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Introduction: The Power of Autobiography in Southern Africa

Maurice Taonezvi Vambe & Anthony Chennells

Biography became an important method of reconstructing the past in Britain and America only in the nineteenth century and by the second quarter of the twentieth century it had, in radical circles at least, come to be regarded as inferior historiography. The cult of the great leader or the record of a person possessed of exceptional qualities may once have justified life stories but in a discipline that was becoming preoccupied with the movements of classes, races and nations, all of which could be shown to be the productions of history and which would in turn shape history, the individual, however outstanding, was interesting only in his or her typicality of some larger collective. Sociology and economics were history's natural disciplinary allies and few historians in consequence sought in literary narratives models for recounting the lives of the people who were busy shaping the pasts that the historians were reconstructing.

In practice of course, although biography may have lost academic respectability among historians, it was produced as energetically and consumed as voraciously throughout the twentieth century as it had been in the nineteenth. As a genre – and this includes autobio-graphy as well – it satisfies the very human curiosity that we possess about other people. If we know or knew them as public figures, we look to biography for information about other selves that the public personae succeed in masking and if media gossip or their own creations have aroused our curiosity about them, biography or autobiography offers us the illusion of familiarity because the genres provide details of their lives as they lived them or are living them.

The recent surge of academic interest in biography and autobiography grows out of the preoccupations of postmodernism which theorise the experiences of a world whose material realities as much as its ideologies call into question the teleologies of class and nation and in the southern African experience of race. As metanarratives of the past and the present are

overwhelmed and finally subverted by a vast diversity of different experiences of apparently similar pasts and presents, we turn for understanding to the local, the particular, and finally the personal. If postmodernism alerts us more to disjunction than to continuity and registers difference rather than similarity, individual lives interest us not primarily because of their typicality but because of their distinction.

Even while we register our interest in the particularity of lived lives, however, we cannot remain indifferent to the way in which those lives have been inscribed by the larger contexts in which they are lived and in southern Africa this preoccupation with context is more pronounced perhaps than in most parts of the world. Only the young, if they are very fortunate, have had no experience of a southern Africa that encouraged us to exist in our own minds and in the minds of others as products of region, race and ethnicity. And, in any case, wherever we live, we are never free from the pressures of global history. In one of the great southern African autobiographies, *Under My Skin*, which is largely set in Zimbabwe, Doris Lessing ponders whether a forceps birth may have shaped what she was to become and then with sudden certainty pronounces, “I do know that to be born in the year 1919 when half of Europe was a graveyard, and people were dying all over the world – that was important. How could it not be?” (Lessing 1994: 8). As the title of her sequel, *The Children of Violence*, suggests, Lessing was to register the influence of the violence of that and the following world war in five novels, and empire in its local manifestation, Southern Rhodesia, added another dimension to her experiences of violence. Lessing refuses to separate her individual story from the various historical contexts through which she has lived but at the same time as she sees herself as a product of war and empire, she insists on her particularity. It is this constant movement between the collective and the self that biographies and autobiographies are forced to negotiate and it is these movements that have attracted so much theoretical interest.

All of the essays in this volume ask in different ways whether authentic selves can be identified outside the narratives that construct them either as biographies or autobiographies. Annie Gagiano writes movingly of Bessie Head’s refusal to essentialise an identity in Marxist or racial orthodoxies. “In her writing,” Gagiano observes, “[Head] knew, she would be ‘assert[ing her own] kind of Africanness which is a wide, all-encompassing feeling of great intensity’ in contrast with the life quality and curtailed vision of the alternative she refers to as ‘a tribal man’”. Head with her history of exclusion in two countries and by two races can be wryly amused at a description of herself as “‘the ebullient *Botswanan*’, adding: ‘If only they knew. Here I am Bessie Head, the Bushman dog’”. The self that Gagiano shows Bessie Head desperately seeking and clinging to after she has found it is “her unwavering certainty that she has a writer’s gift”. Gagiano argues that despite the contempt with which some of her contemporaries

dismissed her shallow political awareness – Lewis Nkosi remarked that “for most of the time Bessie Head seems politically ignorant. She has only this moral fluency” – she possessed “a political awareness, which was both philosophically wide and practically astute”. Gagiano’s essay demonstrates how an autobiographical subject can be recovered outside a conventional autobiography. Her materials are Head’s letters and Gagiano rigourously theorises their narrative methods while remaining compassionately aware of their record of poverty and discrimination and how these contribute to her terror at losing her tenuous hold on reality.

