“Imperialists in Broken Boots”

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TO MY GRANDMOTHER WHO INTRODUCED ME
TO THE PHRASE “IT’S NOT FOR THE LIKES OF US,”
AND TO MY FATHER WHO GAVE ME THE TOOLS TO BEGIN
TO UNDERSTAND ITS DEEP AND CHILLING IMPLICATIONS

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: "IMPERIALISTS IN BROKEN BOOTS"

Introduction: Liminality, Life Writing, and Philanthropy

> More prosperous citizens should be educated to a better sense of their duties and obligations to the less fortunate. The poor ought to be trained in thrift, self-help, temperance, health, solidarity, and racial self-respect. ("Joint Findings and Recommendations," *The Poor White Problem in South Africa* xxix)

* * *

Towards the end of Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1972) Mehring seduces a woman he perceives to be a "poor white," South African parlance for an "inferior" member of the so-called "superior" race. Mehring worries that his lover may be "coloured" and, fearful of punishment under the Immorality Acts, he flees. The novel blurs South Africa's rigid racial boundaries where poor whites are concerned. Anxiety about the racial liminality of the poor white is evident early in the twentieth century, in the report of the *Transvaal Indigency Commission*, in which a poor white is mistaken for a coloured; and in the 1940s documentary film *My Song Goes Forth*, in which a poor white, positioned alongside a "civilized" African, is presented as visibly white *and* visibly degenerate. Poor whites have been the particular concern of those interested in reinforcing racial boundaries, including the authors of the influential Carnegie report on *The Poor White Problem in South Africa*. In 1928 three academics, a doctor, a minister, and a woman writer travelled the length and breadth of South Africa in search of information on the economic, psychological, educational, health, and social causes of the "poor white problem."[1] Motivated by fears of miscegenation, interracial class solidarity, and, quite possibly, interracial feminist solidarity, the five-volume report was quickly published and distributed to church and

government officials. The primary objective was to rehabilitate the poor white through a carefully negotiated middle-class philanthropy. Poor whites needed to be transformed from "imperialists in broken boots" to middle-class exemplars of empire. In large part, the rehabilitation of the poor white facilitated the implementation of apartheid in 1948,- a system whose major premise was the racial homogeneity of whites; but, as Mehring's amorous encounter reveals, poor whites haunt the landscape, long after the problem was apparently solved, long after it "virtually disappeared" (Malherbe, *Education and the Poor White* 121).

Ann Stoler (1992), who has written extensively on poor whites in the Dutch East Indies, argues that "[t]he presence of poor whites in the colonies was far more widespread than most colonial histories lead us to imagine" (335). In Southern Africa, the period of the poor white problem stretched, roughly, from the 1870s to the 1940s. According to the "conservative estimate" of the joint authors of the Carnegie report, the population of poor whites in South Africa steadily increased and reached crisis proportions by the beginning of the 1930s: 300,000 out of a total population of 1.8 million whites (Wilcocks, "Joint Findings and Recommendations" vii). The numbers were substantially lower in Southern Rhodesia: "between 100 and 150" during the same period (Stigger 130). These numbers, however, are undermined by Doris Lessing and Daphne Anderson's references to an "army" of poor whites in Southern Rhodesia. Interestingly, since the end of Apartheid in South Africa and the confiscation of white-owned farms in Zimbabwe, the population of poor whites has increased (it continues to rise 15% a year in South Africa). In South Africa poor whites are no longer protected and so live at subsistence level, sometimes in Shantytowns with blacks, which was a problem that social reformers sought to correct in the first half of the twentieth century. In Zimbabwe many poor whites are elderly and alone, their pensions reduced to virtually nothing since the collapse of Zimbabwe’s economy; most whites remaining in Zimbabwe (less than 30, 000) are unable or unwilling to leave. Poor whites now, however, do not register as a problem. Jacob Zuma visited a group of 200 poor whites just before the last elections (2009), but he really didn’t have to concern himself with courting their votes, as the Nationalist Party (which instituted Apartheid) did decades earlier. Similarly, poor whites are not on Robert Mugabe’s radar and Save the Children is not directing its relief work towards this group. White poverty exists on a much smaller scale than black poverty, but as I argue the economy of poverty is only a starting point of analysis.

My interest in poor whiteism began in 1989, when I taught English in a remote mining community in Zimbabwe. As an inexperienced young adult

I was granted what I felt to be excessive respect. It was embarrassing to be called "madam" by my elders and treated deferentially because of my white skin. I had the uncomfortable experience of walking into the position of a colonial expatriate, an experience similar to what George Orwell described having in 1920s Burma. In order to assuage the guilt arising from the situation, it became my custom to give money to black beggars in the street. One day in a crowded market in Harare I was accosted by an old, haggard white man; he asked me for money; I refused and quickly left. Feeling a new kind of guilt, I returned to the scene of our brief exchange, but could not find him. I realized, with shame, my hypocrisy; and now, upon reflection, realize how troubling it can be when whites in Southern Africa are confronted with white poverty. There is another story: While hitch-hiking with fellow teachers, all black, one speculated that the whites whizzing by in their luxury cars probably thought I was one of *those* whites who cannot afford a car—another kind of poor white? No white person offered me a ride when I was with black Zimbabweans; the association seemed to degrade me in their eyes. Similar to the man in the market, I was a source of discomfort and shame. Of course, twenty years later much of this has changed in Zimbabwe.

