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**The Rainbow Nation and Identity, a Coloured Story: A Reading  
of Chris Van Wyk's *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* and *Eggs to  
Lay, Chickens to Hatch***

A Thesis Presented in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Master of  
Philosophy Degree

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**Nicole Stoltenkamp**

December 2014

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Chris van Wyk

## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks are due to my supervisors, to whom I am greatly indebted: Professor Pier Paolo Frassinelli for his excellent and consistent support and guidance during the writing of this thesis and Charles Villet for his input and encouragement. In addition, I would like to thank the School of Social Science at Monash University and the staff at Monash South Africa (MSA) for their academic support and resources during the process of writing this thesis. I am also greatly indebted to various members of my family, particularly my parents and grandmothers for their moral support and encouragement. Finally and most importantly, to the late Chris van Wyk: I will be eternally grateful to him for his willingness to contribute to this project. He was a gentle soul, generous with his time and knowledge. I am honoured to have met him.

## Abstract

This thesis will focus on how racial identities are constructed. It will look, in particular, at Chris Van Wyk's memoirs *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* (2004) and *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch* (2010), which describe the life of the coloured community of Riverlea, a township in Johannesburg, under apartheid. It will investigate both the construction of the category "coloured" and the notion that the term coloured could be a way of defining the undefinable. The thesis explains the theories that can be used to inform the construction of coloured identity, such as Helene Strauss's justification of the term "creolisation" to describe the coloured identity and Judith Butler's notion that identity is performative. Such theories can be used to inform an individual's choice to adopt, perform or reject examples of identity performances, particularly those identities which were imposed on coloured people during apartheid. However, history alone cannot determine an identity; we all have the ability to choose our identities. Because there are so many identities in contemporary South Africa, an individual living in this new society shares a layer of her/his identity with all humanity.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

This thesis will focus on how racial identities are constructed. It will look, in particular, at Chris van Wyk's memoirs *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* and *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch*, which describe the life of the coloured community of Riverlea, Johannesburg, under apartheid: in this way, I will investigate both the construction of the category coloured – a term that could simply be a way of defining people who cannot be defined in any other way<sup>1</sup> – and how this category was, and still is, embodied by a specific community and its members.

Race continues to play a crucial role in determining social relations in post-apartheid South Africa. The apartheid ideology has been barred but arguably not entirely defeated. People are affected by race, whether they like to admit it or not. As far as we have come in the past two decades from the far-reaching racial separateness of apartheid, South African citizens are still defined by race. If anything and everything can be read as a sign of race, then race is in everything – a universal element of everyday life: “the inevitable adverb and adjective of all experience”, in Deborah Posel's words.<sup>2</sup> Posel perceives race as the unavoidable defining characteristic of all of our identities: in post-apartheid South Africa, everything can still be linked to race and everyone can be described in racial terms. Apartheid racial divisions created a hierarchy that promoted privilege and supremacy for white people while simultaneously oppressing other racial groups. Conversely, the new South African political discourse is meant to foster a notion of democracy and non-racialism. The country's citizens are now expected to embrace tolerance and accommodate each other's racial differences and identities.<sup>3</sup> However, the racial categorisations inherited from apartheid – namely, white, black, Indian and coloured – continue to define social and cultural identities and to produce divisions and stereotypes.

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<sup>1</sup> Ryland Fisher, *Race* (South Africa: Jacana Media, 2007), p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> Deborah Posel, 'What's in a Name? Racial Categorisations under Apartheid and Their Afterlife', *Transformation* 47 (2001), p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Melanie Walker, 'Race Is Nowhere and Race Is Everywhere: Narratives from Black and White South African University Students in Post-apartheid South Africa', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 26 (2005), p. 45.

Desmond Tutu has called South Africa the Rainbow Nation, a metaphor meant to express the overcoming of the divisions between the diverse ethnicities, racial identities, cultures, languages and creeds that coexist in contemporary South Africa. Even though this definition aims to be inclusive and portray a nation that is overcoming racism and racial divisions, it continues to emphasise racial differences. Arguably, the concept of the rainbow to describe a nation falls short of including all the people not defined by a particular colour. If the Rainbow Nation means a nation comprised of races defined by colours, where does “coloured” fit in? Melissa Steyn and Natasha Distiller, in their book *Under Construction: ‘Race’ in South Africa Today*, also question whether the Rainbow Nation metaphor is adequate. They argue that before an appropriate language can be found for the “new” South Africa, we need to know what, exactly, is “new” about the “new nation”:

Before South Africa can ride off into its rainbow sunset, it needs to examine the material and cultural baggage strapped to its horse: attitudes, identities, economic disparity, differing access to structures and languages of power – these did not instantaneously alter the day Nelson Mandela was released.<sup>4</sup>

To find a new language to talk about ourselves, we first need to understand the history and realities of apartheid, which help to make sense of who South African people are today and why society is the way it is. As South Africans, we continue to construct our social realities in racial terms, drawing on the apartheid catalogue of race.<sup>5</sup> The ideological logic of apartheid hinged on the idea that all non-white people were essentially different from all white people. Hence segregation.<sup>6</sup> The parameters created by the apartheid state affected the identity construction of South Africans then, and they still affect it today.

During the apartheid era categorizing a person as coloured meant that this person had certain defining characteristics in common with all people designated as coloured. For instance, under apartheid people defined as coloured often argued that they were “not white enough” to be

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<sup>4</sup> Natasha Distiller and Melissa Steyn (eds), *Under Construction: ‘Race’ and Identity in South Africa Today* (Pietermaritzburg: Heinemann Publishers, 2004), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Posel, ‘What’s in a Name? Racial Categorisations under Apartheid and Their Afterlife’, p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

considered citizens. By contrast, Michelle Ruiters argues that today coloured people commonly stress that “brown does not appear in the rainbow”. According to Ruiters, coloured people were loosely identified as neither black nor white and due to the forced removals: government grouped a mixture of non-white people together and had them live alongside each other. Communities adopted religion, language and cultural elements from one another: “this led to a closer identification between neighbours and within neighbourhoods”.<sup>7</sup>

Zimitri Erasmus and Edgar Pieterse list the main discourses on coloured identity formation in South Africa: the white nationalist discourse, the non-racial discourse, the ethnonationalist discourse, and the denialist discourse. The white nationalist discourse constructed coloured people as “left over people” and characterized coloured culture in terms of stereotypes such as “coon” carnivals and speaking “capey” Afrikaans, while coloureds were generally regarded as drunken-happy-go-lucky clowns (“die jollie hotnot”: the happy Hottentot) who sometimes become violent when drunk.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, during the apartheid era the Black Consciousness Movement, as well as United Democratic Front and ANC activists denied that coloured identity existed at all. In its stead, they favoured an all-encompassing black identity. In their view, this construction of a united black identity was necessary in a context of resistance to white supremacy.<sup>9</sup> More recently, a third discourse has emerged, the ethnonationalist discourse on “brown nationalist movements” in the Western Cape. This is a discourse promoted by coloured people searching for ethnic purity based on selectively reconstructed pasts in an attempt to rediscover “what coloured culture and identity is”.<sup>10</sup> In this attempt to (re)construct their identities, coloureds have rediscovered their own language, culture and land. They want to govern themselves and are not prepared to be governed by “black” people. To achieve their objective they have organised several movements: the Kleurling Weerstand Beweging (Coloured Resistance Movement), the Brown Nationalist Movement, the National Liberation Front and the Coloured Forum, among others. According to Erasmus and Pieterse, this kind of

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<sup>7</sup> Michelle Ruiters, ‘Collaboration, Assimilation and Aontestation: Emerging Constructions of Coloured Identity in Post-apartheid South Africa’, in Mohamed Adhikari (ed.), *Burdened by race: Coloured Identities in Southern Africa* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2009), p. 106.

Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>8</sup> Zimitri Erasmus and Edgar Pieterse ‘Conceptualising Coloured Identities in the Western Cape Province of South Africa’, in Mai Palmberg (ed.), *National Identity and Democracy in Africa* (South Africa: Capture Press, 1999), p. 174.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

construction of coloured identity reproduces and falls back on racist and apartheid discourse.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, the fourth type of discourse, denialism, is based on the perceived inconsistency of coloured identity, and argues that a coloured identity separated from a broader black identity is controversial. It suggests that coloured identity is a white-imposed categorization: a racist, reactionary, apartheid idea. Denialist discourse insists that coloured people lack a distinctive culture or ethnicity. Coloured people are seen as helpless and hopeless remains of Afrikaner and racist apartheid manipulation.

This is not necessarily the case. Coloured identity does not need to be constructed in essentialist terms. Coloured people often attempt to conceptualize the making and remaking of their identities as a fluid process, shaped by time and place. As Helene Strauss argues in her analysis of *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, the coloured subjectivity depicted in it is an example of creolisation. She uses the term “creolisation” – which has mostly been used to describe the complex and often violent cultural exchanges that have taken place between various identities in the aftermath of colonisation and slavery<sup>12</sup> – to describe the tensions, difficulties and confusion about being coloured during the apartheid and post-apartheid eras. If the coloured identity is shaped by a history of colonialism, slavery, segregation and apartheid, then the use of the notion of creolisation is apt to question and consider coloured identities. Taking into consideration the varying discourses surrounding it and considering the South African context, coloured identity formation can be perceived as a response to specific social and political realities. As Mohamed Adhikari explains, the constructions of coloured identities are today often fluid: coloured groups and individuals make and remake their perceived realities and personal and social identities.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Performance of Identity**

In van Wyk’s memoirs the young Chris’s experience of his intertwined personal and political domestic spaces provides a window into the political irrationalities of apartheid that he

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Helene Strauss, ‘Confused about Being Coloured: Creolisation and Coloured Identity in Chris van Wyk’s *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*’, in Mohamed Adhikari (ed.), *Burdened by Race: Coloured Identities in Southern Africa*, p. 24. This is the only published essay that is entirely devoted to Chris van Wyk’s memoir.

<sup>13</sup> Mohamed Adhikari, ‘From Narratives of Miscegenation to Post-modernist Reimagining: Towards a Historiography of Coloured Identity in South Africa’, in Mohamed Adhikari (ed.), *Burdened by Race: Coloured Identities in Southern Africa*, p. 14.

highlights time and again. Both texts are written predominantly from the perspective of the author as a young boy. This first person narrative provides an account of discovery and exploration which allows a harsh situation like living as a poor coloured person during the apartheid era to be seen through innocent eyes: eyes that may be little but seem to see everything more clearly than perhaps an adult – who may have become biased, bitter, or even apathetic – would have. The author effectively acknowledges racial discrimination as a complex theme and uses it to explore the underlying question of identity. Under apartheid, coloured people had their identities imposed on them, they were made to feel inferior and therefore, when confronted with white people, often assumed subversive identities, whether these white people held positions of authority or not. As a result of this construction of identity, and as van Wyk's memoirs suggest, when it came to interactions between people of different races, relationships were largely dependent on social standing, and this influenced identity performance. This however does not mean that people passively reproduced and adapted to pre-established identities and social, cultural and racial hierarchies.

The many identities that coloured people adopted and performed during apartheid could come from a sentiment of confusion as to the established racial order but also from rebellion or the refusal of some to conform to it. The acceptance of the imposed coloured identity by those who chose to conform only highlighted the fact that they were being oppressed by the apartheid regime, even though their various identity performances were an attempt to assimilate with the norm and assume their place in the racial hierarchy. In the memoirs, the young Chris questions apartheid racial hierarchies. For instance, in a passage in *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* he describes how on an outing to the city one day he critically observes an interaction in a bookshop between his grandmother and a white male shopkeeper. He watches his grandmother, Ouma, and tries to understand what makes the white man at the counter better than her. When she talks to him she changes her way of speaking and puts on her “musical voice”. When it is time to leave, he mimics his Ouma and bids the white man “good afternoon,” as opposed to saying “good bye” like he would have to anyone else because he thinks it “sounds posh”.<sup>14</sup> The subjective adaptation of themselves that van Wyk and his Ouma adopt for the benefit of the white man highlights the idea that identity can be seen as a performance, to the extent that

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<sup>14</sup> Chris van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy: A Childhood Memoir* (South Africa: Picador Africa, 2004), p. 68.

South Africa's racial hierarchies required coloured people to perform a subjective shift when speaking to the white man. This shows the power dynamics at play in the interracial encounter and, more broadly, in the country during apartheid.<sup>15</sup> Language is a powerful signifier: in this instance language and the voice adjust according to the context. Essentially, identities adjust according to different contexts. Ruiters claims that various identities within an individual are recognized in particular contexts.<sup>16</sup> She also claims that since identity is plural, in the South African context – i.e., in a society with multiple identities – true democracy requires the recognition of this plurality: “Various identities within an individual that are recognised within particular contexts could provide for and reinforce participatory democratic practices”.<sup>17</sup>

One of the key debates within the social sciences and in the context of South Africa is the question of identity. Questioning identity is questioning who we are, where we come from and where we belong. The concept of identity provides a way to understand how the personal and the social are constructed. But what does identity construction mean? According to Kath Woodward, it involves aligning ourselves with one group, saying that we are the same as them, while differentiating ourselves from other groups of people. We can have a collective identity at the local or global level, whether through culture, religion or politics, as well as an individual identity.<sup>18</sup> Your identity is not only a word to make sense of who you are in the world; it links you to the community you live in, as well as to how you see yourself and others see you. Identities are made up of different dimensions. As an individual each of us has a whole range of identities, which we experience in our daily interaction with others.<sup>19</sup> There is a link between identity and our place in the society in which we live that may arise from the categories into which we are placed by other people rather than from those into which we place ourselves.<sup>20</sup>

During apartheid people were forced to align their identities with one of the four racial groups. It was during the apartheid era that South African people classified as black, coloured and Indian

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<sup>15</sup> Strauss, ‘Confused about Being Coloured: Creolisation and Coloured Identity in Chris van Wyk’s *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*’, p. 35.

<sup>16</sup> Ruiters, ‘Collaboration; Assimilation and Contestation: Emerging Constructions of Coloured Identity in Post-apartheid South Africa’, p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Kath Woodward, *Social Sciences: The Big Issues* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

suffered the most severe violations of their civil rights. They were forced to be racially classified under the Population Registration Act of 1950, while The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 outlawed interracial marriages, and the Immorality Amendment Act of 1950 outlawed interracial sex. Under the Group Areas Act of 1950, well over half a million coloured people were forcibly relocated to designated residential and business areas, usually on the periphery of cities and towns. In 1953 the Separate Amenities Act introduced “petty apartheid” by segregating virtually all public facilities, and in 1956 the National Party removed coloured people from the voters’ roll.<sup>21</sup>

Van Wyk’s memoirs provide a perspective on the events of the time from the vantage point of a coloured person. Throughout the two texts, the young Chris asks questions as he interprets the political developments and their meaning for coloured identity formation, the place of coloured people in South Africa and his decision, as a young activist, to identify with the term black. Zimitri Erasmus and Edgar Pieterse question the relationship between being black, African and coloured. They define black, in the context of apartheid South Africa, as a political construction that refers to all oppressed people, while coloured refers to those South Africans loosely bound together for historical reasons such as slavery and a combination of oppressive and preferential treatment during apartheid, rather than by a common ethnic identity. The coloured identity is thus sometimes seen as overlapping with black and always with African.<sup>22</sup>

In his memoirs van Wyk narrates his strong affiliation with the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM): he decides early on in his life that if he has to be classified in terms of his race, then he would rather be black. On discovering that he has white ancestry while looking through his grandmother’s photos, the young Chris remarks: “This is not good news. I am black. I write black poetry. I am a follower of the black consciousness philosophy. And here’s a white guy messing up my past and future. For God’s sake, white people are the enemy, I don’t want the enemy in my family. Shit!”<sup>23</sup> He does not want to be associated with white people in any way

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<sup>21</sup> Mohamed Adhikari, “‘God Made the White Man, God Made the Black Man...’: Popular Racial Stereotyping of Coloured People in Apartheid South Africa”, *South African Historical Journal*, 55 (2006), p. 146.

<sup>22</sup> Erasmus and Pieterse ‘Conceptualising Coloured Identities in the Western Cape Province of South Africa’, p. 169.

<sup>23</sup> Van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 265.

because of how he feels about their role in the treatment of coloured and black people in the apartheid context.

After the June 16 1976 school students' revolt and their subsequent massacre by police, the situation was volatile. Clashes between the police and black youth were common. As black resistance grows, the young Chris is unrestrained in accusing the apartheid regime of throwing all African and coloured people into a cesspit: "Upside down with our faces submerged in the shit and the whites are holding us by our little brown ankles saying: should we or shouldn't we? The coloureds are holding on for dear life saying we may not be white but we're not quite down there with the blacks".<sup>24</sup> His contempt for the racist apartheid regime is evident yet his mixed feelings about coloured identity are also apparent. He says coloured people do not see themselves as quite belonging "down there" with the black majority. He makes a differentiation between coloured and black and highlights the racial hierarchy between the two. Were coloured people conditioned to have these prejudices? Did they simply repeat the apartheid imposed racism and discrimination toward blacks? While van Wyk is not in agreement with the idea, here he reflects on the hierarchical distinction between blacks and coloureds and positions coloured identity in-between white and black. In another passage, he recalls how as a child he was unable to resist participating in racist name calling and how, in an attempt to deflect taunts about his squint, he retaliated by calling his friend a "kaffir": "How many of me do you see? Melvin asks me". A retort comes into his head from nowhere: "I see two of you, but why is it that you are both Kaffirs?"<sup>25</sup> Later on in the text, an older Chris would take a beating for a black friend. He invites members of SOARTA (Soweto Arts Association) to his home in Riverlea, and as one of his black friends wanders off after a few drinks, a neighbour remarks that "No kaffirs are allowed" in the area. The young Chris takes a beating from the Transvaal middleweight champion for his friend.<sup>26</sup> The symbolism of that beating is Chris's retribution for uttering the word "kaffir" in his youth. His attitudes towards black people change as he becomes politically aware.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

The register of the speech of most of the characters in the memoirs is informal, colloquial, typically coloured slang. This is interesting because it shapes van Wyk's attitudes. It is noticeable that he does not really use slang. His tone and voice are different from those of his companions and peers: he is eloquent, reads a lot and quite often corrects the other characters' English spelling or grammar. This can be seen as poetic. He sees himself as being more cultured or evolved in his ways and thinking, even more so when he gets involved in the Black Consciousness Movement. The author purposely describes this to show that just because he was discriminated against, this did not make him inferior (or perhaps he just wants to demonstrate his free thinking). Once he has found his "poetic self", he even goes as far as proclaiming himself a member of the "1976 generation of poets". His poems are filled with a sharp loathing for white people.<sup>27</sup> This hatred is sparked by his disdain for the apartheid regime. He is drawn to the Black Consciousness Movement, which he comes across through black poetry. Poetry inspires him positively; it makes him proud to be different, to be "black". The power of language is that it can speak something into being. A stanza from one of his poems written at this time, entitled "The Chosen", says:

Some people it seems  
Have to carry their crosses  
For the rest of their lives.  
Others think they can  
Get away with it  
Simply by throwing theirs  
Into ballot boxes.<sup>28</sup>

In the poem van Wyk speaks of how easily the apartheid regime is getting away with racism, while non-white people will struggle with their identity, having to bear the burden of their racial categories forever. The carrying of the cross is an allusion to Christ carrying his cross as a burden "for the rest of their lives". This lifelong cross or burden is similar to the apartheid racial categorisations that people were forced to carry with them. He plays with the word

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<sup>27</sup> Strauss, 'Confused about Being Coloured: Creolisation and Coloured Identity in Chris van Wyk's *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*', p. 36.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 228.

“cross”, which is also significant because non-whites were not allowed to vote then. Through poetry he is first able to express his intolerance of apartheid. Van Wyk feels alienated: he actually does not identify with coloured people or the ones he is meant to look up to.

During this period a general rejection of the term coloured, which was shaped by both ANC non-racialism and Black Consciousness, resulted in coloureds being referred to as “so called coloureds”. Because of their discomfort with the term, the quotation marks were seen as necessary.<sup>29</sup> Quotation marks were added to show the irony or inappropriateness of the term, in light of its vagueness in describing an unidentifiable group of people. Coloured people felt marginalised: the meaning of coloured was (and still is) ambiguous. In 1980 van Wyk became the editor of *Staffrider*, the Black Consciousness inspired South African literary journal first published in 1978. It was a platform for Black Consciousness writers to voice resistance to white dominance.<sup>30</sup> The movement helped van Wyk and other coloured South Africans to identify under the heading of “blackness” and join the resistance to apartheid. Van Wyk later became a political activist and in the 1980s fought for freedom in the United Democratic Front, a movement that helped to unban the ANC.<sup>31</sup> However, contestations arose within the ANC about who is black and what it means to be black or, indeed, what it means to be African.<sup>32</sup> This left coloured activists once again questioning their identity and place in society when they thought they may have found a place after losing their “colourness” and uniting as the black oppressed and fighting for freedom. They were now left questioning their identity once again.

Van Wyk makes subjective shifts in terms of his identity construction through the course of the two memoirs, often questioning his identity. Identities are made, not discovered; they have to be culturally and politically constructed through political antagonisms and cultural struggle, given meaning in particular social contexts.<sup>33</sup> The forces that shape van Wyk’s racial and cultural identity shift in accordance with the national struggle and political change throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s. In the memoirs, these shifts are seen in different ways. Van Wyk’s

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<sup>29</sup> Erasmus and Pieterse ‘Conceptualising Coloured Identities in the Western Cape Province of South Africa’, p. 170.

<sup>30</sup> Mphutlane wa Bofelo, ‘The Influences and Representations of Biko and Black Consciousness in Poetry in Apartheid and Post-apartheid South Africa/ Azania’, in Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander and Nigel Gibson (eds), *Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 193.

<sup>31</sup> Chris van Wyk, interview conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 12 July 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Erasmus and Pieterse ‘Conceptualising Coloured Identities in the Western Cape Province of South Africa’, p. 170.

<sup>33</sup> Mercer Kobena, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 292.

shifting perceptions of race, politics and identity are highlighted by his changing attitudes towards black people when he becomes politically active and aware. Van Wyk's involvement in the Black Consciousness Movement helps him to redefine his identity. "Blackness" is something he can identify with, as opposed to the discredited categories "coloured", "so-called-coloured" or "non-white". In explaining Black Consciousness in an interview with me, van Wyk offered this insight:

A cat is a cat. A dog is a dog. A dog will never be a non-cat. White people are white. Black people are black. Why then, did the apartheid government refer to us as non-whites? It's because of Biko that we decided we would rather be black. We were black. Not nonentities.<sup>34</sup>

Black Consciousness took the leading political role in the resistance against apartheid during the 1960s and 1970s. Steve Biko developed the idea. He was a non-violent anti-apartheid activist. His mission was to raise the consciousness of black people in South Africa through lectures and community activities. He was not afraid to voice his opinions about the apartheid system or of the consequences of having those opinions as a black man. Apartheid called for extreme political action. Biko encouraged and emphasized the emancipation and liberation of black people. He believed that society should be equal and composed of "just people". According to his notions, being black is not a matter of skin colour but a mental attitude. If you describe yourself as black you have started your road towards emancipation. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of August 1977, Biko was arrested and held in prison for twenty-four days where he was interrogated, starved, and viciously beaten. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of September 1977, he became the forty-first person in South Africa to die while being held in the custody of the South African Police. The South African government claimed innocence in his murder, saying that Steve Biko had died from a hunger strike. Yet, the official autopsy concluded that his death was due to a brain lesion caused by the "application of force to the head".<sup>35</sup> Van Wyk and a number of "non-white" South Africans joined the Black Consciousness Movement in the fight against oppression. Van Wyk was able to answer some of the questions that were asked by the young

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<sup>34</sup> Van Wyk, interview conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 12 July 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Steve Biko, 'Biographical Summary', in *I Write What I Like* (London: The Bowerdean Press, 1978), p. 1.

Chris thanks to Biko's ideas. One of the main contributing factors in his identity formation is the fact that he grew up with Steve Biko, who came into his life in the 1970s through his writings and untimely death. Biko and his movement helped van Wyk realise: "I am a person too. I am not invisible. I am here."<sup>36</sup>

The development of a black culture and black literature was one of the main elements of the Black Consciousness Movement. Political and revolutionary messages were spread through poetry and short stories. The Black Consciousness oriented *Staffrider* magazine was the leading forum for their publications.<sup>37</sup> Inspired by Black Consciousness teachings, literature and poetry portrayed the reality of the underprivileged and marginalised. Black Consciousness oriented writers exposed the apartheid regime's attempts to justify racial discrimination and segregation on the grounds that black people were unable to govern themselves and needed to be under the tutelage of whites.<sup>38</sup> Together with the 1976 generation of poets, the Black Consciousness poets are often referred to as protest poets. Van Wyk was one of these poets. He and others like him used words to describe the conditions of oppression, to expose their oppressors' insensitive actions and brutal treatment of them, as well as to imagine the victory of liberation. Through words, they retaliated to violence with counter-violence.<sup>39</sup> While factions of the movement against apartheid took up arms, the Black Consciousness poets fought against their oppressors through their poems and words. This is best expressed in an excerpt from one of van Wyk's poems cited in *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* – the poem titled "My Mother", which reads:

My mother is a boesman meid  
A kaffir girl  
A coolie auntie  
Who wears beads of sweat around her neck  
And chains around her ankles

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<sup>36</sup> Chris van Wyk, 'Introduction', in Chris van Wyk (ed.), *We Write What We Like: Celebrating Steve Biko* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2007), p. xii.

