

“our Now, their Then”: Claiming the Past and Contesting Posterity in Magona’s *To My Children’s Children*

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Abstract

The 2023 publication of a selection of Sindiwe Magona’s essays, titled *I Write the Yawning Void*, is significant for a number of reasons, not least of which are her reflections on the writing of her two-volume autobiography, *To My Children’s Children* (1990) and *Forced to Grow* (1992). Of significance also is how the title of the selection not only frames the book as a whole but speaks broadly to the act of writing, particularly Black South African autobiographical writing of the 1980s and 1990s, as “writ[ing] the yawning void.” Against this background, the aim of this article is to revisit the first volume of Magona’s autobiography in the context of its reception around the time of its publication and, in the light of Magona’s reflections, to proffer some thoughts on how it may be read post-apartheid. The second volume, *Forced to Grow*, is also on the horizon of my discussion. In her selection of essays, Magona sets a new agenda for reading her autobiography today by setting up the tension between “our Now,” by which she refers to the active present in which she lived and later wrote about, and “their Then,” which is the past-ness of that present which the title of *To My Children’s Children* anticipated, by projecting its address and, thus, meaning to the future. In this sense, both the autobiography and the essays operate in the space between memory and forgetting and between historicity and presentism. It is in these spaces that I locate my re-reading of *To My Children’s Children* in this article.

Keywords: Magona; autobiography; identity/selfhood; race; gender; class

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Introduction: “Writing the Void” and the Autobiographical Imperative in Black South African Women’s Writing

In the introduction to *I Write the Yawning Void*, Magona has the following to say about why she wrote her autobiography:

That first book, *To My Children’s Children* (1990), as well as the sequel, *Forced to Grow* (1992) – both autobiographies, worked to fill the strange void of absence. Complete absence of me and people like me from books. Not as I know myself. Not as I knew people among whom I lived. (Magona 2023, 3)

Studies of and in Black South African autobiographical writing in the 1990s could be said to have been preoccupied with the question of how to approach the kind of autobiography that Magona alludes to above, that is, the kind that is not only about “me” but also about “people like me” (Magona 2023, 3). It is the kind of autobiography that came to be called *testimonio*, which Lewis-Beck, Bryman, and Liao (2004, 1118) describe as “a first-person narration of socially significant experiences in which the narrative voice is that of a typical or extraordinary witness or protagonist who metonymically represents others who have lived through similar situations and who have rarely given written expression to them.” In other words, the recurring question in studies of Black South African autobiographical writing in the 1990s was where to draw the line between the individual and communal self, in addition to questions of gender, race, class, and place. This is besides the collaborative self-narratives published in the mid- to late 1980s, such as *Vukani Makhosikazi: South African Women Speak* (Barrett et al. 1985) and *Sibambene: The Voices of Women at Mboza* (Griesel 1987), which in their turn reconfigure the lines between individual and collective authorship and experience. A similar question about the status of the autobiographical self in testimonial narratives has been posed in regard to Indian Dalit self-narratives. For instance, writing of Indian “Dalit [women’s] life narratives,” which “historically created the genre of testimonios in which the individual self seeks affirmation in a collective mode,” Sharmila Rege nevertheless notes that, “situated as women in the community, they articulate concerns of gender, challenging the singular communitarian notion of dalit community” (Rege 2006, 17). Yet still, the question of the class position assumed by the writing self adds to the difficulty of drawing a line between the individual and communal self, as Margaret Daymond (1995) demonstrates. However, Daymond (1991, quoting Sommer 1988), asserts the generic specificity of Black South African self-narratives against an indiscriminating use of the term autobiography. She notes:

She [Sommer] suggests that the testimonial “I” is not the result of “personal preference on the part of the writer who testifies. It is a translation of a hegemonic autobiographical pose into a colonized language that does not equate identity with individuality.” (Sommer 1988, 111, quoted in Daymond 1991, 34–35)