These stories highlight the three premises of this book. The first is that poor white is a fluid, even liminal category. It is the ambiguity of poor whites which most discomforts more privileged whites. Poor whites are not easily categorized: they range from a beggar in a market to a young woman who chooses black companions and modest modes of travel. As Johan van Wyk (1996) explains, "[m]aterial poverty was only one dimension of the poor-white problem" (158); it was also about the disturbance of the myths of racial homogeneity and unity. Another premise of this book is that Southern African life writing engages with its historical and political moment. Southern African life writing interrogates the demarcation of personal and political history; there is no radical disjunction between the two; rather, they are interrelated. Similar to poor white, Southern African life writing challenges neat generic categories; it is not circumscribed by generic boundaries, but often combines genres, such as memoir and history. The final premise is that philanthropy (and even shame) is central to the articulation of the "problem" and the "solution." The tension between the problem and solution is present in the literature; as well, the literature proposes alternative modes of philanthropy, modes which facilitate a reorganization of race, class, and gender relationships. While informed by an understanding of imperialism as a mission which civilizes the poor, the colonized, and other marginal groups, the writers in this study also redefine imperial duty as a

transformation of relationships between white and black, between rich and poor, and between men and women.

It is necessary to address a pressing question: why study poor whites? For a start, the study of poor whites is not an esoteric activity. Poor whites were not anomalies but, like other marginal white groups (including women, children, and gays and lesbians), challenged myths of racial homogeneity and even white supremacy. The problem, therefore, was not confined to Southern Africa and to economic "degenerates," but extended to Britain and to social "degenerates" as well. Both Anne McClintock, in *Imperial Leather*, and Gareth Stedman Jones, in *Outcast London*, intimate, but never articulate, a link between the perceived threat of degeneracy in Britain and the poor white problem in Southern Africa. This book, while its focus is poor whites in Southern Africa, attends to the breadth of challenges to white homogeneity and supremacy. Such a study, then, interrogates the history of white supremacy: not all whites conformed, socially or ideologically, to the emerging climate of white supremacy in the early twentieth century. Unfortunately, as "White Trash Girl," an American performance artist, points out, "any reference to white culture becomes about white supremacy" (Kipnis 128). What needs to take place is an examination of white supremacy and its undermining. The appearance of books such as *White Trash*, *Off-White*, *Women of the Klan*, *White*, and *Not Quite White* indicates a growing interest in such an examination.

Rather than reconfiguring the history of white supremacy, this book seeks to correct a substantial oversight in imperial studies: the class politics of Southern African literature. There is a near mantric repetition of "race, gender, and class" in much recent feminist and postcolonial theory, with little attention paid to the third term of the triad—class. "Colonial class" is a term that I employ to describe the perceived incongruity of class politics in a colonial context. In this respect, a study of poor whites accords with projects to complicate conventional narratives of colonialism and conventional narratives of class. Stoler (1992) identifies and interrogates one such conventional narrative. "[A]nthropologists," she writes, "have taken the politically constructed dichotomy of colonizer and colonized as a given, rather than as a historically shifting pair of social categories that needs to be explained" (321). For Stoler, poor whites in the Dutch colonies undermine the fixity of that dichotomy. Throughout her work, Stoler is interested in pointing out the "nonhomogeneity" of Europeans, whether in the colony or the metropole. People of mixed race and poor whites are two groups which challenge claims to homogeneity. Whiteness, she argues, is mostly equated with a middle-class sensibility.

In *Race and the Education of Desire*, Stoler explains that poor whites, "a scrambled social category" (130) or "colonial oxymoron" (107), threaten this equation. Stoler is interested in charting attempts to uplift poor whites, to render them middle class and respectable. However, she pays little attention to the various and contradictory configurations of poor whites in literature, and has thus far expressed only a nominal interest in the Southern African context; she is, after all, a historian of Dutch colonialism in the East Indies. Nevertheless, attention needs to be paid to the relationship between genre and subjectivity in Southern African life writing *about* poor whites (such as the Carnegie report) and *by* poor whites (such as Daphne Anderson's *The Toe-Rags*).

Life writing about the period during which poor whites emerged as a major preoccupation in Southern African politics and literature reveals the ideology of the problem and solution. Southern African writers' configuration of the role of poor whites in colonialism and of their relationship to structural racism has been more or less neglected by literary and cultural critics. This neglect could be explained as the consequence of a lack of sources. While the most illuminating sources for such a literary and cultural study would be the life writing of poor whites themselves, there is a regrettable "dearth of documentation" (Bozzoli 9). For the most part, poor whites have been written about; few have written their own life stories. A few articles and two dissertations (Berger, Brink) have been written on the early 20th-century life writing of Afrikaner women in the garment industry. Elsabe Brink (1989) explains how these "working women writers," far from being marginal and uninfluential, in fact "created a sizeable body of Afrikaans literature" (108). One of the preoccupations of their writing, according to Brink, was "the scourge of poor whiteism" (114). A recent example of an Afrikaans novel about poor whites is Marlene van Niekerk’s *Triomf* (translated into English), a tragi-comedy about a dysfunctional poor white family on the eve of the 1994 elections which would lead to the victory of Mandela’s ANC and the formal end of white rule in South Africa. Poor whiteism is less a “scourge” in van Niekerk’s novel than a vestige of the past; of course, much of this changed after 1994.

There is a "sizeable body" of literature in English which is concerned with the poor white problem and solution. In recent years there have been quite a few life stories which detail more recent experiences of poor whiteism, including Alexandra Fuller’s *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight* and even Cathy Buckle’s *African Tears.* Several texts under consideration here, identifiable as life writing, directly engage with the period of the poor white problem and solution. Others are less obviously