<sup>37</sup> Mphutlane wa Bofelo, 'The Influences and Representations of Biko and Black Consciousness in Poetry in Apartheid and Postapartheid South Africa/Azania', p. 193.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

But defrocked of her dignity she  
Has broken free of the heirlooms of oppression  
And dresses in the fatigues of those  
Grown tired of serving evil gods

Now my mother is dressed to kill.<sup>40</sup>

In this poem van Wyk describes his mother as coloured (“boesman meid”), black (“kaffir girl”) and Indian (“coolie auntie”): she is all the derogatory terms the apartheid regime has for non-white women. Stripping her of her dignity has only made her stronger and willing to fight against oppression. The use of the word “fatigues” emphasises just how exhausted (fatigued) she has become from living under these oppressive conditions, as well as being dressed for war, in military fatigues. His use of a metaphor in explaining the perspiration on her neck illustrates how hard she is made to work at a job where she can be exploited by the regime because she is non-white. Describing the beads she wears around her neck as beads of sweat shows her poverty. The chains around her ankles are another allusion to jewellery that she cannot afford. They are reminiscent of the chains slaves were forced to wear. Van Wyk directly likens the apartheid system to one that enslaves non-whites. Now his mother is “dressed to kill”, to join the resistance to apartheid. She is prepared to either kill or be killed for what she believes in. The poem is written in free verse, with no rhyme scheme and few punctuation marks. The rhythm is fast paced: this relates to the message of the poem. Suffering is overcome if you endure and resist it at the same time. In due course it can be triumphed over.

Through poetry, van Wyk fought in the cultural revolution against apartheid. He contributed to the black writing which would become instrumental in social change within South Africa. Mbulelo Mzamane considers Chris van Wyk, Fhazel Johannesburg and Ingoapele Madingoane as “the most celebrated, prolific and representative” poets of the new writers’ movement.<sup>41</sup> This movement was made up of black artists, writers and poets. Book clubs, youth associations, poetry readings and word of mouth became ways for the movement to spread their reach. In his

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<sup>40</sup> Van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 290.

<sup>41</sup> Mbulelo, V. Mzamane, ‘New Poets of the Soweto Era: Van Wyk, Johannesburg and Madingoane’, *Research in African Literatures*, (1988), p. 4.

description of short story authors then and now, Chris van Wyk explains that “many black writers began by using their writing as a means to an end; as part of the fight to win freedom, aligning themselves to a specific political ideology”:<sup>42</sup> Black Consciousness in the 1970s and the United Democratic Front or the African National Congress in the 1980s. By contrast, he says that writers today are no longer concerned with the struggle against oppression, their political allegiances are no longer prevalent.<sup>43</sup>

In describing van Wyk’s early writing, Mzamane articulates: “van Wyk is a typical coloured youth of the new generation. He talks the language of Black Consciousness with overtones of negritude. He writes in the tradition of Mongane Serote, Siphso Sepamla and Mafika Gwala”.<sup>44</sup> Mzamane emphasizes van Wyk’s allegiance to the Black Consciousness Movement and notes that, though classified as coloured, he “identifies with Africans and is free of the identity crisis that plagues some older coloured authors. Black Consciousness enabled him to resolve his identity crisis”.<sup>45</sup> As a poet from the Black Consciousness era, in the 1970s van Wyk started to construct his identity with the confidence and consciousness that he was not a non-entity. Since whites never referred to themselves as non-black, he too refused to refer to himself as a non-white. Through his freedom in writing and identification with his fellow like-minded black writers he became an activist and fought for democracy. He started out as a Soweto poet and aligned himself with the Black Consciousness ideology, one whose proclamations was the development of black culture through black literature. These poets and writers therefore saw themselves as spokespersons for all oppressed blacks in the country.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout his memoirs van Wyk recalls his bitterness toward the apartheid system and the discrimination against people racialised as coloured, Indians, blacks and Africans. He shows how racism impacted his life and the lives of coloured people in South Africa, particularly in Riverlea, and how he fought against it. Social constructions of identity have real consequences; one consequence of the construction of coloured identity under apartheid was that people often

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<sup>42</sup> Chris van Wyk, ‘Introduction’, in Chris van Wyk and Vagn Plenge (eds), *Post-traumatic: New South African Short Stories* (Joubert Park: Botsotso Publishing, 2004), p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Mzamane, ‘New Poets of the Soweto Era: Van Wyk, Johannesburg and Madingoane’, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

felt that they had to justify their existence – and they often still do even in post-apartheid South Africa. In South Africa, race has for so long been a part of everything, every day; it is difficult not to see a racial motive or agenda behind just about everything in society, even in the present day. When an issue regarding race comes up, you feel obligated to speak on the behalf of your “race”. When race is raised in any context, accusations of playing a supposed race card are made and people are criticized for making “everything about race”.

As a coloured woman, I often question my own identity, sometimes to the point of insecurity. My experience differs from that of my parents and grandparents. Nadine Dolby argues that youth cannot solely look at the past or to remnants of apartheid to develop and define their identities.<sup>46</sup> This might well be true, but dealing with race after apartheid is not simply a matter of discarding already formed racial positions; we have to embrace and renegotiate them in a new context. The significance of race and identity formation is constantly changing. It is about belonging. It is about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others.<sup>47</sup> Race holds enormous power in South Africa today and continues to act as a form of identification. In investigating the construction of the coloured identity I cannot help thinking that the term may very well be a way of defining a people who cannot be defined. We cannot keep harping on racial difference because in and of itself it doesn't mean a thing; what really separates us lies somewhere else, perhaps in culture and language. Or perhaps in class, and in the different levels of wealth. Race is simply a category, a label. Therefore the extent to which coloured identity can be explored remains uncertain, as ambiguous as the term “so called coloured” was in the 1980s. And this is why Chris van Wyk's memoirs deserve attention. They contain some of the answers: by writing about himself, his family, his friends, his neighbourhood, his culture, he is providing and sharing his unique perspective.

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<sup>46</sup> Nadine Dolby, *Constructing Race: Youth, Identity and Popular Culture in South Africa*, (New York: Suny Press, 2001), p. 118.

<sup>47</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, 'The Value of Difference' in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture and Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), p. 88.

## Chapter Two

### Identity, Politics and Performativity in *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*

This is my story. Not all of it, but a large chunk of it, anyway. And to tell you my own story I've had to tell you about my family, my friends, the people of Riverlea.<sup>48</sup>

#### Introduction

Chris van Wyk's first memoir, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, describes the life of the coloured community of Riverlea, Johannesburg, under apartheid. The text can be seen as both a moral and a political allegory that highlights the ugly truth of apartheid's effects on coloured people. It is about the social construction of identity and also about the idea that one's identity evolves as one grows up and matures. It particularly focuses on the young Chris's identity and the shared identity of the people of Riverlea, as well as on coloured people's identity as a social category. As in the previous chapter, I describe coloured identity as performative and fluid: I understand the significance of social categories and identity formation as constantly changing. In particular, this chapter will focus on the theoretical angles that can be adopted to discuss identity and on the memoir's thematic concerns with secrets, eavesdropping, and the interconnectivity between space, politics and identity. I will relate these concerns to Judith Butler's critique of the expressive view of identity and her thoughts on gender performativity and the reality of identity. My key argument is that the reality of the coloured identity described by van Wyk was enforced by the apartheid state, and that van Wyk's first memoir chronicles his coming to terms and confrontation with this enforced identity. As he became politically aware and critical of the apartheid state, the young Chris was left with the task of choosing which identities to adopt and perform and which to develop for himself as he constructs his own identity.

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<sup>48</sup> Van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 309.

**Writing the Memoir: “Will my teacher first show me how to write before she asks me to write something?”<sup>49</sup>**

With his memoir *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, van Wyk set out to write a story about his own life growing up in the close-knit community of Riverlea, yet he also wrote about apartheid's effects on coloured people, focusing on a community whose members still question who they are and where they stand in contemporary South Africa. He narrates his family's and friends' uncertain identity all the while expressing his understanding of and eventual opposition to the apartheid regime. Van Wyk thus assumes the role of story collector in his community, since to tell his own story he has to tell the stories of the people of Riverlea, of his family and his friends. He relies on humour and irony to illustrate the contrast between his seemingly happy childhood and the actual circumstances of coloured people during apartheid. Raj Singh ascribes laughing to feelings good. However he states that “we expect our literature to do something more than simply entertain us. The true purpose of literature is uplifting our spirits, shining a cold light on dark truths, giving audience to under-represented voices, or toppling the bourgeois hegemony. Humor can only help in accomplishing these goals”.<sup>50</sup> Van Wyk's use of humour makes light of the young Chris's reality through irony. Singh refers to irony as “the contrast between what the character thinks to be true and what we (the reader) know to be true. [...] Because we know something the character does not, we read to discover how the character will react when he or she learns the truth of the situation”.<sup>51</sup> The reader knows more than the young Chris did and follows his quest to uncover the secrets kept from him about apartheid and its effects on his identity. This is Singh's specific application of the concept of irony, he invokes “dramatic irony” which is enlisted in fiction and drama and accords with the performative approach.

In terms of narrative genres, Van Wyk's memoir can be described as a “life narrative”. This is an umbrella term that encompasses the extensive group of personal storytelling that uses first-hand history as its starting point.<sup>52</sup> Readers of these stories are exposed to other people's histories, lives and experiences.<sup>53</sup> Life narratives are based on memory: memories that are temporally

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>50</sup> Raj Kishkor Singh, ‘Humour, Irony and Satire in Literature’, *International Journal of English and Literature*, 3 (2012), p. 67.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>52</sup> Kay Schafer and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 8.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

situated as an event in a specific point in an individual's past.<sup>54</sup> Narratives of personal remembering thus become sites for knowing the past in the present: they present subjective views of the past and memories that lend themselves to equally subjective interpretations. Also, the recollection of an event may differ as years go by. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain how autobiographical style might be an experimentation. Artists turn their daily life into material for performance and a narrative of lived experience.<sup>55</sup> Authors express themselves through self-disclosure, self-presentation and first-hand history by disclosing their personal memories through their narratives. Since the Stone Age, with life stories depicted on cave walls, until this very day, human beings have shared stories derived from autobiographical memory with one another. These stories are based on the notion that a unique and important characteristic of all humans is the capacity for and practice of telling stories. The stories serve as a vehicle for self-expression and definition.<sup>56</sup> Life narratives and autobiographical memories allow authors to express themselves and (re)construct their identity in the eyes of readers or observers. In a life narrative, there is no single self but many selves displayed on several occasions.<sup>57</sup>

In *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* the young Chris explores his many selves throughout the text as his character develops and gains insight into what is occurring in the world around him. The stories and anecdotes van Wyk chose for his text originated from the autobiographical memory of his childhood. When van Wyk wrote the story he thought it was his own, but he soon realised it was about other people as well. In his own words:

I think it [*Shirley, Goodness and Marcy*] comes out of a time when great peoples' lives were being told and people had the notion, ordinary people had the notion that only if you had achieved something really amazing, only if you had conquered something or you had done something monumental could your story be told and then they saw that there was an ordinary boy whose story was being told and this was me as well as them, you know? Ordinary lives could also be celebrated.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>55</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, 'The Rumpled Bed of Autobiography: Extravagant Lives, Extravagant Questions', *Biographical Research Centre*, 24 (2001), p. 10.

<sup>56</sup> Katherine, Nelson, 'Self and Social Functions: Individual Autobiographical Memory and Collective Narrative', *Memory*, 11 (2003), p. 125.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>58</sup> Chris van Wyk, interview conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 4 December 2013.

The narrative style of the memoir is apparently simple. Van Wyk uses the first-person narrative: the protagonist is the young author himself. It is an autobiographical text, narrated from the young Chris's perspective. This narrative technique draws the reader into the story with ease: it keeps the reader close to the action at all times and privy to all the secrets and inner thoughts and struggles of the protagonist. Van Wyk transports the reader to Riverlea during apartheid South Africa, beginning with his early memories of the 1960s up until his late 30s in 1995, a year after the first democratic elections. The characters in the memoir are members of his family and his childhood friends from school and around the neighbourhood. They have a relaxed interaction, a familiarity. The register of the speech of most of the other characters is informal, colloquial, typically coloured slang which for the most part Chris chooses not to use; this choice shapes his attitudes.

The protagonist transforms throughout the text. The young Chris is first introduced as a naïve but curious five year old child who knows nothing about the world around him or about apartheid. As he matures and his curiosity about the world around him grows, so too does his character. The young Chris is dissatisfied with the answers he receives to his questions about the place of coloured people in apartheid South Africa. He starts reading and learning for himself and picking up pieces of information to form his own ideas. When he gets older and becomes politically aware his attitudes change. He starts writing poetry underpinned by the Black Consciousness philosophy. The end of the story, the achievement of freedom, is in his hands, because it is something he sees and believes all along, throughout his political activism and participation in the fight for democracy. In one of the last stories in his memoir, van Wyk recalls a "miracle": "on 27 April 1994 it happens for over forty million South Africans".<sup>59</sup> Throughout his memoir, van Wyk's sense of identity evolves as his character develops, but he always questions the place of South African coloured people in the society set up by apartheid.

Throughout the narrative van Wyk foregrounds the distinction between himself and the character of young Chris. This is revealed by the memoir's language, which is often childish. While the text is narrated from the perspective of a young and naïve Chris, it is written by van Wyk, the

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<sup>59</sup> Van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 15.

author, who has the benefit of maturity, critical distance and life experience. Van Wyk is able to write about his thoughts and feelings and since he himself is the main character he is able to explain his and the young Chris's development over the years through the various stories he narrates. The author tells the reader about learning to write on his first day at school as a small boy. His mother asks him what it is that he has written and he replies, "Aw isn't it obvious? Chris van Wyk."<sup>60</sup> When his grandmother gives him a book that once belonged to his grandfather, he describes his feelings and tells the reader how "I giggle nervously as I sit there with bare feet and my shorts full of street stains".<sup>61</sup> It is easy to imagine a small boy who had just been playing outside. Van Wyk gives the reader regular updates of the young Chris's age or progress in school to make it easy to put the stories, anecdotes and memories into context by saying things like "When I'm in Standard 1",<sup>62</sup> "I've had eleven birthdays and just as many Christmases",<sup>63</sup> or "I'm twenty years old".<sup>64</sup> His thought processes are much like those of a child who would describe his age in the number of Christmases he has experienced. As the character ages, van Wyk as narrator matures as well. The young Chris's interactions with the other characters as well as his surroundings are also seen to evolve.

**Space, Politics and Identity: "The first thing you see when you hit Riverlea is a mine dump that heaves hundreds of metres into the sky like a giant breast. Huddled around this breast are rows and rows of tiny square houses"**<sup>65</sup>

It is with the idea of celebrating the ordinary lives around him when he was growing up that Chris van Wyk set out to tell his story. The story is set in Riverlea and it is van Wyk's perspective of Riverlea, of coloured people and apartheid. It is shaped by his relation with the urban environment of Johannesburg, which in turn speaks to the set of social relations that constitute the apartheid and post-apartheid city. The backdrop is instrumental in defining the author's vision. The city, with its juxtapositions, is used to interpret and express reality. Sarah Nuttall highlights the importance of this backdrop as she describes the "literary city" of Johannesburg, specifically post-apartheid Johannesburg, as an entanglement of "éclat and

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

sombreness, light and dark, comprehension and bewilderment, polis and necropolis, desegregation and resegregation”.<sup>66</sup> Entanglement is a state of being twisted together, “an intimacy that is gained, whether resisted or ignored or uninvited. Entanglement works with difference and sameness”.<sup>67</sup> It is a term that Nuttall uses to describe “a relationship or set of social relationships that are complicated and tangled, but which also implies a human foldedness”.<sup>68</sup> The concept works in relation to the post-apartheid present and in relation to race. Entanglement can be used to analyse identities, histories and spaces. Entanglement helps us to work with the idea that the more racial boundaries were created and legislated, the more they were and continue to be questioned and redefined, opening up a space for finding resolutions for the wrongdoings of the past.

The identities that were discriminated against in the past needed to be acknowledged, and they required continuing recognition. This longing and need for constant recognition gave rise to movements of artists. During apartheid, black writers from Soweto and other areas in and around Johannesburg wrote stories and poetry that were fuelled by the political climate of the time. The city, Johannesburg, became their subject: since they were denied access to this city, their blackness was locked into an overarching binary with whiteness as a form of entanglement.<sup>69</sup> Nuttall’s argument is also relevant to literary representations of the apartheid city and its various entanglements because she highlights the city’s infrastructures, such as buildings, streets, suburbs and cafes, with all their intricate entanglements and how they shape the individuals and the characters in these representations.<sup>70</sup> In the case of *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, the reader is taken on a journey through the streets of van Wyk’s poor community: the streets are indeed less bustling than those of the inner city and are negotiated through language and the conversations between its inhabitants. During apartheid, Riverlea’s inhabitants were made to live in small, low quality housing, built very close together on streets “named after rivers that flow somewhere in the world”.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Sarah Nuttall, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-apartheid* (South Africa: Wits University Press, 2009), p. 33.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 10.

The young Chris grows up on Flinders Street, which like the other streets is not tarred – and won't be for another ten years. The adults complain: "if it were a white suburb, they say, it would have been tarred long ago. But we kids don't mind. It's perfect for football, spinning tops and skipping".<sup>72</sup> Chris not only finds happiness in the streets of Riverlea, he also goes on adventures in Johannesburg city centre. Some streets are described as being more notorious for criminal activity than the streets where the children play. Galana Street, for instance, the street after Flinders: "Between the corner house at the bottom of Galana and the football field is a patch of open veld hardly more than a hundred square metres. It's filled with tufts of grass and broken bottles", and on a early Saturday morning in the Summer of 1965 "with the bloodied body of Mr. Brown", Chris's Standard 1 Afrikaans schoolteacher.<sup>73</sup>

Growing up in a coloured community which was poor and oftentimes violent, where he was forced to conform to its borders and grappling with the cruelty of apartheid, sparked van Wyk's interest in activism. Van Wyk makes his disapproval of apartheid known and exposes its effects on coloured people throughout the text. When his family first moves to Riverlea, the young Chris is in awe of the older boys who climb the mine dump, especially in the evenings as it overlooks a drive-in cinema for whites only. The boys thus get a glimpse of the "prohibited world" of entertainment: "This is apartheid into its second decade, its second phase if you like, with Mandela, Sobukwe, Sisulu and others safely locked up, thousands in exile and white people smirking and prospering".<sup>74</sup> When asking what the Prime Minister Dr Verwoerd has done for coloured people he is told that they were given houses, to which he replies, "But my father says he gives white people better houses".<sup>75</sup> Chris feels confused about apartheid and his feelings toward white people:

I wish I wasn't so full of stupid things in my heart and my head. I'm scared of this, worried about that, embarrassed about most things, especially white people. Nobody actually tells me, but I'm beginning to understand that, according to the law, I am not as good as a white person. So when my granny talks to a white man in a bookshop, I check

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

him out from top to bottom to see what it is that makes him better than me. I listen to them carefully on the radio, taking note of what makes them laugh or sing out loud. When Ma and Dad talk about their bosses, I listen to what makes them angry, what irritates them. Then there are those Afrikaner police who raid the shebeens or come screeching into the township every time there's blood in the streets. They glare at us and call us bushmen.

I'm too wary of these people, this wonderful race of humans.<sup>76</sup>

The world of apartheid is here seen through the naïve and inquisitive eyes of the young Chris, who brings to light the harsh realities of the time by describing them as something that he does not fully understand. He is actually embarrassed about white people and apartheid as an ideology because they are so unreasonable in their treatment of non-white people. The system makes him feel inferior, which was indeed the point of apartheid, and this makes him wary and cynical.

Nuttall is interested in the now. She draws on the relationship between space and narrative and how space shapes experience. Nuttall is interested in pursuing the entanglements that occur precisely within contexts of racial segregation and its aftermath,<sup>77</sup> linking space (the literary city) to experience (apartheid and post-apartheid Johannesburg). She links space to experience in relation to the notion of entanglement: the entanglements that can be seen in the relationships between people “who, most of the time, define themselves as different”.<sup>78</sup> The city and its infrastructure are used as the subject and drawn into being: since the city can be seen as a narrative structure, it can be connected to the concept of identity. Van Wyk interprets his reality through reading and writing poetry and takes himself out of his “literary city”, Riverlea, by questioning the apartheid regime and becoming involved in activism.

When he wrote *Shirley Goodness and Mercy* he felt that coloured people counted for something, that “we lived a life”.<sup>79</sup> This feeling of “counting for something” is in reaction to how during

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>77</sup> Nuttall, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-apartheid*, p. 31.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Van Wyk, interview conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 4 December 2013.

apartheid van Wyk and coloured people like him were made to feel that they were defined by apartheid parameters and had their identity imposed upon them. It is against this background that during the apartheid years van Wyk developed the traits that made him a man in his own right: namely, his love for books and his constant questioning of his circumstances. A worthy analogy of the text, of the protagonist and of his questions about his race can be extrapolated from one passage that recounts the young Chris's love for reading and books. His Ouma Ruby takes him for the first time to a second-hand bookstore:

A second-hand bookshop must be the best place to visit anywhere in the world and the second-hand book is surely not a hand-me-down but a new creation in its own right. The books that line the shelves are old, slightly worn but proud to present themselves to another potential owner. They have grown in stature: from having started out with only one story, they now have two tales within their covers. They have the original story that you will read from cover to cover, written by a famous or favourite author. But they also have the other story, the one about their previous owner. This story is a mystery, never to be revealed to you, except in the merest of hints – if you're lucky.

Maybe it will be in the form of a dedication on the title page. It could say something like this: For Joshua. Take this on your journey together with our love. Auntie Ruth and Uncle David – August 1958.<sup>80</sup>

The second-hand book could be seen as Chris himself, a coloured person, a human being too, who deserves a place in society, “surely not a hand-me-down but a new creation in its own right”. This could be seen as the right to construct or perform one's identity (the second-hand book, a new creation) and reject the imposed identity fashioned by apartheid (the original, new book). The bookshop keeping the books lining the shelves is South Africa, with its majority of non-white people, confined to designated areas by apartheid, who are “slightly worn but proud”. When Chris grows up he too has many stories to tell. Books are the symbols and embodiments of stories and narratives. He not only expresses his love for reading and books by giving them human attributes, but the reader is also able to liken these attributes to the protagonist. This

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<sup>80</sup> Van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 68.

bookshop is located in the city, which can be seen as the space Nuttall uses to inform her idea that space shapes experience. The very books inside the bookshop can be seen as South African society. Chris, a little boy from Riverlea, who feels out of place in the city can be seen as one of the city's juxtapositions. Using the city and more importantly Riverlea as a backdrop, van Wyk is able to highlight the juxtapositions of his happy childhood and the harsh real world of apartheid South Africa.

**Racial Identity: “But how will they know I’m not white? I’ve got a white surname”<sup>81</sup>**

In discussing identity, Judith Butler can be looked to for her insights on gender. Butler has had a notable impact on contemporary cultural theory. She is one of the most widely read and discussed theorists of power, gender, sexuality and identity, and has been responsible for creating new concepts, both in the disciplinary areas she directly participates in and in a range of other disciplines.<sup>82</sup> Among these concepts is her theory of performativity. Butler proposes that identity is performative, suggesting that it is fluid and shifts and changes at different times and in different contexts. She moves away from gender in biological terms and criticises the expressive view of identity. She writes that we perform our identities constantly, in ways that enact, accept, decline and repeat the standards that decide our place in society. As a public action and performative act, gender – one of many identities – is not a completely free choice, but neither is it simply imposed upon the individual. Butler describes the body as an actor on stage, with roles pre-existing and rehearsed: just as a script may be “enacted in various ways and just as the play requires both text and interpretation”.<sup>83</sup> Butler uses the example of the theatre but says that it differs from the performance of embodied identities because it is detached from reality. She makes the distinction between the limitations of an actor on stage and the same individual performing the same role in a public space. In the latter there are different restrictions and possibilities, and there are pre-existing categories that regulate the performance. Identity can be seen as a performance: culture is socially constructed, and identities are performed and changed in accordance to specific social and cultural contexts, whose norms they follow, negotiate or transgress.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>82</sup> Jessica Cadwallader, ‘How Judith Butler Matters’, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 24 (2009), p. 289.

<sup>83</sup> Judith, Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’, *Theatre Journal*, 40 (1988), p. 526.

