her mother, had barely known he’d been ill. At [my sister] Jain’s first funeral, I was the absentee – my parents not wanting me to come back to Zimbabwe-Rhodesia (as it was then) and risk being called up again into the army. And at this second one it is Georgina who is *persona non grata*. Why is it that we can never seem to mourn together, to have unity in our grief?

And I realise that for three generations, men in our family – my grandfather, my father and I—had fought in battle. Yet it was our women – my grandmother, my aunt and my sister who got killed in war. (258)

Jain’s second funeral has come about because her brother was distressed to discover the desecration of her gravesite by a growing number of homeless indigent roaming aimlessly around the streets of a disintegrating Zimbabwe, in 2008. Georgina is *persona non grata* in Zimbabwe rather than at the funeral, which the wording seems to suggest, because she has been active in the creation of a radio station broadcasting against Mugabe’s regime, initially in Harare, later from London. Godwin’s journalistic prose rarely is this reflective, but in this instance it brings into relief the complex ways in which the social and historical frame the intimate self. He mourns the past but equally lays claim to a place in the present, for his family’s remains in Zimbabwe make physical the emotional connection the work articulates. Georgina herself laments the fact that her daughter Xanthe is now growing up in London, away from the world she knew as a child. The predominance of this thematic concern with place and self manifests itself almost as a poetics through which Africa is made real again. At the risk of overdoing the point that is aptly captured in Godwin’s sister’s plaintive, “I so miss my life in Africa. I want it” (33), and it is worth noting that the book’s dedication: “For the next generation: Hugo, Thomas, Holly and Xanthe”. The first three children are Peter Godwin’s, from two relationships.

Reading Godwin, it is hard not to notice how sentences that start in the past tense almost always turn into a present tense, as if the past were being rewritten, reclaimed in ways that make sense to a white Zimbabwean today. Hence a sentence describing the murder of a farmer might start by situating the event in the recent past but then actualises the event – the murder – by telling it as if is happening in front of our eyes. “He was trapped inside the house when they break the door and hit him; he collapses, bleeding and dies on his doorstep” (59). The syntax is reordered in a way that in turn reorders the relation between discourses of race, power and identity and again stresses the self-interested perspective of the teller. Violence should be easy to define, yet Fanon long ago complicated its meaning in

postcolonial, nationalist settings. Indeed, as a writer, Godwin may here merely be drawing on a conceit that encapsulates the urgency of his account, but even if only by default the work itself becomes a means to privilege certain experiences over others. At one point, when his father is confronted by thugs who threaten him repeatedly, Godwin's subject position oscillates between dispassionate observer and concerned son. He describes the encounter between his father and the black man who is trying to extort money from him: "He starts jabbing Dad in the V of his farmer's tan" (171). That Godwin's father is no farmer means that the writer's choice of imagery comes loaded with its ideological baggage, redolent with the melodramatic discourses that have surrounded land-redistribution in Zimbabwe and specifically Mugabe's brutal attacks on white farmers. The tragedy of Zimbabwe is focalised through the viewpoint of the white self and here specifically of a journalistic lens that privileges fact and oral interviews rather than merely memory, though Godwin is himself deeply embedded in the story he tells. This emphasis on a present tense provides an evidentiary base that supports and impels the story, and serves as a strategy of displacement that negotiates the putative complicity of the 'I' whose story is told.