interested in poor whiteism and are not readily identifiable as life writing. For instance, Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* is a text whose engagement with poor whiteism can be discerned through a recontextualization of the writer's life, writing, and politics. No critics have attended to poor white life writing in English. The reports, even writers and critics, tend to equate poor whites with Afrikaners. There are, however, references to English-speaking poor whites. Daphne Anderson's *The Toe-Rags* is the life story of an English-speaking poor white. The Carnegie authors refer to English-speaking poor whites and even include photographs of such "types" of poor whites. E.G. Malherbe took several photographs. Some were published with the reports; many others were placed in his private albums. The Killie Campbell Library, where these albums are housed, estimates that there are more than 2, 000 photographs in the collection. In his education report, Malherbe (1932) comments that "British and Boer were caught in the same economic maelstrom which takes no count of the very arbitrary distinctions of nationality" (6). Furthermore, Colin Bundy allows for the existence of English-speaking poor whites. True, an objective, statistical definition identifies poor whites as Afrikaners, but my intention is to invoke a more subjective definition, to widen the definition of poor white life writing to include some, perhaps, surprising choices of writers and texts. It is essential to challenge poor white as a stable racial and ethnic category, for if we assume the homogeneity of poor whites we are complicit with racist, classist, and sexist attempts to contain, limit, and police this "degenerate" group. And even the writers that I examine do not have "pure," unadulterated, English origins or identities; they continually cross racial, ethnic, national, class, and, occasionally, sexual borders. In doing so, they interrogate categories of identity structured around simplistic notions of gender, race, and class. In *Imperial Leather* Anne McClintock argues that race, class, and gender are “articulated categories”: “they come into existence *in and through* relation to each other” (7).

McClintock explains in her discussion of the British working class that some marginal groups in Britain were simianised, racialised, and explicitly linked with Africans in the last few decades of the nineteenth century; at the same time, attempts were made to incorporate the “respectable” working class into the narrative of imperial progress. Even the way that the working class was viewed was in no way coherent and uniform. In the following chapters I argue that poor white is not a narrow economic category and that it often describes those who threaten to collapse boundaries—racial, sexual, class, and even regional boundaries. I study four writers (Olive Schreiner, Robert Tressell, Doris Lessing, and Daphne

Anderson) who migrate between Southern Africa and Britain, an experience which informs their comparative, even global, perspective on poor whiteism. All four subjectively engage with the poor white problem and solution, and foreground ambiguity in their ambiguously genred texts. They represent diverse political perspectives: the first three embraced various forms of socialism, while Anderson campaigned for the Conservative Party in Britain. This book traces the multiple and contradictory configurations of the poor white problem and solution in their writing. Each chapter examines a writer's engagement with a liminal figure—Schreiner with colonial outcasts, Tressell with British workers, Lessing with flagrant transgressors of racial borders, and Anderson with the poor white child.

There are two sections. In Section One, Schreiner and Tressell, both South African writers, are studied. In Section Two, Lessing and Anderson, both Southern Rhodesian writers, are studied. This regional arrangement is complemented by other connections. Schreiner and Lessing highlight the poor white *problem*, as they embrace the liminal—deviant men and women—and demonstrate that the poor white poses a threat to normative race, class, and gender relationships. Tressell and Anderson, on the other hand, highlight the poor white *solution*, and point out that the liminal—namely, the British working class and children—can be incorporated into imperial myths about white homogeneity and upward mobility. Another way of arranging the writers is in terms of their relationship to philanthropy. Schreiner, Tressell, and Anderson are informed by late nineteenth-century philanthropy: all three posit the benevolent potential of imperialism. Lessing, the most politically sophisticated of the four writers, privileges empathy as a suitable articulation of her anti-imperialism. In this book I hope to point out that race is not easily defined in Southern Africa, that even whites—when poor and/or transgressive—are ambiguously raced. It needs to be said that ambiguity is sometimes productive, sometimes problematical. As I will argue, Schreiner upholds a missionary paradigm even in her most politically progressive writing; Tressell posits the "civilization" of the poor; and Anderson holds an ambivalent position on race categorization and imperialism. Tressell's phrase, "imperialists in broken boots," captures the social and ideological ambiguity of marginal whites in Southern Africa during the period of the poor white problem.

I have chosen this quartet of writers for several reasons. To begin, all four engage with the poor white problem and solution. As well, in a highly political gesture, they situate themselves on the margins of white colonial society. Third, all four migrate between Britain and Southern African, a

migration which informs their sensitivity to the interrelatedness of race, class, and gender politics, and to the existence of English-speaking poor whites. Furthermore, the time-frame of the texts is, for the most part, the poor white period. The texts engage with the same historical and ideological moment. For example, Lessing's *Under My Skin* and Anderson's *The Toe-Rags* are narratives of an outcast colonial childhood in Southern Rhodesia, while Schreiner's *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* and Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* are narratives of the British working class and colonialism. Schreiner and Tressell, and Lessing and Anderson were contemporaries, relationships which have never been critically acknowledged. Lessing (1994) says of Anderson, "She was exactly my age" (65), but this is a rare moment. Fifth, placing two writers who have received a lot of critical attention in Southern African studies (Schreiner and Lessing) alongside two writers who have been more or less neglected (Tressell and Anderson) encourages a view of poor white life writing as a widespread literary phenomenon. Finally, all four writers indicate that there are multiple ways of writing a poor white life. I read all of the texts, from the Carnegie report to Anderson's *The Toe-Rags*, as falling within the life writing paradigm. In my reading of these texts, I foreground mixing and multiplicity, rather than type and homogeneity, both in terms of subjectivity and genre.

Similar to poor white as a social designation, poor white life writing resists definition, privileges blending. Some theorists, however, posit a narrow definition of life writing. While George Gusdorf correctly equates autobiography with western imperialism, he unfortunately fails to distinguish autobiography from other subgenres of life writing:

> [I]t would seem that autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures; but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was not their own. (29)

Gusdorf does not allow for the employment of life writing by women, the poor, and the colonized. All four writers in this study modify the conventions of Gusdorf's "western" autobiography. For a start, they experiment, not with a clearly defined genre, but with a "blended genre" (Kadar ix). Poor white life writing combines a variety of forms, including the treatise, the pamphlet, the essay, the novel, the autobiography, the memoir, and the travelogue. For example, Schreiner combines travel writing and fiction in *The Story of an African Farm* and *Undine*, while

Lessing combines documentary and memoir in *Going Home*. Furthermore, poor white life writing merges personal and political histories. Rather than discrete life stories, the four writers' texts are presented as cultural documents of the poor white period. The generic distinction I return to throughout this study is between autobiography and memoir, a distinction that has implications for women's and colonial writing. Helen Buss explains that it is more likely for a woman to write a memoir (a recounting of one's place as a member of a group), than an autobiography (an account of one's self-development) (24). Marlene Kadar suggests that it is difficult to distinguish between the two, but argues that memoir is an account of the individual *and* historical events through which the author has passed (xii). Accordingly, Schreiner describes her life writing as "personal document," though all four struggle with the tension between the personal and the political dimensions of poor white life writing. All four revise the conventions of Gusdorf's western autobiography: by blending genres and by attending to the play of personal and political histories.