Looking at van Wyk's first memoir from this theoretical perspective, identity can also be said to be performative in it. Language changes according to context: for instance, when coloured people feel that they are in the presence of an individual deemed superior in the societal racial hierarchy they change their voice, accent and tone so as to sound more polite, articulate, submissive even. However, when they are in the presence of people from a similar or the same background, such as other coloured people or black people, a different performance of identity can be seen to take place, as with young people using slang to speak to each other, which they would not use to address white people. For instance, the young Chris and his brother Derek imitate their father and his friends using their workmen and township language which mixes slang and Afrikaans:

“Aw, bra D, so how’ the graft, *ek sé?*” (Hey, brother D, how’s work?), to which he replies: “Ah, bra C, *kak maar oraait*” (Ah, brother C, shit but not too bad.) “You reckon?” (You don’t say?), to which he’d usually respond with a familiar complaint: “Ja man. That *larney sug* to pay man.” (Yes, man, my white boss is stingy and doesn’t pay well).<sup>84</sup>

In another passage, the young Chris’s cousin tells a story about another boy named Chris: “I tell them nay, not ou Chris” (I tell them no, not that Chris).<sup>85</sup> And in yet another story, Chris’s Ouma Ruby is talking about a dress that fits her well: “Size *pas*” (A perfect fit).<sup>86</sup> Slang words are often used by the young Chris and his friends. During the school holidays they spent all day together, and somebody was bound to say: “Don’t talk *kak*, sonny” (Don’t talk rubbish, boy).<sup>87</sup> A greeting to someone named Vickie would be “*Heita Vickie*” (Hi Vickie),<sup>88</sup> and another one would be “*Hoedit my laaitie?*” (Howzit kid or youngster).<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 120.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

While these examples are specific to the text, the performative aspects of identity construction under the apartheid regime spanned across all aspects of people's lives: people who had their identity imposed on them through racial categorisation were constantly performing, deciding whether to conform, rebel or something in-between. In terms of Butler's view of identity as a performative act, it requires a performance which is repeated: it is a "performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief".<sup>90</sup> This means that identity is real only to the extent that it is performed. In other words, Butler questions the idea that the performance is expressive of a core identity. Zimitri Erasmus and Edgar Pieterse, who write about the construction of coloured identities in the Western Cape Province, agree that identity is in no way stable: "all identities are constructed and given meaning in particular social contexts. It is important to see the content of this meaning in its historical, socio-political, cultural and spatial contexts. This meaning is always contested hence unstable".<sup>91</sup> They argue that an inclusive democratic society cannot be built, as they put it, on the normalized notion of "*simunye*" (oneness – which was a slogan used by the South African Broadcasting Corporation, SABC, Channel 1, post 1994). Instead our attention should be turned to the ways in which South Africans "from diverse experiences (gendered, racialized, class, cultural, sexual orientation) interpret and appropriate the meaning of a new South African identity in making sense of their lived experiences".<sup>92</sup> They go further and explain the notion that "we are all one nation"<sup>93</sup> is premised on highly unequal power relations systematically shaped over centuries. A nation constructed through this framework is extremely precarious and unstable.<sup>94</sup>

Identity's instability can be seen in many instances in van Wyk's text: in the young Chris himself and in the other characters. The characters are indeed constantly performing and their identity is socially and politically constructed. For instance, Chris's friend Allan's personality and identity shift when he sees that the van Wyk family treats their helper Agnes as an equal. Allan queries the young Chris about this. He finds it disturbing: "because when Allan talks to me, I know when it's Allan. But there are times when he talks to me when I can hear his mother and father

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<sup>90</sup> Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', p. 520.

<sup>91</sup> Erasmus and Pieterse 'Conceptualising Coloured Identities in the Western Cape Province of South Africa', p. 180.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

speaking with his tongue”.<sup>95</sup> Allan’s family does not even allow their helper to eat from the same crockery or use the same cutlery as they do. A perceived identity will also trigger a particular behaviour such as when volunteer tutors from the University of Witwatersrand offer extra lessons at the young Chris’s school, free of charge. The young Chris is embarrassed of his living conditions and would rather struggle with maths: “there’s no way I’m going to let a pretty white lady from a *larney* suburb, used to a lifestyle of two-ply Kleenex, come and use our loo”.<sup>96</sup> His friend Keith on the other hand accepts the help, even though his home situation is, according to the young Chris, “basically the same as mine.”<sup>97</sup> Keith’s tutor is blonde and pretty and drives a “Volksie”. He tells the young Chris that when his “mother made biscuits and [he] gave her some in a saucer, on a tray”, his tutor asked “What’s with the silly tray? Am I the queen or something?”<sup>98</sup>

Watching others and, in turn, adopting behaviours or identities helps shape the young Chris’s personal sense of identity. If the personal is a category which expands to include wider political and social structures, then the formation of one’s identity is similarly expansive. In relation to apartheid South Africa, the extent to which an individual felt the need to adjust his/her identity according to changing social pressures depended on his/her location within the racial hierarchy. According Erasmus and Pieterse, the processes of identity formation are hardly clear cut. No identity is inherently progressive or reactionary. While they do draw a link between the term coloured and apartheid racial classification, Erasmus and Pieterse do not believe that this link entirely explains the construction of coloured identities. Any such explanation, they argue, “loses sight of the reality that as subjects we do not simply internalize what dominant ideologies say about us. Instead, in our struggles against various forms of domination, including racism, we define and redefine our own sense of self”.<sup>99</sup> They agree that we assume different identities in particular contexts and that all “South Africans have multiple and often contradictory identities based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity among other factors”.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 88.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Erasmus and Pieterse ‘Conceptualising Coloured Identities in the Western Cape Province of South Africa’, p. 179.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

In her essay “Confused about Being Coloured: Creolisation and Coloured Identity in Chris van Wyk’s *Shirley Goodness and Mercy*”, Helene Strauss uses a scene from van Wyk’s memoir to illustrate performativity. In this particular scene, which I already mentioned in my Introduction, Chris’s Ouma “puts on her musical voice” when she addresses a white shopkeeper and the young Chris mimics her: “My Ouma puts on her musical voice, reserved for white people and Coloureds who come to her door with pens and paper in their hands. It has a lilt in it and is, without being rude to my Ouma, not unlike the bell we have just heard”.<sup>101</sup> When they leave, the young boy takes his cue from his grandmother and “sings” his greeting to the white man: “I usually just say goodbye to people but now I also say good afternoon because it sounds posh”.<sup>102</sup> According to Strauss, “the subjective alterations that they make for the benefit of the white man draw attention to identity as performance and to the extent to which South Africa’s racial hierarchies require subjective shifts relative to the power dynamics at play in the intercultural encounter”.<sup>103</sup>

Strauss also discusses whether the concept of creolisation helps to clarify South African coloured identity formation, or if it reinforces apartheid era essentialisms. Strauss considers the critical significance of creolisation in relation to post-apartheid literary articulations of colouredness.<sup>104</sup> She contextualises the term and the social meanings that are assigned to people’s bodies as a result of assumptions about race in the South African context to “address processes of cultural exchange that have taken place under the circumstances specific to slavery, colonisation and globalisation”.<sup>105</sup> The term “creolisation” is used here to articulate the uncertainties about identity that still linger after democracy. Strauss goes on to say that “the transition from apartheid to democracy has created an opportunity for people to articulate a range of hitherto suppressed identity narratives”. However, although this can be seen as offering “exciting possibilities for all South Africans to find more equitable and ethical ways in which to stage their identities to one another, many are uncertain about the extent to which inherited performances of identity require revision”.<sup>106</sup> Strauss suggests that creolised identities are performative: her essay

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<sup>101</sup> Van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 68.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>103</sup> Strauss, ‘Confused about Being Coloured: Creolisation and Coloured Identity in Chris van Wyk’s *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*’, p. 35.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

is interested in the question of cultural creolisation, in how people who are labelled as coloured, for instance, either self-identify, accommodate or resist the label. The apartheid regime imposed an identity on the coloured people of South Africa, and the responses were multiple: self-identifying, accommodating or resisting. Strauss highlights that “identity alterations that people have to make in moments of inter-cultural contact, and the physiological divisions that people have to negotiate in contexts of conflict and domination, are necessarily staged against the backdrop of larger political and social developments”.<sup>107</sup>

Strauss uses creolisation to express the confusion surrounding coloured identities in the South African context: as inherited performances of identity complicate identity construction and fuel insecurities about cultural belonging, it is necessary to adopt sometimes conflicting identities. When Chris, now an adult, meets his old school teacher who tormented him, he thinks: “I have nothing to say to him, he is still distant, aloof, like the white person I think he wishes he was”.<sup>108</sup> Chris perceives this as his teacher’s insecurities about his identity as a coloured man. He was a teacher who was meant to lead the new generation in a new way of thinking, of living. Yet he only scarred the young Chris and his classmates through his treatment of his students. In a way he dominated over them just like the apartheid government.

While writing Black Consciousness poetry and as an anti-apartheid activist, an older Chris is frequently arrested and questioned by the police. On these occasions he has to deny who he really is for fear of detainment. He has to avoid the truth about his identity for fear of being called a Communist, “which I know the regime hates more than any other kind of person. Besides, the Communist Party was banned sometime in the fifties and all Communists go straight to jail”.<sup>109</sup> Van Wyk thus adopts an identity that conflicts with his own, contradicting all that he stands for so that by answering the detectives’ questions he will keep himself out of trouble.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 206.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 247.

### **Secrets: “But of all this I know nothing”<sup>110</sup>**

Secrets are uncovered, told and kept by the young Chris and by various other characters. He uncovers the secret of apartheid as he gets older and learns to understand politics and why democracy will one day be inevitable in South Africa. Throughout the narrative van Wyk eavesdrops on people’s conversations. According to Strauss, this is a metaphor for the process whereby his racial and cultural identity can be constructed through little pieces of information and stories from the radio or things he learns at school or talking to friends and family. The bits of information gathered, the stories heard on the radio and the things learned at school are all retold from his own cultural and social perspective.<sup>111</sup> For the young Chris, eavesdropping functions as the only way to decode his political positioning in South Africa.<sup>112</sup> It helps him understand the reasons behind the performance of racial identities. This is because people around him are very secretive about the realities of apartheid. The young Chris eventually becomes accustomed to help from the Wits students in various forms, from tutors to student dentists. He is unaware of the political climate at this point, and sees the white students in Riverlea as help. It is only when he is in his last year in high school that he begins to see this in a different light. His older friends and mentors debate and say things like: “These whities should fuck off out of our township. To Hell with their help, they’re making us dependant on them. Can’t you see – the more they help you, the more they grow into supermen and women, the more useless you become. They should be working to change the whole society, not putting a plaster on the sick one”.<sup>113</sup> The young Chris sees them as playing a role in their lives for many years not only through trivial things like providing entertainment when he is very little, but providing his community with free dental care, an optometrist and legal aid. The students even build a crèche in Riverlea. He doesn’t say it but he would like to be a revolutionary like them one day: “maybe I’m too cowardly to say anything. So I keep quiet”.<sup>114</sup> He keeps this to himself for a while because he is not sure of how people will react. His secret desire is to be an activist, a revolutionary one day.

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>111</sup> Strauss, , ‘Confused about Being Coloured: Creolisation and Coloured Identity in Chris van Wyk’s *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*’, p. 32.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>113</sup> Van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 108.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

There are many secrets throughout the text. For instance, the young Chris discovers that his beloved books contain secrets. Second-hand books contain an original story, but they have another story about their previous owner: “this story is a mystery never to be revealed to you, except in the merest of hints – if you’re lucky”.<sup>115</sup> This secret or mystery is the dedication he would usually find handwritten as a note on the title page. He makes up a story of his own about the previous owner: “For Joshua. Take this on your journey together with our love. Auntie Ruth and Uncle David – August 1958. Who is Joshua you will ask. And if you’re a South African growing up in the sixties you might think that he must be a white boy to have gone on a long journey”.<sup>116</sup>

The young Chris does not hear many stories from his father or about his father’s past either: “he had no stories, and the ones I know have been secretly whispered to me over the years by my Ma”.<sup>117</sup> This form of secret sharing between the two of them is innocent. Secrets, secret sharing and the uncovering of secrets become more dangerous as he gets older. An older Chris speaks about his friends, one in particular, William, whom he met through William’s mother, Ma Vesta, who came from a proud and “secret tradition of anti-apartheid struggle”.<sup>118</sup> Ma Vesta fought in the struggle for freedom and never gave up hope for liberation. Keeping the secret of his own as well as this friend’s involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle weighed heavier than his earlier childhood secrets.

In an interview, Van Wyk has offered this insight into his thought processes:

if you’re writing in a little corner in your house somewhere at a study table, at a computer, and nobody is around, it feels like you’re telling a secret because it doesn’t feel like anybody’s gonna know about it. And even though I knew or I suspected that the book might be published sometime in the future, I thought that if anybody reads it, a book is a kind of an intimate thing between reader and writer. The reader reads it without me being around. ...But they’ve read some of my secrets.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 285.

<sup>119</sup> Van Wyk, interview conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 4 December 2013.

The importance of keeping secrets is learned early and relevant to any type of social situation.<sup>120</sup> Beryl Bellman explains that virtually any kind of information can be turned into a secret. What is important is the interpretation of reality that accompanies that knowledge.<sup>121</sup> There are different kinds of secrets. Secrets concern information that one has rights to, but chooses, is told, or is obligated to withhold. Once revealed, the information is open to interpretation: as in the case of the young Chris, who solves the secrets withheld from him by the adults in his life as well as by the apartheid regime in order to solve his questions about his identity and place in society. As a young boy, there are two things that are never spoken about in his home: “sex and where babies come from, and why white people and Coloured people and African people and Indian people live in different places. But slowly I read little bits here and hear a snatch there of both these subjects. And the pictures in my head are turning into one strange tapestry”.<sup>122</sup> Once he starts uncovering the truth through Black Consciousness, he starts speaking of Africa: “Not only had the apartheid government separated the various race groups, they had also sliced off South Africa from the rest of the continent”.<sup>123</sup> Because of apartheid, the young Chris’s education is shaped by censorship. His history books never mention names, concepts and events such as “Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Liberia, Ethiopia, the Ivory Coast, Mozambique, Zimbabwe. Nkrumah, Kenyatta, Samora Machel, Frelimo, MPLA, Black Power, Negritude.”<sup>124</sup> He feels that his teachers taught him nothing about Africa, “and I hated them for it”.<sup>125</sup>

The young Chris is interested in entering a competition organised by Chappies bubble gum. There are fifteen bicycles to be won and consolation hampers from Chappies as well. The entry form includes a section where the entrant has to guess the odd picture and also a section in which he/she must explain in ten words or less “why I like Chappies bubble gum”.<sup>126</sup> The boy is confident that he will win. However his father tells him: “You’ll never win. It’s for white children, these competitions”.<sup>127</sup> Even though the young Chris had not seen this in any of the

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<sup>120</sup> Beryl, Bellman, ‘The Paradox of Secrecy’, *Human Studies*, 4 (1981), p. 1.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>122</sup> Van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 106.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

rules, his father tells him that “it doesn’t matter whether they say it or not, everything’s for whites only”.<sup>128</sup> He enters the competition anyway and is reminded of a time when his father entered a competition too: he answered the question correctly and used his work postal address so as to confuse the sender – he did not want to provide his real address in Riverlea, knowing that a coloured person would not win. The young Chris does not win a bicycle, or a hamper, and his father didn’t win anything either – his father was right.

Information often exposes the secret without the secret keeper or anyone else divulging it. This suggests that people can know secrets even when the secret keeper is unaware that the secret has been leaked. John Caughlin, Allison Scott, Laura Miller and Veronica Hefner refer to these situations as putative secrets because from the perspective of the secret keeper, the information is supposedly a secret: unbeknownst to the secret keeper the information is actually known by another person, the putative secret perceiver.<sup>129</sup> Young Chris’s knowledge of information believed to be secret, through eavesdropping, makes him a constant putative secret perceiver. Van Wyk’s use of secrets throughout the narrative can be seen as metaphoric for the process of his identity construction; and not only his, but the uncertain coloured identity in general, since it seems to be somewhat undefinable. In his description of coloured people who inhabit Riverlea, the people (whether physically or culturally) are never identical to each other, never typical or average:

Coloureds come in all shades, from black as pitch to white as milk, and they go through life seeing each other in these little colour variations. Saying things like: He’s dark skinned but quite handsome. She hasn’t got straight hair but she’s quite pretty. Actually her hair isn’t that bad, it’s sort of on the straight side. They’re getting married, but he’s dark and she’s dark so imagine what their children are going to look like.<sup>130</sup>

Chris finds these comments and behaviours to be racist. Yet such differences are also noted by the young Chris himself: “Mr and Mrs Clark, they look like white people, very fair with light

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> John Caughlin, Allison Scott, Laura Miller and Veronica Hefner, ‘Putative Secrets: When Information Is Supposedly a Secret’, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 26.5 (2009), p. 714.

<sup>130</sup> Van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 237.

hair, and speak an Afrikaans that we've never heard spoken, even by our Afrikaans teachers – a kind of Afrikaans that has never been removed from the box it came in.”<sup>131</sup> When a resident of Riverlea is murdered and white policemen come to assess the scene, they get out of their police van and “glower at all of us as if we've all murdered Mr. Brown together. Actually it's probably just that we have spoiled their weekend, violent, wild, barbaric Bushmen that we are”.<sup>132</sup> To Chris, all coloured people are different. Yet to the apartheid police, in his mind, they all look the same: “violent, wild, barbaric Bushmen”.

In his early childhood secrets are kept from him about the realities of apartheid, about the secret lives of white people in their homes and in the places reserved for them only. As he grows up he learns about apartheid but keeps this knowledge a secret, as there are certain things his parents do not speak about. He learns that Nelson Mandela is a secret and becomes more curious about him and his banned political party. When he is an adult he starts writing poetry and acquires a creative way to keep secrets from the government but not from fellow writers and activists through his poetry and his alliance with the Black Consciousness Movement. For the young Chris trying to decode secrets is the only way of making sense of his reality and place in society. He tries as often as he can to talk to his father to satisfy his curiosity. Unfortunately, his father does not offer any insight into his own or the country's past. Not once does he hear his father say the word “‘Mandela’ out loud, or ‘ANC’, or ‘Defiance Campaign’ or ‘Robben Island’ or ‘Treason Trial’. It's as if he has passed through an entire history blindfolded and deaf”.<sup>133</sup> According to van Wyk, this behaviour is commonplace in coloured households: “a woman who read the book once said to me she didn't even know – a coloured woman who'd lived in Riverlea came to me and said – she didn't even know that apartheid existed.”<sup>134</sup> She was the same age as van Wyk, “but her family lived such a cloistered life”.<sup>135</sup>

When he is about ten years old, the Prime Minister, Dr. Verwoerd, is killed. His photo appears on the front page of *The Star*. The young Chris asks his father a series of probing questions about the deceased man's life and education. His father is very short with him, as if this information

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>134</sup> Van Wyk, interview conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 4 December 2013.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

were not his to know. When the boy queries if the death was sad, his answer is “Not for me.”<sup>136</sup> This answer surprises the young Chris and he questions it. To which his father simply answers: “because he’s an arsehole, an idiot.”<sup>137</sup> His father never gives him a further explanation as to why the Prime Minister was an idiot. The boy is left to figure it out. His only assumption is that he must have done something wrong or have deserved to be killed for his father to treat his death with such apathy. The young Chris is unaware of the realities of apartheid and by the time the regime is into its second decade, with Mandela and others serving their time on the island, “thousands in exile, and the white people smirking and prospering”, he says that of “all this I know nothing”.<sup>138</sup> Van Wyk blames most of his teachers who only taught what they were told to. Throughout the text, the young Chris uncovers the truth behind these secrets and some of them become the foundation for his political involvement.

Secrets are all around the young Chris. He has written his grandmother a letter for her to read aloud at her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday and discovers a secret when he tries to force her to read it after she gives him numerous excuses as to why she simply cannot at that moment but she would later. His mother ushers him away and tells him that she is illiterate. Reading starts to inform his decoding of secrets. The author makes a subtle connection between books and secrets, or later between words and secrets through poetry. Not only is Chris reading, but he is becoming more perceptive about what is going on in the world around him. He keeps this knowledge and understanding to himself because he learns early on that people do not like too many questions and that books give him better answers. From literature, he takes an interest in poetry and soon discovers the Black Consciousness Movement. The Black Consciousness Movement informs his identity and introduces him to “interracial identification”.<sup>139</sup> He becomes involved in politics but this only presents him with more reasons to keep secrets. He reads his first poem, which is titled “In Detention”, in public:

He fell from the ninth floor  
He hanged himself

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<sup>136</sup> Van Wyk, op. cit., p. 85.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>139</sup> Strauss, ‘Confused about Being Coloured: Creolisation and Coloured Identity in Chris van Wyk’s *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*’, p. 37.

He slipped on a piece of soap while washing  
He hanged himself  
He slipped on a piece of soap while washing  
He fell from the ninth floor  
He hanged himself while washing  
He slipped from the ninth floor  
He hung from the ninth floor  
He slipped on the ninth floor while washing  
He fell from a piece of soap while slipping  
He hung from the ninth floor  
He washed from the ninth floor  
He hung from a piece of soap while slipping<sup>140</sup>

The poem is first read at a poetry evening “at the United States Information Service in Commissioner Street, Johannesburg. The small auditorium is packed with poets, playwrights, painters and lovers of literature and the arts, as well as the disciples of Steve Biko, the father of black consciousness”.<sup>141</sup> The simple fact that “there are black and white people together means that we have already committed a South African sin. And there is still the poetry to come: anti-racist, black consciousness, anti-government, screams from the heart against all and everything the National Party worked hard and jailed and killed for”.<sup>142</sup> At that time congregating interracially was illegal – a sin, a secret. When Chris does eventually get arrested for his writing and his involvement with the movement, he manages to evade all the policeman’s questions, including when the cop asks him what he reckons would happen if the blacks took over. The one thing he knew for sure is that it would bring an immediate end to apartheid: “But”, he writes, “I shrugged.”<sup>143</sup>

Each secret can be seen as a text. Van Wyk examines its structure, decodes it and reveals the information to the reader. He then uses it to define and construct the situation. Bellman suggests

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<sup>140</sup> Quoted in van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 245.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

that social networks can be defined according to differential access to concealed knowledge and/or interpretive keys that elicit some alternate version of social reality.<sup>144</sup> Therefore van Wyk's perception of his reality based on his secret solving ultimately defined who he became. He considers himself "radicalized in comparison to other coloured people".<sup>145</sup> Van Wyk pronounced himself black as a young activist in the mass democratic movement. He was aware that he was constantly changing: "the first thing I remember about being who I am, about my identity when I was growing up, was when I actually accepted that I was black. And I actually became radical in my thinking and wanted to see a change, wanted to join a political movement, I became friendly with other people who had the same ideas".<sup>146</sup> Through the act of uncovering secrets, his identity is constructed and revealed in the end.

Van Wyk found his truth, as did the young Chris when he uncovered all his secrets. The vehicle to uncovering the truth was books. Books opened doors to other worlds and provided answers to questions that people were unwilling to answer. As he matured he realised that the answers were to be found in his freedom. When he began writing he realised that the secrets were the poetry that underlined his writing: the secrets from his childhood memories were solved, but new secrets had to be made and kept in order realise his dream of freedom and democracy for black South Africans.

### **Reception: "About South African writing"**<sup>147</sup>

When Chris van Wyk wrote *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, he hoped to sell about two or three thousand copies. He never imagined that over twenty five thousands would be sold.<sup>148</sup> The memoir was so well received that it was translated into Afrikaans and Janice Honeyman adapted and produced *Shirley Goodness and Mercy* for the stage. It ran at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg between 19 March and 13 May 2007. The play won a Naledi Award that year for Best New South African Play Produced.<sup>149</sup> Honeyman is known for her work in story theatre. In an interview with Maureen Isaacson for *The Sunday Independent* she explains how she had

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<sup>144</sup> Bellman, 'The Paradox of Secrecy', *Human Studies*, 4 (1981), p. 2.

<sup>145</sup> Van Wyk, interview conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 4 December 2013.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 266.

<sup>148</sup> Maureen Isaacson, 'Chris van Wyk: The Storyteller of Riverlea', *Mail and Gaurdian*, 7 October 2014.

<sup>149</sup> Naledi Theatre Awards, Winners of the 2007 Naledi Theatre Awards, <http://www.naleditheatreawards.org.za/winners2007.htm> [accessed on 3 September 2014].

condensed van Wyk's "sometimes emotional, sometimes turbulent but mostly witty and humorous life story".<sup>150</sup> According to Honeyman, theatre "reduces it [the memoir] to the essentials, as condensed milk reduces a pint of milk; making it stronger, sweeter, more intense".<sup>151</sup> Adrienne Sichel, writing in *Pretoria News*, commented: "Honeyman's skills as a writer and a director extract enough of the essences to create authentic distillations of lives and histories. A crucial link between both storytellers is that they adore using their skills as writers to *skinder*, to eavesdrop on the personal, those humorous little quirks that transform the ordinary into the memorable".<sup>152</sup> The reactions of a number of other critics were similar: "never has a play reminded me more of my own childhood. It's quite hilarious but also shows us the ugly truth of apartheid's effects on coloured people – who still question who they are and where they fit in today's South Africa".<sup>153</sup> Nokuthula Mazibuko explains how the play "turns van Wyk into a leading mzanzi figure".<sup>154</sup> Mazibuko points out that the audience gets to see "how the people of Riverlea turn what was intended to be a cramped dumping ground into a close knit community that nurtures and grows van Wyk's mind. Through the writer's intrepid lens, the good, the bad and the ugly about family and community affairs is fair game for a good long lekker laugh".<sup>155</sup> The inhabitants of Riverlea, who take centre stage in the play, are also said to have made up most of the audience. Scott Burnett of *The Weekender* cites the place as being of importance in terms of geographic symbolism: "apartheid was a mad experiment in geographic symbolism. Coloured people's houses, not as bad as [those of] the blacks in Soweto, but not as nice as [those of] the whites in the suburbs were an attempt by government to determine identity".<sup>156</sup>

When questioned about his identity after the run of the theatrical adaptation of his memoir, van Wyk had this to say: "as a politically attuned coloured person I consciously referred to myself as black in preference to coloured". Later he found himself trying on a new South African identity, both coloured and South African. He likened it to "putting on a newer, bigger coat with lots of space to stretch in preference to the earlier tighter model".<sup>157</sup> The interviewer agreed, in that he

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<sup>150</sup> Maureen Isaacson, 'Honeyman Brings Writer van Wyk to the Stage', *The Sunday Independent*, 1 April 2007.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>152</sup> Adrienne Sichel, 'Poignant Memoir of an Activist Artist', *Pretoria News*, 3 April 2007.

