

Nega Mezlekia Outside the Hyena's Belly

Notes from *the Hyena's Belly*, Nega Mezlekia's memoir of growing up in Ethiopia, won justified acclaim when it was published in 2000. It also aroused controversy when Anne Stone, a Montreal editor and novelist, came forward to say that she had "authored" substantial parts of the Governor-General's-Award-winning text and deserved acknowledgment (Richler, "I Will Bury [You]"), something that Mezlekia vigorously denied. Mezlekia stands accused of violating what Philippe Lejeune has called the autobiographical pact: the implied understanding that in autobiography, writer, narrator, and protagonist, all referred to in the first person, can be identified with the name on the cover of the book. The purported violation does not concern the veracity of the memories (as in the case against Rigoberta Menchú, accused of not having been present at scenes she claims to have witnessed), but rather the relation of the author to the memories. I am in no position to determine the relative truth of Stone's and Mezlekia's claims or even to hazard an opinion. It is possible nonetheless, without prejudging the outcome of the legal controversy, to ask, "Who invented Nega Mezlekia?"

Stone's and Mezlekia's rival claims are inevitably overshadowed by charges of racism and sexism. Noah Richler writes of Nega Mezlekia's "quite possibly culturally rooted chauvinism, and contempt of the seemingly weak" ("So Just Who"). David Widginton, publisher of Cumulus Press, protests against the discrimination suffered by emerging writers and small presses. Karen Connelly, on the other hand, a member of the jury

that awarded Nega Mezlekia the Governor-General's Award for Non-Fiction, finds that the scandal, pitting as it does a black man against a white woman, expresses the ugliest emotions generated by race-feeling. Is this a story about two cultures and their different attitudes to truth and storytelling? a story about intolerable power differentials between genders and races? a dispute about property rights? or a bitter example of the enigma of arrival? It may, of course, be all these, for a story about a refugee given refuge can still be about treachery, and a story of guilt still involve unjust victimization. The scandal has the feel of a cautionary parable, a quality it shares with other, similar disputes: for instance, the plagiarism charges against the French African novelists Yambo Ouologuem and Calixthe Beyala (Miller 216-45; Gallimore 205-10); the accusation of mendacity against Rigoberta Menchú (Arias); or the admission by Alex Haley that his genealogical memoir *Roots* borrowed improperly from Harold Courlander's novel *The African* (Taylor).

If Anne Stone believes that she wrote substantial parts of the book, and it is hard to imagine why she would lie (which is not the same as saying that what she believes is true), it must be that she thinks her words made it possible for the tale to be told. According to the *National Post*, her lawyers allege that "Mr. Mezlekia's ideas and spoken words have been expressed into written words by our client" (Richler, "I Will Bury"). Stone implies that her relation to the text is like that of Alex Haley to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* ("Whose book is this?" Malcolm had to ask [qtd. in Sanders 456]) or Elizabeth Burgos-Debray to *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. According to others, like Gordon Platt and Rosemary Sullivan, the voice of the story, "uniform, personal, compelling and genuine," necessarily points to someone who lived the events narrated (see Gessell). "I don't believe," declared Penguin publisher Cynthia Good, "that the tone or voice of the book, the extraordinary life that is revealed in humour and drama, in event and passion, could be written by anybody who did not experience it" (see Posner, "Publisher Disputes"). In other words, Mezlekia's defenders point to something called the voice of the text to prove that the self that experienced the events narrated is necessarily the self that writes those events. They believe the words do not just belong to Mezlekia; the words *are* Mezlekia.

The fraught relation of authorship to selfhood surely explains what Richler calls Mezlekia's "particular obsession with 'authorship'" (Richler, "So Just Who?"). Indeed, Stone and Mezlekia are equally concerned with authorship, on which they stake a large measure of selfhood. She says, "after

the book went to Penguin [without any acknowledgement of her role] I felt like a ghost” (Richler, “So Just Who?”), while he takes pride in the fact that “People already recognize my face, and name” (Richler, “I Will Bury You”), and reacts as if Stone seeks to take that face and name away. Because authorship is at once a kind of intellectual property subject to contestation and a deep expression of selfhood, Mezlekia and Stone are both caught in a bind. She is not certain that anyone ever authors a text, but wants acknowledgement for her part nonetheless, while the “particular obsession with ‘authorship’” that he betrays is taken as proof that he never had the authority he claims.

Richler, in his defense of Stone, says that “no one disputes whose stories these are”: Stone merely found them, drew them out, and put them down (“So Just Who”). Marni Jackson writes that, “No matter how much Stone helped him with the language, this is his story.” Mezlekia, however, is leery of any implication that he could not speak until Stone gave him a voice. When he insists that the story narrated in *Notes from the Hyena’s Belly* is his (see Richler, “I Will Bury”), he does not believe, any more than Stone, that the writing is incidental. His claim is to more than the memories of surviving to manhood in Ethiopia that the narration relies on, to more even than the voice of the narration; he lays claim to the words themselves. Stone limits her claim to a request for acknowledgement (see Richler, “Behind All Good Writers”), but that is more than Mezlekia feels he can concede. In the relation that she presents as something more than that of editor to writer, he presumably sees the fearful shadow of the ethnographer’s relation to the native informant. The ethnographer owes her tale to a living person and takes it from an oral and private context in order to make it available to a reading public. Ethnographies commonly have two names on the cover: the name of the informant in the title—*Poppie Nongena* (a pseudonym), *Nisa, Aman*—and the name of the ethnographer listed as the writer: Elsa Joubert, Marjorie Shostak, Virginia Lee Barnes and Janice Boddy. Mezlekia insists that he is not merely the source of the story, but a writer with a literary career ahead of him whose own inspiration comes from Eduardo Galeano, Gabriel García Márquez, and Isabel Allende (see Posner, “Lion of Ethiopia”).

Behind the controversy, especially as originally framed in the pages of the *National Post*, is not just a doubt over who wrote the text but also a doubt over whether Mezlekia *could* have written it: Gatehouse and Richler leave Mezlekia’s spelling mistakes uncorrected and signal them with the word

“sic” in parentheses. It is presumably this challenge to his status as a writer, felt as a challenge to his very self, that so angers Mezlekia. He complains bitterly that Stone never believed his work would “see the light of day” (Richler, “So Just Who?”). Such doubts concerning literacy and authorship have always haunted black writers: Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass both faced the near-impossible task of proving at once the authenticity of their experience (making it ring true to white audiences and readers) and the originality of their narratives (making it their own and not the work of their white abolitionist backers), two goals that were often mutually exclusive (see Stepto). As William Andrews explains, “By the early nineteenth century black narrators realized that to assume the privileged status of author in the literary discourse of white America, they would have to write self-authorizing, that is, self-authenticating, narratives” (23).

Clearly Nega Mezlekia has been better able than most newly arrived immigrants for whom English is not a first language to understand what constitutes literary authority in his new homeland and to achieve it; yet, just as clearly, there are rules and responses that he has found more difficult to fathom. The outside position from which he looks back on his life in the hyena’s belly must seem not as safe as it once did. I am reminded of the bitterness generated by the visit to Montreal in 1995 of Taslima Nasrin, the feminist novelist who had to flee Bangladesh after receiving death threats. Expecting something of a hero’s welcome or at least sympathetic ears, she encountered instead hostile crowds of Canadian Muslims who challenged her interpretation of the Koran, and she received severe criticism in the French-language press for the harm that her provocation was doing to cultural tolerance and for what columnist Nathalie Petrowski regarded as her grandstanding (see Abley). On her first trip to North America, Nasrin was taken off-guard and very shaken. The “West” was a more complicated place than she had imagined when first inspired by Western models to seek her own liberation.