In the remainder of this introduction I examine the reports on poor whites and offer a more detailed outline of the chapters that follow.

The Poor White Reports: A Survey

From the end of the nineteenth century, many South Africans began to worry about the growing population of poor whites. There were several state “interventions” (Davies 1) to prevent interracial solidarity in South Africa. Poor whites, economically and socially linked to Africans, posed a threat to the homogeneity of the white race. Davies explains that the intention was to divide the working class into a “privileged” white minority and a disempowered black majority (1), into “civilized” and “uncivilized” labour (258). There were “tentative signs of joint struggle by white and black unemployed” (247). There were concerns over cross-racial mixing or solidarity. In response to this concern several commissions were struck and many conferences were convened between the 1890s and the 1930s. There were no parallel gestures in Southern Rhodesia, though the findings of the South African commissions of inquiry elucidate that ideological context as well. The state was successful, according to Davies, for the interventions “produced real isolation effects between white and black members of the working class” (232). Davies points out that there was no unity among the white and black poor after the introduction of the “civilized labour policy,” beyond the institutionalization of Apartheid in 1948, and beyond the resolution of the poor white problem. In their introduction to *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth-*

Century South Africa, Marks and Trapido explain that an important change in colonial philanthropy took place: the “civilising mission” (6) was replaced by “racial upliftment” (8). Practically, this meant that middle-class whites took responsibility for the rehabilitation of poor whites.

Government and church leaders, even academics and writers, were so acutely aware of the threat to white supremacy posed by poor whites that for some it became the centre of their professional activities. The Carnegie report represents the most famous intervention; however, it had many predecessors. The first conference on poor whites was held by the Dutch Reformed Church in Stellenbosch in 1893. Four years after the end of the South African War, often identified as a cause of poor whiteism, a government commission was struck and charged with investigating indigency in the Transvaal. In 1908 the *Report of the Transvaal Indigency Commission* was presented to Parliament. Several commissions and conferences addressed the problem after the Transvaal report, but in 1932 the most comprehensive study to date was published: *The Poor White Problem in South Africa*. The Carnegie report constructs a poor white life based on the authors' economic, psychological, educational, medical, and sociological "findings" in "the field." As Malherbe (1981) recalls, "We visited them in their native habitats, listened to their hunting stories and recorded their family histories" (144). Life writing, in the form of biography, is a central genre of the Carnegie and Transvaal reports. Both reports attempt to write a poor white life story and cover the period of the texts under consideration in this book. While they attempt to erase, through a middle-class and racist philanthropy, the vagaries of a poor white life, they inadvertently paint a complex portrait of poor white men *and* women in South Africa. There are several "types" of poor whites. As well, there are those who are irredeemable and those who are redeemable, those who embody the problem and those who embody the solution. The reports' failure to simplify poor whites is demonstrated by attention to the following: i) their preoccupation with definition; ii) their awkward negotiation of the problem and solution of philanthropy; and iii) their concern with "the presence of the native" and the influence (for bad and good) of the white woman.

Definition is a major preoccupation of both reports. Racial categorization is not a straightforward task, as Virginia Dominguez remarks in *White By Definition*. In a similar manner, Judith Raiskin refers to the "metaphysical nature of [racial] categories" (6). The authors of the reports are forced to return again and again to the problematic of definition. The only way that they can manage and discipline their wayward white population is through definition. Definition is achieved through words, but also, in the case of

the Carnegie report, through photographs. The authors develop a list of "types" of poor whites and attach photographs to illustrate their taxonomy. For the most part, photographs define their physiognomy, their housing, and their family relationships. Photography is by no means politically innocuous; as McClintock argues, it "became the servant of imperial progress" (12). While the Carnegie report alone includes photographs, both reports begin with attempts to define, with accuracy and precision, "indigency" and "poor white." The authors of the Transvaal report are forced to admit that "indigency is not capable of a definition at once brief and comprehensive" (3). They nevertheless make an attempt, and identify two groups of indigents: actual and potential. Twenty-five years later, R.W. Wilcocks, author of the Carnegie Commission's psychological report, defines the "poor white problem" as a "process of impoverishment" which includes the actual and "the potential poor white" (2). Despite the quarter century that separates the reports, the "problem" continues to threaten to envelope the entire white working-class population, both Afrikaans and English. There is a sense, however, in which the textual and pictorial definition of "poor white" facilitates its elimination, for the "types" are identifiable, ideologically manageable, and therefore eradicable. Nevertheless, the reports' subtle employment of the language of borders and boundaries further underscores the pervasiveness of the problem.