Sam Raditlhalo’s discussion of Hugh Masekela’s autobiography, *Still Grazing*, anchors his discussion in Jane Watts’s remark that “autobiography is the South African writers’ answer to this interference with their consciousness – they use it to try and reverse the conditioning process in order to free themselves, through reassessment of their entire growth and development, of their mental subjugation, to make their consciousness”. Raditlhalo demonstrates that for Masekela this was no easy task and he traces the strange dialectic of Masekela’s migrations so that only by living and working in the United States can he know himself first as an African and finally discover that he is a South African. In his discussion of *Still Grazing*, Raditlhalo uses an informative quote from Stewart Hall, that great theorist of the postmodern condition and opponent of identity politics. For Hall, we use (and this is true of the autobiographer in particular) “the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves”.

Liz McGregor’s *Khabzela*, a biography of the well-known DJ Fana Khaba who died of AIDS, raises other interesting theoretical questions about when biography fuses into autobiography, which N.S. Zulu discusses. Since McGregor is Khaba’s biographer and she is describing her experience of meeting him and then recording his life, is her book not as much her autobiography as the biography of an HIV positive black man? Zulu notes that “the final selection and combination of story events in *Khabzela* lie with the “‘white woman’ as the autobiographical first person becomes narrator” and, using Rimmon-Kenan’s terminology, she is thus the “dominant focaliser” in Khaba’s story. Zulu recognises that given the control that McGregor necessarily has over her material, such a book may appear to be a white biographer’s exploitation of the experiences of black sexuality and disease. But as Zulu records, McGregor in her few meetings with Khaba recognised that he was already disorientated by the progress of the disease and his family and friends are largely responsible for telling his story posthumously. The biography is partly therefore a record of community responses to an individual life and the disease that ended it. McGregor controls her material to the extent of refusing to have any truck with an “African solution” to the epidemic that claims to be employing

“comprehensive and holistic” approaches in its treatment. Instead she both tells Khaba’s story and places AIDS in a scientific context thereby registering both its menace and removing it from the realm of witchcraft and less recondite mystifications.

If a biographer who seems to have little in common with his or her subject runs the danger of objectifying the person whose life is being written, a different problem may arise in too strong an identification between biographer and subject. Trish and Wilf Mbangas – she is a white and he a black Zimbabwean – were married in Rhodesia when marriages between black and white were frowned upon by both black and white communities. Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo who discusses their biography of Seretse and Ruth Khama, *Ruth And Seretse*, quotes their frank acknowledgement of their own personal investment in the Khama marriage. The Mbangas write of the “special affinity” they felt for Ruth and Seretse knowing as they do “what it is like to be caught up in a love so powerful that the normal boundaries of colour, class, creed and public opinion cease to matter”. To the Mbangas, the Khamas “were pioneers, and we who follow in their footsteps salute them”. These remarks movingly preface the Mbangas’ retelling of the Khamas’ story, and the identification of the younger couple with the older is also evidence that biography is not inevitably subjective. It can be used to oppose assumptions about the collective whether they are the orthodoxies of Marxism and white southern African racism that pursued Bessie Head or the prejudices against marriage between people of different races that the Mbangas had to endure thirty years after the Khamas’ marriage became headline news. Dodgson-Katiyo notes that the biographical form which does not obey fixed rules of genre allows the Mbangas freedom to intersperse their historical narrative with fictional reconstructions that help to locate the Khamas’ story in a genre that Doris Sommers identified in Latin American novels and which she describes as “foundational fictions”. These are “almost inevitably stories of star-crossed lovers who represent particular regions, races, parties, economic interests”, and the stories show that their coming together in marriage help “to establish the legitimacy of an emerging nation” and to direct it “toward a future ideal”. If the Khamas lived out a courtship and marriage that provided the moral foundations of a Botswana tolerant of its diverse communities, the Zimbabwean Mbangas can see within the lives they are celebrating the foundational narrative for what they hope their own country may become. Dodgson Katiyo writes of *Ruth and Seretse* that “[i]f the dream of harmony and prosperity that Zimbabwean independence promised has now turned into a nightmare, then, a search for a new ‘originary’ moment signifies the desire for a new nation”. Here biography not only recalls lives that are exemplary for Botswana but through the experiences of the biographers that parallel those of their subject, biography points to ideals that have been betrayed in Zimbabwe.