<sup>153</sup> Somaya Stockenstrom, 'Hilarious, Tear-Jerking Tale of Coloured Life Under Apartheid', *Sunday World*, 8 April 2007.

<sup>154</sup> Nokuthula Mazibuko, 'Art Attack', *City Press City Pulse*, 22 April 2007.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Scott Burnett, 'Geography Takes the Lead', *The Weekender, Weekend Review*, 7 April 2007, p. 10.

<sup>157</sup> J. Brooks Spector, 'No Inverted Commas in Colourful Chris van Wyk', *The Sunday Independent*, 8 April 2007, p. 14.

viewed the young Chris, his family and friends in universal situations, not just ‘coloured’ ones, meaning that the play could be about everyone’s childhood.<sup>158</sup> One of the many important aspects in constructing one’s identity is to broaden your perspective, to “put on a bigger coat” as van Wyk puts it. This means adopting a broader perspective and moving away from historic ideas about race and apartheid racial categorisations. With that in mind, van Wyk’s memoir could very well contribute to the construction of the new South Africa, where so many identities have been suppressed, and many people, including many coloured people, are confused as to what their identities are.

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Three

### Friendship, Identity and Narrative Style in *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch*

#### Introduction

Chris van Wyk's second memoir, *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch*, looks at the identity construction of coloured people in Johannesburg during the period that leads up to the end of apartheid. It is evident too that throughout this text the author has strong views on their plight and future. *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch* is in a way a sequel to *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* – or rather, as van Wyk says in the interview cited below, it is a companion to it. *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch* was published in 2010 and tells the story of Chris van Wyk's childhood, growing up and attending Riverlea High School. The protagonist is still the young Chris, a dynamic character who evolves through the course of the two memoirs. The other characters are again the members of his family: his father Nicholas (Nick), his mother Shirley, siblings Derek, Shaun, Allison, Nicolette and Russel. He also writes fondly about his Grandmother Ruby (Ouma) van Heerden, and his friends in the neighbourhood, especially his best friend Keith (Conos), as well as Agnes, the family maid.

Van Wyk's tone is playful yet serious at times, relying on the use of humour and anecdotes about religion, the adventures and mischief of being a child, superstition and history to construct a lively literary representation of life in his coloured community. The use of humour discloses much about his township and successfully reveals the community's attitudes, values, fears and perceptions. Van Wyk's own humour is revealed throughout the text. His friend and fellow writer, Ivan Vladislavić, points out how van Wyk was able to “evoke laughter that isn't far from tears” through “self ironising comedy about painful things”<sup>159</sup> such as his memories of apartheid. Vladislavić believes that it is in the pages of the books about his childhood in Riverlea that van Wyk:

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<sup>159</sup> Ivan Vladislavić, ‘A Vivid Voice’, *Sunday Times Lifestyle Magazine*, 12 October 2014.

found his true voice [which] turned out to be a resonant echo of the one he used in the world. You can hear him speaking in every funny, sad, large-hearted line. The books put Riverlea on the map and brought him a wide readership. It was the local response that mattered most to him. [...] He loved to tell stories about the many people who contacted him to correct or confirm things, to challenge how they'd been portrayed or ask why they'd been left out.<sup>160</sup>

### **Agnes**

The relationship between the protagonist and Agnes is the main focus of this memoir: “there were so many moments that were so poignant, so sweet, so touching and so revealing that Agnes and I shared that I [thought I] should share them with other people”.<sup>161</sup> One thing that stands out about the van Wyks’ domestic helper is that she retains an incredible sense of humour despite her circumstances. Humour is a good way to talk about something controversial or to get a point across; it lightens the mood when the underlying themes are very serious. Humour invokes the feeling of happiness and pleasure, which is almost paradoxical in van Wyk’s stories about apartheid and the plight of South Africans who were discriminated against by the regime. Writing about these stories in this way catches the reader’s attention. It is easy to relate to the memoirs thanks to the way van Wyk narrates them; they engage the reader and the changes in the characters are creative, meaningful and often memorable.

As a child, the central character cannot understand the apartheid government’s enforced segregation and discrimination, and feels frustrated by the way he and his parents are treated. Agnes helps him understand and answers many of his questions in her unique way, which provides an opportunity to laugh at circumstances and situations that might otherwise seem sad or serious. Van Wyk first wrote about the family’s maid, Agnes, in *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*. He felt that there was so much more about their relationship that influenced his childhood and that he had left out that he based the second text around it. The second memoir is a tribute to Agnes: in fact, the title is something that Agnes used to say. “Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch” is a phrase Chris hears from her: she repeats it whenever she has to get back to work, when she is

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Chris van Wyk, interview conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 18 March 2014.

very busy or when she dismisses him: “I got eggs to lay and chickens to hatch”.<sup>162</sup> The young Chris was often bemused by this ungrammatical phrase. It is only years later, when he is listening to jazz and he discovers a band called Louis Jordan that, while listening to one of their albums, a surprise awaits him: “the surprise that will inspire me to write this book”.<sup>163</sup> One song makes him sit bolt upright and turn up the volume:

It’s a song about a Farmer Brown, who one night hears a noise in his hen house. It must be a fox or something come to raid my hen house, he says crossly. So he takes his gun and goes to investigate. He gets there to find that there is no fox and that everything is in order. In fact, he has disturbed his fowls who, irritated at having their sleep disturbed, yell out to him:

There ain’t nobody here but us chickens  
There ain’t nobody here at all  
So calm yourself and stop that fuss  
There ain’t nobody here but us.  
Tomorrow is a busy day  
We got things to do, we got eggs to lay  
We got ground to dig and worms to scratch  
It takes a lot of sittin’ getting’ chickens to hatch<sup>164</sup>

Agnes Msiza is “a small dark woman in a brown beret. Her pink overall once upon a time had five buttons but only two have survived. Her eyes are puffy as if from lack of sleep or too much drinking. But, no matter”:<sup>165</sup> van Wyk finds her intriguing since the day they first meet, when she tries to teach him the meaning and etymology of a word that he had thought was just a slang word that the boys in Riverlea had made up. Young Chris’s friend Conos<sup>166</sup> leaves and says “Check you Kabawo”,<sup>167</sup> and when Agnes hears this, she asks what he said. To which the young

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<sup>162</sup> Chris van Wyk, *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch* (South Africa: Picador Africa, 2010), p. 8, p. 125, p. 135, p. 264.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 288.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>166</sup> Keith Ferris, a close childhood friend, who was first mentioned in *Shirley Goodness and Mercy* and appears in a photograph with the young van Wyk in the sleeve on the cover of *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch*.

<sup>167</sup> Van Wyk, *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch*, p. 99.

Chris replies, “Kabawo is not really a word, it’s how we talk in the streets”.<sup>168</sup> However, he is incorrect about this and he gets his first lesson from Agnes that day: that Kabawo is in fact a Xhosa word which means “my father’s son”.<sup>169</sup> This first meeting sets the tone for their special relationship. By the end of the memoir and by the time Agnes has served her time at the van Wyk household, the young Chris does seem to have taken the place of “her father’s son”. He has a comfortable relationship with Agnes, whom their mother insists the children refer to as “Aunty Agnes” because she is not their friend and calling a woman by her first name who is the same age as their mother would be disrespectful regardless of her being black. The neighbours are shocked and when they witness the children doing this they say things like “she’s not your auntie”.<sup>170</sup>

At the time, it was socially acceptable for people to have these attitudes; they were brought up with the notion that black people were the lowest in the hierarchy, both socially and culturally. However this was not the case in the van Wyk household. Van Wyk believes that Agnes is one of the women who have shaped his life: “A woman could help shape a boy’s life while she buttered his bread and made his bed”.<sup>171</sup> She is his confidante: he asks for her advice about girls and speaks to her about topics he wouldn’t dare raise with his parents, such as Nelson Mandela, communism and politics. She jokes and gently teases him. Her sense of humour and ability to tease is evident when the young Chris decides to start writing to a few pen pals, all girls, and he expects their correspondence when he comes home from school. Agnes plays the fool with him:

I sit down in the dining room and read my new letter from a thousand kilometres away – slightly delayed by Mrs. “Eggs to lay” from Soweto. And now she interrupts me by calling from the kitchen: “what’s the time there?” It’s my turn to click my tongue. I stop reading about how my friend Janette from Bonteheuwel went up Table Mountain and I glance up at the clock – but I can’t see the clock because there’s a letter in front of it addressed to me! From the kitchen comes a familiar chuckle. You got time to play hey Agnes? I’m reading letter number two when Agnes appears in the lounge – and strolls out

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 88.

<sup>171</sup> Van Wyk, *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch*, p. 8.

again, leaving an envelope on the table. In the end Agnes's joke consists of a total of five letters.<sup>172</sup>

Chris reads to Agnes, who cannot read, and promises to teach her one day. Agnes teaches him to count in Zulu when he plays truant from school. He'd rather learn from her: "You want I must teach you Zulu?" She seems surprised: "You supposed to be at school learning there but you stay here with me and I must be your teacher".<sup>173</sup> It is an exchange that speaks to the representation of racial politics in van Wyk's memoir and to its author's political and cultural allegiances within and across the divisions engendered by apartheid.

As I mentioned earlier, van Wyk's identification with black South Africans would lead to his affiliation to the Black Consciousness Movement. In one of his poems from the Soweto era, which appeared in *Donga* – the publication that became a platform for the new writers' movement in 1977 – entitled "On Learning Sotho", he associates learning Sesotho with the development of his personality:

I was a young Sotho boy then  
a baby wetting a layette of words  
and all of you laughed boisterously  
when I swore at myself  
not knowing the difference then  
between 'nna' and 'wena'  
And I'd impress all the ladies  
with 'dumela ausi!'  
or 'moratiwa!' when I was randy.

The words crawled at first  
no matter how they tried to walk  
among the grown, bombastic men.

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p. 247.

Oh I was a child again  
joyfully sucking on the tits  
of a language new to me  
though it had always been  
dangling from Agnes who makes the tea  
or Mrs Mabuja who sweeps the office.

Thank you for your patience brother  
and your English to guide my Sotho.  
I'm growing now  
and one day I will be as big as you  
and Joseph and Walter and Lucky.  
Then I will also laugh when you do  
or cry  
and understand why.<sup>174</sup>

The poem speaks of his frustration with being laughed at when he made mistakes while learning Sotho words and phrases: “when I swore at myself” could mean when he literally swore at himself or figuratively swearing himself for making mistakes. His initial experiences with Sotho are an allusion to a child: “the words crawled at first”. The child grows until “one day I will be as big as you” and that day he will speak and understand the language. The learning of a new language is an allusion to a baby learning to crawl and then walk. He likens this process to his childhood by calling Agnes to mind: “joyfully sucking on the tits of a language new to me though it had always been dangling from Agnes who makes the tea”. This is significant because he was very young when he first heard another African language from Agnes, who tried to teach him Zulu. However he is older now and it is Sotho that has the power to make him feel like a child again. It reminds him of a time when he felt like he didn't really fit in anywhere during apartheid. He calls himself a Sotho boy. He doesn't call himself coloured.

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<sup>174</sup> Transcribed in Helen Moffet and Es'kia Mphahlele, *Seasons Come to Pass: A Poetry Anthology for South African Students* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 264

In one of the interviews included in this thesis, van Wyk recalls: “[I called myself] a black South African all my political life and I ran into a lot of people who didn’t agree with that because people in Soweto are black, not coloured people.”<sup>175</sup> His trouble and awkwardness with learning a “black” language is much like him fumbling through his younger years, uncovering secrets, and answering his own questions. He matures, embraces blackness and sees that understanding Sotho is understanding why the country is in the state it is, why black people are treated the way they are and why he should fight for freedom. He is grateful to those men and women who taught him – “Thank you for your patience brother” – and he gives thanks for translating those initial words and phrases that he once struggled with into English “to guide my Sotho”.

According to Mzamane, van Wyk “looks to the Africans for his natural allies in his fight against racism and oppression. He wants to share their cries and laughter, so that to him learning Sesotho becomes a process not only of closing the language gap between himself and the Africans but also of closing ranks and cementing solidarity with them”.<sup>176</sup> In the same way, he looks to Agnes as his ally, his companion. He makes mention of Agnes in the poem “Agnes Who Makes the Tea” as a familiar presence in his life. She is there as he develops his identity. She is there as he becomes a man. She is there as he comes to terms with how unfair life is under apartheid for all black South Africans. Van Wyk was once asked why he had not included more about Agnes in his first memoir:

I was interviewed once on the radio and asked why there wasn’t more of Agnes. I wrote the book because of Agnes. When I wrote *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, Agnes first features in the book. I don’t speak about her in the way that I would have liked to. I had a unique relationship with Agnes that a lot of boys in the township didn’t have. You can see that we chatted a lot, we discovered a lot about the country and its people, even though neither of us knew a great deal about it. I was so curious about what was happening and she was there to help me. She had things to say. We’d speak and it was also as my political sense of the country unfolded that Agnes came into our lives. So I wanted to know more but I also understood why things were as they were. There was

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<sup>175</sup> Van Wyk, interview conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 18 March 2014.

<sup>176</sup> Mzamane, ‘New Poets of the Soweto Era: Van Wyk, Johannesburg and Madingoane’, p. 5.

such a unique relationship that I thought I didn't give Agnes enough space and time in the first book. I wanted people to know and understand the relationship because it wasn't an ordinary "the maid is here ironing our clothes or making lunch" relationship: she was much more than that to me and I wanted to pay tribute to her, hence the picture of Agnes on the cover of *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch*. She was my friend, my buddy and she loved me.<sup>177</sup>

Van Wyk declares to have had two mothers: "when my mother wasn't there Agnes was there: the minute my mother left for work, Agnes came, so I had two mothers".<sup>178</sup> The unique relationship between Agnes and the young Chris is profound. Agnes helped him answer many of his questions about life and the world around him. As said, this relationship takes centre stage in the second memoir. Van Wyk did this in order to let people know and understand that to him and his family Agnes meant so much. The memoir pays homage to her. Throughout the memoir, van Wyk captures glimpses of his past in his stories about Agnes. They are so precious that he has to share them. This is not the only book he writes for her.

The young Chris finds himself thinking about Agnes because of the unrest in the townships in the eighties – which "is really the beginning of the end of the racist apartheid government before the ANC came into power"<sup>179</sup> – long after her time with the van Wyk family has come to an end. The mood in the country is that of anger and violence, and it makes him worry about his old companion: "where is Agnes I wonder. And what is she doing now? Is she safe?".<sup>180</sup> This inspires him to write a book for Agnes. He recalls his promise to teach her to read when he is commissioned by the publisher of easy-to-read books for adults to write a small book for their Adult Basic Education series. His story for Agnes, "My Name is Selina Mabiletsa", is about a proud black woman who could not read. She starts going to a school for adults to learn to read and write.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Van Wyk, interview conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 18 March 2014

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Van Wyk, *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch*, p. 277.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

Van Wyk's relationship with Agnes is distinct because it was a special kind of relationship between oppressed people during apartheid; he being a coloured boy from a poor township, she a domestic worker from a poor township working for a family living in a poor township. His memoir is not a journal, but more of an archive, an archive of love stories: love stories to his past, to Agnes, for helping to shape his identity.

**“It takes a village to raise a child”<sup>182</sup>**

In providing justification for writing *Eggs to Lay*, *Chickens to Hatch* and the stories contained in it, van Wyk explains:

[It's] not really a sequel, it's sort of in tandem with *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, but it was written after. People who loved *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* used to comment about what I'd forgotten to write about. More importantly, they said in the coloured community there were dogs, lots of “pavement specials”, and we had adventures with dogs. Neighbours fought over dogs and dogs fought with each other in the streets. I thought it was a good point, so I put the dogs in: there's a whole chapter on dogs. I liked the idea because it's a unique feature of a township, whether it's a coloured township, or Soweto, or whatever. White people have pedigreed dogs, they've got Alsatians, Maltese Poodles; in the township nobody had a pedigreed dog, everybody had a dog that you could fetch off the pavement and make it your dog. It was an ordinary “pavement special”, a mixed breed.<sup>183</sup>

Van Wyk includes all the stories in *Eggs to Lay*, *Chickens to Hatch* that he had not included in the first memoir, even including a story about his own family's dog because “every family has a dog and ours is Bruno van Wyk (a dog always has the same surname as its owners)”.<sup>184</sup> The second memoir is different from his first because not only does he fill in the missing pieces about his childhood, his family his community and his political involvement, but he also writes about a different historical period. He begins his memoir as a grown up Chris, but continues in the same style as the first, in that the stories are not chronological, drawing on the theme of memory,

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., p. ii, African proverb.

<sup>183</sup> Van Wyk, interview conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 18 March 2014..

<sup>184</sup> Van Wyk, *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch*, p. 107.

secrets and identity, and the memoir ends in his adult life, when he has mellowed and seems to be a lot less of the hot-blooded young activist we were introduced to in the first memoir.

*Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch* takes place in the years when South Africa is approaching democracy. The narrative can be seen in a different context from that of the first memoir. The text unfolds during the time of the young Chris's life when he began to understand the political climate but still questioned many things. As a Soweto poet, he shared the preoccupations of the poets of that era: revolt, death, detention and exile.<sup>185</sup> Mzamane says that "a reading of South African poetry in this period refutes the myth that poetry is in a world of its own or is separate from the sufferings, struggles and victories of real life".<sup>186</sup> The poetry of the Soweto era, like Black Consciousness poetry in general, is social commentary about the formation of a national consciousness that has been accompanied by a political struggle – "from the ravages of Sharpeville, through the cultural renaissance and the Black Consciousness era, to the Soweto era".<sup>187</sup>

Van Wyk describes writing a memoir as being a little like "travelling into your own past. Unlike science fiction, you can't change the past. But, like science fiction, it does have its own magic".<sup>188</sup> He writes from this situated perspective and a shift in it is almost palpable in every story told. The stories are not chronological; there is no beginning, middle or end. This is significant and can be linked to the theme of memory, secrets and identity. The open-ended story or structure of the text itself, which in many ways cannot be concluded, can be likened to memories which are not always precise, secrets that are never really uncovered, or an identity such as the coloured identity, which might simply be undefinable. An understanding of memories and of the processes of transformation they narrate demands a continual engagement with the past. Post-apartheid literature and memoirs can provide such an engagement. They can revisit the past and create new narratives to meet the needs of the present.<sup>189</sup> According to van Wyk, remembering the past is not a refusal to move on: "the years under apartheid saw the stifling of our culture and history through censorship, bannings, exile, jailing and even death.

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<sup>185</sup> Mzamane, 'New Poets of the Soweto Era: Van Wyk, Johannesburg and Madingoane', p. 5.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> Van Wyk, quoted in David Medalie, 'Words of Warmth and Laughter', *Mail and Guardian*, 10-16 October 2014.

<sup>189</sup> Shane Graham, *South African Literature after the Truth Commission* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 18.

Now in the New South Africa, not only has this repressing been halted, but a positive reversal has begun”.<sup>190</sup>

The narratives we create in order to justify our situations, actions and choices become the ways in which we define ourselves. They are our life narratives, how we explain our complicated lives and our undefinable identities. Van Wyk expresses his inability to define his identity in an excerpt from the text in which he recalls listening to the news on Springbok Radio: “the stuff the newsreader tells us about I just do not understand. Why are the Americans fighting a war in Vietnam? It’s got something to do with communists, but I don’t know what”. He questions why there is “a war on the border? Where is the border? It seems like our army is stopping communists from getting into our country and taking over”.<sup>191</sup> The Prime Minister, John Vorster, speaks on the radio. He says: “The communists will never take over this country because we have God on our side.” The young Chris perceives his voice as a sad voice with no sense of humour: “He sounds like a man who has never been a boy, never played a prank, never held a frog in his hands, never liked a girl, and never shared a secret with a best friend. He sounds as if he were born to warn others about the communists”.<sup>192</sup> Another thing the Prime Minister likes to talk about is the “Coloured Problem”:

What is this coloured problem, I ask myself. Why are we a problem to him? One afternoon I turn to Agnes taking washing off the line, and ask her: “what is the coloured problem?” Agnes thinks for a while, and says she doesn’t know what he is talking about, but later on, she comes to me and says, “I know the answer. When coloureds drink too much they break each other’s windows”. We both laugh.<sup>193</sup>

He would hear people say: “‘We must solve the coloured question’. I was nine years old and I thought: ‘I have presented these people with a problem, what have I done?’”.<sup>194</sup> Agnes tries to find humour in answering his questions about his place as a coloured person during apartheid. This highlights their dynamic and close friendship. It is stories such as this one that help van

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<sup>190</sup> Van Wyk, ‘Introduction’, in van Wyk and Plenge (eds), *Post-Traumatic: New South African Short Stories*, p. 8.

<sup>191</sup> Van Wyk, *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch*, p. 133.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Van Wyk, cited in Isaacson, ‘Chris van Wyk: The Storyteller of Riverlea’.

Wyk tell his story of self-discovery and identification with Agnes and black South Africans on the whole and his struggle with defining his identity.

### **Writing the Memoir**

Readers expect a life narrative to tell the story of the narrator. Authors of autobiographical life narratives are expected to account for how they have lived their lives. They are expected to be able to cast identity diachronically, to represent the changes occurring over a period of time, through performances of identity, as a life story. This spreads into the past and the present and makes the narrators accountable for their actions. This accountability is further expanded in *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* and *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch* by Van Wyk's choice to write both memoirs in a style that would be accessible to the people that the stories are about: very ordinary people from the community in which he grew up.

The stylistic and narrative device van Wyk uses to make the stories as widely accessible as possible is writing from the perspective of his young self. This allows him to use an easily accessible language. This is probably one of the reasons why Van Wyk chose to use this narrative device, which according to him a lot of writers are not able to use. He explains it as:

a gimmick, I do it effortlessly. [...] It's a nice thing to do, it's got a quaintness about it, and it gives the book a kind of authenticity. You see the naïve Chris: he speaks naively, he thinks naively, there's an innocence about him. The book would have had none of these elements if I hadn't done this. It just sounded, naturally, the right thing to do. I'm writing about a childhood, I should write like a child and it worked.<sup>195</sup>

The young Chris develops from an innocent boy into a politically active man, participating in the struggle for non-racialism in South Africa. The greater part of the text focuses on the young Chris's teenage years and the reader is taken along on his path to self-discovery. For instance, when the young Chris is called by his mother to run an errand for her, she interrupts his game of soccer with his friends. On his way to see what she wants, the young Chris thinks to himself "I am no longer that little boy with the GOODYEAR/MERC who used to race to the shops at

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<sup>195</sup> Van Wyk, interview conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 18 March 2014.

eighty miles per hour”.<sup>196</sup> He is a teenager now. When he was younger it was fun to run errands for his mother in his “car” (an old car tyre), but now she annoys and embarrasses him by calling him in front of his friends. The narrator switches between a very young Chris and a teenaged Chris and narrates effortlessly as both. As the young Chris develops and gains a different sense of his own identity, a similar instance holds a different meaning and provokes a drastically different reaction.

Van Wyk’s first person narrative takes the reader along in his journey into adulthood. The author gets into his own young mind and sees things first from a child’s and then from an adolescent’s perspective. This narrative device allows the reader into his young mind too; it allows the reader figuratively into his body as he navigates through apartheid South Africa, growing up and experiencing democracy and eventually freedom. Van Wyk’s referral to himself in the first person as a child makes the memoir intimate. The effect of this is to present the story directly to the reader in order to bear witness to the drama of the political situation at the time. One could relate the use of the first person singular “I” to the young Chris’s realization and understanding of apartheid and its meaning and how it really was bigger than just him. The struggle for democracy is bigger than the “I” but it had to start with the “I”, him.