Whatever the truth of the controversy surrounding *Notes from the Hyena’s Belly*, it is significant that Stone and Mezlekia agree that the story lies not in the memories but in the written words. Autobiographical theory, and critical theory more generally, have rendered us skeptical about any suggestion that the past or the self exist somewhere apart from the narrative told of the past and of the self. The autobiographical self is brought into being by the narration and not the other way around. The Ethiopian boyhood that is the

subject of *Notes from the Hyena's Belly* did not simply exist in the author's memory, waiting to be told; it had to be invented in the course of writing. That invention presumes an understanding of language and of narrative conventions, of literary authority and audience expectations. As Kenneth J. Gergen writes, "To report on one's memories is not so much a matter of consulting mental images as it is engaging in a sanctioned form of telling" (90).

For the purposes of this discussion, let us distinguish between three selves implied by the text, roughly corresponding to what Leigh Gilmore refers to as "the *I* who lived, the *I* in the text, and the *I* who writes *I*" (93): we will call the boy who grows to manhood in the book "Nega" and the adult narrator of Nega's story "Mezlekia," and reserve the name "Nega Mezlekia" for the man who has published the book. The autobiography for which Nega Mezlekia won the Governor-General's Award presents Mezlekia's telling of Nega's story. My question "Who invented Nega Mezlekia?" can now be phrased as "What conditions made it possible for Nega's life to be a story and for Mezlekia to tell it?"

Nega Mezlekia asserts the unity of author and subject, but in this essay I will pry them apart, not in order to back Stone against Mezlekia, but to show that the division of the self implicit in all autobiography and in textuality more generally is refracted and compounded in any literary depiction of Africa. The position in which the controversy has placed Nega Mezlekia—having to assert the autonomy of his literary creation, yet never able to be as self-sufficient as he might wish—is a position the text itself performs, and would have performed if Anne Stone had never seen it. The fissures in the text do not necessarily constitute internal evidence for dual authorship. They do not arise from the "cloven tongue" that Thomas Couser diagnoses as characteristic of collaborative autobiography "because it conflates two consciousnesses . . . in one undifferentiated voice" (208), but derive instead from the division in the self of the migrant and the ambivalence inevitable to the literary representation of Africa. Of course, not every postcolonial autobiography and not every African text arouses such controversy (although, as I have already suggested, a remarkable number do). Nor can we attribute the scandal as it unfolded in the Canadian press to the fissures within the text. We can say, however, that the public controversy and the textual fissures both arise from the contradictions inherent in the dynamic of African autobiography.

I

According to Stone, the text is the product of collaboration; Mezlekia insists the story is his alone. It is tempting to read the two sides of the controversy along gender lines and to see Stone as upholding what feminist theorists of autobiography, such as Stanton, Brodzki and Schenck, and Friedman, refer to as a relational model of the self, associated with the female self and opposed to the autonomous, individualist self which, it is argued, has characterized male autobiographical writing in the Western literary tradition—think of Augustine, Rousseau, Franklin, and Thoreau. According to the theorists of autobiography, the autonomy claimed by male autobiographers for a self who stands alone before God or the world (or the illusion of such autonomy) is not possible for the female subject whose subordinate position has taught her to understand her life in relation to others.

The postcolonial or minority subject, like the female subject and unlike the hegemonic white male self, is also usually defined in relation to others. According to Regina Blackburn, the self of African American autobiography

is not an individual with a private career, but a soldier in a long-historic march toward Canaan. The self is conceived as a member of an oppressed social group, with ties and responsibilities to the other members. It is a conscious political identity, drawing sustenance from the past experience of the group. (2)

Mezlekia's story invites being read as just such a story of the nation—Nega's aspirations as a young man were to work for Ethiopia's freedom and modernization; his ordeal as a soldier, a refugee, and a prisoner is Ethiopia's tragedy. The title, or at least the subtitle, "Memories of my Ethiopian Boyhood," resembles the titles of other African autobiographies, black and occasionally also white—Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir*, Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History*, Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman*, Mark Mathabane's *Kaffir Boy*, Christopher Hope's *White Boy Running*, and Peter Godwin's *Mukiwa*—in referring to a synecdochical self who shares an identity with many.

Nega Mezlekia has insisted, however, both within and without the covers of the book, on his autonomy as a writer. In her defence of him in the *Globe and Mail*, Connelly remarks on how surprising it is that the book acknowledges only his editor at Penguin and the Canada Council. Something is missing, she believes, for the text cannot be the product of "only one person" but must belong to "an entire community and time." In this she echoes Stone, who also says, "Authorship is an industry concept. It doesn't identify or see the communities from which a work comes—and it doesn't have to be a writer's community. It's the community that informs the work"

(qtd. in Richler, "So Just Who?"). As Connelly reminds us, the claim to self-sufficiency is not a crime, but neither is it without significance. Nega Mezlekia's need to declare that the text is his alone, what Richler calls his "ruthless ambition" ("So Just Who?"), may have its roots in a fear that anything less than full authorship implies a subordinate or minoritized self, perhaps even a feminized self. Marni Jackson compares the process of editing to midwifery or to the help of a vet in delivering a calf, implying a female, even a bovine, writer (and incidentally giving an entirely new meaning to the title *Notes from the Hyena's Belly*). But Mezlekia's narrative authority derives most emphatically from his location outside the hyena's belly. His memoir is not a communal story of the dispossessed but the tale of a survivor. Mezlekia is only able to tell his tale because he can separate his hopes for himself from Ethiopia. Nega came to Canada alone and, as Mezlekia confesses on the final page, "severed all contact with my friends and relations in Ethiopia" (350), with dire consequences for those he abandoned. The confession expresses Mezlekia's sense of guilt but also Nega's ambivalence about family and nation.

Jean Starobinski suggests that the urge to write autobiography always derives from a radical break, a conversion or new life, that makes it possible for the writer's self to look from outside on the self that lived the life (261). Nega grew into Mezlekia, the adult who can tell the boy's story, but Mezlekia can only tell the story because a break occurred that made Nega's life a complete whole available for narration. The title itself, *Notes from the Hyena's Belly*, implies a division between inside and out, which is a distinction between there and here, then and now, boy and man. The break, of course, coincides with the departure from Ethiopia and the arrival in Canada and corresponds to a familiar break between tradition and modernity.

Georges Gusdorf famously argues that autobiography originated in Europe in the Renaissance and received its form at the same time as the novel, during the Enlightenment. Conveniently leaving aside Augustine and thinking only of Montaigne and Rousseau, we can say that only at that particular historical conjuncture, coinciding with the rise of the private bourgeois individual as the privileged subject of history, did it become possible for an author to assume that his story, his psychology and private experience, could interest perfect strangers (the male pronoun is intended). The author of Rousseau's *Confessions* could trust that his private life and inner soul were of as much interest to a larger reading public as to himself because he could assume that others, too, knew themselves to be first and foremost their inner selves.

Autobiography, of course, is no longer necessarily Western or bourgeois or neocolonial, any more than the novel or modernity is. I only rehearse this history in order to point out that the question of “Who invented Mezeleka?” is more properly a question of “How does Mezeleka acquire the authority to make a claim on the interest of strangers?” Autobiography fulfils an impulse that Laurence Breiner describes as “as universal as self-pity” (3): everyone everywhere has a story. Not everyone, however, has a story s/he can publish. In his claim to an autonomous self and to literary originality, Nega Mezeleka follows deliberately in the line of Western male autobiographers (how much those male selves ever achieved the autonomy and self-sufficiency they claimed is, of course, another matter). Mezeleka’s authority, however, is not and cannot be that of Rousseau or Wordsworth: the interest of his narrative lies not in the deepest wellsprings of the self that it brings to light but in what he has to say about growing up in Ethiopia and what he has witnessed of the havoc wreaked by the Cold War in the Horn of Africa. In other words, Mezeleka’s authority derives from the way his experience is different from that of his readers. The achievement of Mezeleka’s narrative is that it sees how the land where he grew up is actually strange.