The position of the autobiographical self has also been questioned from the standpoint of “truth” or verisimilitude in autobiography. For instance, in her essay titled “Not

Quite Fiction’: The Challenges of Poststructuralism to the Reading of Contemporary South African Autobiography,” Judith Lütge Coullie submits five autobiographies by Black writers to this sort of critical inquiry. Drawing on Wallace Fowlie’s “remarks [on] the autobiographic enterprise”—that is, that “it is not quite fiction, but it is not far from it” (Fowlie 1988, 165, quoted in Coullie 1991, 1)—she argues that “at issue is the apparent refusal of the genre to conform to our commonsense expectations of it” (1991, 1). Thus, for Coullie it is when we conceive of “the narrator as a linguistic construct ... an isolatable part of the totality of the text, distinct from the protagonist(s) and the implied author, as well as from the material person, the real author,” that the issue of autobiographic “truth” becomes undecidable (1991, 4–5). This is because “when it comes to scrutinising individual texts it becomes decidedly difficult to determine just how little or how much ‘tampering’ has occurred” (1991, 1). Using Godfrey Moloi’s autobiography, *My Life: Volume 1*, as a case in point, she wonders to what extent the “events [have] been selected and shaped according to the movie style, rather than the other way round” (1991, 2). To this end, she asks whether “the narrative [is] more fictive, more the result of artistic form-imposition, than factual”; that is, whether “Godfrey Moloi, the living man, [is] quite the hero that the protagonist of *My Life: Volume 1* is” (1991, 2).

Two responses to Coullie’s post-structuralist challenge to the reading of South African autobiography warrant quoting for the kind of intervention that I seek to make in my discussion of Magona’s autobiography. They are Felicity Nussbaum’s “Autobiographical Spaces and the Postcolonial Predicament” (1991) and Daymond’s “On Retaining and on Recognising Changes in the Genre ‘Autobiography’” (1991), which I have already alluded to above. While both acknowledge the insights brought to bear on our conception of the genre of autobiography by post-structuralist theoretical interventions, they nonetheless raise important questions about the extent to which these insights might be useful for reading non-Western and Black women’s autobiographies. At issue for both Nussbaum and Daymond is the question of who decides on the question of “truth” in autobiographical discourse or on what constitutes “our commonsense expectations of [the genre]” (Coullie 1991, 1). For Nussbaum, “our very identity as readers, as well as the identity of those we read, might be imagined as uneasy predicaments rather than fixed or stable positions” (1991, 25), while for Daymond “the indications of how these texts are actually read by their primary readers, black women, seem ... to contradict Coullie’s central claim that they are to be understood as a kind of fiction” (1991, 32). For her claim, Daymond draws on the “Workshop on Black Women’s Writing and Reading” (Daymond and Lenta 1990), in which responses by Black women to autobiographies written by Black women “seem[ed] to be fundamentally at odds with Coullie’s position” (1991, 33). In the case of one of the women at the Workshop, Thandi Moses—who said of Ellen Kuzwayo’s *Call Me Woman*, “It’s had a lot of influence; it takes just one person to do something, then other people realise that ‘Oh, it can be done’”—Daymond remarks that “this reading” suggests that for Moses “the narrative [of *Call Me Woman*] is directly mimetic of what has been achieved in life by a ‘real’ person” (1991, 33). Furthermore, “the reader

[Moses] is taking an energy from an exemplary protagonist's claims of selfhood that is vital to her, as is her pleasure in the text's validating what she recognises as her own experiences" (1991, 33). In this light, Daymond concludes that "these are reading practices for which South African critics need to be able to account without taking the dangerously elitist step of declaring them to be innocent or naïve" (1991, 33).