Yet, as I have been arguing, works such as Godwin's make no such attempts to remove the self from the events being told. Rather, although *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* is described as a memoir, often it reads as reportage, direct witnessing supported by carefully scaffolded by local informants, people whose lives are put at risk because they spoke to Godwin. In *Soft Weapons* Whitlock discusses in detail the way testimony often goes hand in hand with complex and dangerous ideological agendas. While I would place St. John's *Rainbow's End* and Kann's *Casting with a Fragile Thread* in a different category, work such as Godwin's and Fuller's has become intrinsic to the ideological weaponry deployed against Mugabe's regime. It is, in this way, almost a text book illustration of Whitlock's view of life writing as 'soft weapons' that circulate particular world-views and indeed views of the world by drawing on affective effects that are once simplistically crude and quite sophisticated. There is a certain irony moreover in the fact that in a society where the voice of the black majority goes largely unheard, narratives such as Godwin's and Fuller's act as counter narratives of dissent, openly challenging the self-serving 'nationalist history' privileged by Robert Mugabe. In this way they raise interesting questions about the role and function of such peculiarly personal narratives in the creation of a national discourse. Thus, might we concern ourselves with the issue of why there are no black Zimbabwean life writing narratives on the shelves of bookshops near us? Is the trauma of the white Zimbabwean detailed in these memoirs less important or worthy of an audience because memoirs such as *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* (2006) are framed and underpinned by their uncanny ability to stand in as products of their political and historical settings? In other words, given the embedding of the white farm in Africa in the dispossession of the black majority, can its story ever be told in ways that fully do justice to the contesting claims of black and white Africans? At another level, I am interested in how these narratives, relatively rare and problematic as they are, now act as one of the central media through which Zimbabwean culture and politics are accessed in the 'West'. Both Godwin and Alexandra Fuller have now built a career entirely anchored on the ability to tell *Zimbabwe*, and *of Zimbabwe*. In a rather perverse turn, a society increasingly struggling

with the draconian control over the means of knowledge production, and the writing of a deeply self-interested kind of history, sees the memoir of the white Zimbabwean emerge as the counter-narrative whose own self-interested aims and intentions are subsumed in a broader discourse of democracy and freedom of expression. In work after work white southern African authors such as Alexandra Fuller and Peter Godwin rehearse in part or in full issues explored in their first or earlier autobiographical works, in a whirlpool of self-imagining where repetition is the key to self-presencing. The reiteration of the white story of the white self counters the fear of erasure triggered by an impending, and perhaps really just apparent, loss of the means of production that ensured the stability of particular discourses, particularly from the perspective of the white liberal. As the well-known South African white writer and political activist notes in his 1998 memoir, *Dog Heart*, "We (Whites) are painted in the colours of disappearance" (151). Although the position of whites in South Africa differs vastly from that of their counterparts in Zimbabwe, a recent essay by historian R.W. Johnson (2009) in *New Left Review* noted about a million, roughly a fifth, of the white population there too have left the country (61). In all these instances the story of self serves as an anchor to a reflexion on past and present that offers a more or less explicit foil to the historical narratives of the post-colony. While these are not complexly structured works, the well-worn tropes signify because of their ability to conjure up different yet similar narratives of dislocation and disempowerment.

Godwin's *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* is especially remarkable for its seamless suturing of the story of contemporary Zimbabwe with the narrative of the *Shoah*, the Jewish holocaust. In the remainder of the essay, I focus on this book in some detail for the way in which it foregrounds how "perception of time and change are connected to historically specific modes of being, particular understandings of ourselves as subjects and agents of history" (Moore 1). Moore's words are not concerned with Zimbabwean life writing, rather, with the persistence of the story of self in the contemporary world more generally. On more than one level, writers like Godwin and Fuller draw on the hegemonic force of this cultural and historical paradigm, hungrily reclaiming in representation the fading presence of their stories in postcolonial, post-independent Zimbabwe. That they draw on the memoir for self-making means that their work is inevitably at the heart of a broader rehearsal of political and cultural debates from which Africa often comes off badly. In a uniquely perspicuous satire of white writing on Africa, Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina (2005) satirises in "How to Write About Africa" a tendency to view the continent as an amorphous locus for the staging of white European anxieties.

When a Crocodile Eats the Sun, Godwin's second memoir, appeared 10 years after his first work, a childhood memoir, *Mukiwa*. While that work dealt primarily with the making of a young Rhodesian man, *Crocodile* shifts the focus to the present day predicament of a white Zimbabwean. After living for a while in the UK, where he attended Cambridge University, Godwin married and settled in the US. He works as a freelancer for publications such as *Reader's Digest*, *National Geographic*, *Men's Journal*, *Forbes FYI* and *The NYT Magazine*; all at some point have commissioned him to write on Africa, and some of that writing has found its way

into the memoir. Neither, it would seem fair to say, is renowned for their contribution to the demystification of Africa and the kind of heroics Godwin frequently performs in search of *the truth*, would appeal to their readers. Although this is something he is careful to disclose at the end of the book, in the 'Acknowledgements', it complicates the portrait of a familial story of trauma. Godwin's more recent return to Zimbabwe to report on the 2009 elections, detailed in *Fear: The Last Days of Mugabe's Regime*, highlights the intertwining in his writing of personal story and national history.