Recognizing strangeness requires imagining readers for whom the events he narrates have the force of novelty, inevitably an audience outside Ethiopia. Harrowing and tragic as they are, Nega’s experiences are in no way unusual. Among Ethiopians, his story would presumably be too ordinary to warrant attention. *Notes from the Hyena’s Belly*, contrary to what Connelly implies, is not written within the context of a national Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This text, by an African for a western audience, is Made in Canada. The criteria of the Governor’s General Awards stipulate only that a writer be a citizen or landed immigrant, not that the text be Canadian as well (whatever that might mean). Mezeleka’s narrative, however, would qualify on all counts: it could only have been written because he left Ethiopia.

To say that coming to Canada was a necessary condition for the invention of Nega and Mezeleka is not to diminish the achievement of the book. Coming to Canada does not immediately confer a subject upon one nor give one a voice. It must be a common experience among refugees who have come through similar horrors that their story remains incommunicable because it is beyond the imagination of anyone around them. Even where psychic health requires that they tell their story, the translation of the story into a form that others can receive may elude them. Mezeleka’s narrative,

conscious of the strangeness of what it describes, also relies on the assumption that there is something he shares with his readers. His story is only possible because he is able to leave the dreaded hyena's belly behind and join readers where they are.

Although he writes about tyranny and war, and explicitly implicates the Trudeau government in the support of African dictatorships, Mezlekia is not writing *testimonio*, the Latin American genre of memoir that publicizes atrocity in the name of justice. Doris Sommer writes that “[t]he testimonial ‘I’ does not invite us to identify with it. We are too different, and there is no pretense here of universal or essential human experience” (108). Nega's experience is far from universal—in its strangeness lies its interest—but in order to judge what Nega has suffered, Mezlekia must appeal to universal notions of humanity. He says, “I was no different from my fellow man” (291). Rousseau, who can boast, “I am made like no one I have seen; I believe I am made like no one that exists” (33; my translation), assumes that his difference from everyone else is what makes him the same as his readers. Mezlekia makes the opposite assumption: that he is the same as his readers *in spite of* the difference of his experience.

Notes from the Hyena's Belly is closest to the genre of the Chinese Cultural Revolution memoir, examples of which include Liang Heng's *Son of the Revolution*, Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*, and Anchee Min's *Red Azalea*. The characteristics of the Cultural Revolution memoir are that the author, who claims no special status except as a survivor, tells a world audience in the world language, English, which is his or her second language, about the horrors that occurred in the homeland which he or she has left behind, horrors whose inhumanity is brought home by appealing to notions of universal human rights. It is true that Mezlekia shows no awareness of these other memoirs of survival. When he locates his experience in a larger global context, he deliberately limits that context to Europe: the Red Terror during the rule of Mengistu in the late 70's, when 100,000 were killed, was, he tells us, “a horror surpassed only in the darkest days of Nazi Germany and, perhaps, Stalin's purges of 1937” (295), a description which ignores Kampuchea and China (not to mention Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, Sierra Leone, and the list goes on). Elsewhere, however, Mezlekia does refer to Ethiopia's “killing fields” (300), an explicit reference to experiences other than European ones that have been brought to the world's attention.

Cultural Revolution memoirs are not postcolonial as that term is commonly understood. Their primary concern is not with resisting Western

hegemony but with appealing to values presumed to be universal. Most Ethiopian literature is written in Amharic, the language with an ancient literary tradition that Nega Mezlekia started to learn as a youngster beginning school but which, given the uncongenial conditions in which it was taught, he never took to. Mezlekia, like the authors of Cultural Revolution memoirs, finds the freedom and the ambition to express himself in English, a language that is not his own but that is also not the colonizer's, and that is valued because it gives access to an international audience and promises a means of judging the cruelty and absurdity of the world in which he came to adulthood.

Ethiopia has in common with China that, while it was frequently at the mercy of imperialist machinations and was occupied for a brief time by Italy, it was never colonized. Indeed, both Ethiopia and China have imperialist and colonizing histories of their own. Jijiga, the town where Nega Mezlekia was born, is a frontier outpost where his father had been sent as part of the Amhara colonial administration imposed on Somali nomads after Ethiopia's conquest of the Ogaden, which occurred in this century in collusion with the European imperial powers. Ethiopia has, of course, suffered the body blows to self-image and self-understanding that all Africans and, for that matter, the Chinese, too, have suffered, particularly in the last two centuries, as they have been fitted disadvantageously into a world order not of their own devising. Nonetheless, precisely because China escaped direct and extended colonization, Chinese students have, at different times in the twentieth century, been able to appeal to Western eyes and to a notion of universal modernity in order to criticize the emperor, the warlords, or the Communists. Mezlekia and the Ethiopian students of his generation have done the same. Writing for the West makes it possible to express some things that would otherwise remain unimaginable, even as it inevitably closes doors and makes other things difficult.

II

The title, *Notes from the Hyena's Belly*, implies a doubled position: what was once inside is now outside. The division in the text, at once in the hyena's belly and under western eyes, constitutes a claim to authenticity (these notes come from the horse's mouth) and to objectivity (the author joins readers on safe ground). The division is mirrored in the division we have already made between Nega and Mezlekia. Nega, the boy who cannot understand the events that sweep him up and make nonsense of his world,

finds appropriate life-lessons in the fables his mother told, which he recalls at important moments as he moves outward in ever widening circles: first from Jijiga to the Ogaden, then to the capital Addis Ababa, and finally outside Ethiopia altogether. Mezeleki the narrator, on the other hand, starts from the world centre that is the West and looks back to the periphery, with an historical frame and a political awareness that bring Ethiopia into a sharper focus than anything available to the boy can.

The split between Nega and Mezeleki that makes the narrative possible produces a split within Mezeleki himself, who narrates in two very different, even irreconcilable styles. One readily distinguished voice makes itself heard in the following passage, obviously plagiarized from some reference work:

Ethiopia has the largest number of domesticated animals in Africa, eighth in the world. About 27 million cattle, 42 million sheep, 17 million goats and millions of camels roam the countryside, taking up 61 percent of the land. This is a mixed blessing for the country. . . . The pastoral regions can support only 21 percent of the cattle population, 25 percent of the sheep and 75 percent of the goat herd. (118-19)

Alongside this advocate of population control, a very different voice explains what all those camels and sheep have to say to each other. "Camels don't read Amharic, as they are uncivilized," so when it comes to reading placards carried by demonstrators, they need the help of sheep:

A sheep nibbling a banana peel decided to help. It read the placards with one quick glance. Looking up at the curious camel, the sheep pronounced, "B-a-a-a-a-d!" (105)

The first voice—let us call him Mezeleki the Engineer—locates his story against a background of Ethiopian politics, which might be summarized as the struggle for modernization, motivated by a desire to join the larger world but sabotaged by the Cold War, when the larger world toyed with the desires and plans of Ethiopians. This voice favours broad generalizations based on comparative history: "If the rural land policy had led to the demise of the feudal lords, the urban land policy effectively wiped out the nascent middle class" (126) and offers historicist explanations for events: "These areas would have weathered the bad times had it not been for three significant factors" (117). To explain Ethiopia, he gives us statistics on government spending (318), comparative crop yields (322), tree cover and soil erosion (118), and armaments supplied by the Soviets (201).