My discussion of *To My Children's Children* begins from these reconsiderations of the status of the autobiographical imperative in Black women's testimonies and I do this through Magona's own reflections on her autobiography. Indeed, *I Write the Yawning Void* adds another layer of complexity to the concerns about who reads and theorises about Black women's autobiographies that Nussbaum and Daymond problematise in their comments about what may be called the blind spots of post-structuralist reading. For her part, Cecily Lockett cautions against Anglo-American and, in particular, French feminist theory's "enclos[ure] ... within the world of ideas, in which language and discourse may easily exclude the harsh and painful realities of suffering and oppression experienced by women" (1994, 6). A significant part of my discussion concerns the issue of Black women's writing during apartheid as acts of humanisation—of "writing the yawning void"—and this dimension of Magona's writing has endured in post-apartheid works such as *Mother to Mother* (1998) and her children's stories. Magona's *Mother to Mother* is based on the true story of the murder of a White American Fulbright scholar, Amy Biehl, in Gugulethu, by a group of young Black boys. In the novel, which takes the form of an epistle, Mandisa, a Black mother, writes to Amy's mother, in an attempt to explain her son's part in the murder. In doing so, she remarks on the spectre of apartheid's dehumanisation of Black boys—and men—and that even if her son had not been involved, "she [Amy] might have got herself killed by another of these monsters our children have become. Here in Gugulethu, or in Langa, or Nyanga or Khayelitsha. Or, indeed, in another far-away township in the vastness of this country" (2016, 2). In a manner of speaking, then, *To My Children's Children* provides the historical backdrop to the murder of Amy Biehl in that it is a chronicle of the period in which apartheid geography was being mapped and the townships mentioned in Mandisa's address to Amy's mother guaranteed the dead ends of Black lives. Indeed, when Magona says in writing her autobiography "I was writing for future people. ... I was sure my manuscript would be invaluable to those in the far-distant future, social scientists of various kinds, who were looking back, researching our Now, their Then" (2023, 110), she is alluding to the future anterior that is the signature of *To My Children's Children*. Magona's autobiography, like many similar works set in its time—autobiographical, fictional and non-fictional—is about the search for humanity in a world governed by taxonomies of race and ethnicity and, within these, of gender, sexuality, and place. More importantly, however, it is the social, political, and cultural uses to which such taxonomies were pressed into service that frames the narrative's quest for an alternative self-image and way of being human.

To return to the point that I made above regarding re-reading Magona's autobiography through her reflections on why she wrote it, let me state at this point that I am also

cognisant of the vexed question of the “author’s intention”—what William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley call the “intentional fallacy” (1967, 3)—in deciding on the meaning of a text or in thinking through the relationship between texts and the realities to which they appear to refer. However, I argue that the American New Critical model within which Wimsatt and Beardsley wrote, in which the text’s meaning derives from its own verbal environment, has limited purchase on a text such as *To My Children’s Children*. Or, for that matter, on Black South African autobiographical writing, which, as Thengani H. Ngwenya notes, is “shaped largely by the writer’s circumstances at the time of writing, narrative conventions, the writer’s intentions and the culturally defined codes of self-signification” (Ngwenya 2000, 1). On this aspect of the multiple locations and, thus, broader reach of Black South African autobiography, Daymond asserts with specific reference to the reception of Black women’s autobiographies:

If black women are reading [autobiographies written by black women] metonymically when they say to themselves “Woman, you too can do it”, then, I suggest, they find the writer’s textual subject position both recognisable and empowering for daily life because life too is discursively based. (Daymond 1991, 35)

From this perspective, the relationship between a text and the reality to which it refers can be said to be dialectical rather than putative, and the meanings that can be drawn from a text arise from engagements with it that this dialectic avails. What Daymond suggests, then, is the idea that a text is neither self-enclosed nor self-validating, at least from the point of view of a certain cultural and political location. Rather, a text such as Magona’s or Kuzwayo’s issues a call and anticipates a response, as in the titular address “to my children’s children” (Magona) or the imperative “call me woman” (Kuzwayo).