Any definition is inevitably slippery because "poor white" disturbs what are presumed to be clearly demarcated racial boundaries. The poor white problem was a problem of borders. Robert Davies identifies urbanization and unemployment as contributing to the fluidity of racial borders:

> On becoming urbanised and unemployed many of these white proletarians drifted into the large, sprawling multi-racial slums which grew up around the major cities and towns from the beginning of the [twentieth] century. Indeed, in some cases unemployed whites and Africans lived together in the same shanties, and there were even cases of whites begging food from Africans, or performing odd jobs for Africans in return for food and shelter. (77)

A short chapter in the Transvaal report, called "Whites in Native Reserves," identifies racial mixing as a rural problem as well. The authors worry about the marginality of rural poor whites: "We have had considerable evidence that there is serious danger of isolated groups of poor whites who live without any regular means of subsistence *in or on the borders of native reserves* becoming demoralised and adopting native modes of life"

(111 emphasis added). Inadequately defined racial borders pose a very particular threat to white homogeneity and supremacy. White working-class suburbs, they suggest, need to be situated far from "native reserves," in order to ensure that whites do not "los[e] their civilisation and sink . . . to the level of the Kaffir" (111). The Carnegie report, while a little bit more subtle in its discussion of borders, achieves the same effect. In the midst of attempting to define "poor white," Grosskopf quotes from an "educated Africander": "You feel that, in a way, they [poor whites] have let you down" (18). A poor white is one who "lets the side down," who in fact undermines the unity of the white race in South Africa. In current theoretical parlance, *he*, and as I will demonstrate, it is very definitely "he," is a "border crosser." Therefore, a more precise definition of a poor white is one who, in a way that threatens white homogeneity, lives along the spatial and racial borders of colonial Southern Africa. For the authors of both reports poor whites underscore, as Anthony Appiah argues in another context, the vagaries, indeed the social construction, of racial categories.

The white authorities (church, state, and school) viewed any kind of race, class, and gender blurring as a problem that needed to be corrected. Poor whites in particular were subject to a wide variety of philanthropic gestures intended to correct their troubling ambiguity. But liminality, as the symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner points out, is not necessarily negative. He describes liminality as a "blurring and merging of distinctions" (26) which is "conducive to . . . invention" (31-2). In defiance of categorization, liminality is often figured as inventive in poor white life writing from Southern Africa. For example, Schreiner and Lessing comment on the empathetic possibilities of outcast figures in their texts. This study attends to the play of both views of liminality. For the authors of the reports and, in the end, for Tressell and Anderson, liminality is negatively connoted. All is not lost, however. One of the central tensions, particularly evident in the five volumes of the Carnegie report, and suggested by McClintock in her analysis of the British working class and imperialism in *Imperial Leather*, is between the tendency to keep the poor at a distance and to invite them to participate in the privileges of a white skin. This tension raises two important, and related, questions. What (if anything) can be done to solve the poor white problem? Who is responsible for the degeneration and regeneration of a substantial portion of the white race in Southern Africa?

Having identified the problem, both reports search for a solution. While there is a sense in which many poor whites are a lost cause, the authors of both reports struggle to underline their reformation. The

language of "degeneration" is often accompanied by the language of "regeneration." The solution to the problem lies in helping poor whites adapt to a changing economy, characterized by the introduction of railways, large-scale immigration, and mining. Unlike the "non-European" population, there is nothing inherently inferior about poor whites; they are simply maladjusted. The authors of the reports promise that the rehabilitation of the poor white can be achieved through carefully administered middle-class philanthropy. Both reports argue against charity which, they claim, has a demoralising effect. The authors of the Transvaal report launch a tirade against charitable relief, and they argue instead for the prevention of indigency through a study of the "unhealthy social and economic conditions" which produce it (5). Relief, if it does take place, should not only secure the "necessaries of life," but the "moral and economic regeneration" of indigents as well (5). Similarly, in the "Joint Findings and Recommendations" section of the Carnegie report, the authors argue against "charity" in favour of "self-help" (Wilcocks xxviii). Any philanthropic middle-class intervention that either of the reports proposes is described as the natural consequence of the superiority of the white race. The Transvaal report, for example, insists that poor whites are more efficient workers than non-whites. An exchange between an investigator and a boot factory owner is transcribed: "Then you had no philanthropic idea in starting it?—No" (38).

There are several possible reasons for the investigators' aversion to charity. For a start, charity seems to highlight the inferiority of poor whites, their proximity to Africans. If social reformers argue that Africans need to be raised to the level of "civilization," the same argument must not be invoked to describe the reformation of poor whites. A whole new discourse of reformation is required, one which emphasizes social conditions and self help. The authors of the Carnegie report, in particular, are further unsettled by the association of "charity" with socialism. For example, in his psychological report, Wilcocks quotes from poor whites who identify social assistance as a "duty of the state" (95). The authors of both reports call for the development of an effective model of charity in South Africa, through the intervention of the middle class and without recourse to socialist paradigms. Grundlingh and Sapire explain that socialism was a "competing ideology" in 1930s South Africa; it issued a direct challenge to Afrikaner nationalism and to South Africanism (26). For the most part, socialism was considered suspect by those concerned with the reformation of poor whites: it promoted solidarity across race and ethnic differences. White middle-class South Africans needed to intervene in the poor white problem for two reasons: to give poor whites the

opportunity to work and, more importantly, to give them moral guidance. Intervention was necessary in order to quell miscegenation and other gestures of interracial solidarity or proximity. The beggar I encountered in the Harare market embodied the necessity of intervention: the only white beggar in the market, his community and his major benefactors were presumably African. In the reports, however, it is the wives and daughters of the poor who are identified as most culpable and most in need of reformation; it is in their discussion of poor white women that social investigators struggle with the tension between the problem and the solution, between the irredeemable and the redeemable poor.

The authors of both reports cite competition between white and black workers as part of the problem (loosely defined borders), and propose that this particular problem can be solved through the introduction of a "job colour bar" (precisely defined borders). Both reports gender the poor white male, and identify him as a victim of cheap African labour and of white women who fail, in McClintock's words, to "maintain boundaries" (263). Women were identified—by the social explorers in working-class Britain and in poor white South Africa—as both the problem and the solution. According to McClintock, this is because women are responsible for reproducing the "*boundaries* of national groups . . . through restrictions on marital and sexual relations" (355 emphasis added). The problem, then, is both "africanised" and "feminised." Belinda Bozzoli writes out of a conviction that gender and race politics have been segregated (139), and sets out to integrate marxism and feminism in the field of South African studies (144). While not primarily concerned with the poor white woman, Bozzoli posits that the uplift of the white working-class woman was secured at the expense of the black woman: black women's domestic labour helped white women secure a "middle-class lifestyle" (159). The "presence of the native" and the influence of the white woman are identified as the two principal causes of the problem. The two are linked, but final responsibility for the rehabilitation of the poor white man rests on the shoulders of the poor white woman. Minimal attention is paid to women in the Transvaal report, but the authors are evidently concerned about the "propinquity" (a recurrent word) of white women to African women and men who, they claim, influence their domestic and sexual habits. In contrast, a half volume of the Carnegie report is devoted to "The Mother and Daughter in the Poor White Family."