The second voice, the one that reports conversations among animals,

obviously works with a very different frame, one derived from the animal fables Nega's mother told. In honour of what seems the debt to Ben Okri's magic realist novel *The Famished Road*, let us call this narrator Mezlekia the Spirit-child. The opening of the narrative—"In 1958, the year of the paradox, I was born in Ethiopia, in a hot and dusty city called Jijiga, which destroyed its young" (5)—with its emphasis on birth and on the paradox of birth that a new soul should enter an already existing world, proclaims its affinity to the literary mode of magic realism. Nega's birth is set against the backdrop of the dying of the queen in the capital, and we are led to expect an allegory of the nation, perhaps in the style of *Midnight's Children*. Mezlekia's home, however, was never the centre even of his own world but was "lost somewhere in the tangled paths of domestic Jijiga" (3). Jijiga, like García Márquez's Macondo or the slum in *The Famished Road*, is a mapless, timeless labyrinth on the periphery of the periphery. Morality is upheld elsewhere, in the northern highlands, "the seat of all great kings, the place that holds all the virtues of the old kingdom intact" (48). Mezlekia's father, called simply "Dad," like Azaro's father in Okri's novel, always feels that he lives in an "Islamized east, with an incomplete knowledge of the ethical conduct of pure Amharas" (48).

This doubly marginalized perspective proves well-suited for expressing the mixed truth of Ethiopia, at once a world apart, albeit no longer self-sufficient, and a part of the modern world, however peripheral. The narrative's double-voicedness reflects the uneven development which has left Ethiopia uneasily perched between modes of production, even between worlds. Jijiga, where Nega was born, is the home of Tsege, the midwife who helped deliver an angel's offspring with wings intact, and of Mrs Yetaferu, who observes more saints' days and holy days than there are days in the calendar. It is also where Nega goes to high school, and it is a strategic prize in an all too efficient modern war.

It would be a mistake, however, to identify the Engineer's realism as Canadian or Western and the Spirit-child's magic as African. Mezlekia the historicizing Engineer is recognizably African. It is hard to imagine the autobiography of someone who grew up in Toronto invoking economic and sociological statistics—even a story of poverty or of racism in the city will take for granted the readers' familiarity with larger sociological conditions—yet a South African like Ellen Kuzwayo will refer to average wages and census figures in order to set the background for her story in *Call Me Woman*. In Africa, where economics are more dire and individuals can never forget the

limits on their freedom to make their own lives, sociology is more likely than psychology to offer literate people an explanation of their circumstances.

The voice I have called Mezlekia the Spirit-child, which is deliberately far from the standard narrative voice of autobiography, is, of course, marked as African. Yet I can think of no other African autobiography that reports the speech of animals. In *L'Enfant Noir*, a snake talks to Camara Laye's father, but the very process of schooling that allows Camara to write the autobiography means that the snake will never talk to him. The talking animals that populate Mezlekia's narrative belong not so much to Africa in general as to African fable. I can perhaps make this point clearer by considering the relation of Mezlekia's narration to the belief world of Nega's mother. That woman "had believed" (note the past tense) that there are no good or bad people, only good or bad spirits (330), and that is also what she taught her son (65). Mezlekia's narrative, however, does not feature spirits, only a pair of unnamed angels who never speak or intervene. Although Nega twice undergoes exorcism, we never believe in the demons suspected of possessing him. Mezlekia's narrative does not reproduce his mother's world or share her value system. What it does do is imitate the stories she used to tell.

In the two exorcism ceremonies that Nega suffers, extreme physical abuse has the effect of sending his spirit on journeys to other worlds. It is unusual in an African autobiography for such dreamlike interludes to be considered worth reporting, but not uncommon in fiction. The land of clouds and the land of goats where the abused Nega travels sound like the first-person fictional narratives of Amos Tutuola or Ben Okri, and it is difficult to imagine that Nega Mezlekia has not read these. Compare the following sentences by Mezlekia, utterly devoid of comment or irony,

Millennia passed and I was still in the goat's skin. The kingdom on Earth rotted away and vanished. (85)

with this passage of Ben Okri's:

They travelled for three hundred years and arrived in our night-space. I did not have to dream. It was the first time I realized that an invisible space had entered my head and dissolved the interior structure of my being. The wind of several lives blew into my eyes. (445-46)

A phrase like "it was -10 000 C" (71), with its combination of hyperbole and precision, would not be out of place in the mouth of Tutuola's Palm-Wine Drinkard. And a sentence like "Seven students, two low-flying angels, and a devil in a wheel-chair had been injured so badly that they had to be hospi-

talized" (110) could come from the short stories of García Márquez.

My point is that the narrative's "magic" is as literary and as modern as the "realism" of *Mezlekia the Engineer* and that it belongs as much to the adult as to the child. Magic realism is not somehow more mimetic of third-world reality than realism. The talking animals in *Mezlekia's* narrative do not represent the lived experience of Ethiopians in some direct, unmediated way. No less than realism, magic realism is a narrative convention.

The magic realist text is not part traditional and part modern: tradition is itself modernity's invention. But the text most certainly is divided. The division into something that stands for tradition and something that stands for modernity is precisely what makes the magic realist text modern. The division within the text is best understood as a split between inside and outside. This is clear in the case of *Mezlekia the Engineer* who stands ostentatiously outside the experience of young Nega. The Engineer invites the reader to stroll along the Horn of Africa in the year 1000, where

you would have witnessed a human tidal wave moving inland, and wondered where it could have come from. You might even have glanced at your surroundings and surmised that these nomadic peoples had somehow crossed the bottleneck at the Gulf of Aden; the vast Indian Ocean was impossible to navigate. (193)

The "I" addressing "you" here is not an Ethiopian addressing Canadians, nor someone in Canada describing Somalis, but a scientist addressing students. The Engineer understands Nega by locating him in a frame much larger than his personal experience—"Somalia's affairs made a startling appearance in my young life one windy afternoon in October 1969" (199). This same Engineer freely provides culturalist explanations along the lines of "this is what we do because this is our culture": he will say, for instance, that "As a child of the Amhara community, I was brought up according to time-honoured aristocratic moral codes" (25) and explain that, "As in many cultures," beggars are despised in Ethiopia (256). To attribute differences in behaviour to differences in culture is to presume a vantage point above and outside cultures.

Mezlekia the Spirit-child does not offer the corresponding insider's point of view but provides a different frame, one that, no less than the Engineer's, leaves Nega's ordinary lived experience behind. *Mezlekia* reports what animals say, but only among themselves. Young Nega does not talk to animals nor they to him. Ants police schoolchildren by biting them when they fail to pay attention (27) and we are told that cats and dogs attend a party (156), but, in general, the anthropomorphized animals in the narrative do not

interact with humans. Instead they live in parallel societies that provide an outside witness, usually an ironic one, to human actions. Reading the placards carried by demonstrating students, the local dogs “became engaged in a heated argument about what ‘Land to the Tiller!’ meant and how it would affect their territories, the lines of which were painstakingly redrawn every few seconds” (105), while later, in the midst of a war among humans, “the hyenas severed their diplomatic relations with us” and the “lions made a proverb out of our carpet-bombing” (221). In other words, the animal societies are related to human society much as Canada is to Ethiopia. While the Engineer’s narrative contains Nega’s Ethiopia within a larger world, the Spirit-child’s also relativizes it and brings out its unnatural character. The division that matters is not between Africa, supposed to be the continent of childhood, and the West, the land of history, but between inside and various outsides.