Godwin comes back to Zimbabwe in 1996, after receiving a phone call from his mother; his father had suffered a heart attack. Thereafter he moves repeatedly back and forth between the US and Zimbabwe until in 2004 the father dies. As the memoir opens, Godwin and his mother await the arrival of his father's body, on its way to be cremated at the local Hindu site. He has died of old age and in a long passage repeated word for word at the very end of the memoir Godwin sets fire to the father's corpse. It is now 2004. The next beginning of the memoir takes it back to 1996, when, while "on assignment for *National Geographic* magazine in Zululand" to interview Prince Galenja Biyela, he first got a call from his mother: "It's your father; he's had a heart attack" (8). In what follows Godwin tells in detail of his constant travel between the US, where his wife and eventually two small sons live, and Zimbabwe, where his father's health declines. In between, in a narrative thread that becomes progressively more problematic, Godwin discovers that his father is Jewish, a Holocaust survivor whose family perished in Auschwitz. This revelation is a key moment in the story of self that the memoir conveys but it is perhaps even more important to the development of an inalienable link between the treatment white Zimbabweans endure at the hands of Mugabe's regime and that suffered by Jewish people under Hitler. Faced with the impending death of his father, as the latter's health deteriorates rapidly, Godwin becomes obsessed with tracing his father's genealogy so that he too should know his. In the dying days of Mugabe's madness, this seems to acquire a particular urgency for the Godwins, father and son. Soon it is revealed that the Englishman George Godwin was in fact a Polish refugee by the name of Kazimierz Jerzy Goldfarb (128), when it comes, unsettles the family and creates a new dynamics in the relationship between father and son. Why did the father not trust his son to give him this knowledge? At this level this is essentially a family narrative, a story of deep personal trauma, especially as the father slowly reveals that he hid his Jewish identity to protect the family from the fate endured by his own parents and sister. Peter Godwin's initial reaction to this information is anger, frustration but also disavowal of this new identity. Later, asked the question at one point, he repeats to himself, "Are you a Jew?" (116), and replies in the negative. But that does not stop him from beginning a search for evidence of the fate of his father's family, and the persecution of Jews in Poland eventually begins to occupy his thoughts in ways that will make him announce to a stranger, unprompted, "I'm a Jew too" (164). It will be fair to point out that the stranger is a rabbi from whom he is trying to buy an old apartment in Manhattan, and in a sense the shared identity creates the conditions for his admission. But it is equally worthwhile noting that what begins as an attempt by Peter Godwin to reconnect to a distant and hidden father, soon evolves into a crudely self-centred search for a way of linking the dispossession of white people in Zimbabwe and that of Jews in WWII Europe.

However, that admission will eventually prove pivotal in a different context. When, soon afterwards Godwin travels back to Zimbabwe, and as he watches the increasingly precarious position of white people like his parents, he notes: "Being white here is beginning to feel like being Jewish in Poland in 1939" (174-175). No doubt it is a tempting simile, especially for a writer in search of the perfect turn of phrase and for a man who has just assumed his suppressed ethnicity. Yet it is hard not to note how the comparison neatly removes white Zimbabweans from the reality of their own history, that textual envelope Gilmore spoke of. That, theorists of whiteness have argued, is a typical turn of whiteness as social ideology – it signifies not by insisting on difference but by insisting on invisibility (see, *inter alia*, Dyer, Lipsitz, Steyn). In one seemingly harmless narrative turn, white Zimbabweans are absolved of any responsibility for their complicity in the creation of the present status quo. They are now *only* victims, rather than victims now but also perpetrators in the not too distant past. In an echo of a privatisation of feelings of which white South Africans were accused during the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Krog 167), when so few came forth to testify and then usually for political reasons, Godwin absolves himself and those like him from the responsibility of one hundred years of colonial power. Asking himself the question, "[h]ow many generations will it take before the taste of colonialism has been washed from our mouths?", he answers it, too: "I can't lug the sins of my forebears wherever I go" (266). Mugabe, in a language the white imaginary has little trouble to grasp, is Hitler pursuing a defenceless group of people. Bizarrely, in an instance where reality and fiction fuse, one of Mugabe's henchmen responsible for terrorising white farmers off their properties renames himself 'Hitler' (50-51).