One can also think of autobiography in James Olney’s sense as a form that “insinuates itself into all sorts of other disciplines and endeavors—history, psychology, anthropology, sociology” (1986, 64). In “The Historical Dimension of South African Autobiography,” Ngwenya remarks that “mainly because of its strong historical dimension, [South African] autobiography serves the crucial function of reflecting, analysing and interpreting the racial, ethnic, class and gender differences in the South Africa [*sic*] community” (2000, 1). For Johan Jacobs, “the lesson of South African autobiography seems to be that its deep subject is to be sought in the complex cultural and historical text that lies behind the name of each individual autobiographical subject” (1991, ii). In this sense, and to the extent that the disciplines that Olney asserts the autobiographical form insinuates itself into expand the dimensions of textuality and selfhood, our encounters with autobiography as a form and act of self-representation cannot avoid Fredric Jameson’s view of “narrative as a socially symbolic act” (2002). For Jameson, “the political interpretation of literary texts” is “not ... some supplementary method, not ... an optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods current today ... but rather the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation” (2002, 1). Needless to say, set in the time of political repression in South Africa, Magona’s autobiography actively invites a political interpretation and, significantly,

sets store by its claim to both its historicity and futurity. And it is to this idea of historicity and futurity/posterity that *To My Children's Children* lays claim to that studies such as *And Wrote My Story Anyway: Black South African Women's Novels* (Boswell 2020) and *Inyathi Ibuzwa Kwabaphambili: Theorising South African Women's Intellectual Legacies* (Magoqwana, Magadla, and Masola 2024) appeal. The isiXhosa proverb “*inyathi ibuzwa kwabaphambili*” means “follow[ing] in the footsteps of those who have gone before” and “is mainly used to advise the novice and simply means that it is right and wise to ask those who know through experience” (Mesatywa 1971, 172, quoted in Magoqwana, Magadla, and Masola 2024, 2). In the concluding chapter of *I Write the Yawning Void*, titled “A Tribute to Those Who Came Before Me,” Magona herself uses this proverb, a further testimony to what Jacobs calls “the deep subject” of an individual’s life story, which can be found “in the complex cultural and historical text that lies behind the name of each individual autobiographical subject” (Jacobs 1991, 2). In her tribute, Magona acknowledges André Brink, among other writers who influenced her, in particular Brink’s role in the Sestigers, those Afrikaans writers who dared “break loose of the *laager* – as Afrikaner insularity is often described” (Magona 2023, 187). From this perspective, Magona’s claim that she wrote her autobiography for “future people”—as it were, for her “children’s children”—redefines the textual boundaries of the *autos* in the term autobiography. In other words, the appeal of the conventional autobiography to the singular self of the autobiographer is undercut by what above Sommer calls the “plural self” in testimonial self-narratives (Sommer 1988, 111, quoted in Daymond 1991, 34–35).

Ways of Being Human / Ways of Being Woman: Self, Writing, and Posterity in Magona’s *To My Children’s Children*

As I note above, the title of the first volume of Magona’s autobiography defines a future which is anterior to its present. Moreover, as a work of memory and reconstruction, it also inhabits the past simultaneously. Leigh Gilmore posits that claiming the past and contesting posterity is especially significant for women autobiographers, in that for women “autobiography [is] a site of resistance, especially as it engages the politics of looking back and challenges the politics of how the past and the present may be known in relation to a particular version of history” (Gilmore 1994, 80). In reflecting on why she wrote her autobiography, Magona asserts this sense; as she says, it “was history, if only on a personal level” (Magona 2023, 110). *To My Children’s Children* raises a number of important questions, not least of which is the narrator’s discovery, as she grows up, that as a Black woman her ability to form an independent self is bound up with her race, gender, class, and place. She grows up in a Christian family, with a father who works as a migrant labourer in Cape Town, which is far from his family in the Eastern Cape village of Gungululu. At the age of five, she and her older brother Jongilizwe relocate to Cape Town, when their mother leaves the village to join her husband. Whereas as a child in Gungululu she is not aware of the colonial and, later, apartheid structures that govern Black life, and Black women’s lives in particular, in Cape Town she becomes increasingly aware of these structures and her and her mother’s