The Engineer’s and the Spirit-child’s perspectives both appeal to universal values in order to judge the absurdity and inhumanity of Nega’s experience. Mezekia the Engineer appeals to human rights and to a narrative of modernization, which is identified with secularism, economic development, and democracy. These values are actually close to those of the animals in the stories that Nega’s mother tells him: animals “fight one another to assert their territory; they stalk the weak from time to time, to feed their own young; but they also accept that it is everyone’s right to share this world” (330). It is only humans who wage war against their own species: Nega’s experience of war teaches him that “the human animal . . . was the only beast to be feared in the wilderness” (163). Both the Engineer’s universal values and the values found in the animal fables that Nega learned at his mother’s knee have been betrayed by the boy’s teachers, the emperor, the military junta that succeeds him, and the Cold War politics of the super-powers.

In *Notes from the Hyena’s Belly* the true hyenas are the human ones. Early in the narrative we are told that, after nightfall, the streets of Jijiga are taken over by hyenas and otherwise deserted. No one goes homeless in Jijiga, for to remain on the streets would be suicide. The ubiquitous predators are an image with which to frighten children, and no childhood would be complete without a story of daring an encounter with them. Childhood fears gain a wholly new force, however, when a coup brings a military junta to power and random killings render the suburbs of Addis Ababa “a movable feast” for hyenas and vultures (302). The belly of the hyena becomes a

metonymic euphemism for violent death. Twice Nega is rounded up with other young men and faces the threat of summary execution, and each time the prisoners ask themselves, "Who among us would sleep our last night in the hyena's belly" (149, 253). The form of the question leaves ambiguous whether it is death or the prison from which death seems to be the only issue that is the hyena's belly. The young government cadres with the power of arrest and execution who provide the scavengers with their feast are themselves versions of the beasts they serve, "two-legged hyenas" sharing a single belly (300). The hyenas that figure in tales told to frighten children become self-consciously literary metaphors for that modern phenomenon, the ideology-spouting, superpower-dependent third-world military dictatorship.

Hyenas only come out at night. Folklore has it that, in the day, they retreat inside a cactus. During the day, the children who cower behind walls at night are free to come out. As night and day struggle for supremacy in Ethiopia, the young students who, heedless of the threats of arrest and torture, demonstrate against the government are like children who cut open the cactus and pelt the light-stricken hyena with stones (115). The forces of night, which are the forces of the tyrannical state waging war against its citizens, strike back, however, when cadres take over Jijiga; Mezlekia says, "The hyena was out of the cactus's belly, and the sun itself refused to rise" (148). Permanent darkness descends on the land, the land is swallowed, and Ethiopia becomes one large prison to which there is no outside. To escape, Nega will have to find another universe.

III

The division between Nega inside and Mezlekia outside that makes the narrative possible is not a clean break but extends cracks in every direction. The division of the autobiographical self is recreated at every level. Mezlekia's own voice cracks, as we have seen, producing the split between Engineer and Spirit-child. But the child Nega was already split between his mother's animal fables and his experience of school.

For a story about "boyhood" Mezlekia's tale is strangely reticent when it comes to talking about family. Nega's siblings are not introduced until very late in the text, although this defuses the horror of the near starvation of his younger brother Henok, of whose existence we had not been aware until then. Nega's father and his methods of discipline are only described long after the news of his death. Instead of family, *Notes* begins and ends with a

description of years of schooling. Schooling and the age-related progression through classes provide a ready-made order to the lives of most literate people. Precisely because the discipline of education is so widely shared, however, it is hard to tell it as story, which requires not just order but also novelty and deviation. Civil war, flight, torture, and imprisonment are, of course, sufficiently momentous, specific to the individual, and distinct from the tranquillity required by the reading experience that they can command the interest of readers, but large-scale violence is notoriously hard for the individual who suffers it, to narrate and make sense of. I once served as interpreter for a Salvadorean ex-guerrilla fighter applying for refugee status in Canada, and remember how much difficulty he had telling what happened first and what happened next. Life in the bush (like the experience of war more generally, or life in the refugee camp or prison, I imagine) makes nonsense of chronology, a problem inevitably compounded by the psychological effects of trauma, the need to watch one's words in front of authorities, and the desire to hide the shameful. Mezlekia's solution to the problem of balancing order and disorder is to juxtapose narratives of school and of war. War provides the interest, but school provides the order.

In Africa, school is sufficiently distinct from the experience of previous generations that it can form the core of an autobiography. School measures the expansion of the horizons of the young Camara Laye and Wole Soyinka in their autobiographies. It performs the same function in *Notes from the Hyena's Belly*, where Nega progresses from a thatched mud shed to a brand new concrete high school to the university in the capital. High school does not take Nega away from home and his truest self, as it does Camara Laye; instead it opens "a window onto the larger world, a world that had long been kept from our view by aging imperial drapes and our families' careful planning of the vista" (93). The narrow horizons of childhood turn out to be an illusion created by conspiracy. Nega the schoolboy has much in common with Manthia Diawara who celebrates the African modernity represented by Sékou Touré and the other nationalist leaders who won independence for the new states in Africa, thereby endowing Diawara and his generation "with the consciousness of a truly modern subjecthood, including the right to freedom, self-determination, and equality under the law" (56).

In high school, Nega meets students from elsewhere, and particularly from the countryside (93), and becomes conscious of belonging to a larger class spread throughout the nation but having experiences in common:

We hung around with boys from other groups, talking about the same subject: the feudal lord and his modern-day slaves. As word trickled in from young people in much bigger cities, it seemed to us that the entire student body in the nation was, somehow, entranced by the same issue. (102)

The students' consciousness of belonging to a nation is accompanied by a painful awareness that the state perpetuates feudalism and fails to be as modern as these new citizens-in-the-making feel themselves to be. Mezeleki narrates this burgeoning political awareness as a moment of disillusion: Nega loses his childhood faith in the bounty of the emperor. Yet we have known Nega as an eleven-year-old with plenty of experience of the perversity and inhumanity of teachers and other adults. This is a boy who, tired of saluting, feels that "I didn't know what it meant for a country to lose its independence, but wasn't so sure that the deprivation of a flag was such a bad idea" (199). His loss of faith in the emperor is perhaps best read as the narrative expression of a doubleness always at the very heart of the high-school student's identification with the nation: he learns to identify not with the nation as it is (feudal) but with the nation as it should be (modern and like other nations). In other words, he learns he is inside because he has been taught to see himself from the outside.

Eventually, as he makes his way to the capital and to university after some deeply disturbing, even otherworldly, experiences as a guerrilla (how could the experiences not be confusing when he was an Amhara fighting for the Somalis?) and as a refugee fleeing the war, he loses faith in the nation altogether. The self-evident good of a university education and of the participation in a larger world which it makes possible allows Mezeleki to judge the barbarity of a state that would turn all study into propaganda if it could, and since it cannot, unleashes a campaign of terror against students across the nation.

The experience of school makes clear the split in Nega but does not produce it, for he has always felt he does not belong in the corrupt and superstitious world of his birth. A constant theme is that he was born into "the wrong universe" (3): "I wished I had been born in another universe" (288). It is by some cosmic error that Nega finds himself in a land, where, as Kibret Markos puts it, parents and teachers treat childhood as "a demonic behavior to be exorcised by the whip first, and by the torturous 'therapy' of witch doctors." Jijiga, the land of story, where animals speak and angels pass through on business, is also where people wage war on the human instincts that children are born with. The readers' sympathies are all with the child,

whose pranks (hitting the teacher with a spitball, putting chillies up the anuses of the teacher's cattle) display a natural rebelliousness. After a particularly severe beating and long before he becomes aware of nation or experiences the state's tyranny, Mezlekia reports, "I knew that I had, just then, ceased to be a carefree schoolboy and become a man: a vengeful man who had just picked a fight with the entire world" (55).