The speaking voice of the young narrator brings the reader very close to the action. He provides the inner frame of the narrative. This narrative device is an instantiation of what Jay Verney describes as “writing from life”. According to Verney, on one side is life, on the other is life as the author perceives it to be. She writes: “There is living, there are lives and there is my life. From a binary perspective, life is either everything or else it’s one’s own narrow experience of living and being”.<sup>197</sup> Authors’ writing about their own personal life experiences is filtered through the “from” factor. They express their point of view in both particular and general terms. Verney argues this case with reference to her own experience of rereading her first novel, *A Mortality Tale* (1994). She writes that this experience enabled her to see her text from a new perspective. Initially the first person narrator was clearly recognisable. The “I” was Verney. As the story progresses, the character develops her own rhythms and makes her own decisions,

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<sup>196</sup> Van Wyk, *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch*, p. 27.

<sup>197</sup> Jay Verney, ‘Writing from Life’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 21 (2009), p. 210.

“regardless of authorial influence”.<sup>198</sup> Verney gave the narrator aspects of her own life to see how they would fit and to determine if they would be appropriate for the story in the same way that van Wyk does with his memoir. According to Verney, this is one of the fundamental roles of the writer: to produce works which offer insights into what happens through the selective use and conversion of experience.<sup>199</sup> Thus, van Wyk uses humour to address the very real issues related to growing up as a coloured boy during apartheid and chooses not to write as an activist and instead writes from a child’s point of view. In this way, the focus is not so much on the political instability at the time, even though this did indeed shape everyday life for all who lived through apartheid; rather, the emphasis is on his own subjective experience of it.

### **Identity: “But I’m a coloured”<sup>200</sup>**

*Egg to Lay, Chickens to Hatch* highlights the young Chris’s conflict of identity and how he tries to fashion his identity throughout his adolescence and early adulthood. The basic conflict in the memoir is based on his circumstances and the political climate around him. The inner conflict is the growth the protagonist undergoes over the course of the story. His very growth drives the plot: his experience as a young coloured boy, how he viewed his life and the identity performances of the other characters, and how this has ultimately shaped the decisions, which are based on or influenced by this experience and the notion of a shared identity.

When asked whether identity can be seen as performance, Chris van Wyk replied:

It’s an interesting question. When I started writing, my writer friend – to whom I am eternally grateful, [...] Fhazel Johennesse – he was clever and he pushed me: he went to a better school and he saw that there was a writer in me and encouraged me. He and I would discuss books and the dream of becoming published writers one day: we discussed it 24/7. We smoked and drank and discussed literature. We did all the things that young men do but we discussed literature. Neither of us went to university but we read voraciously. He was clever and articulate and the two of us often debated about various things. He found it amazing that when I spoke to him I’d become articulate, I’d use

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Van Wyk, *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch*, p. 90.

language and words that I wouldn't normally use. Sometimes in his presence I would speak to somebody I'd meet at the shops and I'd suddenly go into "slang mode" and I'd speak slang to them: "Heita my broe, hoezit?" ("Hello my brother, how's it going?"); "It's nca man, it's grand" ("It's good"). He'd say I became a different Chris when I was with different people. I think I knew it subconsciously but I was shocked when he told me. I asked him if it was a bad thing. [I asked] because I felt like a fraud, like I wasn't being the same Chris, not constant. He said he didn't know. I read somewhere, strangely enough, years later, in a book on writing, that it's a good thing for writers to have different identities – just to get into the world of other people. I can get into the world of children. On Thursday I'm going to speak at a school to six year olds about human rights: it's not a problem. If I'm with my friends discussing politics, I'll get into that mode; with my sons I get into another mode. I live comfortably with it because I think it's a versatility that I have. I think all humans have it anyway.<sup>201</sup>

According to Butler, identity is "performed" much like the act of marriage where man and wife are "pronounced" by the proper authority. Only, unlike the marriage ceremony, she does not consider the performance of identity to be permanent. She says that "identity exists nowhere out of, before or after its performance, and therefore demands the constant repetition of the performative gesture to generate the appearance of the seamless and fixed identity it purports to 'be'".<sup>202</sup> Identity is not a product but a process, "not the expression or imitation of an ideal, but the repetition of a gesture that through this iteration creates an illusion of stability".<sup>203</sup> We do not fashion our identities once and for all: we fashion and refashion them constantly by means of performance. Butler says that the performance is real, it is the reality of identity. If the "reality" of our identity is its performance then our identity is constantly in flux as we carry on performing it. Identity is a performance in "that social action requires a performance which is repeated. This repetition is at once a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; it is the mundane and ritualised form of their bodies' legitimation".<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Van Wyk, interview conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 18 March 2014.

<sup>202</sup> Quoted in Timothy, Scheie, "'Questionable Terms': Shylock, Celiné's *L'Eglise*, and the Performative', *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 17 (2009), p. 155.

<sup>203</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>204</sup> Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', p. 526.

In van Wyk's memoirs, the narrator highlights his difference time and again. This only emphasises the performances of his own identity, as well as of those of the other characters in the text in the various situations they find themselves. In one such instance, in 1990, the young Chris is married with a family of his own. His housekeeper Miriam comes to him with a problem. The father of her son will not pay her the maintenance money for her to care for their son. She asks Chris to take her to the courthouse to help her get the money. Chris explains that he cannot do this and they both go back to what they were doing, but he cannot concentrate. He gives in and asks which school the man teaches at, as well as for the phone number. He phones and asks for the man in an Afrikaans accent, knowing that this would lead the man to believe he means business and to scare him a little: "Sorry to disturb sir. But may I speak wif Thabiso Moses Maseko",<sup>205</sup> he asks. The principal, who answers the phone, "wastes no time getting my man on the phone".<sup>206</sup> When he comes to the phone, Chris keeps his Afrikaans accent and tells him that he is "speaking wif Louis Jordaan. I am the Director General in the Department of Social Welfare".<sup>207</sup> He goes on to tell Maseko that if he does not pay his maintenance, he will be arrested. His plan works and Miriam gets her money every month. In pretending to be an Afrikaans man from the Department of Social Welfare, the young Chris performs a different identity: that of a man who is only taken seriously because he is white and in a position of power. The passage shows that each performance is context specific.

Van Wyk relies on the young Chris as the narrator: this works perfectly to describe situations and those around him in a naïve manner. Here is a description of a trip to the city with his friend Conos:

During all that time we saw smelt and heard the city. We saw pedestrians, white people behind high counters, cars and trucks, high rise buildings, Indian vendors in long bright floral saris. Saw 'Whites Only' signs on park benches. We smelt the inside of the Magistrate's Court which was a mixture of oldness, wood polish and sweat. We heard

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<sup>205</sup> Van Wyk, *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch*, p. 284.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

hooters blaring, people yelling. American jazz with its trumpets and drums and pianos. But we didn't really see or smell or hear anything.<sup>208</sup>

Here the young boy describes his outing in great detail yet does not feel he has really smelt or heard a thing. This disconnection or exclusion could be attributed to the marginalisation of non-white people in apartheid South Africa. It could also be something the boy chose not to experience as part of his own identity performance. It could be that the young Chris would rather not see the city with “non-White blinkers” on, for instance being barred from day-to-day activities such as sitting on benches and travelling on the bus. Using a child's voice to construct an identity aids in questioning the unquestionable and defining the undefinable.

### **Eavesdropping: “Street secrets”<sup>209</sup>**

Van Wyk's autobiographical collection of stories “centres on the gradual process of maturation whereby he learns to map out the boundaries of identity and difference in Riverlea”.<sup>210</sup> In memoirs the passages on which a life story is based make up the foundation of the text. The author draws from memory, observation, detail and shared experience to make up those passages. This goes back to Verney's definition of “writing from life”, where the “from” factor performs a starting point, a point of departure. In essence if you write about your own life, you're writing about many people's lives.<sup>211</sup> Reading about other people, such as the community members of Riverlea, with all their idiosyncrasies, is much like eavesdropping on a conversation about people you've never met before and knowing the author's secrets about them. In many ways it feels as though these stories have been happened upon by the author, or he is retelling them to you as the reader after eavesdropping. The word “*skinder*” is a term that comes up a few times in van Wyk's memoirs and it means gossip: the young Chris eavesdrops on this *skinder* and gains material for his stories by doing this. The mothers in Riverlea enjoy visiting one another and “*skinder*” over a cup of tea: “Auntie Vera often comes over for tea and some *skinder*”.<sup>212</sup> The young Chris eavesdrops all the time. He in turn “*skinders*” with his friends. One

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>210</sup> Strauss, ‘Confused about Being Coloured: Creolisation and Coloured Identity in Chris van Wyk's *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*’, p. 31.

<sup>211</sup> Verney, ‘Writing from Life’, p. 211.

<sup>212</sup> Van Wyk, *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch*, p. 14.

of his friends “is a stringy girl with two frizzy ponytails that jiggle as she tells her skinder stories”.<sup>213</sup> He *skinders* with Agnes and with the readers of the memoir, with whom the narrator shares secrets that he keeps from his parents, such as playing truant, smoking, stories about girls and questions about the government.

As the character grows and the voice shifts, so does his implied or limited responsibility regarding his and other characters’ secrets. The theme of secrets identified in *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch* varies from that of the first memoir. The young Chris is now faced with the task of keeping secrets of his own, uncovering more secrets regarding the government and his place in society, and learning who to trust. Agnes becomes his ally and partner in crime. Of course the secrets regarding the government or politics are not revealed to him when they count as secret. We usually only hear about this sort of secret when it is becoming something else, such as public knowledge. We only learn of these secrets once they are revealed.<sup>214</sup>

The young Chris starts keeping a diary: with his subsequent entries, secrets are revealed. He finds information in the diary regarding national public holidays, namely van Riebeeck’s Day and Dingaan’s Day, which leads him and his friend Conos onto the topic of politics, and eventually the question “do you know what’s a communist?” arises.<sup>215</sup> The young Chris is able to give an answer, but is still intrigued after his friend leaves. He looks up the word in his dictionary and later asks Agnes to explain to him. Agnes tells him his aunt Sophie was a friend of Lilian Ngoyi, an anti-apartheid activist. Auntie Sophie turns out not to be a communist but an early trade unionist. When he goes to visit her, she tells the young Chris a story about her days working at the factory and belonging to a union headed by Solly Sachs, the socialist and labour activist.<sup>216</sup> This makes the young boy secretly want to become a communist, as his aunt made being a communist sound attractive. He has trouble understanding why it is such a bad word and why people are afraid of saying it out loud. He decides to become a communist anyway, joins the South African Communist Party for a few months, and then resigns. Nobody knew about his new political allegiance: “I look at all of them and think, ‘Poor people, you have a communist sitting

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>214</sup> Claire Birchall, ‘Cultural Studies and the Secret’, in Gary Hall and Clare Birchall (eds), *New Cultural Studies: Adventures in Theory* (United States: University of Georgia Press, 2006), p. 294.

<sup>215</sup> Van Wyk, op. cit., p. 126.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

right here amongst you and you don't even know it!' And I shake my head. I was a communist for a few months when I resigned. Well, actually I suppose I just stopped being one".<sup>217</sup> This is after he "spoke to someone who had actually known a real communist".<sup>218</sup> This is ironic. When he gets older he is accused of being a "real communist" when he starts fighting for democracy because anti-apartheid groups and activists were branded as communists.

One evening his family finds his diary and reads it. It contains stories that are mostly unflattering towards them, such as complaints about his parents and childish affronts directed at his siblings and friends. The young Chris tries to grab the diary from his uncle because he feels that it is private, and so his father scolds him: "What do you mean, what secrets do you have?"<sup>219</sup> Unfortunately for Chris, he tries to grab his diary back too late; his uncle reads an entry about himself. The children have been getting blamed for sticking their stale chewing gum all over the house. In his diary entry the young Chris reveals the identity of the real culprit: "you don't have to be a rocket scientist to know who the real culprit is: Uncle Tony the Stimorol man". This gets the young boy into trouble. When he eventually manages to get his diary back, his father sees it as an act of defiance. This only makes the boy more fearful of having and keeping secrets. He is confused by the secrets that grownups keep from children and is left wondering why he is punished for keeping such secrets of his own. He makes an ally in the form of his friend and confidante, Agnes: he keeps secrets for her and she in turn keeps secrets for him. Sometimes on a Monday morning Agnes comes to work a little drunk – or with a heavy *babalaas* (hangover). She doesn't have to tell the young Chris, he can see: "the usually chirpy tongue is heavy today, the eyes are half-closed with thick dark rings around them".<sup>220</sup> She does not clean as efficiently as she usually does. Which leads his mother to ask him "was Agnes OK?", and he replies "Ja she was OK".<sup>221</sup> Agnes returns the favour when every once in a while he could not face going to school and he'd play truant. She would not tell his parents. He decides not to go to school when, for example, "the woodwork teacher Mr Stanley wants my toothbrush rack ready for inspection today, complete with its stupid little holes for five toothbrushes and its little shelf for the toothpaste tube. All I have to offer Stanley so far is the plank that he gave me at the beginning of

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

the term. Maybe I could ask him to give me at least a mark for neatness”.<sup>222</sup> Agnes also does not tell his parents that he had started smoking cigarettes with her at the age of fourteen.

One day Agnes finds a pamphlet at the train station and brings it to the young Chris. She does this after he has been asking a lot of questions about politics. The pamphlet is for a political party called Sofasonke, which she explains means “we all die together”.<sup>223</sup> He thinks that “it sounds like a party that means business, that either gets what it wants or dies trying”.<sup>224</sup> Years after Agnes leaves, he reads about the party leader James Mpanza, “who was a Zulu born in Zululand in 1981”.<sup>225</sup> In his early twenties, Mpanza robbed the general dealer’s and set fire to the store. The shopkeeper was killed in the fire and Mpanza was sentenced to death for robbery and murder. He served many years in prison instead, after being pardoned from death row. The young Chris explains Mpanza’s life after prison:

It is now the 1930s. Mpanza’s youth has been spent in the dust and stench of various prisons and he is a stocky man living in the dust and stench of a slum called Doorfontein. Soweto did not exist yet. When apartheid comes into power in 1948, the first thing they do is separate all the races into Bantu (black), coloured (mixed race), Indian and white. The Bantu it decides should go and live in their various homelands, the Zulus to Zululand, Tswanas to Boputhatswana, Vendas to Venda, Xhosas to the Transkei and so on. When the law is passed almost all blacks in South Africa find themselves about a thousand kilometres from where they were supposed to be. But the government needs them to work in the gold mines, and in white homes. Soweto is built. A few hundred families move in, but a few thousand are left on the waiting list. Those left off from the list, take up residence in existing homes. The white government never solves the housing problem and James Mpanza becomes a champion of the homeless with his Sofasonke Party. In the mid-seventies the Sofasonke Party is still fighting for housing. The party hands out pamphlets to commuters at a Soweto train station, a black woman takes one and saves it for a curious coloured boy who’s forever asking her questions.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., p. 275.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., p. 275.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., p.276

It is ironic that Agnes gives Chris a pamphlet for a political party which would cause his interest in politics to grow. She was uneasy when he asked questions about politics and Nelson Mandela. Her answer was “You can’t talk about that. If the police hear you, they come and lock you up”.<sup>227</sup> But the pamphlet she gives him sets the path for his later activism.

Interestingly, in van Wyk’s first novel, *The Year of the Tapeworm*, the protagonist, Mandla Nhlabatsi, is a journalist who lives in a fictional township called Sofasonke. In his description of the impact of apartheid on ordinary people, van Wyk tells the story from their perspective, instead of that of the party that is supposed to represent them. Maureen Isaacson has written that van Wyk was “derisive of the top-down political vantage point”.<sup>228</sup> In an interview, he told her that “people come home from work and say, ‘I need a holiday’, they don’t come home and say, ‘I want to put on a Free Mandela T-shirt’”.<sup>229</sup> He called the township in his novel by a name that sparked his interest in politics as a young boy, and that inspires him to write about oppression and activism in a different way than he does in his memoirs. He writes from the perspective of black people like Agnes. One of the characters in the novel describes witnessing a riot:

A cry of “Amandla” thundered through the air. And suddenly people – kids, men, women – their fists raised in the salute of the oppressed masses, appeared from behind rickety fences, in dark doorways, on the stoep filled with shoppers and indolent kids. The youth signed off with the customary “VIVA SIBISI VIVA”.<sup>230</sup>

The name of the township holds true to the translation that Agnes gives the young Chris: “we all die together”. Its inhabitants are passionate about their cause as they rally for the support of other equally oppressed people. The protagonist of the novel speaks about Riverlea and compares it to the township of Sofasonke:

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., p. 274.

<sup>228</sup> Isaacson, ‘Chris van Wyk: The Storyteller of Riverlea’.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Chris van Wyk, *The Year of the Tapeworm*, (South Africa: Ravan Press, 1996), p. 34.

I turned off Main Reef Road into Riverlea. The coloured township lay huddled around a dark yellow mine dump like a large litter around a teat. The streets were as filthy as those of Sofasonke, indeed the ordered rows of skull and crossbones, the dirty children, the swaggering Saturday night drunks, the shebeens bursting with the fizz of life, all this bore a striking resemblance to Sofasonke but for two things: there were no comrades spraying graffiti here and no cops patrolling the streets.<sup>231</sup>

This comparison shows van Wyk's memory of the harsh reality of apartheid, growing up in Riverlea as a coloured person. Sofasonke can be seen as Soweto during that same era. Van Wyk's identification with all the oppressed communities in South Africa and his decision to call himself black would eventually push him towards activism, black consciousness and the fight for freedom. This sentiment would lead him to write his memoirs. His identification with his coloured community from Riverlea, on the other hand, would provide him with the insight necessary to write these books in the style he did.

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

## Chapter Four

### Conclusion

It was while researching my chosen topic for this thesis – the construction of coloured identities in South Africa – that I thought about Chris van Wyk and his contribution to the field, through his writings as a coloured author and poet, as well as through his activism and his involvement in the literary revolution which played a role in bringing about democracy in South Africa. I read *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* first and found the text brilliant in its simplicity. In this memoir, van Wyk mentions Delfine and Stephanie Press, who were childhood friends of his in Riverlea. The young Chris is walking down Flinders Street with a group of his friends:

Ahead of us Delphine and Stephanie Press and Anita Lawrence are playing skipping rope [...]. When they see us coming they go stiff and the rope goes slack and they stop singing their song [...] because here come the boys to bomb up their game and pull their hair.<sup>232</sup>

Stephanie – a family friend of mine – is the same Stephanie Press featured in the text. I'm sure if there had not been this family connection, van Wyk would still have gladly obliged to assist me with this project because, as J. Brooks Spector has written, that is how he was: "he was a warm and welcoming mentor to the next generation of writers coming after him. He returned the favour just as he himself sought out the advice and counsel of earlier mentors like Stephen Grey and Robert Greig".<sup>233</sup> When I first met Chris van Wyk what struck me was his humility and friendliness, his ability to remember so many stories and tell them with humour and wit. He was simply charming. I remember when on our first meeting we were getting to know each other in his kitchen while he made coffee and he asked if I'd like anything to eat, but before I could answer he said "I'm having bread, let's have some bread!" He went on to prepare a simple sandwich, which made me think of the ones Agnes would make for him and his siblings when he

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<sup>232</sup> Van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 95.

<sup>233</sup> J. Brooks Spector, 'The Beautiful Soul of Chris van Wyk, Departed', *The Daily Maverick*, 6 October 2014, <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2014-10-06-the-beautiful-soul-of-chris-van-wyk-departed/#.VD39u8txnIV> [accessed on 6 October 2014].

was a boy: “she’s at the kitchen table smearing butter and apricot jam on to about a dozen slices of bread”.<sup>234</sup> He hadn’t lost that enthusiasm for life and his joy of telling stories like the ones he writes about in the memoirs. When I told him that I would be quoting some of these stories, he found it quite funny: “I’m glad you’re telling me you’re going to quote me. Now I’m going to speak well. I’ll try and say profound things”.<sup>235</sup> He’d often get carried away with stories he loved to share:

I remember about three hours ago I was going to tell you how I wrote *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*. Because you said you were going to ask me that. Well, you said let’s talk about your two books, and then I said well, first I have to tell you...<sup>236</sup>

I met with him a few times after that first meeting, to gain insight into his life, his writing and specifically his two memoirs. Talking to him was thoroughly enjoyable and insightful. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 2014 Chris called me to say that he was undergoing chemotherapy for his pancreatic cancer. Sadly, before I could finish this project, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2014, Chris van Wyk passed away. He was fifty-seven years old. The tidal wave of tweets surrounding his death was quite moving. Prominent coloured entertainer, actor, comedian and columnist Soli Philander took to twitter and wrote: “RIP Chris van Wyk tears are appropriate”.<sup>237</sup> A newspaper headline called him “a beautiful soul”. J. Brooks Spector of *The Daily Maverick* described how, as the news of his passing spread, his fans “took to social media to share their grief and sadness over this loss – as well as their memories of how it had felt when they first encountered his writings. For some, it was the shimmering, near-elegiac quality that came through so clearly in his two childhood memoirs, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* and *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch* that was key to their admiration for Chris van Wyk.”<sup>238</sup>

I will always admire his drive to be unique, to fight for what he believed in and his ability to make light of a serious social ill such as apartheid. He thought of himself and a fellow writer, his friend Hazel Johennesse, as “just ordinary young boys. But we were special; we felt that we

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<sup>234</sup> Van Wyk, *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch*, p. 98.

<sup>235</sup> Van Wyk, interview conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 4 October 2013.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Soli, Philander, ‘Twitter Status’, <https://twitter.com/SoliPhilander/status/518364249044029441> [accessed on 4 October 2014].

<sup>238</sup> Spector, ‘The Beautiful Soul of Chris van Wyk, Departed’.

were somehow, in some way special”.<sup>239</sup> And he was special; he knew that he wanted to make a difference in South Africa. He told me about becoming “feverish with excitement when you thought about the possibility that in this country apartheid could be defeated, and I used to tell people about that”.<sup>240</sup> During apartheid this attitude was not accepted by everybody, people would tell van Wyk not to talk about politics, but he chose to because he knew he had to, freedom to him was “obvious”:

it was like an oncoming truck. It was coming. Because if you look at it, Ghana getting decolonised in the 1950s, and then Kenya and all these other countries: Tanzania and then Zambia, and then closer to home Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, which used to be Rhodesia. It was coming. Even the white prime ministers knew it was on its way. It was moving southwards and I said, all you had to do was look at that. You were never going to keep people in bondage for such a long time.<sup>241</sup>

As an activist, it was his writing, his poetry especially, that greatly contributed to his dream for democracy. He described to me what he referred to as the “mood” in South Africa when he first became involved in politics:

The ANC is banned, writers are banned, all political parties are banned in the 1960s as well after the government had declared a state of emergency and they wanted to settle scores with all political groups who were opposed to apartheid. Many activists are forced into exile: musicians, writers, political activists. So when I grow up in the 1960s – I was born in 1957 – when I attend school in ’62 or something, the ANC is banned already. I don’t know the name and it becomes so bad that [people in] your community don’t even talk about the ANC because they actually should, even if they have to whisper it amongst each other. But they are more frightened than they should be. If people say ANC they go to the window and they close the curtains! They do ridiculous things, man. Stupid things. When we grew up and we became politically active, we laughed at them and said, oh God it’s not so bad! Oh look there’s a policeman going down the road, you mustn’t say ANC.

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<sup>239</sup> Van Wyk, interview conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 4 October 2013

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

You know? Coloured people were actually so conservative that they made me sick sometimes. So conservative. And racist. They actually didn't want to talk about it. At school when we mentioned it in a classroom, instead of a teacher telling you what was actually going on, they would say "no we can't talk about that". They could. They could a little bit. But they didn't.<sup>242</sup>

Once he had uncovered what was actually going on in the country, his decision to fight through his poetry and his allegiance with the anti-apartheid literary movement was in a way "like just sticking our tongues out at the racist South Africa".<sup>243</sup> He told me about an incident where his friend Fhazel Johennesse had asked him if he wrote any poetry:

I thought what an odd thing to ask somebody. You don't go up to people and ask them that. But he assumed that I did! And you know what I said? Yes, of course! Because I should be writing poetry. So he says "will you show me some of your poetry?" And I went home and thought, oh my God, what have I done? I've lied. I better write a few poems!

And I started writing a few poems. Probably the biggest junk in the world. I'm glad they haven't survived.<sup>244</sup>

It was in the spirit of telling me his life stories that van Wyk spoke about a poem that he had written and he had "read somewhere and felt just encapsulated what the mood was like".<sup>245</sup> This poem was "In Detention", which I am going to transcribe again:

He fell from the ninth floor  
He hanged himself  
He slipped on a piece of soap while washing  
He hanged himself

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

He slipped on a piece of soap while washing  
He fell from the ninth floor  
He hanged himself while washing  
He slipped from the ninth floor  
He hung from the ninth floor  
He slipped on the ninth floor while washing  
He fell from a piece of soap while slipping  
He hung from the ninth floor  
He washed from the ninth floor  
He hung from a piece of soap while slipping<sup>246</sup>

Mentions of the poem dominated his obituaries. J. Brooks Spencer wrote that it:

became the defining poetic anthem of apartheid's horrors. In his passing people have been recalling that this poem had been a crystallising moment for them in grasping the nature of the police state that surrounded them. [It became] a much read, widely anthologised, and often-recited work, capturing the essential dishonesty and cruelty of the tyrant's hand, distilling the inner truth of all those callous police statements about how, one after another, political detainees had somehow taken their own lives even as they were being interrogated in a South African police headquarters building – John Vorster Square.<sup>247</sup>

“In Detention” was included in van Wyk’s first published collection of poetry, *It Is Time to Go Home*, which earned him the Olive Schreiner Award. David Medalie, in his obituary for the *Mail and Guardian*, cites it as:

one of the most famous South African poems ever written. Moving as it does from ostensibly matter-of-fact statements to increasingly frenetic absurdity, the poem ridicules the lies with which the apartheid government sought to account for the deaths of

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<sup>246</sup> Van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 245.

