

Special Issue II: The Power of Autobiography in Southern Africa

Introduction: Fractured Experiences and Porous Narratives

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A recent study of *Selves in Question: Interviews on Southern African Autobiography* offers a window through which most notable writers from South Africa use self-representation to question and define notions of self, how they relate earlier to later selves and to others, thereby constituting collective and personal identities (Coullie, Meyer, Ngwenya & Olver 2006: 1). The volume foregrounds auto-/biographers' acts of narration through the genre of the interview and projects these as critical moments at which writers reflect on their creative reflections. However, the overarching reliance is on South African writers with very few from other countries from southern Africa, a fact that makes the volume less representative of the creative output of the region that defines its scope. It is for this reason that the two special issues for which we write these two introductions, analyse southern African autobiographies, memoirs and biographies as creative verbal acts that can stand on their own, outside the lives of their composers. Whether it is biography, memoir or autobiography, writing cannot be taken for granted. The ideological imperative for male and female authors to create their own texts in which they reconstruct their own counter-memories arise from the realisation that "[t]o write is to claim a text of one's own; textuality is an instrument of territorial repossession; because the other confers on us an identity that alienates us from ourselves, narrative is crucial to the discovery of our selfhood. The text is the mirror in which the subject will see itself reflected" (Gikandi 1992: 384).

The struggle to represent the selves is performed in physical as well as other multiple spaces. Gikandi suggests that "others" have the capacity to misrepresent us. This notion rests on the assumption that the self does not have problems in representing itself to itself, and also to its other selves. But can we always assume that pure identities can be recuperated from and through the zone of textuality without necessitating a preliminary critique of selves? Can we rely on the belief that others cannot to some extent, "truly",

and “adequately”, represent others without *othering* them? Is a “narrative” merely a “mirror” through which the “subject” self is unproblematically “reflected”? Is it not possible that even when the self appears to be speaking, what people and readers hear may in fact be a voice spoken to by the subject position the voice occupies within the larger discursive symbolical economy?

Rethinking the processes by which identities are constituted through auto-/biography and memoirs force us to acknowledge the limits of our own modes of memory. For example, in an interview with M.J. Daymond on “Writing Autobiography and Writing Fiction” Doris Lessing (2006: 231-242) discusses her nagging awareness of “big gaps [in her] memory” that are a product of selection and ordering of events. She tells the reader of her interview that

[t]he similarity between novels and autobiographies is that ... you cannot conceivably write all your memories because there'd be millions of words and readers would be asleep within the first chapter. So then you have to choose and this is what, after all, you sometimes do with a novel – cutting, cutting. So I found myself shaping it in a way, and life isn't terribly shapely.
(Lessing 2006: 233)

In autobiography writing there is material that is consciously left out as unnecessary although readers might in other situations have found interesting that which has been excluded from that narrative. Es'kia Mphahlele complicates our understanding of autobiography writing by suggesting that even those materials that are consciously used to produce autobiography are never merely the faithful reproduction of all the selected aspects of a writer's life. He says in his interview with Manganyi that

[t]here is no way that you are going to capture everything that happened in your life. There is no way that you can even approximate the sequence of those events in your autobiography. So, what you indeed do is to recreate yourself. It is in a sense a monument of self. In its becoming, it's a monument and in its composition it is a metaphor. You are saying here is my life story and yet at the same time it's a metaphor rather than absolute.
(Mphahlele 2006: 244)

The shift from “monument” to “metaphor” introduces to autobiographical narratives polyvalence to the sign which then “refuses to register an easy equivalence between an event and its textual representation” (Chennells 2006: 137). If writing an autobiography can be likened to a “second acquisition of language, a second coming into being of self, a self-conscious self consciousness” (Eakin in Levin & Taitz 1999: 169), biography writing can also be likened to “mediated testimony” (Coullie et al. 2006: 4). With biography there are no guarantees as to whether or not what readers come to read are authorised versions in which contestations over the validity of the

rendered stories can encourage multiple readings of the work. Unlike in the case of autobiography and memoirs – both which command their authority from the “single” voice, biography complicates notions of narrativity and truth-bearing because the writing author can only enter the world of those for whom he/she writes via a limited vocabulary and choice of signs familiar to him-/herself. That is why performed biographies, autobiographies or memoirs “re-engag[e] rather than reimagin[e] experience” as “a number of characters interface with their narrators” (Coetzee 2006: 329) and this further denies these narratives any “authority” to manage and force coherence onto a diversity of subject positions within them.

Each of the essays in this issue is sharply aware of the capacity of auto-/biography and memoir to authorise individual identities that can be projected as metaphors of others in similar social circumstances. And yet, and this is the significance of the special issue – each of the contributors points to the inescapable disjunctures within identities of the self that auto-/biographies, and memoirs can also authorise when the authors attempt to make their narratives coterminous with the birth and growth of postcolonial southern African nations.