This image of a group of people under siege is reinforced throughout the memoir by the constant sense of a black gaze turned on the white subject. After all, in a now established move, he writes: "A white in Africa is like a Jew everywhere – on sufferance, watching warily, waiting for the next great tidal swell of hostility." (266) Although they live in a formerly whites-only suburb, the Godwins are too middle-class – that is to say, insufficiently upper middle-class in this new dispensation – to be protected from the shifting social structures in the new nation. As the situation deteriorates in the countryside and more people arrive in the city, their house is encircled by numbers of squatters living right against their fence. As he comes to stay, Godwin wakes up in the middle of the night listening to the sounds of the teeming multitudes beyond his parents' natural hedges: "So I get up and stand at the window and look out through the curlicued burglar bars, out across the swollen profusion of our garden, to the massive bowers of bougainvillea that mark the boundaries of Fort Godwin." (239) His mother refuses to have a wall built for fear that it will signal to thieves that the family has valuables at home. When, towards the end of the narrative, the hedge catches fire in the night and burns to the ground, the family wakes up to what seem to them hundreds of eyes watching their every move (279). In the unravelling of the trope of the white self in Africa finely crafted by Blixen, the family stands denuded before the hegemonic gaze of the black person: "The hawkers sit there at their little stalls, staring in at us, murmuring to themselves, unapologetic for burning down our barrier" (279).

Significantly, then, Godwin's focus on his parents' vulnerability becomes metonymic of the memoir's own claim about the white community's growing defencelessness. He watches them, two frail elderly people trapped in the gaze of an anonymous mass of people. These are not even the stooges Mugabe regularly sends out to terrorise people, black and white, but rather the faceless Negro Frantz Fanon (1952) speaks of, alive most of all in the phantasmagoria of the white person's mind. The irony in Godwin's book is that while it rehearses, repeatedly, the issue of a complex white African identity rather than the racist stereotype associated with white southern Africans, one that Chennells too stressed, it reduces Africa and Africans to the apocalyptic nightmare Europe sought to tame. As he puts it at one point, on one of the many flights back to Africa, "[o]ur flight path took us down a continent of catastrophe." (202). Africa is synonymous with chaos. No wonder the only place left for his mother at the end of the memoir is in the safety of a gated community.

In Godwin, the collapse of his parents' world, and their story as individuals at the end of very long and complex lives, ultimately overwhelms what in many ways started as a clear, perhaps intentional narrative conceit – the attempt to parallel their undoing to that of Zimbabwe as a nation. Small 'l' liberals of a type endemic to southern Africa whiteness, the unravelling of the nation-state leaves the Godwins totally exposed in a world where the rules have changed dramatically. In a sense, the speed with which they journey from being a well-off white family to being among the poorest people in the new nation confirms Chennells' view I referred to earlier. But their collapse might be put in perspective when we consider the sheer size of the exodus of black Zimbabweans out of the country. As he feels death approaching, Godwin Sr. tells his son that the family is now bankrupt, a revelation brought about by a visit to the old white suburb of Borrowdale, a niche of privilege even in Rhodesian days and a place the Godwin family always knew from without. In the kind of fantastical absurdity that obtains in a society regulated by absurdity of a very refined type, Mugabe has now taken up residence in Borrowdale, building a 50 room mansion with money provided by China. In fact, mansions of 15, 20 or more rooms, dwellings where black people now live and from where they exit in expensive Mercedes Benzes and SUVs, are now common place in Borrowdale (290-292). Godwin clearly intends the visit to the old preserve of a very rarefied whiteness to show that his parents were never on that level, thus modulating their complicity in the Rhodesia of old; in the process the journalist in him takes over, aiming to show the garden-variety picture of Africa, of obscene corruption and nouveau riche vulgarity (that too is the crux of R.W. Johnson's essay I referred to above, "Post-Apartheid Blues", 61-74). In the process, though, the Godwins find themselves overwhelmed by the pace and nature of change, and most of all by the new social paradigms at work in Harare. The sociological commentary his father offers is in this way is perhaps really the son's own thinking, for as the observer – the journalist writing always for Anglo-American news outlets – he is naturally attuned to what his readership and viewership will want to know and see. As the insider-outsider-insider Godwin comes to watch and comment on what refers to as Mugabe's choreographed dance macabre. The passage recalls an earlier one when Godwin tells his readers about his father's view that the son is yet to find "a *real* job" (23); then, Godwin senior seems to have the upper hand. As the book progresses, both he and the readers are given the answer to that criticism – were it not for

the son's dogged determination, the real story of Zimbabwe might never be told.