<sup>247</sup> Spector, ‘The Beautiful Soul of Chris van Wyk, Departed’.

detainees while they were in police custody. Even now it is impossible to remain unmoved by the chilling opening lines.<sup>248</sup>

In the obituary for *The Sowetan* Victor Mecoamere describes it as “an anti-apartheid classic that is still being analysed in literary and political circles”.<sup>249</sup>

I asked van Wyk whether he thought that there had been a cultural revolution in South Africa through poetry and writing, and he had this to say:

You know, it would be nice to say that I wrote this poem and then the country came to its senses. But it wasn't like that. I'll tell you something though; the ANC was very interested in writers in the country and artists. Because there was a mood, there was an anti-apartheid mood: writers were writing about apartheid and how they hated apartheid.<sup>250</sup>

As an activist van Wyk was a lifelong supporter of the idea of equality and a public intellectual who was often critical of the society he lived in. He became known for his humanist beliefs. In his tribute, Arts and Culture Minister Nathi Mthethwa says: “we have been blessed to have had a creative intellectual and cultural activist of his calibre among us”.<sup>251</sup> He highlights how van Wyk had used humour in his writing “to show the ludicrous side of apartheid”.<sup>252</sup> He describes Chris as an “outstanding cultural activist and writer who used his creativity and talent to fight the apartheid system. Thus he contributed to articulating the vision and aspirations for a new society”.<sup>253</sup> Likewise, the tribute from the African National Congress salutes van Wyk as a:

distinguished South African who emerged in the ranks of those who defied and challenged the inhuman system of apartheid at the height of its viciousness. His credentials in the liberation movement date back to the time of the United Democratic

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<sup>248</sup> David Medalie, ‘Words of Warmth and Laughter’, *Mail and Guardian*, 10-16 October 2014.

<sup>249</sup> Victor Mecoamere, ‘Struggle Poet van Wyk Dies’, *The Sowetan*, 6 October 2014, p. 9.

<sup>250</sup> Van Wyk, interview conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 4 October 2013.

<sup>251</sup> *City Press*, “Nathi Mthethwa Pays Tribute to Chris van Wyk”, 5 October 2014, <http://www.citypress.co.za/news/nathi-mthethwa-pays-tribute-chris-van-wyk/> [accessed on 16 October 2014].

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*

Front, which was a popular response against the erstwhile system of oppression. Chris was amongst those who through his writings documented and captured the importance of fighting for a democratic society.<sup>254</sup>

Van Wyk was part of that generation of activists. He could not help being politicised; this became more evident when he started writing. His writing career started with poetry:

The more we wrote, the more we read. [...] I decided that the noblest artist that you could become ever in your life was to become a poet. When people said to me, years later, that's Chris, the poet, it made me so proud because just to be a poet was the most amazing thing, and it was like having reached some kind of a height. I thought there was nothing better in the world than expressing yourself in words and expressing an emotion and a feeling and an event in such a way that it becomes memorable and that people quote it ever after. I just wanted to be a poet. I mean: poets, all poets, most poets are like that, they think it's just the most amazing thing. It's like writing songs in words without music. It has its own music. It is the most fascinating thing: love poems, poems about events, serious poems, angry poems, whatever. [...] I also wanted to get into prose writing, short stories and a novel, eventually. But it was nice to start off as a poet.<sup>255</sup>

Van Wyk's poetry underlined his writing. Becoming a writer was in many ways the first step to his identity construction and it helped him differentiate himself from the identity performances of the coloured people around him that he witnessed growing up. Poetry helped him develop his own identity. Writing about his community and its people was liberating: he gave a voice to ordinary lives shaped by apartheid. He had an amazing way with words, his writings had an impact.

As a coloured person who grew up during apartheid van Wyk was very aware of race and of what it meant to be coloured in South Africa:

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<sup>254</sup> All Africa, 'South Africa: The Passing of Chris van Wyk', <http://allafrica.com/stories/201410061680.html> [accessed on 6 October 2014].

<sup>255</sup> Van Wyk, interview conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 4 October 2013.

In Riverlea, everyone was poor. I did not understand before I was six years old that it had to do with the colour of my skin and all we looked forward to was playing with our tops in the street as well as ‘gezat-ing’: putting all your money together to buy a packet of chips and tablespoon of atchar to put inside a loaf of bread.<sup>256</sup>

He described his experience of apartheid as neatly divided into phases:

Phase one: “I-don’t-know-what-is-going-on-phase”, when you are about five or six years old. I just want to play with my friends and I don’t care if I’m barefoot. But then you start working it out, there is the white person coming to the house, your granny and your mother are extremely polite to them. Phase Two: “I am not as good as them, God made some trick that I have to accept.” Phase Three: “To hell with them I am so angry about what they are doing to me that I want to kill most of them.”<sup>257</sup>

This phased experience of apartheid shaped his identity construction: the young Chris did not know what was really happening in the country until he started asking questions and uncovering truths. He chose not to accept the identity imposed on him and on coloured people, and decided to rather create his own identity and fight for what he believed was just.

When I think about my time with Chris, I remember how much he loved to laugh. It was often difficult to picture him as an activist or renowned South African writer while he was telling jokes or making light of anything serious. No account of van Wyk’s life and work has failed to mention of his incredible sense of humour. David Medalie says that “he was famous for it. [...] One could see when a laugh was rising up in him; and then it would emerge, loud and unabashed – a sound that was something between a cackle and a guffaw”.<sup>258</sup> Both his memoirs are filled with humour, despite their stories about living in poverty and being oppressed. Through his writing van Wyk was determined to show that disadvantaged people are capable of living lives that challenge the identities imposed on them. And that is what Medalie states van Wyk’s humour spoke of: his “capacity for resilience and an irrepressible appetite for life even in

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<sup>256</sup> Quoted in Isaacson, ‘Chris van Wyk: The Storyteller of Riverlea’.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Medalie, ‘Words of Warmth and Laughter’.

strained circumstances”.<sup>259</sup> Van Wyk had no restraint when it came to criticizing racial and social injustices and according to Medalie “he will always be acknowledged as one of our most important anti-apartheid writers”.<sup>260</sup>

Van Wyk was also one of South Africa’s most important writers of books for children. He found joy in telling stories to children who often didn’t have books. As J. Brooks Spector has noted, there were many sides to van Wyk: “besides those wonderfully narrated memoirs of a well-lived childhood, he also wrote a small library’s worth of children’s books – including a version of Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom*”.<sup>261</sup> The texts that he wrote for school children show his ability to relate to young readers: explaining dense topics to a child is not easily accomplished, yet to him it came easily and it was a long lasting passion.

### **On Being Coloured**

Coloured identity originates from a white-imposed apartheid categorization – racist and reactionary. It is shaped by a history of colonialism, slavery and apartheid. It came about through a process of racial segregation. But race is complex, it is constructed in historical, cultural and social terms. Whether or not we accept race as a fact, we need theory to make sense of it. Van Wyk’s memoirs portray identity construction in different contexts that are dependent on race. In them identity is performed in response to apartheid racial categories: coloured people did and still do have an identity; one that has been imposed on them. However, if we could deny race or transcend it and think in postracial terms, then how would we define coloured identity?

Coloured identity formation can be perceived as a response to specific social and political realities rather than through a common ethnic identity. The coloured identity is made up of coloured people from different demographics, economic, religious and cultural influences. Mohamed Adhikari explains that coloured identities are “today often fluid”;<sup>262</sup> individuals have the ability to make and remake their idea of reality and their personal and social identities. My position on the construction of coloured identity in post-apartheid South Africa is that while

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> Spector, ‘The Beautiful Soul of Chris van Wyk, Departed’.

<sup>262</sup> Adhikari, ‘From Narratives of Miscegenation to Post-modernist Reimagining: Towards a Historiography of Coloured Identity in South Africa’, p. 14.

racism has most certainly declined, race remains central in defining identities. It is because of historic discriminations that many South African people, and coloured people specifically, are still discovering and constructing their identities. Van Wyk's construction is a particular discursive construction of coloured people from Riverlea, which participates in the conversation on coloured identity in South Africa. Coloured people existed in relation to whites during apartheid, and they were all discursively constructed. However, it was Fanon who said: "I am not the prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny".<sup>263</sup> Since identities are fluid, we have the choice to perform and construct our own in response to our history.

Judith Butler proposes that identity is performative, that it shifts and changes at different times and in different contexts. If we perform our identities constantly, in ways that adopt or resist or repeat the criteria that decide our place in society, then Butler's thoughts on performativity are apt to explain coloured identity. Strauss also suggests that identities, creolised identities specifically, are performative, thus interrogating how people who are labelled as coloured either self-identify, accommodate or resist the identity that the apartheid regime imposed upon them. My key argument is that the reality of the coloured identities described by van Wyk was enforced by the apartheid state, but these identities were also contested. Van Wyk was able to choose which identities to adopt and perform and which to develop for himself. Through the Black Consciousness Movement, writing black poetry and talking to like-minded oppressed South Africans, he became proud to be who he was, to call himself black. Erasmus and Pieterse draw a link between the term coloured and apartheid racial classifications. They say that this however does not entirely explain the construction of coloured identities because dominant ideologies such as apartheid do not have a final say in our identity construction. They propose instead that the struggle against domination causes us to define and redefine our identities. The protagonist of van Wyk's memoirs, the young Chris can be seen as the embodiment of this notion.

With his memoirs *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* and *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch*, van Wyk set out to write a story about his own life. By doing this, he also wrote about apartheid's effects on the people of Riverlea, who were his family and his friends. His texts speak about a

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<sup>263</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 229.

community whose members still question who they are and their place in South African society today. By telling his own story he had to tell the stories of other coloured people. Through his eavesdropping and uncovering of the secrets about the realities of apartheid and politics, the young Chris discloses the reasons behind the performance of racial identities, specifically coloured identities. By questioning and challenging apartheid racial categorisations, van Wyk's memoirs contribute to the construction of the new South Africa, where many coloured people are still confused as to what their identities are because they are not sure which to choose as they are left with examples of an identity that was imposed on them.

The last story in *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* begins with van Wyk's decision to continue living in Riverlea:

I decide to stay here. There are so many people in their eighties and nineties who have stories to tell. Stories that need to be told, stories that are part of our history and which apartheid had made us believe should never be told [...] but now these people are telling these stories. And they're telling them to me. And they trust me and speak to me easily because I grew up here. I played football in the streets here. I got married here. I was an activist here. And now I even work from home here, as a full-time writer. So, at least once a week, I take my tape-recorder and I take my ninety-minute cassette and I go and have a good *skinder* with an old man or woman. And the stories I hear!

The other day I go and interview Mrs Stoltenkamp, who is ninety years old and in a wheelchair. She is hard of hearing so I have to shout a little. Otherwise everything else is fine. She tells me that when her mother was a little girl in the late 1800s she and her sister became well known far and wide for their fine singing voices. So famous in fact that President Paul Kruger himself used to send for them to come and sing for him at his presidential home in Pretoria.

“President Paul Kruger, Oom (uncle) Paul?” He was the president of the old Transvaal republic, who led the *Boers* in battle against the British in the Anglo Boer War in 1899.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Van Wyk, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, p. 309.

When I read this I was intrigued. I asked van Wyk about a possible family connection between Mrs Stoltenkamp and I. He was not sure but this made me think about the interconnectivity and kinship that exists between coloureds and the interconnectivity between humans: a connection that moves across time and space to past generations and into present generations of relatives who then reach further outward to friends, community and ultimately to the entire human family. As a coloured woman, I am always looking for clues about my history or connections with people like me. It can be said that coloured people are connected in their search for their undefinable identity, but are also interconnected with all South Africans and the rest of humanity. This thinking is fundamental in uniting all humanity, irrespective of race, and is the basis on which a new society can grow. As Fanon so aptly said:

No attempt must be made to encase man, for it is his destiny to be set free. The body of history does not determine a single one of my actions. I am my own foundation. And it is by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate the cycle of my freedom.<sup>265</sup>

Like van Wyk, we all have the ability to choose our own identities and in the same way that identity is performative, so is liberation. His representation of his chosen identity and of coloured identity draws on different aspects of being coloured as well as being South African and shows that there are many different layers to your identity.

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<sup>265</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 231.

## Interviews

### **Interview with Chris van Wyk conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 4 October 2013.**

Chris van Wyk: Okay. So it's on record. So it'll be okay, I think.

Nicole Stoltenkamp: Ja. It should work.

CvW: Eating another biscuit.

NS: You don't have to say things like that, because this is actually recording.

CvW: Putting box down.

NS: Chris being silly.

CvW: Ja.

NS: I don't have any questions for you and I don't know where to start.

CvW: Well, I don't mind talking!

NS: You can start by talking about you and your books and I'll ask you any questions as you go.

CvW: You're asking me about *Shirley*, *Goodness and Mercy* and *Eggs to Lay*, *Chickens to Hatch* specifically. But you also want to get some insight into Soweto poetry and Black Consciousness poetry. If you talk about Black Consciousness poetry, and I was a Black Consciousness poet in my day, the term 'non-white' was not used.

It just makes perfect sense to me, you know, because white people do not call themselves non-black: they don't base their existence on the definition of black people – they are white – so why should we? And we all thought so at the time in the 1970s, when Black Consciousness became a pervading ideology: but why should we call ourselves “non” something? I'm non-P.W. Botha. I'm non-John Foster. He's John Foster. He's happy to be John Foster but I am a non-John Foster:

I'm a non-white. So we regarded ourselves as black. Those days have come and gone and that ideology doesn't hold fast anymore, so I don't mind if people say coloured.

Riverlea used to be 100% coloured when I was growing up there, because people like myself and Grant Stoltenkamp looked sort of similar in colour – you know what I mean – so we were regarded as coloured people: your father and me and my mother and Merle Stoltenkamp and everybody. Today anybody can move into Riverlea and stay there and become a resident of Riverlea, which is what we fought for in the ANC. Even to this day it's probably about 98% coloured. And one day, just one day maybe if it is just for the sake of your thesis, if you want, we can take a drive there.

I'll show you where we lived, where we I grew up and I'll show you where Stephanie grew up. And I'll show you where your late father lived.<sup>266</sup> And he grew up not far from where my wife grew up. They were neighbours, sort of. They were like ten houses apart. But I went to her house and I had a best friend named Keith – he appears with me on the cover of *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch*. He was my best buddy and he lived two doors away from my wife Cathy, whom I didn't know I was gonna marry, but I went to Keith's house all the time. I don't want it to sound complicated but I knew Riverlea. Riverlea was the kind of place where everybody knew each other. I still speak at awards evenings and I speak about the value of literature, the value of reading, and I often talk about these things and I go to Investec if they ask me to talk to their staff. They've got a diversity program that they run, so they get me to come and speak to the staff. So that white people and African people can have an insight into how coloured people lived once upon a time. And then I tell them just as I explained to you in the kitchen just now: that's an important point, it's not something that I show off about, but I knew everybody in our street which is amazing. It is what happens to poor people: you know, when you're all working class people, you live close to each other. I was in all those homes. And I knew every person by name: aunty so and so, uncle so and so. All the families. And to this day, I can tell you, I'll probably get it right about 85% of the time. From Stephanie Press down the road, to down the road there down down down, to Mrs Lang where we bought our koeksisters, who lived next door

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<sup>266</sup> Billie and Merle Stoltenkamp are my grandparents; Grant Stoltenkamp is my father, who passed away many years ago. They lived in Riverlea when my father was little. I had no idea that Chris knew them. Chris told me that my grandmother worked as a typesetter. He paid her to type for him when he and Fhazel Johannesburg first started their magazine. Stephanie Press is a family friend, he writes about her in the first book: when I first read it, I asked my aunt if it was the same Stephanie we knew, and so she put me in contact with Chris, who was more than happy to help with my project.

to Stephanie Press. So we knew all of them, because people came to borrow things from you and your mother sent you to borrow things from people and they lent you things, and you lent them salt or a button, or a needle and thread or two slices of bread. That's how people lived, people needed each other. Now, that was kind of an introduction.

*Shirley Goodness and Mercy* was almost an accident because I think that I had just had my fifty-sixth birthday – I'm fifty six years old – but I always wanted to be a writer since I was nine years old. I was naïve and I wasn't sure what being a writer was all about, but I was fascinated by words, stories enthralled me, they captivated me: I mean, stories we all know like *Cinderella*, *The Three Bears* and all that. We all start with those stories, but they told everybody those stories, everybody heard those stories, from aunts, uncles, mothers, fathers and so on, and I became more interested in those stories than normal kids. I became obsessive, not especially those stories but when I became literate, when I started reading I became fascinated by those stories. I think those books are actually called primers that you use in primary school, the books that you learn the words from. But sometimes there was a little rudimentary story that you could learn the words from and I fell in love with those stories even. And I remember when I was very young – I tend to believe that I was probably about nine years old but maybe I was a little older, maybe I think I'm cleverer than what I actually am! Maybe I was older – I asked my father if I could be a writer and he said “yes, of course you can.” And I used to go to the library. I remember when I was eleven years old we heard there was a library being built in Riverlea. We actually saw them putting the bricks up! Because we grew up in a Riverlea that was new: it was a township and it was a ghetto and it became dilapidated over the years, but it was new when we moved in. The shops were being built, the library was new. I used to say “wow, this is an amazing thing”, and I used to speak to my friends about it and say “what you think, we're gonna have a library”. But it was nothing to them, it was just a library. They used to wonder what am I getting so excited about. But I couldn't wait for it to open, so I could borrow books, read them, take them back and borrow more. I remember when we were in standard four or five, I had a bunch of friends whose names are also featured in the memoirs – Robert Rhoda and Keith Hendricks and Clifford Wyderman and Rodger Durell: we all used to read. I was probably the most voracious, the keenest reader among us but really they were good readers and they read without being told to read. I remember us reading *The Hardy Boys* and reading Enid Blyton's books. That was the craze at the time – probably the craze about 30 years before I came to read

them, because subsequently I've read about them and I've read about those books being around for years, so I was reading old books but they were fascinating to me anyway. So, that was Riverlea. And that was the reading years. My teachers also inspired me to read. I remember a woman called Mrs. Abrahams, Shirley Abrahams – whom I write about, sort of humorously – who inspired me to read. She loved for us to read expressively, she told us stories and she was my first teacher and my third teacher. She taught me in grade one and standard one. So she was my teacher and she would get us to read and she was gentle with us, and she was persuasive and she was clever in the way that she... she didn't beat us; she just patiently got us to read expressively and taught us the importance of books. And she's a teacher that I just got in touch with a few years ago.

NS: Did you hear from her again?

CVW: Yes!

NS: And then? Did you see her again?

CVW: No! And I lost her phone number!

NS: Ah no!

CVW: But I can still get it. I became a writer with a friend of mine, Fhazel Johennesse. I'm not sure if I showed you my first book?

NS: No, not yet. And you haven't showed me the book that you wrote for Ouma Ruby.

CVW: Oh, I'll show that to you now, and I'll show you my first book: my first book was a book of poems which came out when I was about twenty three years old. It's a collection of poems. I was in standard nine and there was this column run by Robert Greig in the *Saturday Star*. He was a journalist and editor, but he was also a poet who published his own poetry, he lived in Mayfair. Of course I didn't know where he lived or what he did or who he was. There was this announcement in the newspapers: Robert Greig would look at school poetry written by school kids. It's the worst you can imagine. I was in standard nine and I started submitting my poems. I'm not sure how long it took before one got published. All high schools were invited to send their poetry and usually it was just standard nines and matrices. And the poems got published

every week, but it was unusual because not only did the poems get published but Robert Greig did an analysis of the poems. He published four poems: for instance, Sandy van Rensburg from Roosevelt Park High, then Chris van Wyk from Riverlea High, and then Thomas Kissenger from so-and-so.

NS: From all schools, Chris? All schools in Joburg? Coloured, white...

CVW: Yes. Well it's a Joburg based newspaper and the *Star* was determined not to be racist about this. Anybody could submit poetry. I submitted. I remember myself going up to the counter at the shop and opening the newspaper, before I bought it, because you were allowed to have a glance. I opened it and saw "Poet's Platform": my poem, "Apologies to a Gardener by Chris van Wyk" – it's probably the worst poem I've ever written, but it was published. Five rands would be sent to me by post very soon, a cheque! In those days five rands was a lot of bucks! And I bought three copies of the newspaper. I was just so amazed and I ran home and I showed it to my parents. They were very pleased, very very pleased. Then a few people in the township started talking about me because they had seen it, so I'm talking about a Chris that was about seventeen years old here.

NS: And this is the first time anything of yours that was ever published?

CVW: Yes! There were my words in the newspaper, and it was a shock to me. I was so keen to become a writer. I thought, well this is the launching pad to my career. I remember a strange thing that happened. When you become a writer you think the whole world is going to applaud and... the first little remark that I found disconcerting: there was an old husband and wife who ran the dairy – in those days you could buy milk, cheese and ice-cream from the dairy, the dairy was in the same sort of shopping complex; it's strange, you can buy those things from any shop today, but this was the dairy, the dairy specifically dealt with those things – and they were a sort of decent, polite nice couple who greeted you as they walked down the road, they lived in Riverlea, you walked past them as they walked from the shop or they walked to the shop, or when you went to the shop they were behind the counter and they served you and they said "hello Chris" and so on... and about a week after my poem was published, the first funny remark: Mrs Beyers said to me, "hey you, you think you're a writer now, you think you're something hey?" And I was shocked because I thought adults would be happy. I thought they'd

say “well done”, you know? But she was almost, like, jealous and she didn’t like it. But then even more disconcerting than that, I kept on submitting poems to the “Poet’s Platform” and after about three months of submitting poetry, I got a call from the *Star* (at school because we didn’t have a phone at home). And the principal sent somebody to fetch me to take the call in his office. This must have been in 1974/5. I get to the office and he says there’s a call for you. I think this is the most amazing thing! Getting a phone call from the principal’s office. I answer it and it’s this reporter from the *Star*. She explains why she’s phoning. Maybe I was actually in matric. I think I had been submitting my poetry for about a year already, and she says that the “Poet’s Platform” column has been running for a year now, and there were two poets that were the most outstanding, me and another white girl from somewhere. And she’d like to come interview me. I was shocked. And they came to my house and I made them tea with condensed milk. Oh God, I made sure the yard was swept; I mean, you know we didn’t have a fancy garden, but at least the sand was nice. So she interviewed me. I can’t remember what she asked; I remember cutting out the article but I’m not sure if I still have that one. And they interviewed the other girl who’d won. It was the two of us; it was a big page, almost of us looking at each other even though the photos were taken separately. Something like “these are the two best poets from Poet’s Platform, Chris van Wyk from Riverlea High School another girls and so on”. Then I went to school one Monday morning. Mondays was assembly, so we were in assembly and we were singing some holy songs, and the principal was telling us what shits we are, you know the drill?! When we thought it was all over, Mr. Wills said that he’s got an announcement to make and he came forward and asked the principal if he could make his announcement. He called me out and said to the school that we must be very proud. He’s got a copy of the *Star* with this article in it about me being a poet and he said “well done Chris.” The principal didn’t even know about it. He got the entire school to applaud for me. I stood there: I was so shy but I was very proud of myself. And then that same morning we had a double period in Afrikaans with Mr. Kirk, who’s mentioned in the book as well [name changed in the memoir]. He gave us a comprehension test or whatever homework there was to do, but he said he doesn’t want us to take out our books at all. He said today’s an unusual day: he wants to do something; he said the class must watch. And he said to me, “I want to deal with van Wyk”. And he said “you, have got the temerity to call yourself a poet?”; and he said “what is an iambic pentameter?” and a list of these poetry terms, you know? And he asked me “what is a sonnet?”, “how many lines does a sonnet have?”, “What is this or

that”, of which I didn’t know anything yet. And he said to me after I had failed to answer all his questions: “Now please stop this rubbish about becoming a poet, this business about you being in the newspaper is just rubbish. Just concentrate on your homework. Concentrate on your schoolwork because you’re not going to be a writer.”

NS: That’s terrible.

CVW: I was totally floored. I looked at him and couldn’t believe what he was saying: he was my teacher! I was absolutely humiliated. And after that we had school break. None of my fellow students came up to me to say what he did to me was mean. Nobody supported me.

NS: I would’ve cried.

CVW: I thought, aw you people. And then when the book came out: well, when I had an opportunity to write about him and his disgusting clothes that he wore and his surly mannerisms, I thought here’s my chance now. But anyway. Then when I left school, while I was in matric actually, a friend of mine, Fhazel Johennesse, I was at Riverlea High School, he was at St. Barnabas.

NS: Is this the same Fhazel whom you start the magazine with?