place within them. She describes the world of her formative years in the village as “magic-filled ... wonderfully carefree, and innocent ... all these things and more” (1990, 4). In Cape Town, however, the racial and ethnic structures that govern her society and community increasingly come to overdetermine her individual choices in decisive ways, including her “choices” of where she lives, with whom, and under what conditions. Indeed, the idea of a “typical childhood” (Magona 2023, 110) that she comes to associate with village life is replaced by the insecurities of not having a stable home and the vulnerability of a mother whose presence in Cape Town depends on her husband’s employment, which in turn determines his legal status in Cape Town. As Anne McClintock points out, a Black woman’s identity during apartheid was linked to that of a man, either as a “‘superfluous appendage’ of her husband’s labor”¹ or a perpetual minor, even to her own son(s) (McClintock 1991, 113). In *Call Me Woman*, Kuzwayo recalls an instance of this non-identity when she applied for a passport to travel overseas and was required to have her application form signed by her “oldest son ... so giving his approval and permission for me to go overseas.” This was despite her “explanation that my son still lived with me at home” (Kuzwayo 1985, 240).

Against this background, two related imperatives frame Magona’s autobiography: the narrator’s quest for a humanistic society and for the legacy of Black women and (grand)mothers to be written back into history. Humanism, according to Edward Said, is “an ongoing practice and not ... a possession” (2004, 6). It is, as it were, “a useable praxis” whose principles must “connect ... to the world in which [we] live” (2004, 6). With regard to Magona’s autobiography, I remarked earlier that it is about the search for humanity in a world governed by taxonomies of race and ethnicity and, within these, of gender, sexuality, and place. One could think of the autobiography’s womanist legacy in terms of what Magoqwana, Magadla, and Masola call “the age-old wisdom of our grandmothers,” which they argue must be “centralis[ed]” (2024, 1). It is in the context of both the humanist and womanist imperatives that one might read Magona’s recollections of her life in *To My Children’s Children* and in her reflections on one aspect of her writing in “Why I Write Children’s Stories” (Magona 2023, 173–182). That is, that “It was in such a warm *human* environment that I spent the first five years of my life” (Magona 1990, 7; my emphasis) and that “I doubt I would [be writing children’s stories] had I not had the childhood I’d enjoyed,” whereby “*Makhulu* [her grandmother] as well as other adults of my childhood ... gave me that gift” (Magona 2023, 174). Indeed, about her early life in the village the narrator says, “There has always been a place to which I belonged with a certainty that nothing has been able to take from me” (Magona 1990, 1). And this is a place and time in which she “had no idea of the link between the colour of my skin and the difference in life-styles; between mine and those of children of a lighter hue, ‘coloureds’, and those of a yet lighter shade,

1 McClintock gives the example of Mrs Msini, who suffers the misfortunes of her migrant labourer husband, Mr Harlan Msini, to the point of losing all rights to live anywhere, because her place is with her husband, wherever he is. The phrase “superfluous appendage,” McClintock informs us, means that, once married, “there is not one inch of her native South African soil on which [a Black woman] can legally tread” (1991, 113).

whites” (1990, 24). *To My Children’s Children* moves from this place of belonging, through the alienation of racial and gender difference, to the narrator’s awareness of what Siphokazi Koyana calls her “evolving womanist consciousness” (2001, 64). The closing chapter of this first volume of Magona’s autobiography, titled “Forced to Grow,” attests to this evolving womanist consciousness, as the narrator’s domestic space evolves into the political one. In this chapter, which lends its title to the second volume, the narrator, aged 23, is left by her husband Luthando to raise their three children as a single mother, but not before he goes to her employer, Mrs Koorn, to demand that she terminates her employment on account of her pregnancy. As a “minor” in the eyes of the law, a “superfluous appendage” to her husband, both of which give her husband the authority to make decisions for her, and a Black woman at the bottom of the racial hierarchy, she also discovers that her status as “a returnee from wifhood” is akin to that of “spoiled goods” (Magona 1990, 107) or “damaged goods” (Magona 1992, 79). By contrast, “a man’s stature grew in direct proportion to the number of women he had impregnated” (1992, 79). It is thus with understated irony—and self-irony—that she remarks on the culture’s gendered nomenclature thus:

Umabuy’ekwendeni – a returnee from wifhood – was my new designation; and I was doomed thereafter to *idikazi* which, according to the Reverend Robert Godfrey’s *A Kaffir-English Dictionary* (printed in 1918), refers to “an unmarried female.” And, the dictionary further enlightens us, this is “a term of reproach to all women who are husbandless.” (Magona 1992, 1)

The import of the irony is that it doubles back on the divorced men whom the culture leaves undesignated but who are deeply complicit in the patriarchal structure from which the “diction[ary]” derives its meaning and upon which it assembles its vocabulary.

Earlier I argued that autobiographies written in conditions of repression and struggle redraw the boundary between individual and collective selfhood and that the relation of the text to the reality to which it refers is dialectical. Such is the case in the ambivalence towards African communitarianism that characterises the mode of address of Magona’s autobiography and, indeed, her other work. While she is forthright in her critique of Afrikaner racial nationalism, her stance toward regressive aspects of African culture and what she considers the blind spots of African nationalism reveals the tension between individual and collective consciousness in testimonial self-narratives more generally. For instance, asked by David Attwell if it was true that “while there’s a strong sense of community that comes through in the narrative voice of the autobiography, there’s also a sense in which the self that you construct there needs to escape the community,”² Magona acknowledges this ambivalence in her writing. She notes:

2 In an “interview [that] was recorded during Middfest in Middletown, Ohio, 2 October 1999” (Attwell, Harlow, and Attwell 2000, 282). In the interview Attwell identifies Magona’s ambivalence as arising from the tension between the “need [for] a more individualistic trajectory ... in order to fulfil

There is an ambivalence there, you are right. Because as much as I say the community was a kind of protective entity, there were also things that were restrictive. ... I understand that and it is true. But in the sense that overall, overall, there is more good than bad in that kind of setting.

And that in leaving South Africa to take up a position at the World Bank in the United States:

I was escaping poverty, and I was also irritated by restrictions on women. But I would be quite prepared to say I would rather be in that kind of community and fight the irritation, and say yes, I am part of you, but you will not ask this of me. (Attwell, Harlow, and Attwell 2000, 286)

In this and other interviews in which Magona reflects on her writing, one senses strongly that her views on the writing of her autobiography and what she sees as the responsibility of the writer arise from her lived experience, rather than from a predetermined ideological agenda. One example of this, which she registers in *Forced to Grow* but is implied in *To My Children's Children* and is also the central theme of *Mother to Mother*, is the existential dilemma of living a humanistic and moral life under apartheid and post-apartheid. In *To My Children's Children*, she traces her own life after moving to Cape Town: first, in Blaauwlei and, after the shacks burn down, her family's move to Zwelitsha and, after the apartheid government's forced removals, their move to Nyanga West, renamed Guguletu. In *Forced to Grow* she recalls, among other incidents, the student upheavals of 1976; as she describes the events in the interview with Attwell and Harlow, "the young people who were now not in school began to look to the killing of people, and the necklacing, and the burning of people's houses if they were suspected of being collaborators" (Attwell, Harlow, and Attwell 2000, 289). She describes her reaction at one of the community meetings as having been one of "bewilder[ment]," wondering what would happen "If we allow the children, if we let our children sink to the level of burning people's houses, if we allow our children to sink to this level, how will we call them back one day? Back to normalcy?" (2000, 289–290). In *Mother to Mother* she registers the tragic consequences of the existential dilemma for Black, mainly male, youth brought about by the racial economy of apartheid and its racial geography, the legacy of the apartheid Group Areas Act of 1950, one of which is the violence to which Amy Biehl falls victim.