The boy's distance from the world is indicated by the many questions he asks of his elders. As a child he "often wondered" why meat requires ritual (172). He asks why the herbalist has to be naked to pick herbs (161) and how it is possible for a painting to show predators and prey peacefully side by side (330). The young adult continues the pattern, asking why hospital patients must be physically abused to keep them quiet ("Kibret was surprised by my ignorance" [248]), or why a bus driver is so generous with gifts to the young boys on the road (he must bribe them to prevent them damaging the bus) (260). Nega who never knows what everyone else seems to know is in the position of Mezlekia's readers who also do not understand and who marvel at the strangeness of this world.

When young Camara Laye in his autobiography inquires after the meaning of cultural practices at his home in Guinea, it signals his loss of a world: something will remain forever inaccessible to him, a mystery closed to his understanding. When Nega questions why the people around him do what they do, it marks his ironic distance from the world. Mezlekia says, with all the detachment of a tourist, "the orthodox Christian church had always intrigued me" (333). At one point Nega asks his uncle the priest, "what is the language of the angels?" (21). The uncle's age at the time ("eighty-year-old" [20]) suggests it is probably as an adult, temporarily living with his uncle on a break from university studies, that Nega asks this question, and his intention is mildly irreverent. The narration, however, deliberately obscures the difference between the boy and the man, and suggests the man's skepticism was also the boy's.

The very sign of Nega's integration in the world into which he was born—his frequent return to the animal fables that his mother told him as a child—becomes a sign of his alienation from that world. The text supplies plenty of evidence that the stories do not have the effect intended: as often as not Nega does not heed their lessons. His mother tries in vain to quell his rebelliousness by telling him a story to show that an individual cannot exist alone. Another elaborate story bears the flimsy moral that solutions to problems are found in one's own backyard, which is patently not true in

Nega's case (341).

The status of the animal fables as icons of Ethiopian culture is itself a measure of Mezlekia's distance from the world he describes. Jack Goody points out that Africans consider animal fables something to entertain small children with and not the privileged repository of cultural wisdom: "As for those observers who take the content of such tales as a sample of the thought of oral cultures, it is no more wonder that they end up with notions of its 'primitive' nature than if some African scholar were to construe Snow White in the same manner" (83). In *Notes*, such animal fables, including one tale that Western readers may recognize as the story of stone soup and another which is a joke about a European explorer swimming among crocodiles in the Nile delta (317), and not the centuries-old literary tradition or the Orthodox Church, are taken to represent the heart of Amharic culture.

The bruised young boy who feels he belongs in another universe can sound like Azaro, the *abiku* spirit-boy in *The Famished Road*. As I have already noted, the echo is particularly pronounced when, in two separate incidents, the boy is forced to undergo painful rituals to exorcize his demons, and he travels to other lands, a land of clouds and a land where goats rule over people. But Nega knows more than does Azaro, whom we never see at school (although he does go to school). The standards of the world where Nega rightly belongs are also those of Sweden and America. Nega and his schoolmates loved the government of Sweden which donated their new high school but could not be sure "if Sweden was in the same universe" (90). So, too, the American-built university library in Addis, like something out of Von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods*, seems to have been built by hands that "had issued from another universe— . . . it was not something a two-legged, short-tempered and plain-skinned creature, such as a human, could either conceive or compose" (289). The high school and the university point to an alternative universe where Mezlekia and his implied readers rightly belong. Mezlekia can delight in the incongruity of the nomad in the market who picks up a pipette stolen from the school laboratory: he and his readers know what pipettes are for (92).

As William Pietz has pointed out, the standard emblem of Western technology used to gauge culture clash has long been the gramophone in the jungle. Judging from *Notes from the Hyena's Belly*, sound reproduction technology has now been fully integrated into African experience ("Abdi quickly rolled the reels of oral history that had been passed to him through hundreds of generations" [163-64]), and the new mark of incongruous moder-

nity is the microwave oven: when Nega's comrade-in-arms Hussain describes one that he saw in France, Mezlekia comments, "It's not that anyone believed a word of it, just that the sheer incredibility of it all was enlivening to the ear" (167).

Sometimes the discrepancy among worlds is just too great: Mezlekia says that socialism sounded admirable, but he suspects that, when imposed on a primitive agricultural economy such as Ethiopia's, "it had been delivered to the wrong universe" (142). The juxtaposition of alternative universes, some where goats rule and others where unemployed people receive money from the state and the law protects cats from abuse, emphasizes just how much of a nightmare universe Ethiopia is. When Nega comes to Canada, he finds home and appreciates how much he was in exile while growing up in Ethiopia.

By the end of the book, the hyena's belly which was the tyrannical state has become the whole of Ethiopia:

When my bus finally arrived, it was full. A sea of human faces peered out of the windows at me, one huge creature with thousands of dark eyes and countless small mouths. . . I decided to squeeze in, becoming part of the hideous beast. (285)

It seems the modern subjecthood that Nega shares with Manthia Diawara is inseparable from his despair that anything can ever be different in "sunny Africa" (351), the kind of despair Diawara deploras as Afropessimism.

IV

I have suggested that the split between inside and outside is what makes the narrative possible. It is related to the split Starobinski finds symptomatic of all autobiographical narrative. In the African autobiography, however, the split also makes the narrative problematic. However much they are papered over, cracks are forever reappearing. We can judge from the many moments of hesitation and even incoherence still found in the text how difficult it must have been to find a narrative form.

Rigoberta Menchú has been accused of lying in her own narrative because she recounts events as if she were present when she was not. It is not difficult to understand how this may have happened, and Menchú's accusers are being disingenuous: it is surely a common experience that, when telling stories orally, as Menchú did, one simplifies how one knows things by presenting them as if one had seen them. Mezlekia is almost certainly guilty of a similar narrative shortcut when, for instance, he admires

an elaborate con game perpetrated by “a most original and enterprising school of beggars” at Harar bus station while he was waiting to buy a ticket (256). Later he recounts how, as a boy, he had been “invited to witness the execution of a project,” a cruel massacre of monkeys, in circumstances which cast doubt on whether he actually saw the massacre or only its bloody aftermath (275). He says that the trap set for the monkeys did not take effect right away and the peasants had to take turns keeping vigil, which would imply that Nega, the reluctant witness, waited half a day, longer than anyone else was willing to wait, in order to see the barbaric sight that made him physically ill (276).

My point is not to challenge Mezlekia’s story of Nega but to suggest that the anomalies are traces of the difficulty in telling this story. Kuni is identified as “a rural town less than half an hour’s drive from Asebe Teferi” when Nega goes there as an adult (273-74); much later we realize that Kuni is the home of his uncle Yeneta, the priest introduced in the second chapter, and where Nega spent his vacations as a child. Only at that point, almost at the end of the book, does Mezlekia refer to the village as “my beloved Kuni” (325). Whereas in the opening chapters Nega’s hometown Jijiga and the eastern highlands are conflated as sites of the marvellous, by the end Jijiga can actually feel bourgeois and ordinary beside the primitive highlands, where the boy came in contact with the “prejudices” associated with the “Amharas’ mythical view of the world” (17). The highlands stand in relation to the modern “multicultural mixing bowl” of Jijiga (17) more or less as Isara, the grandparents’ home in Wole Soyinka’s memoir, stands to Aké, the school and mission where Wole grew up. To young Wole, Isara seems “several steps into the past”: “Age hung from every corner, the patina of ancestry glossed all objects, all human faces” (67). (I am referring here to Isara as it appears in the autobiography *Aké* and not as it appears in the eponymous novel). By the end of Mezlekia’s narrative, the world of marvels is not the world that has produced Nega, but the world from which he feels he must take his leave.