Then *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* becomes a strangely haunting narrative reaching out to the ghosts of the past and those of a future that will not be. The fear in narratives such as Godwin's, St. John's, Fuller's and Kann's is that when they move to the USA, to the UK, to Australia and elsewhere, no one will know that there were white people in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe. But that is the price tag of whiteness. The dance he dances – and the trope is one he invokes repeatedly – speaks here of a negotiation of new ways of seeing, being and knowing in the new country. As an insider who chose to leave long ago, but as a journalist who comes back repeatedly to be with his elderly parents, Godwin is at once interpreter, translator and thick descriptor (Geertz). Each visit is sponsored by a different mainstream low-brow publication such as *Men's Health* or *National Geographic*. Bearing witness to his father's passing, and celebrating in the memoir the father's life, Godwin writes consciously, but just as often out of habit, as a white man of Africa. For example, as he sits up with his father in a derelict hospital ward outside of Harare, the Parirenyatwa Hospital named after the country's first back doctor, they watch in horror and with curiosity how far the system all around them has collapsed. Godwin describes how a patient who "came from the psych ward" (15) "growls and ... in guttural display of the depths of his insane mind. He is, a nurse explains, the Lion Man" (16). Faced with this display of raw animalistic force, Godwin recalls his last journalistic assignment in South Africa, just as he interviewed the Zulu Prince Sobiyela, a descendant of the Zulu warriors who defeated the English in a battle of ferocious blood lust. Understandably, as a journalist, Godwin's mind is always on the job and as such the memory of the prince is not out of place. Yet, as he seamlessly sutures the two moments of blood curdling screams, writing that watching the patient it is as if the encounter with the Prince had taken place months ago (16), he is only partly wrong – it was in fact centuries earlier. The Naked Lion on the bed next to G's father is in fact the embodied spectre of a presence that has long haunted the white person's life. *Maman, un Nègre*. Or Father, a Negro. Is a coincidence that the black man is naked?

Like the wolf in bed, pretending to be Grandma, Godwin looks on with the self-awareness of his own white liberal gaze. When, soon afterwards the first black doctor attends to his father, Godwin whispers to his mother that "the time for gesture politics is over" (16). Her reply silences him: "Okwanga is one of the very best. He qualified in Britain", though here too it is over the top to note the quaint way in which the Empire still signifies. Faced with his mother's unwavering allegiance to the black-run hospital and its staff, he watches helplessly as his father is shuffled between black doctors. Soon a new one arrives: "His name is Dr. Hakim. I say nothing. Dr. Hakim is from the Sudan. He is meticulously dressed in a charcoal pin-striped suit and ox-blood brogues" (16). The difficulty he faces here and such an old trope in white writing on Africa that to point it out is to appear churlish is that there are good blacks and dangerous, threatening Naked Lions (21-22). Later, travelling back to Zimbabwe for yet another stay with his parents, he sits next to a "Congolese businessman" whose colour soon becomes apparent: he "palms peanuts and chugs some Cape sauvignon blanc" (52), the stark contrast between the subtle wine and the black man's lack of civilisation is underlined when "he

presses his bell for more wine."The conversation elicits nothing useful to the journalist other than confirmation that everyone knows how far Mugabe has taken Zimbabwe on the road to misery. Sitting next to a white Zimbabwean the Congolese businessman obligingly notes that the country has now gone to the dogs because "Africans can't do governments. We are useless at it, disorganised" (53). To the diasporic white African Godwin both is and addresses, this must be music to the ear. The encounter proves propitious in other ways, too, for as he tries to avoid getting involved in a conversation that might lead to trouble, Godwin reaches for a magazine where the death of a white farmer at the hands of the war veterans is told in detail. Reading it and examining the photograph that accompanies the piece Godwin remarks that the position of the dead farmer "looks oddly like a supine crucifixion" (53), and before long he is discoursing on the land reforms, the land claims, the violence endured by the white farmers. "Surreptitiously, the Congolese businessman reaches across the empty seat between us ... He sees the picture and raises his eyes to look at with an expression that I cannot quite recognise at first. Then I realise it is pity. He feels sorry for Olds and for me and for our little tribe of white Africans (53). Earlier, following the expedition to Borrowdale, the Godwins were also the object of black Zimbabwean pity when a black woman offered to pay part of their bill at a supermarket. Trapped at home for long periods of time, they had lost track of Zimbabwe's hyper-inflationary trends but the real shock the narrative registers is that a black person should now be doing what for so long was the prerogative of the white person in Africa – *doing good*.