M. E. Rothmann, author of the volume, was a well-known Afrikaans writer. She worked hard to convince the commission to include a section on women. Like her male companions, Rothmann travelled throughout rural and urban South Africa and, with the help of other women, interviewed

poor white women in their homes. Unlike her male counterparts, Rothmann's volume has been described as "poignant" and her approach as full of "sympathy." Bozzoli (1983) explains that "[t]he report outlines in poignant fashion the stories of isolated farm women" (152), and Brink (1990) claims that Rothmann "approached her subjects with respect and sympathy" (282). This may be so, but it would be mistaken to ignore, as Brink acknowledges later in her essay, Rothmann's complicity with certain racist, sexist, and classist paradigms. For a start, she can only identify the poor white woman in her relationships, as mother and daughter, to the poor white man. It is telling, after all, that the volume is not called "The Poor White Woman." The authors of the reports and historians of the poor white problem assume that the poor white is a man. At least one writer under examination in this study, Olive Schreiner, tries to avoid the "gendrification" of poor whites and locates human empathy (her modification of philanthropy) in outcast men *and* women.

Moreover, Rothmann’s volume is classificatory, in conformity with the other volumes. Rothmann places her subjects in two groups: Group 1 is a lost cause, while Group 2 can be rehabilitated. She never really explains why the first group of women is beyond reformation, but one can assume that they have seriously undermined the border separating the white and black races in South Africa, perhaps (one can only guess) by reproducing a "coloured" baby. Their transgressions are sexual, for Rothmann explains that their bodies are covered with "syphilitic sores." Rothmann concerns herself with the "civilization" of the second group, which includes women whose "habits are those of the more backward among the coloured people" (170). Mothers and daughters need to be instructed in proper domesticity, need to be disassociated from African women and men. Ann Stoler, in "Making Empire Respectable," explains that "middle-class morality, manliness and motherhood" were threatened by degeneracy (50). Degenerate women undermine their roles as middle-class exemplars of motherhood and imperialism (to borrow from Anna Davin) and contribute to the emasculation of poor white men. According to the commission's joint authors, women play a central role in "raising the social level of the family" (Wilcocks, "Joint Findings and Recommendations" xvi); it is implied that they may just as easily lower the social level of the family. Both reports, but especially Rothmann's volume, propose a philanthropic surveillance of women's domesticity and sexuality. They need to be under surveillance in order to prevent a further breakdown of racial borders. It is significant that the Carnegie report ends with a study on women, for women are identified as the site of the problem and solution. They are responsible, through proper domestic and sexual conduct, to maintain rigid

racial distinctions. According to the Carnegie Commission, they have failed miserably. All four writers in this study are informed by the ideological climate captured in the poor white reports: including the liminality of the poor white, the gendering of the poor white, and the necessity of white middle-class intervention.

The Chapters

In Chapter 2, "Olive Schreiner's Personal Document of Poor White Philanthropy," I trace Schreiner's valorisation of and identification with the colonial outcast. Schreiner was born in the Cape in 1855 and, after a life-long migration between South Africa and England, died there in 1920. Perhaps because of her travels, but more so because of her unconventional politics (she was a feminist and an anti-imperialist), Schreiner experienced life as an outsider, in both South Africa and England. Her writing, which includes novels, short stories, and political tracts, draws extensively from this experience of marginality. Despite the apparently subjective nature of her writing, Schreiner engages with historical change. This is facilitated by her introduction of a genre called "personal document," a genre which bridges personal and political histories, subjective and objective perspectives. Although she only names this form in the 1890s, Schreiner employs it to study poor whites and philanthropy in two of her early novels—*Undine* and *African Farm*—and in her later political writing, most notably *Trooper Peter*. These three texts were written between the 1870s and the 1890s, and are attentive to contemporary South African politics. In her poor white life writing, Schreiner explores how three historical features of the poor white problem—the Mineral Revolution, the trek from the African farm, and the racial division of the South African working class—are experienced and reconfigured by outcast South Africans: including deviant women, cross-dressing men, and "poor and unlearn'd" philanthropists. In effect, Schreiner celebrates the lives of those who, as poor whites, resist middle-class and imperial incorporation.

The magnum opus of a socialist writer who spent several formative years in South Africa is the subject of Chapter 3, "Robert Tressell's Solution to the Problem of Imperial Poverty." Robert Tressell was born in Dublin in 1870. He lived in South Africa for more than a decade (from the late 1880s to 1901). He spent the remaining decade of his life in England, where he died, in an impoverished state, of tuberculosis in 1911. In England Tressell wrote *The Philanthropists*, a book which has been canonized as the central British working-class and socialist novel of the early twentieth century. I set out to challenge this designation and re-

contextualize Tressell's life, politics, and text. First, it is necessary to reconstruct Tressell's South African experience and the relationship between England and South Africa's imperial and class politics during the 1890s (when Tressell lived in South Africa) and the 1900s (when he lived in England). For Tressell, as for the authors of the poor white reports, the solution to the problem of "imperial poverty" (at “home” and in the colonies) is the incorporation of the white working class. The original text was heavily expurgated, and is often identified as a victim of middle-class prudery and capitalism. However, the text both resists and complies with its incorporation into middle-class print culture. This is an important point, for the text's complicity with its production complements its ideological complicity with the incorporation of the poor white, the British working class. The text itself intimates parallels between the "poverty problem" in England and the "poor white problem" in South Africa. It assumes an anti-incorporation position, but ultimately posits the incorporation of the poor into the patterns and privileges of empire and a bourgeois life.