Maurice Vambe's essay returns this collection to a discussion of autobiography, in his case Joshua Nkomo's *The Story of My Life*, and his account lists and demonstrates some of the pitfalls of the genre. Of its nature autobiography is constructed from "the subjectivity of a single voice" but Vambe notes that that is no guarantee that such a voice can access "a single objective reality". Vambe quotes from an interview J.M. Coetzee gave David Atwell in which Coetzee observed that autobiography is invariably "'*autre*-biography [or] an account of another self'" and if that other self hangs disquietingly over the story of a life, Vambe further complicates its presence by suggesting the presence of what is perhaps a fourth self, the self about whom the autobiographer has refused to commit herself or himself and that lives in silences in the text.

Reading these essays has made us only too conscious of the instability of the constructed subjects whether they are self or other or a combination of the two. Vambe, however, adds to this sense of the instability of the subject by reminding us that Nkomo is writing a political biography and that it is "a polemical text serving a particular political agenda". If autobiography and biography enforce our sense of the unpredictability of the life that is being traced, Nkomo's story "refuses any other way of reading it, of seeing in it different interpretations other than those that the author wishes to promote". For Vambe the flaws of Nkomo's story are found not in the instability of the subject but in its fixity. The man who recalls his persecution by ZANU and Mugabe, Vambe argues, has for much of his story "no other context than the political life of ZANU, and the personality of Robert Mugabe. This has impoverished Nkomo's account as he is never allowed to become the subject of his own autobiography". This is deeply insightful and perhaps the necessary fate of all political autobiographies. Nkomo was called by his followers the "Father of Zimbabwe" but Vambe suggests that his story is of a man whose identity was not of his own making but rather was formed by reaction to Mugabe and ZANU (PF), over whom he had no control or, to complete the parenting metaphor, by people who should have been his children in the generational politics of nationalism. By emphasising his persecution by Mugabe as a dissident or by the Shona majority as a Ndebele, Vambe argues that Nkomo's story reduces his stature as national leader and he falls into the very trap that Mugabe has set for him: his story is told in such a way as to limit his significance as a politician to region and ethnic minority. Like many of the more elderly among Zimbabwe's current leaders, Nkomo during his long political life was involved in a number of alliances and had in consequence to occupy changing ideological positions. Vambe claims that one of Nkomo's uses of autobiography is "to manage and force coherence upon a diversity of his own potential subject positions". If he instead had chosen to record how he responded to the many shifts of Zimbabwean history, he would have been able as a narrator to come to terms with the multiple selves that any of us can recall when we try to recover our pasts. He would also have been able to convey and to celebrate

within his own story the diversity that makes up the Zimbabwean nation and in liberating himself from his subordination to Mugabe, he would have been able to depict other possibilities for the nation than those that ZANU (PF) prescribes.

Like Vambe, Anthony Chennells writes about a Zimbabwean autobiography, Judith Todd's *Through the Darkness*. Chennells is interested in the form Todd has chosen for her reminiscences which he compares to a diary, a narrative form that rejects any possibility of teleology since it registers only the happenings of a day and its speculation on future possibilities are dependent on what each day reveals. If Vambe sees Nkomo's story as flawed by its polemical insistence, then Todd, although equally polemical in fact, conceals her overt political intentions by simply allowing the records of the years to speak for themselves. Chennells argues that Todd's narrative method encourages us to trust her as a dependable witness and her story as an accurate record. One consequence of this trust is that Mugabe and ZANU (PF) are seen as responsible for the nation's collapse not because she has accused them but through the evidence of their own actions which she has recorded.

A feature of the following essays is the diversity of the individual lives that biographers and autobiographers have recorded. Seretse Khama was a president of Botswana and Joshua Nkomo a vice-president of Zimbabwe. Nkomo and Judith Todd were persecuted by both the governments of Rhodesia and Zimbabwe. Bessie Head is one of southern Africa's most important writers and Hugh Masekela was an innovative musician who helped to introduce South African music to the world. Fana Khaba was known to millions of South Africans as a radio personality and his public acknowledgment of his HIV status made possible a more liberated and informed discussion of AIDS than would have been possible without his example.

If these lives are diverse, the approaches that the authors of these essays use are equally varied. Annie Gagiano theorises an autobiography shaped by letters. Trish and Wilf Mbanga rewrite the biography of the Khamas by allowing their experience of cross-cultural marriage to inform their understanding of what Ruth and Seretse endured and triumphed over. Sam Raditlhalo's discussion of Hugh Masekela insists on his multiple selves ranging from tsotsi to musical genius and N.S. Zulu discusses the different layers of memory that Sue McGregor uncovers in recording the life of Fana Khaba. Chennells and Vambe both consider the different ways in which autobiography functions in recovering memory.

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.

References

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