Thereafter follows what turns out to be a substantial part of the memoir, the telling of Mugabe's complex, chaotic and eventually disastrous land reform program. Godwin's family are not farmers, though in the small community of Zimbabwean whites some of their friends are. For Godwin the issue journalistic and political and soon he is telling in detail of how Mugabe "choreographed a crisis" (58) that will see thousands of farms reposessed, tens of thousands of black farm workers and many white people homeless. Returning to the theatrical metaphors he often uses, the farmers' expulsion becomes a powerful vignette in a story of personal trauma and loss. In this way again the self's story serves as a foil that frames and highlights the collective loss and trauma of a group of people, the whites of Zimbabwe. At such moments, it is to the wealth of imagery that has long defined "Africa's fate" that Godwin returns. Described as a "paean to melancholy" (50) Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1903) is invoked to show that the past and the present are one and the same but here not in the sense of a Marxist reading of time passing but rather because Africa is irreversibly outside history. Against this state of affairs, alone but indomitable, stand a few individuals like Godwin's own mother, a formidable woman by any measure. At 75, she gets up at the crack of dawn to attend to 80 patients in a display of commitment that is all the more remarkable because she is in Africa, or so the memoir implies. Recalling the moment in *Heart of Darkness* of a French warship "firing into a continent", Godwin writes of his mother:

Even when there's little she can do for them, she has not abandoned her patients, she continues to lob her little shells of compassion, benignly bombarding the mangrove littoral with her good offices. (50)

In a country where suspicion, conspiracy and political strife are common, Godwin's memoir draws much of its credibility from a strategic deployment of tropes of silence and ambiguity. Claims that are crucial to the political situation in contemporary Zimbabwe are referred to in broad and vague terms. The memoir emerges thus as a form particularly suited to the production and circulation of a body of knowledge – a type of knowledge – capable of standing up to the tragic elegies of a revisionist national history as favoured by the present government. Here, making a case against the change that has taken place without actually saying it, the memoir takes on the role of an objective historical text. The contrast it invokes mobilises the spectacular power of trauma to elicit a reading that shames Mugabe's regime, should he feel that way inclined.

As I have been arguing, in the Rhodesia/ Zimbabwe setting, this representation is also very often totally immersed in and constitutive of a series of complex political and social relations as a community of (white) people who bravely and desperately fought for the chimera of a 1000-year Rhodesia promised by Ian Smith in 1965, have sought to come to terms with the new political dispensation and have since found themselves on the scrap-heap of history. Thus preparing to inform friends and acquaintances of the death of their father and husband, Godwin and his mother become aware of how few remain in Zimbabwe. The vast majority have left for a diaspora noticeable most of all for its points of reference, every single one a more or less established site of white privilege. It is easy to take issue with the strategically self-pitying narrative Peter Godwin weaves in his various memoirs because they have come to play an important role in the process of divestment from an imaginary where Africa was white and willingly available for the narration of a white self. Whether they like it or not, the readership they reach and possibly target continues to see Africa as an exotic, mysterious *and dangerous* background for self narratives lived on the cusp of dramatic historical changes in which the narrator's skin colour simply cannot but be a central issue both to the telling of a personal story and to the experiences the narrative recounts. It is hard, if not impossible to write as white person about and in contemporary Africa without immediately getting caught up in the web of previous discourses on the continent. In this sense, I am less interested in indicting this kind of narratives or their authors for engaging in the (re)narrativising of Africa that is inextricable from a European ideological framework than I am in examining the range of subject positions available to, and taken up by white African writers who adopt life writing as a form of expression. After all, as James Olney (1980), among others, has argued,

the special appeal of autobiography ... is a fascination with the self and its profound, its endless mysteries and, accompanying that fascination an anxiety about the self, an anxiety about the dimness and vulnerability of that entity that no one has ever seen or touched or tasted. (23)

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