Doris Lessing's exploration of the possibility of transgressive relationships, even dialogue, between the "weak links" of Southern Rhodesian settler society—women, children, poor whites—and Africans is posited in Chapter 4, "Doris Lessing's `Convergence Zones.'" Lessing was born in Persia in 1919, moved with her family to Southern Rhodesia in 1924, and migrated to England in 1949, where she has lived ever since. For more than a quarter century she was a "Prohibited Immigrant" in both South Africa and Southern Rhodesia; since her ban was lifted she has written extensively about her travels throughout the region. Much of her life writing reflects upon growing up in colonial Africa as it records more recent postcolonial history. The ideological parameters of the poor white problem inform the writing of her own life and enable her to reflect upon the convergence of colonial and postcolonial histories, the poor white problem and the more recently acknowledged poor black problem. Her writing undermines, as Ann Stoler (1995) would put it, the myth of a white bourgeois hegemony in Southern Rhodesia, and in foregrounding the possibility of "convergence zones" (Lessing, *African Laughter* 305) firmly establishes her affinity with the poor white *problem*. Her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, is confined to the poor white paradigm, closes down the possibility of transgressive relationships, while her Southern African life writing is less confined to the poor white paradigm, more receptive to the transgressive possibilities of poor whiteism. A study of *Going Home*, *Under My Skin*, and *African Laughter* indicates that as Lessing continues to practice writing her life she moves toward an articulation of her own transgression of categories and of empathy between outcast whites and

Africans.

Similar to Lessing's *Under My Skin*, Anderson's *The Toe-Rags* is an autobiography of an outcast colonial childhood, and is the focus of Chapter 5, "Daphne Anderson and the Reformation of the Poor White Child." The text offers little insight into Anderson's adult life. We know, as Lessing (1994) explains, that "the beautiful author married well . . . when she was in her twenties, and lived happily ever after" (66). Furthermore, the publisher of the paperback edition of her autobiography (subtitled "A Memoir") writes, "Daphne Anderson left Southern Rhodesia when Ian Smith introduced the policy of UDI [Unilateral Declaration of Independence] in 1965. She settled in England and now lives in East Anglia with her husband and three sons." As with Schreiner, Tressell, and Lessing, Anderson's life has been characterized by multiple migrations between Southern Africa and England. *The Toe-Rags*, informed by these multiple migrations, is the story of a poor white childhood in Southern Rhodesia prior to the Second World War. For Anderson, the race and class ambiguity of the poor white is amplified and ultimately solved in the figure of the poor white child. There are three parts to this chapter. First, the function of the child in the articulation of poor whiteism is considered. Second, the genre of childhood autobiography in a colonial setting is discussed. Finally, the division between the lengthy childhood text and the shorter young adulthood text which comprise *The Toe-Rags* is examined. Initially Anderson exposes the brutality of imperialism and proposes cross-race class solidarity, but eventually acquires a faith in the benevolence of imperialism and the opportunities it provides for the white working class. The poor white child can be reformed through a benevolent imperialism.

CHAPTER TWO

OLIVE SCHREINER'S "PERSONAL DOCUMENT" OF POOR WHITE PHILANTHROPY

Introduction: Olive Schreiner and Colonial Class

In the early 1890s Olive Schreiner began to compose *Thoughts*, her "personal document" (as she calls it) of South African history and politics. Ostensibly a political study, *Thoughts* foregrounds Schreiner's own perspective. On the eve of the South African War (1899-1902), when tension between Briton and Boer was palpable, Schreiner added a lengthy footnote, in which she praises a poor white Boer woman driving a wagon, an unusual occupation for any woman in South Africa in the late 1890s. The woman's unconventionality inspires Schreiner to identify her as a model for the movement of "working-women" and as an alternative to the female "parasitism" which saturates fin-de-siècle European and South African culture. Schreiner addresses part of her footnote to the woman herself:

> Like this wide plain, you wake in me an aspiration for freedom and independence which no woman in the town below us could awaken. For God's sake, Tante, never give up your wagon whip for a mother-of-pearl card case, and your kappie for a straw hat with paper flowers, and, instead of digging up fuel in your kraal and cutting wood, take a croquet mallet for your weapon of toil! (219)

Schreiner admires this woman's practical clothes and encroachment on the field of masculine labour, and boldly claims an affinity: "The future is ours, Tante!" (220). This footnote is one of Schreiner's few references to a member of an "official" group of poor whites, the *bywoners*, a class of tenant farmers. However, in all of her South African writing—from *Undine* to *Trooper Peter*—Schreiner upholds and identifies with the outcast, the transgressor of borders, the social and economic degenerate.

That Bill Bolin can describe Lyndall, from Schreiner's *African Farm*,

as a "parlour-confined Victorian woman" (6) is symptomatic of an oversight in Schreiner criticism: many critics assume that her characters and interests are English and middle class. The poor white problem, hardly idiosyncratic, profoundly influenced Schreiner's exploration of "what colonialism did to whites" (First and Scott 97). By no means was Schreiner a poor white, as evidenced by the *bywoner* woman who "scowled" at Schreiner, so obviously English and middle class. Her writing engages with the poor white *problem*, and Schreiner positions herself in relation to colonial failures. Her attentiveness to class divisions in a colonial context exposes the ways in which class is implicated in colonialism. In the same way that class and race are inseparable, class and colonialism function in collusion. Furthermore, this attentiveness undermines the ideology of imperial progress, as it indicates that poor whites, even the white working class, are ambiguously situated. Finally, it is the potential site of a disruption of imperial binaries, most notably the juxtaposition of white wealth and black poverty.