Zodwa Motsa discovers in Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* not only an autobiography but also epic qualities typical of great moments in history. Motsa adopts a comparative approach to highlight the epic qualities, first for literariness and then the text is compared with similar “classical” literary writings in other societies such as England, Italy and Mali with the view to foreground the text’s primordial social function. Motsa’s aim with this critical exercise is to canvass for the recognition of this autobiography as a typical African epic whose functional remedies can be applied to the very society from which it comes.

Maurice Vambe and Katy Khan chose the site of Zimbabwe’s national anthem as constituting a political biography of that nation. However, the act of codifying the “oral” anthem into a piece of writing and then projecting this anthem as epitomising the experiences and the lives of the individuals within the nation is in fact marked by a disjuncture. This happens because, by their very nature, acts of narrating individual or collective identities should always be viewed as approximations of that lived reality. Furthermore, national anthems as wish lists are based on some selected themes deemed to be of national importance. But, if it is remembered that the lyrics of Simudzai Mureza weZimbabwe were composed by a literary figure, and became the ones selected and adopted by the Government of Zimbabwe, amongst other compositions, then there is reason to believe this political biography is “complete in its incompleteness or incomplete in its completeness”.

Tasiyana Javangwe returns to the question of the constructedness of auto-/biography. His chapter explores how self-identity is (re)constructed through the narrative act of autobiography in Doris Lessing’s *Under My Skin, Volume 1, 1919-1949*. Javangwe argues that the authentic self is born in the

process of narrative writing and that the self coexists with other selves that are a result of socialisation. He then interrogates how this process of identity formation is realised through the prisms of memory, history, culture and social environment and the unconscious self as codified in Lessing's work.

Mavis Mandongonda shows how, by tackling the challenges of single motherhood, career/celebrity experiences of a woman with HIV through the genre of autobiography, Tendayi Westerhof opens a new avenue on contemporary women's issues. Westerhof observes the narrative conventions of life-writing but goes a yard further and weaves narratives of social activism into her work. Not only does she offer a personal testimony, but she also takes the initiative to spread awareness regarding the pandemic and the vulnerability of women. Here, a female autobiography refuses to subserve open political goals of nationhood in favour of private experiences that are now insisting on forcing themselves as constituting the "political" content of autobiography. Being HIV positive, Westerhof lends a voice to the voiceless women by exploring their experiences in a number of ways; through the conventional, ordinary woman/growing girl, the woman as a single mother, the woman and HIV, the woman in a mixed marriage and the woman as a survivor. She brings to the fore the stigma that is often associated with HIV, a feat which must have taken a lot of courage and willpower.

Away from auto-/biography, Robert Muponde focuses on Geoffrey Nyarota, the author of *Against the Grain: Memoirs of a Zimbabwean Newsmen* (2006) who was well known in Zimbabwe's media and political circles as a troubling and troubled, and now self-exiled journalist. His name is controversially folklorised as synonymous with the growth, tensions, and fate of the Zimbabwean story as told by newsmen. He is not known as a writer of books. His memoirs, advertised as long-awaited, and their arrival coinciding with an aborted much-hyped long "winter of discontent" for the ruling party, is uncannily in active conjunction with the politics of the times. Nyarota's memoirs are not an ordinary collation of life histories, recollections and musings, but are in many ways an attempt at self-folklorisation. This places him in direct competition for authorial resources with the metanarratives of the nation along which he writes his story, and against whose grain he bumps off. What then should we learn about this newsman? While his memoirs help us to understand some of the ways Zimbabwean nationalism has congealed into a frightening narrative and space, Nyarota's story is a metanarrative of some sort, which should be undone to reveal the figure that hides behind it as a truth-seeking, but forgetful and compromised newsman. This essay traces not only the conflictive relationship between the personal histories of the memoir-writer and the public histories, but the very similarities – however they are established in conflict – between the narrativised of the nation and of the person. It is not just the notion of the self-in-society in autobiography, nor its susceptibility to chronology and

multiple lives that is of interest to this essay, but its similarities to what it disavows. Is the nation therefore a sum total of its memoirs?

This special issue ends with a contribution of Nhamo Mhiripiri for whom all types of writing are a “site of struggle”. Mhiripiri raises some important issues related to biography and political contestation. The first issue is about the “art” of writing biography as a genre and its ideological purpose. The second key issue is how Bhebe attempts to build a popular sense of national identity through the person and image of Simon Muzenda. The above-mentioned issues inevitably demand the enunciation of the role of the biographer and all imaginative creative narrators in constructing discourses of nation-building, the promotion of particular class and ideological positions, and to legitimise the ruling ZANU-PF political party’s hegemony to which Muzenda belonged and of which he was vice president. There are instances when the reader becomes curious to know the relationship between the biographer Bhebe and Muzenda and the ruling ZANU-PF in order to better understand the way Muzenda’s story – and by extension the history of Zimbabwe – is constructed.

The editors are grateful to the contributors to this volume who have demonstrated in their contributions the rich diversity of southern African lives and the different ways in which individual memories, whether these are recorded by biographer or autobiographer, can uncover aspects of our past.

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