The narrative also evinces a great instability in its attitude to the young boy. Nega’s role of the uncomprehending stranger in a very strange land can come across as naïveté. Mezlekia, for instance, reports with sarcasm on the corruption of the judiciary:

Though the judge took bribes, he never permitted the money and favours he received to get in the way of his judgment. It was, after all, an open court. The bribe’s only consequence took the form of a hulking man who stood at the door to the courtroom, blocking evidence and restraining witnesses. (99)

Yet young Nega was apparently “dumbstruck” when the same judge ruled that a man with thirty-two stab wounds, a bullet wound, and a severed head had committed suicide: “I remember thinking that the learned judge had made a terrible mistake, but quickly realized that he could not have reached any other verdict, as all of the evidence and witnesses were missing from the court” (99). The reader may well doubt whether Nega, the rebel who sees through his teacher Mr Alula’s much vaunted morality, was actually ever present at the trial, for how could he ever have believed the trial would be fair? How could he have been surprised by what happened or reconciled to the verdict afterwards? Nega’s naïveté about the world he grew up in is unbelievable except as a pose: he plays the straight man to Mezlekia’s sarcasm. Mezlekia’s sarcasm has worthy targets: the self-serving rhetoric of morality (“it was immoral for the King’s musketeers to raise arms against” troublesome tribesmen; better “to dispatch another Somali tribe against them” [49]); notions of cultural superiority (“Amharic was God’s own choice for the medium of government” [129]); military spending (“All those glossy catalogues with alluring pictures of machine guns, missile-launchers, armoured personnel carriers and majestic tanks had to be put back on the shelf until new sponsors were found” [127]); superstition (“There was never a shortage of such holy men in Jijiga, who found it much easier to communicate with the unborn and the long dead than with the living” [154]); corruption (“The sacks and various containers of donated food had ‘Not For Sale’ printed boldly on them” to remind the aid donors “not to sell it to us” [122]); and tyranny (“the Emperor would have liked to help, but he was not a wealthy man”; “After all, all he had was \$1.6 billion, and it was tied up in Swiss banks” [123]), but the sarcasm comes at the cost of making Nega a naïve *Candide*. This is the boy who thinks Haile Selassie “did not seem like the kind of person who would stand by and watch a feudal lord herd a world of serfs to his private jail” (102); who discovers with “horror” that “when someone you don’t know fires a .50-calibre anti-aircraft gun at you, he actually means to kill you” (178); and who thinks “that a coup d’état was the most profiting and ingenious enterprise Africa had ever embarked on, one wherein everyone involved came out a positive winner,” except “the faceless masses” (200). The irony is inherently unstable: are we supposed to see with Mezlekia around Nega or are we to understand that Nega never really thought these things and this is only a pose?

The instability quickly spreads. A sentence like the following, “My interest in the political life of Ethiopia grew steadily in the 1960s” (101), said by

one who only turned twelve in 1970, smacks of the politician's memoir. Even when it marks his genuine engagement with the world, Nega's earnestness comes to sound naïve. The boy lies awake "many nights wondering if Kenya and Ethiopia had not heinously divided a unique people," the Somalis (188). Fortunately for his conscience, "the more I studied history, the more I questioned this view" (189). He believes that "If I had any hope of helping to change the system. . . I had better resume my education" (187) and maintains "irreconcilable differences with the military junta, because I was convinced that Ethiopia had no future under their leadership" (318), worthy sentiments that cannot, however, escape being tinged with the residue of Mezlekia's prevalent sarcasm.

The adult Nega does not know how to get a ticket for the bus (you need to hire a beggar to wait in line [305]), and is daunted by the overcrowding—"Dozens of sweaty faces pressed circles into the dirty windows while a tangle of bodies, hooked by one or more limbs to the precarious seats on top of the bus, jolted and swayed with the uneven road, like an angry nest of snakes." Somewhat incongruously, Mezlekia adds, "we must have offered a strange sight to passersby" (305). Who does he imagine would see this who had not seen it before? It is difficult to understand the juxtaposition in the same narrative of overcrowded transport with torture and mass murder. There may be a sociological relation—poverty hardens people's hearts; great disparities in wealth make people seem expendable—but the relation may also be merely rhetorical: the Canadian reader will find them equally foreign adventures.

Evelyn Waugh, who attended the coronation of Haile Selassie, compared Ethiopia to *Alice in Wonderland*. A "galvanized and translated reality, where animals carry watches in their waistcoat pockets, royalty paces the croquet lawn beside the chief executioner, and litigation ends in a flutter of playing-cards" (23) could well be a description of *Notes from the Hyena's Belly*. Mezlekia actually goes farther than Waugh or Alan Moorehead, author of *The Blue Nile*, in making Ethiopians seem what Waugh calls a "remote people." He reports, for instance, that, because of the sycophantic nature of priests, funerals of nobles last so long that, in their impatience, crowds *habitually* send armed men to rob the priests, lock them in the cellar, and throw the remains of the dead lord on the ground (334). Mezlekia also reports, for the salacious pleasure of readers, that there is a tribe in Ethiopia for whom an initiation rite involves bringing back a penis from another tribe. A sure giveaway that he has no direct experience of these people is

that he explains their behaviour in terms of culturalist imperatives: they do what they do in order to maintain “the continuity of thousands of years of culture” (222). Whatever basis in actual practice there might be for this African equivalent of urban legend— “Young men of the Adal tribe often hide themselves in the brush by the highway waiting for accidents to happen, so that they can lay claim to the members of the victims” (223)—as with all reports of African cannibalism, ritual killings to secure body parts, and witchcraft, we should be sceptical about the prevalence and the nature of the practice. The pleasure Mezlekia gets from telling this tale does not mean he sees with Western eyes—this is clearly a tale the Amhara tell of their primitive neighbours—but it does indicate how aware he is of Western readers.

V

Mezlekia who tells us about the Adal penis-hunters whom he has not met also gives us an example of healthy skepticism. Nega’s friend among the Somali guerrilla fighters, Hussain, “admitted to me that while growing up in Djibouti, he had believed that Amharas each had a short tail between their legs”:

He had heard many stories of the atrocities committed by Amharas, mostly untrue, and had formed a mental picture of the people capable of perpetrating such horrors. It was not until he had made his first trip to Dire Dawa, Ethiopia’s third largest city, that he was shocked to find the Amharas were shaped like men. (168)

Mezlekia comments that, “Far from revealing the inner workings of his mind, this revelation made him an even greater mystery,” for, if he did not hate Amharas, why was Hussain fighting them so fiercely (169)? Of course, the answer is a complicated one. As Mezlekia’s own narrative shows, some Amharas *are* capable of atrocities, and there are plenty of “two-legged hyenas” among them. Moreover, recognition of their common humanity does not make Hussain and Nega transparent to each other. When Nega meets Hussain, he is himself an Amhara among Somalis and must prove that his opposition to the government on ideological grounds gives him common cause with those who are fighting against Amhara domination. Yet he cannot be sure that he has enough in common with his comrades who remain suspicious of all Amharas. At the risk of proving their suspicions well-founded, he finds a way to desert.