When Schreiner began to write in the 1870s she bore witness to the shifting class configurations taking place in the Cape Colony and in the Boer Republics. Despite the rhetoric of imperial and economic progress which accompanied the discovery of diamonds (1867) and gold (1886), a new white underclass emerged. Schreiner's life itself was typified by an ambiguous class location, periods of financial hardship, and an outcast status. Her father, Gottlob Schreiner, was a man from a humble German background who trained as a missionary, but failed in his vocation; her mother, Rebecca Lyndall, English and middle class, experienced, in McClintock's words, a "fall from class" (262) when she married Gottlob and moved to South Africa. Schreiner spent part of her youth at the Diamond Fields, and then worked for five years as a governess on isolated Boer farms before finally travelling to England in 1881. In London she visited the notorious East End, lived through the Hyde Park riots, and joined political and intellectual circles. She returned to South Africa in 1889, and became deeply involved in regional politics. She spent the remainder of her life moving back and forth between England and South Africa. Schreiner's life history and her writing indicate that she was by no means oblivious to the pressing question, and the radical philanthropic possibilities, of colonial class in South Africa.

Schreiner understood that life writing engages with historical change when she began her experiment with "personal document," a form which, like memoir, bridges personal and political histories, subjective and objective perspectives. In *Thoughts* she defines personal document:

> It is not a history, it is not a homily, it is not a political brochure—it is

> simply what one South African at the end of the nineteenth century thought, and felt, with regard to his native land: thought and felt with regard to its peoples, its problems and its scenery—it is nothing more than this; but it is also nothing less. (14)

Schreiner disassociates her writing from history: "Nothing has been farther from my thought than the writing of any history" (13). She is not interested in writing a purely objective history of South Africa (Professor Theal has already done that, she repeatedly remarks); instead, her writing inhabits the space between subjective experience and objective history as she imaginatively engages with historical change. Nadine Gordimer misreads Schreiner when she complains that Schreiner "dissipated her imaginative creativity in writing tracts and pamphlets rather than fiction" (7), that her writing is too "statistical" (8). Ironically, Elleke Boehmer identifies Gordimer's own writing as "historically responsible." According to Boehmer, "South African writing requires new forms for thinking about reality" (28). As early as the 1870s, however, Schreiner was experimenting with a "new form": personal document. Having established that she is not writing a history, but something "less pretentious" (*Thoughts* 13), Schreiner tells her own story of growing up in South Africa, a personal story which she describes as "allegoric" (16) of South African race, class, and gender politics.

Although she names this form only in the 1890s, Schreiner uses personal document to study poor whites and philanthropy in two of her early South African novels—*Undine* and *African Farm*—and in her later political writing on South Africa, most notably *Trooper Peter*. All three texts were written between the 1870s and the 1890s, and are attentive to contemporary South African politics: the Mineral Revolution, Anglo-Boer tension and war, the racial division of the South African working class, African resistance to imperialism, and "the Woman Question." Although it is only fairly recently that feminists have attended to the relationship between race, class, and gender, Schreiner introduced the triad into feminist, anti-imperialist, and socialist discourses as early as the 1870s. Schreiner's poor whites threaten rigid gender and, increasingly, race categories. Schreiner introduces an alternative (to the reports) discourse about poor whites: because they suffer and/or fail, they are empathetic to the suffering of others. Gerald Monsman identifies Schreiner's "subversive application of the social gospel of equality" (7), but her poor white philanthropy is also informed by a hope that colonialism is potentially benevolent. In her poor white life writing Schreiner explores how three historical features of the poor white problem—the Mineral Revolution, the trek from the African farm, and the racial division of the

South African working class—are experienced and reconfigured by outcast South Africans: including "bad" women, cross-dressing men, and "poor and unlearn'd" philanthropists.

"Good-for-nothing vagabonds: *Undine* and *African Farm*

In the early 1870s, when Schreiner began to write, South Africa was still predominantly rural. The discovery of diamonds and the consequent introduction of railways and new immigrants, however, were rapidly transforming the social, political, and physical landscape of the colony. The "Great Trek," which took place between 1835 and 1838, was re-enacted as thousands of rural Boers and more recent immigrants and speculators trekked to the Diamond Fields and to the expanding urban centres in search of an easy fortune. Many diggers, well into the twentieth century, failed to realize their ambitions and joined the ranks of the poor whites. The joint authors of the Carnegie Report identify poor whiteism as "maladjustment to changed conditions" (Wilcocks, "Joint Findings and Recommendations" viii). In the 1870s the poor white problem took on a threatening shape, but its roots were established decades earlier.

The Dutch occupied the Cape for 150 years before the British claimed the colony "by a force of arms in 1806" (Simons and Simons 11). British colonization resulted in the emancipation of Dutch colonists' slaves, but it also ensured "the subjugation of the Africans, and a cultural dualism among the whites that developed into rival nationalisms" (15). Many discontented Boers joined the "Great Trek" to what were subsequently called the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. Early in the nineteenth century the trek marked a move towards Boer independence and nationalism, whereas later trekkers were lured from the traditional African farm to the cities and mines. By the end of the nineteenth century the trek was linked to the growing poor white problem. The Carnegie Report repeatedly worries about the "trek spirit" of poor whites (Wilcocks, "Joint Findings and Recommendations" 7-9, 12, 13). Grosskopf, in his economic report, is quick to associate the "rural exodus" of white South Africans with "rural impoverishment." Trekking is a form of social deviance that needs to be corrected. Schreiner reinterprets the trek in *African Farm*, but in *Undine*, her first book, she is far more interested in the social and economic promise of the Diamond Fields for women, the working class, and (less so) Africans.

When Schreiner joined her brother and sister at the Diamond Fields in 1873, diamond digging was still rather rudimentary, and the mining capitalists were only beginning to amass their fortunes. One of those