Yet it is the tension between the primacy of the personal and the weight of apartheid history—which Magona acknowledges but does not completely accept cannot be transcended through a personal will to succeed—that drew critique from Daymond. Earlier I alluded to Daymond's class analysis of Magona's autobiography and fiction and it is to this aspect that I now turn, the better to tease out some of the implications of Said's view that humanism—or the fact of being human—can best be understood as a

yourself" and her sense of belonging to a community that is "to some extent ... a kind of imprisonment" (2000, 286).

function of the nature of the specific worlds in which we live. As Daymond (1995, 567) argues with respect to Magona's critique of white liberalism in *Forced to Grow*:

When she speaks of her own position, she declares no profound affinity with or loyalty to either the urbanised peasantry from which she comes or to the professional class to which she aspires. Instead she speaks as a determinedly mobile individualist and, in so doing, again plays right into the habit, in the dominant discourses of South Africa, of hiding class issues behind the "totalising languages of racism."

However, as Ngwenya points out:

In a society where government legislation determines class position it is short-sighted to think of oneself as belonging to any other class other than the one legally prescribed for one. What emerges with striking clarity in Magona's autobiography as in the life histories of other black South Africans, is that the idea of a black professional class in South Africa has always been riddled with contradictions. It was therefore safer and pragmatic for black professionals of Magona's time to foreground their racial identities as their 'new' class identity did not afford them any practical changes in terms of political rights and material benefits. (1996, 215)

These, I argue, are not mutually exclusive positions but highlight what above I have identified as the dialectical tension between the personal and the political in Magona's writing and the positions she has taken up beyond her writing. Nevertheless, what seems to me to distinguish the two positions from each other is how each understands the category of class, particularly insofar as it relates to other markers of identity where Black subjectivities are concerned. This is to say that, whereas Daymond appears to deploy the category of class as exclusive of the category of race, Ngwenya not only points to the intersection of both but also to the complexities that such intersection brings to bear on an exclusive or conventional—which is to say Western—idea of class. To say that "when [Magona] speaks of her position, she declares no profound affinity with or loyalty to ... the urbanised peasantry from which she comes" is not borne out by her writing or commentaries; neither is the claim that she is an "individualist." For instance, in the interview that I cited above, she declares her affinity with (and) loyalty to her setting and community of Guguletu. She says that, despite the irritations and restrictions of her environment, "overall, overall, there is more good than bad in that kind of setting" and that "I would rather be in that kind of community and fight the irritation, and say yes, I am part of you, but you will not ask this of me" (Attwell, Harlow, and Attwell 2000, 283). Nevertheless, what comes through quite strongly in her autobiography, particularly in *Forced to Grow*, is that she is, indeed, "determinedly mobile," which, as I note above, renders her neither "individualist" nor alienated from "the urbanised peasantry from which she comes."

Dorothy Driver's (1990) reading of *The Diary of Mary Tholo*, which was published in 1980 and, like *Forced to Grow*, documented the events of the 1976 student upheavals in Guguletu, throws further light on the tensions between the personal and the political