CVW: Yes, that’s right. Now, St Barnabas was a better school than Riverlea High. It was a nicer school. It was also a school where they sang Nkosi Sikalele during assembly. Fhazel used to tell me. They did progressive things, they were a cool school! They had a cool principal. They even had African kids at the school, which I thought was so cool. When I looked around my school, I just saw coloureds: how boring! They went to play football in Soweto against Soweto teams, things like that. Their teachers encouraged them to think radically, to be progressive. Unlike Mr. Kirk, who said that is out of the question. Their teachers encouraged it, their principal, a white man, said go for it.

NS: At St Barnabas in the 70s?

CVW: At St Barnabas in the 70s, the principal was a white man, and he died about two years ago. I’ll tell you what his name was but I’ve forgotten it now. He was the principal right up until ten years ago. He was an old man, still the principal. My son, Karl, was at St Barnabas and when

St Barnabas had financial problems my wife and I used to go there because they had meetings to solve those problems and I saw him there. He was in his seventies or something, but when Fhazel was there, he was in his forties or fifties. He was a radical kind of guy. So Clifford Wydeman and my friends up there on the other end of Riverlea, they saw a likeness between Fhazel and I. They said this guy Fazel also writes essays at school and he reads a lot, so they brought Fhazel down and we met each other, and we became best buddies. I remember when I was in matric Fhazel was working already because he was a year older than me. I remember passing the hall in Colorado Drive: so the taxi stops and out pops Fhazel. He's just from work and he's going home, he says "howzit Chris?". I say, "howzit man?" He says, "listen, I wanted to ask you something, do you write poetry?" I thought what an odd thing to ask somebody, you don't go up to people and ask them that. But he assumed that I did! And you know what I said? Yes, of course! Because I should be writing poetry. So he says, "will you show me some of your poetry?" And I went home and thought, oh my God, what have I done? I've lied. I better write a few poems!

And I started writing a few poems. Probably the biggest junk in the world. I'm glad they haven't survived. It was the oddest thing, I mean if I told Fhazel about this today, he would say "Oh God, you are embarrassing me. Stop saying these things!" But it's true. So he was working – you must know, this is the heart of apartheid South Africa: the 70s were heavy apartheid but he was working with two white girls. They became friends, colleagues. And they wrote poetry. They probably also wrote junk. And they said to Fhazel, why don't you get another coloured guy, and the four of us can write a book together. Like just sticking our tongues out at the racist South Africa: two black guys and two white guys writing poetry together. So we each wrote fifteen poems, so there'd be sixty poems in the book and we'd be famous! We thought isn't this an amazing idea? So we started writing and eventually the girls faded from the scene, and were no longer part of our plan.

NS: Why? They got scared or they lost interest?

CVW: They just lost interest. It was something you say one week and it disappeared the next, but they didn't scare or anything and we weren't interested in writing poetry with them. They didn't turn us down or say we don't want to be part of the plan anymore; it was just that we became more serious. The more we wrote, the more we read. Then we read about South African poetry: I

read South African poetry magazines and international poets like Seamus Heaney and Pablo Neruda and others. I decided that the noblest artist that you could become ever in your life was to become a poet. When people said to me, years later, that's Chris, the poet, it made me so proud because just to be a poet was the most amazing thing, and it was like having reached some kind of a height. I thought there was nothing better in the world than expressing yourself in words and expressing an emotion and a feeling and an event in such a way that it becomes memorable and that people quote it ever after. I just wanted to be a poet. I mean: poets, all poets, most poets are like that, they think it's just the most amazing thing. It's like writing songs in words without music, it has its own music. It is the most fascinating thing. Love poems, poems about events, serious poems, angry poems, whatever. So Fhazel and I started that. And another misconception – we decided that we were going to be poets, well we were poets by now, so we decided we should start a poetry magazine, or a literary magazine. I also wanted to get into prose writing, short stories and a novel, eventually. But it was nice to start off as a poet. Every week we'd get in touch with each other. It's strange, we didn't have cell phones or even phones at home, but we'd find a way to get in touch. We'd drink alcohol also, lots of alcohol. Because we thought that was part of being a poet.

NS: Smoke a lot and drink a lot.

CVW: Ja! [Acting out smoking and writing] I'm a poet! Well, we did a lot of that and we had lots of adventures and chased after girls and did things. It was nice. We were just ordinary young boys. But we were special, we felt that we were somehow in some way special because Fhazel is a clever guy, and what's always struck me about him was that he was he was highly articulate. He spoke so well, it was like music to my ears. He spoke beautifully and he refused to speak slang. For instance, if someone in Riverlea said "Heita", he'd say "Good afternoon, how are you doing?" And we had arguments, we had lots of debates about writing, and about politics and about being black. We taught each other things, ideas and so on. And you become sort of high on these things; it was a lovely time in my life to be with such a guy, we were just buddies. We liked music also. We listened to the Beatles, and we listened to heavy metal music. I was the heaviest metal fan in Riverlea. Nobody else understood what I was listening to. I've still got the LPs, believe it or not: Black Sabbath and Uriah Heep. When I look at the LPs my sons tease me, and I think what a wasted youth. But it was a special time and I remember during that time some

things that you look back on with pride: first of all, I remember Fhazel and I were the first two people who spoke about Mandela. I remember hearing the name Mandela from Fhazel for the first time because he heard it from his teachers. We spoke about Mandela because when I was fifteen I didn't know about Mandela. When I was twelve I didn't know about Mandela. It had happened, he was on the island, and the ANC was banned. I think I heard about Biko before... Maybe not... I'd heard about Mandela first. But I remember whenever we spoke about Biko and Mandela and about Black Consciousness and the ANC, uncles and aunts would say to us "don't speak about politics, you are going to end up on the island!"

You became feverish with excitement when you thought about the possibility that in this country apartheid could be defeated, and I used to tell people about that. I remember specifically there was a man who played football with my father, Callie Paige, and he'd come to our house to visit, and he'd listen to me explain to them, because I also spoke about things that they should have known about better than me. My father would sort of boast about me. When they'd have a drink in the lounge and talk politics, he'd say "listen, let me just call my son, Chris just come tell these guys". Then I'd tell them about the ANC and I'd feel very proud of myself. I'd explain to them what happened and what freedom means. I remember Callie Paige, who was my father's age – he must be about seventy-eight also today, he still lives in Riverlea – he said to me, "Chris, I want to tell you something, listen to me carefully" – this was about in 1980 – "the whole of Riverlea knows that you're a writer now". I was just really an activist.

NS: You also need to talk about your involvement in the unbanning of the ANC. But after you finish your story.

CVW: Ok, Ok. So he said to me: "look, let me tell you something, when I was born apartheid was here" (although apartheid started in 1948 officially, when he was already a big stupid man.) "Many have tried to defeat it, but the white man is the most powerful human in the world". It was this defeatist attitude. It was like white people are the master, you must look up to the master. For instance, my friend Keith's father would say it's against God to be against your government. I used to get mad and say but what if the government is against God? But if the government is doing something ungodly, it is my right and my duty to stop the government from doing it. And they'd say, "well, you are too big for your boots, you are only nineteen or twenty years old and you're talking this nonsense!" Anyway, Callie Paige used to say to me, "you will

never defeat apartheid, let me tell you that". A few months after the elections when the ANC came into power, I was jogging in Riverlea and he was far away but I called him and I said, "uncle Callie, uncle Callie come listen here," and I jogged up to him and I was out of breath and I said, "let me just get my breath back I want to tell you something". I said, "do you know what I want to tell you?" And he said "no." "I want to tell you that the ANC is in power now." I said, "do you remember you told me that they will never be in power?" I said, "don't you feel stupid now?"

NS: What did he say?

CVW: He just shrugged his shoulders and said "uh uh." You know? I realised I was being too harsh because he really didn't know, he just didn't know. Somebody asked me one day... I can't remember how we got onto this, but he asked and I said to him I knew we'd have freedom one day. He looked up and said, "but Chris, how did you know?" And I said, but it was obvious, it was like an oncoming truck. It was coming. Because if you look at it, Ghana getting decolonised in the 1950s, and then Kenya and all these other countries: Tanzania and then Zambia, and then closer to home Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, which used to be Rhodesia. It was coming. Even the white prime ministers knew it was on its way. It was moving southwards and I said all you had to do was look at that. You were never going to keep people in bondage for such a long time. But anyway, I'm describing the 70s and the 80s to you and it all had to do with my writing. This awareness of the world around me and the possibilities and the books that I was reading and my friendship with Fhazel, which was a really nice friendship because he had such a good mind. Sadly enough, he stopped writing.

NS: Is he still alive?

CVW: Yes, he's very much alive; I bumped into him maybe about eight years ago.

NS: So you guys aren't close friends anymore? Eight years? Chris, that's sad.

CVW: No. So I bumped into him eight years ago, and he was happy to see me. He was with his new wife and I was with Cathy. And he looked at me and said, "Aw you're getting fat, you look like a ball!" You know, if someone says something like that to you... I know girls don't like it, but males also don't like it. And then one day I phoned his ex-wife because I needed his phone

number for something. She asked when last I had seen Fhazel. I told her and I told her about the fat remark, and she said “what, did you see what he looks like now?” This conversation made me so happy. She said “Chris, he’s twice your size”. Now I’m dying to see him so I can say “aw you look like two balls, I look like one ball!” So funny. We remained friends but he wasn’t interested in politics or becoming an activist. We drifted apart. He was all talk, but when it came to working as an activist, he didn’t want to. I became friends with a whole lot of other people who were political activists and who are still my friends today. They were determined and we all joined the UDF, made posters and banners and went to rallies. And Fhazel didn’t want to do that kind of thing.

NS: Now you can tell me about the UDF and activism

CVW: The UDF. The UDF started in, I think, 1984.

NS: I thought it started earlier.

CVW: Ja, 1980. About two months ago I went to a funeral: of professor Mohammed. He was a maths professor at Wits university. You know, the UDF, the United Democratic Front was formed because... and there’s still speculation about this, and the jury’s still out on it, but people say that Allan Boesak says that it was his idea. Do you know who Allan Boesak is?

Ns: Yes.

CVW: He’s a man with a very big ego. He’s got a massive ego. He thought that he was the next best thing in South Africa next to Mandela. Or maybe bigger than Mandela. He was a good orator. An amazing orator. But he became corrupt. In the months leading up to the formation of the UDF Boesak was speaking at a political event somewhere; you were born in 83?

NS: 83, yes.

CVW: You weren’t even there when the UDF started. The reason I ask is because I’d like to know if you have a sense of the mood. Because the mood is interesting: often when people write about history they don’t write about the mood that existed in the country. The ANC had been banned a long time ago, they had been banned in 1960 or 61 – I can’t remember, I write about this all the time. Many in the ANC were imprisoned, including Mandela. Mandela’s prison

number is 46664: 64 is the year in which he was imprisoned, 46 is how old he was, then there's another 6 and that is because he was prisoner number 6. During the trial they each got numbered. So that's how you got your prison number. So Walter Sisulu, who was older, would probably have been 48764. So let me give you a quick history. The ANC is banned, writers are banned, all political parties are banned in the 1960s as well after the government had declared a state of emergency and they wanted to settle scores with all political groups who were opposed to apartheid. Many activists are forced into exile: musicians, writers, political activists. So when I grow up in the 1960s – I was born in 1957 – when I attend school in '62 or something, the ANC is banned already. I don't know the name and it becomes so bad that your community don't even talk about the ANC because they actually should, even if they have to whisper it amongst each other. But they are more frightened than they should be. If people say ANC they go to the window and they close the curtains! They do ridiculous things, man. Stupid things. When we grew up and we became politically active, we laughed at them and said oh God it's not so bad! Oh look there's a policeman going down the road, you mustn't say ANC. You know? Coloured people were actually so conservative that they made me sick sometimes. So conservative. And racist. They actually didn't want to talk about it. At school when we mentioned it in a classroom, instead of a teacher telling you what was actually going on, they would say "no we can't talk about that". They could. They could a little bit. But they didn't. I don't know if you remember when we were kids, our parents didn't want to talk about sex? "No! We can't talk about that!" and "No you cannot ask me that".

NS: My mother gave me a video. Handed me a VHS, "here you go".

CVW: Oh my God... So, when I was about twenty-three, twenty-four, Achmat Dangor was another friend of mine. He's also a writer, he lived in Riverlea for a while. Do you know Jessie Duarte? Now Achmat is Jessie's older brother. Before I met Achmat, he was the youth league leader of the Labour Party. If you asked him that today, he'll deny it. Because the Labour Party was a kind of a limp coloured political party. And there was a Labour Party that Allan Hendricks led at some time and there was a Federal Party and a National Party. Of the three, the Labour Party was the most left leaning. But they didn't really mean anything in the communities because it was just for City Council meetings and seeing that your streets were clean. But they never went

beyond that. So eventually people like Achmat Dangor left the Labour Party and secretly maybe joined the ANC or even if they didn't join, they supported the ANC's policies. Very secretly.

At the time in the 1970s, Allan Boesak attended a meeting, can't remember where. I read about this: he made a speech and said it's time, there's so much excitement in the country about people wanting to be free that there are different people talking about freedom and talking about their rights, maybe not articulating it into freedom. Our rights have been lost and we don't have rights, this and that's not happening, that kind of thing. It's an oppressed people trying to find a voice. These people were spread out from Johannesburg to Cape Town to Durban, all over the place. Coloured, Indian, African people but they weren't speaking as one voice. There were sports groups saying we need to participate on all the sports fields. There were youth groups, church groups, women's groups, wherever people met, congregated in small or larger numbers, they spoke about apartheid and what it was doing to them. People in communities said I can't feed my family anymore. People on the sports field said I can be the best soccer player in Johannesburg or in Riverlea but I can't represent my country, it's wrong. So Boesak makes his speech at a meeting held by one of these groups. He says it's time all the groups join forces as one big party. This is twenty years after the ANC had been banned. This is the 80s now. In the meantime in the 1960s, when the government was rounding up the activists and imprisoning them, one of the biggest activists was Oliver Tambo. Tambo takes years to convince the world that they are fighting a just cause. He manages to open ANC and anti-apartheid organisations and offices all over the world.

In the 1980s, at the same time that Allan Boesak calls for one voice for all organisations to come together, Oliver Tambo also does it. He says we must now fight apartheid as one, and there are so many small organisations in the country. We must bring them all together to fight. Today there are different opinions about who said it: some say it was Boesak, others say it was Tambo. Even historians can't decide who it actually was. But I suppose that's not important. Unless you're Allan Boesak, that's not important.

Back to professor Mohamed: he comes to Achmat's house when the UDF gets formed, with all the local activists in Riverlea to hear about this new organization. But the United Democratic Front isn't a singular organization, it's an umbrella organization. It had lots of different organizations underneath it. So we all meet at rallies and we all have the same goals in mind: the

“Release Mandela Campaign”, we were trying to gather one million signatures, take it to government to get them to release Mandela. So we’d go up and down the streets, Riverlea, Corrie, Bosmont, getting people to sign petitions.

NS: Did you get lots of signatures?

CVW: Yes.

NS: In those areas?

CVW: Most people chased us away. Most people told us to go to hell. They don’t want these people to rule the country anyway. They’re happy with apartheid. But every third house or so said ja, they’ll sign it. A lot of people said you shouldn’t be involved in this, we don’t like it, just get away from my house.

NS: Do you think they actually thought there might be a civil war? Or they didn’t want blacks to rule?

CVW: I think in most cases they just didn’t want blacks to rule, it was a race thing. No, no, no: we want white people to rule. And some of them said it in so many words. We like white rule. And I said to them, “but you’re a second class citizen without a vote.” And they said, “ok, I don’t need to vote, what? Voting is rubbish. I’m happy not to vote.” So we got involved and the kinds of things we did was, we made posters, secretly. With activists of different races, we got together, organized concerts, raised funds. A lot of us were detained, we fought and raised funds for people who were in detention, for lawyers’ fees and so forth. We made posters and t-shirts, to free Mandela, the million signatures campaign. I’m trying to think of all the things we did: every week we’d be on the streets, we’d gather at someone’s house and then we’d go out and fight against apartheid.

NS: Do you think there was a cultural revolution, through writing?

CVW: You know, it would be nice to say that I wrote this poem and then the country came to its senses. But it wasn’t like that. I’ll tell you something though; the ANC was very interested in writers in the country and artists. Because there was a mood, there was an anti-apartheid mood:

writers were writing about apartheid and how they hated apartheid. I think I told you about one of the poems a very short poem that I...

NS: That you read somewhere?

CVW: Yes: that I read somewhere and felt just encapsulated what the mood was like. I probably have it somewhere. No, not probably, I do have it. It's in a magazine. I'm not sure which issue. What I didn't tell you: after Fhazel and I started our magazine, we only had two issues, and then I became employed as the editor of a magazine called *Staffrider*. It was a very famous magazine. It was famous before I got there. I didn't make it famous.

NS: Oh, I thought you did. I'm pretty sure I make it sound like you did.

CVW: No, no, no! No, I was the editor, which was nice, it was a role that I played but other writers were also editing the magazine. Matsemela Manaka, who edited before me, and Andries Oliphant, who edited after me. I think Andries was the best editor of the magazine. He really ran it well. There was a small community of writers and I was interested in all of them. The first writer that I came across was when my English teacher Mr. Boa brought a book to school, the poems of Oswald Mtshali. I was in matric, I think, or standard nine. I can't remember the year but he was our English teacher, and I was the guy who wrote the best essays. Nobody could beat me with essay writing. My teacher liked me. I was sitting in class one day. I was sitting at the back and I was chatting to some guys and he said guys I want you to listen up: this is not a lesson, but I'm going to read something to you now, it's the poems of Oswald Mtshali from *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* – the title of the collection, I've still got my copy here. He explained to us that these are revolutionary poems by a Zulu guy in English. His name is Oswald Mtshali and he drives a scooter. He was a messenger in town: he worked for a company and they gave him letters to deliver from Commissioner Street to Fraser, from Fraser Street to President Street, but he was jotting down his poems. He wrote them in about 1973 or 1974, maybe a year or two earlier. The strange thing is they weren't banned. Usually these things get banned immediately but the government was sometimes erratic and these poems weren't banned.

They spoke about blackness, they spoke about a need for change and that was enough to get your work banned. Sometimes the government overlooked things. So Mr. Boa explains who Mtshali is. I have never heard of him, but it's poetry that speaks to your heart. At the time we were

learning Shakespeare and Wordsworth and Yeats and stuff like that and he said this is very different: to the point. This has got none of those flowery euphemisms attached to it. This is straightforward stuff. Then he said something that I will never forget. This isn't an English class, so I don't mind if you people don't listen. But Chris, listen. Because you're going to do this soon. He had so much faith in me. I wasn't going to listen. I sort of was half listening because it was words and writing, but when he said that, I listened more attentively. I heard it and thought this a new way of writing poetry: it's sharp, it's bold, it's brassy, it's confident, it is to the point, there are no holds barred, it's clever, it's angry and it's relevant. Fhazel once said "isn't it nice when you read a poem like Oswald Mtshali, or local poetry, the guys that came before us, Oswald Mshtali, Mongane (Wally) Serote, Mafika Gwala?" We looked up to them, and Fhazel once said something wonderful to me, he said, "isn't it nice when you hear the word dagga in a poem?" I said "yes, that's why it becomes relevant." He said, "that's it, Chris, it's our own language. We're hearing it in poems." And when someone said poem we thought of England and about green fields and about roses. We thought about something else. Then we read this and it immediately made us pay attention to what was happening locally. We also started reading about the history of writing in the country: Alan Paton and *Cry, the Beloved Country* in the 1950s, about Nadine Gordimer, about Es'kia Mphahlele and all those people I met. They became friends of mine. One day Fhazel and I went to visit a friend, Benji Francis: a man walked in, the reception said whom shall I say is calling. Tell him it's Oswald Mtshali, he said. We were shattered, gobsmacked. We couldn't even go up to him and say hi. Today Oswald and I are friends.

One day I went to meet Wally Serote. The ANC held a conference: they called it the Conference on Culture and Resistance. They were in exile, the conference would be held in Botswana. They asked musicians and artists. They sent us all letters, secretly, to attend. I was working as the editor of *Staffrider*. The ANC had a newsletter and a magazine that came out every month. They sent it to people whom they thought were on their side. There were many who were secret supporters. They had to disseminate information. They had a radio station called Radio Freedom which broadcast from Zambia or Botswana. So the ANC had conferences every year where they'd discuss strategy, the way forward and keeping the ANC alive in Botswana, and in Moscow, and in London, but also in Soweto, otherwise people would forget.

I'm jumping all over the place. But I suppose it's nice to hear it being said.

NS: It is nice. It's also nice to be able to add a few quotes from you.

CVW: I'm glad you're telling me you're going to quote me. Now I'm going to speak well. I'll try and say profound things.

NS: Please do!

CVW: In fact, I remember about three hours ago I was going to tell you how I wrote *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*. Because you said you were going to ask me that.

NS: Oh, then I never did because you were talking too much.

CVW: Well, you said let's talk about your two books, and then I said well, first I have to tell you...

**Interview with Chris van Wyk conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 9 December 2013**

Nicole Stoltenkamp: What makes *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* a good story?

Chris van Wyk: I'm glad you think it's a good story. When I wrote it I didn't think it was a good story but a lot of people think it's a good story. Why is the book selling? And why are people talking about it? And why are people excited about it? And I think what makes it a good story ultimately is that it's a story that almost, in a sense has never been told. It's a story about ordinary people. I set out writing a story about my own life, but if you live in a community like Riverlea, or if you live in a poor community, you can't write about your own life without it touching other peoples' lives because you live so close physically, and you live so close spiritually as well that you almost share your life with other people. When I wrote the story, I thought it was my story but I realised afterwards that it is my story indeed, but it is also other peoples' stories. You know, lots of people said to me, "thank you for writing my story". I think it comes out of a time when great peoples' lives were being told and people had the notion, ordinary people had the notion that only if you had achieved something really amazing, only if

you had conquered something or you had done something monumental could your story be told and then they saw that there was an ordinary boy whose story was being told and this was me as well as them, you know? Ordinary lives could also be celebrated.

NS: What is your specific writing style?

CvW: I think the fun thing about being a writer is that you can spend your entire life trying to find a writing style. I don't have a specific writing style but when I wrote *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* I was conscious of what I wanted to do. I wanted to write it in a childlike fashion and I wanted to write it with the curiosity of a child, with the simplicity of a storyteller. Sometimes I think that writers take themselves too seriously and they almost in a way try to show off. I tried to do the opposite of that. I said to myself: I know all the big words and I do lots of crossword puzzles and I can use puns very cleverly and so on, but all I want to do in this case is just tell a simple story. The worth and the value of the story will in itself make the reader want to read on. I don't need other devices in order to do that. So I just used simplicity and a childlike simplicity: not even an adult simplicity but a child's simplicity to tell the story.

NS: Who is your audience? As an author, what risks did you take? Since you cannot gauge who the audience is and whether or not they would be willing to read the book or misinterpret it entirely.

CvW: Well, whenever I speak to budding authors or writers, I tell them to imagine an audience because once you have an audience in mind your story becomes more real. I specifically imagined my audience. I remember speaking to a fellow writer once upon a time before I'd written *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, and saying to him, you know, I'd like to write a book that addresses the people of Riverlea, that specifically speaks to coloured people, but which could be read by people universally. And I think because the specific becomes universal, when people write specifically, whether you're Faulkner or Hemmingway, they write about characters in their own home town. They don't think about us living here in South Africa or in Malawi or in the Congo or in Switzerland. They write about their own audience but the specific becomes general and becomes universal, so that's what I was hoping for. That it would become a universal story.

NS: Did you learn anything about coloured people or about yourself from writing the memoir?

CvW: The nice thing about the memoir, about writing such a memoir, is that you do learn. As you write you speak to people and people react to the book after it's published, and I learned some really crazy things. First of all I learned that coloured people loved the book a lot. Lots and lots of coloured people who had never read a book in their lives started reading *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* and wanted to read it and really liked it. In fact some of them read it several times over because some of them told me it was their favourite book – although I suspect it was the only book they'd ever read. But in the case of other people, some people objected to the fact that I had written about coloureds drinking and getting drunk. It's as if they so stupidly didn't want people from other race groups to know our secrets, even though I know that white people drink, Indian people drink, African people drink. But I wrote a true and frank account about what happened in Riverlea and I wrote about how my father drank, and about how his friends drank, and I thought it was quite funny to write about it. But some people felt very unhappy about it. There's also the fact that even though I thought it was a memoir I had this idealistic vision of it that it was about me and the people I grew up with. I used actual names! Which maybe I shouldn't have done because some of them really didn't like what I had said about them and their families. There are skeletons in cupboards that people want to remain in cupboards and they found it offensive that I could just write about them without even asking them if I could write about them.

NS: Is there a message in your memoir that you want your audience to appreciate?