I have suggested that Mezlekia the narrator is able to write this memoir because he can assume a common understanding with his English-language

readers. That shared understanding requires their common distance from Ethiopia: it presumes that what others do is strange and, in the case of the two-legged hyenas, not even human. This shared understanding of Africa remains, however, precarious: the African writer finds his own literary credentials treated with suspicion. Having written about his escape from a land where people are predators and prey, Nega Mezlekia now finds himself publicly vilified as a monster in a land where cats are protected by law. The writer who sought to establish his authority by writing his self now finds that being written is not such a comfortable position.

Let me reiterate that this analysis of the fractures in the narrative should not be construed as evidence to support the claims of either Stone or Nega Mezlekia. The controversy surrounding the text does not arise directly from the internal fractures. My argument is that the controversy and the fractures are both symptomatic of the splitting characteristic of the African self and of the migrant self. The split in the self characteristic of all textuality and of autobiography in particular is inevitably compounded in the African autobiography.

WORKS CITED

- Abley, Mark. "Columnist Voices Contempt for Visiting Writer." *Montreal Gazette*. 23 Sept. 1995. H1.
- Andrews, William L. "The Novelization of Voice in Early African American Narrative." *PMLA* 105.1 (1990): 23-34.
- Arias, Arturo. "Authoring Ethnicized Subjects: Rigoberta Menchú and the Performative Production of the Subaltern Self." *PMLA* 116.1 (2001): 75-88.
- Barnes, Virginia Lee and Janice Boddy. *Aman: The Story of a Somali Girl*. Toronto: Knopf, 1994.
- Blackburn, Regina. "In Search of the Black Female Self: African-American Woman's Autobiographies and Ethnicity." *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*. Ed. Estelle C. Jelinek. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980. 133-48.
- Breiner, Laurence A. "Lyric and Autobiography in West Indian Literature." *Journal of West Indian Literature* 3.1 (1989): 3-15.
- Brodzki, Bella and Celeste Schenck. "Introduction." Brodzki and Schenck. 1-15. —, eds. *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988.
- Camara Laye. *L'Enfant Noir*. Paris: Plon, 1953.
- Chang, Jung. *Wild Swans*. New York: Doubleday, 1991.
- Connelly, Karen. "Call Off the Literary Lynch Mob." *Globe and Mail*. 13 Dec. 2000. A13.
- Couser, G. Thomas. *Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography*. New York: Oxford UP, 1989.
- Diawara, Manthia. *In Search of Africa*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1998.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice." *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Shari

- Benstock. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988. 34-62.
- Gallimore, Rangira Béatrice. *L'Oeuvre romanesque de Calixthe Beyala*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997.
- García Márquez, Gabriel. *The Innocent Erendira and Other Stories*. Trans. Gregory Rabassa. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.
- Gatehouse, Jonathon and Noah Richler. "Massacre-Plot Manuscript Billed as Memoir: Editors." *National Post*. 13 Dec. 2000. A4.
- Gergen, Kenneth J. "Mind, Text, and Society: Self-Memory in Social Context." *The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self-Narrative*. Ed. Ulric Neisser and Robyn Fivush. New York: Cambridge UP, 1994. 78-104.
- Gessell, Paul. "Author's Voice is Unique: Judge Says It's Unlikely Winning Memoir Was Ghostwritten." *Montreal Gazette*. 28 Nov. 2000. A24.
- Gilmore, Leigh. *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Self-Representation*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994.
- Godwin, Peter. *Mukiwa: A White Boy in Africa*. London: Macmillan, 1996.
- Goody, Jack. "The Time of Telling and the Telling of Time in Written and Oral Cultures." *Chronotypes*. Ed. John Bender and David E. Wellbery. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1991. 77-96.
- Gusdorf, Georges. "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography." Trans. James Olney. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Ed. James Olney. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980. 28-48.
- Hope, Christopher. *White Boy Running*. London: Abacus, 1988.
- Jackson, Marni. "The Mysterious Process of Birthing a Book." *Globe and Mail*. 2 Dec. 2000. D26.
- Joubert, Elsa. *Poppie Nongena*. New York: Holt, 1980.
- Lejeune, Philippe. "The Autobiographical Pact." Trans. Katherine Leary. Lejeune. *On Autobiography*. Ed. Paul John Eakin. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989. 3-30.
- Liang, Heng, and Judith Shapiro. *Son of the Revolution*. Douglas: Fontana, 1984.
- Kuzwayo, Ellen. *Call Me Woman*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1985.
- Markos, Kibret. "Africa from the Inside." *St Petersburg Times*. 18 Feb. 2001. 14 May 2001. <http://www.sptimes.com/News/021801/Perspective/Africa_from_the_insid.shtml#Anchor-49575>
- Mathabane, Mark. *Kaffir Boy*. New York: New American Library, 1986.
- Menchú, Rigoberta. *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Ed. Elizabeth Burgos-Debray. Trans. Ann Wright. London: Verso, 1984.
- Mezlekia, Nega. *Notes from the Hyena's Belly*. Toronto: Penguin, 2000.
- Miller, Christopher. *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985.
- Min, Anchee. *Red Azalea*. New York: Pantheon, 1994.
- Modisane, Bloke. *Blame Me on History*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990.
- Moorehead, Alan. *The Blue Nile*. London: H. Hamilton, 1972.
- Okri, Ben. *The Famished Road*. London: Vintage, 1992.
- Pietz, William. "The Phonograph in Africa: International Phonocentrism from Stanley to Sarnoff." *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*. Ed. Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington, and Robert Young. New York: Cambridge UP, 1987. 263-85.
- Posner, Michael. "Publisher Disputes Mezlekia's Prize." *Globe and Mail*. 6 Dec. 2000. A9.
- . "The Lion of Ethiopia." *Globe and Mail*. 26 Feb. 2000. 30 Oct. 2001. <<http://www.globebooks.com/interviews/mezlekia.html>>

- Richler, Noah. "I Will Bury [You] If It Takes Me a Hundred Years." *National Post*. 4 Dec. 2000. A1.
- . "So Just Who Is the Real Author?: Why We Should Listen to Anne Stone." *National Post*. 4 Dec. 2000. D1.
- . "Behind All Good Writers." *National Post*. 7 Dec. 2000. A18.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Les Confessions*. Vol. 1. Paris: Gallimard, 1959.
- Sanders, Mark A. "Theorizing the Collaborative Self: The Dynamics of Contour and Content in the Dictated Autobiography." *New Literary History* 25 (1994): 445-58.
- Shostak, Marjorie. *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981.
- Sommer, Doris. "'Not Just a Personal Story': Women's *Testimonios* and the Plural Self." Brodzki and Schenck. 107-30.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Aké*. London: Rex Collings, 1981.
- Stanton, Domna C. "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*. Ed. Domna C. Stanton. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987. 3-20.
- Starobinski, Jean. "Le Style de l'Autobiographie." *Poétique* 3 (1970): 257-65.
- Stepo, Robert B. "Narration, Authentication, and Authorial Control." *Modern Critical Interpretations: Frederick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1988. 45-57.
- Taylor, Helen. "'The Griot from Tennessee': The Saga of Alex Haley's *Roots*." *Critical Quarterly* 37.2 (1995): 46-62.
- Tutuola, Amos. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. 1952. London: Faber, 1961.
- Waugh, Evelyn. *Remote People*. 1931. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.
- Widgington, David. "Unacknowledged." *National Post*. 7 Dec, 2000. A19.