CvW: The message I suppose is that you don't have to be great: if you have lived a life it's an achievement as well to have: that you are somebody. I remember thinking that [in apartheid South Africa] the world revolved around other people, around rich people or around white people. You knew that they were the people that mattered. Coloured people were on the edge: we were onlookers, we were bystanders, we were witnessing something but we weren't actually participating in it. When Chris Barnard did the first heart transplant, it was a white achievement. It wasn't a South African achievement because even as a little ten year old at the time I felt left out of something, I felt like I wasn't part of it. I wanted to be part of it but I wasn't really. In fact also when my father brought home the *Star* or any other newspaper it was white news – whether it was good news or bad news. Sometimes it was a mayor having an affair with somebody or whatever, or it was people achieving something, or it was young people doing well in matric,

excelling academically, but it wasn't quite us. We had a section at the back of the paper just to please us. Just a half a page saying "coloured news" or something. But when I wrote *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* I thought, well, we also counted for something, you know, we lived a life.

NS: Are there parts that were purposely meant to unsettle?

CvW: No. No, I just wrote it and wrote it from the beginning to the end without actually thinking about it. I was consciously thinking about how I was telling my story, but I never thought that I would unsettle people. I realised afterwards [that] if you're writing in a little corner in your house somewhere at a study table, at a computer, and nobody is around, it feels like you're telling a secret because it doesn't feel like anybody is gonna know about it. And even though I knew or I suspected that the book might be published sometime in the future, I thought that if anybody read it, a book is kind of an intimate thing between reader and writer. The reader reads it without me being around; you read it without me being around. The status of reader and writer between Nicole and Chris is changing now because you've actually asked all the intimate details about the book, but by and large with most ordinary readers they read it and they don't ever contact me about it. But they've read some of my secrets and so when there were things that were unsettling I didn't mean for them to be unsettling. I remember kids asking me questions in a school assembly where I'd gone to speak about the book, which I had to answer, like you're asking me questions now: about how I got one hundred cuts from a school teacher once. That was unsettling, and it's not something that I want to talk about, but a kid stood up and asked me about it and he had a right to ask me because I had written about it. So, some of the things were unsettling, but I didn't mean for them to be unsettling. I know that I used the kind of gimmick in which I tell the story of apartheid, the searing cruelty of apartheid, from the naïve perspective of a little boy and that unsettles audiences. But one or two Afrikaners confronted me and told me how much they liked the book, but asked me if I still hated them. It was a strange question. I don't hate anybody. But that's the kind of candour that I use to write and some people mistook the candour for deliberately wanting to unsettle them.

NS: Do you think it is an accurate representation of Riverlea, your neighbourhood?

CvW: I never can tell. It is an accurate representation as far as I'm concerned and you have to underline *as far as I'm concerned*: it is subjectively mine. It is Chris van Wyk's perspective.

Some people don't have a kind of perspective like that, you know? I'll give you a kind of diametrically opposed perspective: a coloured woman who'd read the book and lived in Riverlea came to me and said she didn't even know that apartheid existed. She was the same age as me. But her family lived such a cloistered life that her parents never discussed it and her father and mother never spoke out against oppression in the way that my parents did – they didn't speak out about it in the way of true radicals of course, but they would come home and they would say “that effing boss” or “that Mr so-and-so”, “that white piece of this”, and that made me understand that there was a difference between ourselves and white people, and that they were ruling us and that it was unpleasant sometimes, until I began to experience it myself. But some people did not experience it in the way that I did and a lot of people enjoyed the book, but some of them didn't like the portrayal of people. A woman, for instance, who works at a bank that I visited, told me that she had read my book and enjoyed it, but she said I referred to Wentworth, where she comes from in Durban, as a slum. And I just wrote it down. I can't even remember referring to Wentworth, but she took offence. A lot of people took offence to the way in which I portrayed people in Riverlea, but it's my portrayal and I'm happy with it and I'll stand by it, and if somebody else writes a book about Riverlea, I'm absolutely sure that I will differ with their perspective or their perceptions of it.

NS: How would you say the term or category coloured is constructed in the book? Is it a term that could simply be a way of defining people who cannot be defined in any other way? How was or is this category embodied by a specific community (Riverlea) and its members?

CvW: I'm sure I used the word “coloured” dozens of times. I must have because I'm writing about coloured people. I remember the first time I typed it on the computer. I sat back and looked at it and thought... how should I say this? You know? I grew up, as an adult I became radicalised in comparison to other coloured people. I joined the UDF and I fought against apartheid and the first thing we did was to pronounce ourselves as black people. Those people who were activists in the movement, the mass democratic movement, or the UDF, if you like: we pronounced ourselves as black. We saw ourselves – coloureds, Indians and Africans – as black people. And here I'm writing about a community, and shouldn't I call them black then? I didn't because I knew that they wanted to be called coloured and I know there's a serious problem with how coloureds, how these people see themselves. They see themselves as brown, as black, as

coloured, as in between, as human beings, as this, as that. I don't know what they see themselves as. I sometimes don't even bother because I think it's a waste of time, but at the time I remember consciously thinking about what to call them and settling on coloured because it's a non-controversial term.

NS: If coloured people are neither black nor white and were grouped together during apartheid with a mix of people classed as non-white in designated areas, and they adopted religion, language and cultural elements from each other, which led to closer identification between neighbours within communities like Riverlea, what has changed since writing the memoir? It is set mostly during apartheid and briefly after the ANC came into power.

CvW: What has changed? Look, the first thing that has changed is that the ANC has grown more corrupt under Jacob Zuma, like you can't believe. The romantic notion of the new South Africa: that bubble was burst by Zuma as he built and rebuilt Nkandla. The ANC for me has become a hateful organization, one that doesn't look after its people anymore. As far as coloured people are concerned, you know, I grapple with that kind of problem because when I was living in Riverlea right up to before we left, I was involved in community issues to some extent. I won't say deeply. I can't say that I was deeply involved. I was involved as an activist not in community issues, but as an activist fighting to end apartheid. But after the ANC came into power I became involved: I started a neighbourhood watch program which I wanted to extend into a neighbourhood care program – if I could call it that, like the poor people of Riverlea. We could take care of them in some way as well, raise funds and so on. But the apathy was unbelievable. I couldn't grapple with that. People are indifferent: the people of Riverlea and I suspect that is the same for most townships. People don't care much for what's going on. For my own part I often have a debate with my friends, my activist friends, some come from Coronationville, some from other coloured communities, and we get together sometimes. We all have one thing in common and that is that we were comrades in the struggle, and some of them speak about wanting to go back to the townships, about wanting to back to go fight battles there because it's serious. There are serious drug problems and that kind of thing. I definitely don't want to do that because... why should I? Aren't there other people who should be doing that? I ask myself. There must be other coloured people who should take the lead. Are they gonna ask me after I die also to come and help them? Do you know what I mean? Surely, there should be someone there able to do it. They

should teach themselves to do and they should... and I don't live in that community anymore, I don't. The longer I stay out of that community the less I know about it... I don't know what's going on in Riverlea anymore. When I was there, there wasn't a drug problem as bad as there is now. So, I didn't turn my back on Riverlea. But I've got my life to live. I live in a new area now. I'm not an activist here in Northcliff, but I want to write. And in order for me to go to Riverlea... I can't even drive! I can't ask Nicole to give me a lift to Riverlea every morning so that I can be an activist there. I don't know what has changed and what has remained the same. But I think that Riverlea is worse off than it was when I was living there.

NS: How long have you been out of Riverlea for?

CvW: Since about 2004/2005.

NS: Why did you choose to write from the perspective of the young Chris?

CvW: For obvious reasons. It's a device that some writers can use and some writers can't. I found that first of all I could do it quite easily, and I had written other children's stories and short stories before. I could get into that mind set quite easily, so I decided to write from a child's perspective because when I wrote *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* there was a lot of deleting: I write from a position of anger about something and I'd say, but that's not true. Because when I was five years old, I wasn't angry about having to go to the post office and having to stand at the window, I wasn't angry about apartheid, I wasn't angry about living in a coloured community, I wasn't angry about using a non-white entrance. I was curious about these things but I wasn't angry about them because I didn't know what it was. I wasn't even angry at white people. I thought they existed and we existed and I remember I was six or seven years old, when kids don't talk politics, but whenever I'd see white people I'd know that they lived separate lives and I had these thoughts in my head that they lived better lives than us. I could see from the suburbs they lived in and the things they did on television, from the things they said on the radio that they were kind of God's chosen people and that we were not, and I thought that maybe that was something and this was when I was 6 or 7 years old. This was something I should accept because it's the way of the world and nothing can change that. and I remember listening to John Voster, one of the Prime Ministers that came after Verwoerd. He came after Verwoerd actually, in 1966/67, and I remember him talking on the radio and I remember his Afrikaner accent: I vividly

remember him talking about the “coloured question” or “the coloured problem”, and I thought “why am I a problem to other people, what have I done? But if he says that and he’s the Prime Minister he knows what he’s talking about.” But long before my other friends could understand it I sort of zoomed in on the problem and I realised that it was racism. I think before I was twelve years old I started thinking along those lines already. But before that I was naïve, innocent, and I wrote from that perspective and I know that to use a perspective like that is a clever device because that actually does unsettle a lot of readers. Lots of readers have said, “do you know that some people think that you decided when you were a kid not to write about apartheid in *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*?” And they said to me, “Chris, this is the most revealing book about apartheid I’ve read.” Do you understand the gimmick? The device used?

NS: Were you ever confused about being coloured? In terms of racial hierarchies: class and race.

CvW: I was never confused about being coloured but I was always questioning it. I always asked myself, where do we come from? Why are we here in the middle? What has happened? I know that white people did this to us, put us in the middle. But I’ve never felt confused – I can’t remember in my life, in my adult life at least, when I started getting a self-consciousness. I can never remember feeling that I was less than other people, but I did feel that there was something that I needed to explore about being coloured and often I’d look around me and I’d see that there were darker coloureds, lighter coloureds, there were coloureds with straight hair, coloureds with curly hair, and as an adult I understand where that comes from now. But I thought that our parents should have helped us as children because there was so much racism and teasing and that kind of thing going on that was unnecessary and that isolated some coloured people from others. I understand now why it was and why we were lumped together. But I was never confused, and I still think that to this day I have this idea of writing a book about it: kind of an epic tale about where coloureds come from, what they went through, what they’ve been through over the years, starting from 300 or 500 years ago. My only problem is that I would write this book and no coloured would read it.

NS: I’d read it. As black resistance grew, you [became] unrestrained in accusing the apartheid government of throwing the African and coloured people into a cesspit “upside down with our faces submerged in the shit and the whites are holding us by our little brown ankles saying:

should we/shouldn't we? The coloureds are holding on for dear life saying we may not be white but we're not quite down there with the blacks". Was it contempt for the apartheid regime or more confusion about your identity here? Feeling like you don't belong "down there"? Even though you weren't in agreement with them ideologically, this is simply apartheid imposed racism, repeated.

CvW: I remember putting that in the book: you saw it in the book, hey? I remember that cesspit thing with people being held by the ankles because it was a joke that I had heard. You know, someone said to me: "Do you know what's a coloured?" "Well, a black person is in the cesspit, a white person is not in the cesspit, the coloured is almost in the cesspit". It was a sort of vivid description about where coloureds stood. When I became actively involved in politics, I was always a little contemptuous about coloured people and their attitude, because they didn't like white people oppressing them, but they pretty much enjoyed oppressing black people. They used the "K" word all the time but they moaned, groaned and whined when white people called them something or abused them in some way. They didn't mind abusing black people and the things they sometimes said about African people are sort of... you can't repeat it. I couldn't put half those things in the book because it was so bad. Yet now they're complaining again, they're saying we weren't good enough to be this and we weren't good enough to be that, that old expression, I hear it all the time. But these are the same people who didn't like black people. Even though I understand racism when whites don't like black people, I don't understand racism when coloureds don't like black people who are being treated just as badly by whites themselves. That's the kind of contempt I couldn't understand. And that is what I was referring to when I wrote that, I suppose, but I don't think I was confused about being coloured.

NS: What do you think of the idea that identity can be seen as a performance? Adjusting according to a particular context, for instance Ouma in the bookshop changing her voice and way of speaking.

CvW: My Granny, Raya van Heerden, who lived in Corronationville, was a great woman and I loved her to bits. But the apartheid oppression had obviously had an effect on her. She did feel that being coloured was being less than being white. It was obvious to me because of the way she spoke: when she encountered a white person she sort of upped her game! It was actually quite silly to the observer, even to someone as young as me. I remember her saying, "Good afternoon

“sir, may I help you?”, and I thought it was stupid. And I know that a lot of other coloured men and women were doing that and were trying to bend over backwards to please white people: in work situations and at home, whenever white people came to visit, and this actually perpetuated the racism because white people saw this fawning among the coloured people and they became more cruel and more bossy. So my granny died about six years ago. She died at the ripe old age of 95, so she lived a long life, and she wasn’t even literate, but she was a happy woman and she was a woman who was confused by the fact that she was coloured.

NS: How many identities do you uncover in Chris’s character? Or do you think of Chris as a free thinker, poet, freedom fighter, activist, intellectual? Are his identity shifts subjective? They are shaped by the national struggle and are culturally and politically influenced. He becomes more politically aware and his attitudes change.

CvW: To tell the truth, I didn’t even notice these things. I didn’t notice that I was changing all the time, but I don’t think it’s a bad idea to change and the first thing I remember about being who I am, about my identity when I was growing up, was when I actually accepted that I was black. And I actually became radical in my thinking and wanted to see a change, wanted to join a political movement. I became friendly with other people who had the same ideas. Luckily for me there were lots of people older than me and wiser than me and younger than me who wanted the same things and so I could learn from them and they could learn from me and so on. There was a small coterie of friends in Riverlea that got together to discuss politics, poetry and culture, and to go to poetry readings when we were 17, 18 or 19 years old, which is a thing that other coloured people didn’t do, and I remember them looking at me and thinking these people must be thinking that I’m a freak, you know? That I’m reading books all the time and I’m talking politics all the time, and I remember when my friends and I used to go to a shebeen for a drink, for some beer, and guys would gather around us and ask us questions as if we were some sort of curiosity, a travelling circus or something. I remember people saying, “you people are just crazy because white people are just gonna be your bosses forever, so you’re wasting your time,” and I tried to explain to them that that was not going to happen, that there was going to be freedom soon. But I like the idea that I changed my identity and I changed, not identity, I changed the way I thought all the time, which I think lots of other people do who are not writers. We all do. It’s a natural thing and I think it’s not necessarily a bad thing.

NS: I'm not sure if I understand this correctly or if I read the book and looked at it differently, and you can correct me if I'm wrong. Why did you draw so little on political issues and experiences? While you acknowledge the racial discrimination, it can only be seen as a complex theme that is used to inform the question of identity.

CvW: When I wrote the book I consciously did that because there must have been about 300 books written about the political situation. I remember people saying "Ah, not another one. Not another. Oh God, must we listen to the same story?" And these books were becoming unpopular so I thought, how about a refreshing book that doesn't actually deal with the political issues, that just deals with my personal issues, and that's the simple answer.

**Interview with Chris van Wyk conducted and transcribed by Nicole Stoltenkamp, 18 March 2014**

Nicole Stoltenkamp: Is *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch* as good a story as *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*?

Chris van Wyk: This answer might sound rude, but I don't know if it's a good story. I wrote the story and I hope that it is a good story, but I really don't know. I tried to emulate *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* because that was such a "hit", it was such a popular book and I tried to emulate it because it's kind of a sequel to that book. This is the one question that you'll have to ask a reader, rather than the writer himself. You can ask ten people who have read the book what they think of *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch* and they'd be honest and say "it's the worst book they've read or it's the best book they've read". But I absolutely cannot say. I just tried to do my best and that's what a writer does and you take it to the publisher who is the first reader of the book. He decides whether the book is good enough to be published. But as with *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, I had no sense of how good or how bad it was. You don't instinctively know: this book is going to sell two hundred thousand copies, or something. It's a strange mystery of literature.

NS: Did you change anything about your writing style in the second memoir?

CvW: I don't have a specific writing style, I choose different writing styles depending on which books I write. I chose to write both memoirs in a style that would be accessible to the people that the book is about. The book is about very ordinary people and it's about people who often don't read books. That's my assumption and I think it's a safe assumption: that people in the community in which I grew up, and I don't want to say anything disparaging about them, but it's people who would rather spend their money buying airtime than buying a book, or buying newspapers. I remember that when I grew up in Riverlea our family and two or three other families in our street were the only ones who bought the newspaper every day. Most people did not and they were just not interested in reading. Some people can read, but don't want to. I didn't feel that the people of Riverlea would read my work, but I wanted to write as if they would read it. It wouldn't have bothered me too much if they had not read it, but I wanted to write it in a style that would be accessible to them. So that's the specific style, it's a conversational style, it's a style that I hoped would be accessible to the lowest common denominator: that anyone would be able to read it. Nobody would struggle. Some people actually came back to me with both these books and said, "we thought, when someone suggested that we read Chris's books, ooh it's going to be difficult!" Their sense of reading is that it's a slog, it's a difficult thing to do, but after reading it they floated through it. It's easy to read and understand. People – especially people who've dropped out of school or who haven't gone onto tertiary education or who haven't formed a love of reading – don't want to read because they equate literature or reading with some academic acrobatics: that you have to be incredibly learned to enjoy a book, because that's sometimes how people made it out to be. So they saw that it was easy and I wanted it to be easy. When I write again it might be different, it might involve word play or descriptive passages because I believe if you write it shouldn't be just ordinarily telling a story, you have to make the writing special. The specialness that these two books had was their accessibility: when you set them against other books, they are so easy read. So I don't know about other writers, but I will change my style from book to book.

NS: Is there a different or new message in your second memoir?

CvW: No. When I wrote the book I just simply wanted to tell a story. I thought that if I just told the story of my life, it would have a message anyway. I don't have to embed something into the story. The last thing you do when you're writing a book is to preach to somebody. That's not the

writer's role in storytelling; the writer's role is to tell the story and the reader can make up his or her mind. In fact, when I started writing when I was about fourteen years old, I would go to the library and find books about writing to see how you did it, and often the one message that came across was don't preach. Don't tell people what you think they should know. As soon as I open a book that says you have to believe in God and be a Christian, I leave the book alone. Don't tell me what I must do, just tell me your story. That's what I did when I wrote *Eggs to Lay*, I just wanted to tell a story and if there's a message then it's not necessarily a bad thing. The response was that, with both books, the message was how bad apartheid was. I didn't do that, but the underlying message is that apartheid was bad. I didn't say look how badly we lived, I just said this is what we did every day. I know instinctively while I was writing the book that I didn't have to explain things to people, I just had to tell my story and people would understand.

NS: Is there anything more or different about coloured people that you learned from writing the second memoir? Or from the way the two memoirs have been received by the coloured community?

CvW: I didn't learn much that I hadn't known before, but the one thing that struck me was, while a lot of coloured people read the book, people who know me, family members who are never going to read the book, have been asked if they've read their nephew or cousin's book and they've said no. They've been told that they're in the book on page 32, but there's a total lack of curiosity and I discovered that people still will not go near books because they have a fear of books. I think from having been caned for not reading, something traumatic in their lives has happened that keeps them away from books! I also suspect, without having been told, that a lot of people, cousins, uncles and aunts can't read. It's still difficult for them to read any book, they struggle and they're not going to spend days trying to read my book. I took it for granted that a lot of people could read but I realise now how bad the literacy levels are in coloured communities. They equate books with a burden and with being at school. So they're not going to read these books. If they saw it as a movie they might watch it because they equate movie watching with entertainment, not books. I discovered that there are illiteracy levels that should make us scared. I also discovered that the people who did read the book were so happy that someone had told their story. They didn't consider it to be Chris van Wyk's story, because it was so absolutely similar [to theirs], give or take the odd scene. They were proud that their story had

been told. I got the sense that there were people from my generation, those who grew up during apartheid, who had grown used to being onlookers to history, grown used to others doing or saying things worth repeating in a book. And here I come along and I write down the story of ordinary lives and people are reading it. That was a lovely discovery: people wanted to see that they hadn't lived for nothing.

NS: How would you say the term or category coloured is constructed in the book?

CvW: I wrote *Eggs to Lay* as a kind of sequel, as I've said. I did dwell on the word coloured and I stopped writing for a while. I thought: do I put it in inverted commas? Do I say black? Or what do I do? I decided I'm writing for a part of the South African community that actually calls themselves coloured, I'm not going to deal with the politics of it. I called myself a black South African all my political life and I ran into a lot of people who didn't agree with that because people in Soweto are black, not coloured people. I used to tell them that the term coloured was bestowed on them by the apartheid regime, but they didn't care who gave it to them, they were proud of it. They'd become irritated with the term black. The book wasn't a forum for argument. I just wanted to tell a story, not argue about terminology, so I just used coloured and nobody has blinked about it.

NS: So, how would you describe the relationship between the two memoirs? And what has changed for you since you finished writing them?

CvW: The second is not really a sequel, it's sort of in tandem with *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, but it was written after. People who loved *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* used to comment about what I'd forgotten to write about. More importantly, they said in the coloured community there were dogs, lots of "pavement specials", and we had adventures with dogs. Neighbours fought over dogs and dogs fought with each other in the streets. I thought it was a good point, so I put the dogs in: there's a whole chapter on dogs. I liked the idea because it's a unique feature of a township, whether it's a coloured township, or Soweto, or whatever. White people have pedigreed dogs, they've got Alsatians, Maltese Poodles; in the township nobody had a pedigreed dog, everybody had a dog that you could fetch off the pavement and make it your dog. It was an ordinary "pavement special", a mixed breed. So what has changed: the one perspective is I don't want to dwell on the past as a writer, I've written the two memoirs and that's it. Life isn't about

what happened in the 1950s and 1960s. I regard myself as a creative writer; I want to write novels and move on. An academic, a professor, asked if I'd like to be part of a networking club of memoir writers so that we can discuss our work on the internet, on a website. But I'm not interested in memoir. Life has moved on now. I want to write about the future, about the present. The memoirs were decent books and there was a good response, but it can't last forever. I want to do other things and I am doing other things.

NS: Why did you choose to keep writing from the perspective of the young Chris?

CvW: I chose to do that because I can. A lot of writers can't. It's a gimmick, I do it effortlessly. I hope that this is the first time that I sound like I'm bragging when you interview me. It's a nice thing to do, it's got a quaintness about it, and it gives the book a kind of authenticity. You see the naïve Chris: he speaks naively, he thinks naively, there's an innocence about him. The book would have had none of these elements if I hadn't done this. It just sounded, naturally, the right thing to do. I'm writing about a childhood, I should write like a child and it worked.

NS: Why did you focus so much on the relationship between the young Chris and Agnes?

CvW: Funnily enough, I was interviewed once on the radio and asked why there wasn't more of Agnes. I wrote the book because of Agnes. When I wrote *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, Agnes first features in the book. I don't speak about her in the way that I would have liked to. I had a unique relationship with Agnes that a lot of boys in the township don't have. You can see that we chatted a lot, we discovered a lot about the country and its people, even though neither of us knew a great deal about it. I was so curious about what was happening and she was there to help me. She had things to say. When my mother wasn't there Agnes was there: the minute my mother left for work, Agnes came, so I had two mothers. We'd speak and it was also as my political sense of the country unfolded that Agnes came into our lives. So I wanted to know more but I also understood why things were as they were. There was such a unique relationship that I thought I didn't give Agnes enough space and time in the first book. I wanted people to know and understand the relationship because it wasn't an ordinary "the maid is here ironing our clothes or making lunch" relationship: she was much more than that to me and I wanted to pay tribute to her, hence the picture of Agnes on the cover of *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch*. She was my friend, my buddy and she loved me. There were six siblings but she thought I was a cool

guy. And I thought she was cool. We interacted all the time. She also had an incredibly nice sense of humour despite her circumstances. There were so many moments that were so poignant, so sweet, so touching and so revealing that Agnes and I shared that I [thought] I should share it with other people. It was a tribute to Agnes: in fact, the title is something that Agnes used to say.

NS: Let me ask you one more time. What do you think of the idea, which I develop in my reading of your memoirs, that identity can be seen as a performance?

CvW: It's an interesting question. When I started writing my writer friend – to whom I am eternally grateful, I think I mentioned him before, Fhazel Johennesse – he was clever and he pushed me: he went to a better school and he saw that there was a writer in me and encouraged me. He and I would discuss books and the dream of becoming published writers one day: we discussed it 24/7. We smoked and drank and discussed literature. We did all the things that young men do but we discussed literature. Neither of us went to university but we read voraciously. He was clever and articulate and the two of us often debated about various things. He found it amazing that when I spoke to him I'd become articulate, I'd use language and words that I wouldn't normally use. Sometimes in his presence I would speak to somebody I'd meet at the shops and I'd suddenly go into "slang mode" and I'd speak slang to them: "Heita my broe, hoezit?" ("Hello my brother, how's it going?"): "It's nca man, it's grand" ("It's good"). He'd say I became a different Chris when I was with different people. I think I knew subconsciously but I was shocked when he told me. I asked him if it was a bad thing. [I asked] because I felt like a fraud, like I wasn't being the same Chris, not constant. He said he didn't know. I read somewhere, strangely enough, years later, in a book on writing, that it's a good thing for writers to have different identities – just to get into the world of other people. I can get into the world of children. On Thursday I'm going to speak at a school to six year olds about human rights: it's not a problem. If I'm with my friends discussing politics, I'll get into that mode; with my sons I get into another mode. I live comfortably with it because I think it's a versatility that I have. I think all humans have it anyway.

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