in Magona's autobiography. Moreover, Driver brings up another important dimension to the intersection of class and race in Tholo's response to the student upheavals, that is, her "position" in the community "as mother/teacher/authority" (1990, 226), a position that Magona also invokes in her autobiography. As in the case of Magona's response to the events of 1976, Driver reads Mary Tholo's response as typical of a mother's and teacher's, "negotiat[ing] the set of expectations placed on the adult world by [the protesting] children, as well as the expectations placed on her by the world from which she received her education" (1990, 225). Aside from the narrators of Magona and Tholo's self-narratives registering generational discord between parents and their children, on a textual level their narratives also reveal an important point about how one reads the past in the present. Indeed, the June 1976 student upheavals have been read more as the story of Black youth heroism, which on one level they were, and less as the story of the tensions that Tholo and Magona's self-narratives also indicate they were. What I am suggesting, then, is that Magona's response to an aspect of Black political struggle in her autobiography is not untypical. Rather, as Lewis Nkosi says of Black South African autobiography during apartheid, autobiography was the genre better equipped to contest the apartheid state's "commit[ment] to treating its African subjects as *mass*, completely undifferentiated" (1965, 163; original emphasis). In this light, to enter the textual spaces of Magona's autobiography and her reflections on her writing is to glimpse the polyphonic nature of Black historical narratives and the complexity of Black experience. The multiple and sometimes contradictory registers occasioned by the rapidly changing circumstances of a single life that one finds in Magona and Tholo's self-narratives reflect the instabilities of Black autobiographical writing and, indeed, Black writing and experience more broadly. Remarking on this aspect of Tholo's *Diary*, Driver notes that "Tholo knows herself as mother, teacher and wife" and that "it is primarily from the positions these roles offer her that ... she is accustomed to speaking." However, "with Soweto 1976, the positions of authority implied by these roles begin to shift" (1990, 226). Driver identifies similar shifts in the writing of Mirriam Tlali (in her novel *Amandla*) and Noni Jabavu (in the preface of the second edition of *The Ochre People*), the difference between them being their locations in relation to the event. In the case of Tlali, Driver quotes her as saying "'We are in the hands of the children now'" and Jabavu as saying, "'I hope that in reading this book which one of your 'grandmothers' wrote long ago and far away, you will see how vastly you have progressed and brought us forward from the views we beheld when we were your age in those times long-gone'" (Tlali 1980, 35 and Jabavu 1982, both quoted in Driver 1990, 227).

There are other shifts in her sense of herself and her circumstances that Magona registers in her narrative, as her "horizon widened as [she] grew older": from the time that, at the age of five, she "witnessed [her] first liquor raid" in Blaauvlei, through her schooling and teacher-training at St Matthew's Teacher Training College, her first job as a teacher, her pregnancy and the loss of her teaching job, her taking up domestic employment in the white suburbs of Cape Town, to the break-up of her marriage to Luthando, with three children to raise as a single mother. It is in her accounts of her individual

experiences that the experiences of her community come, sometimes unbidden, into the scope of her personal account. Nevertheless, in an interview with Siphokazi Koyana and Rosemary Gray, Magona asserts the collective nature of her autobiography, that is, that she “perceived even those individual experiences as being more communal rather than personal (strictly speaking) ... where the collective, effectively silenced, made the personal all the more important and pertinent” (Koyana and Gray 2002, 7). And, while admitting to being “No feminist” at the time of her adolescence, she is nevertheless aware of the social and cultural traps that women commonly fall into. As she remarks after she falls pregnant and is forced to resign from her teaching post:

A young wife. An expectant mother. No longer employed. I was a housewife. Less than a year after leaving St Matthew’s with the certainty, at least in my own mind, that a splendid career was beckoning, I was a housewife. Nothing more. Nothing less. (Magona 1990, 110)

Again, what is evident in this account is the narrator’s awareness of the limits imposed on individual agency by the gendered nature of power, besides its racial and spatial character. This awareness comes through not as the elaboration of a political programme—the narrator admits to being “No feminist”—but, rather, as the fact of experience. Thus, the narrator reveals the faultlines of collective consciousness at the same time that she acknowledges that “Alone she can change nothing” (Koyana and Gray 2002, 104). Here, Magona is referring to the double consciousness of the autobiographer, whose “responsibility” is “to tell the story she has set about telling” but “is not divorced from the society in which she lives” (2002, 104). And to the extent that this society is also gendered, Kgomotso Masemola’s view of the historiographic status of South African women’s autobiographies, with specific reference to Ellen Kuzwayo and Magona’s autobiographies, is particularly apposite. He notes that “the crisis of [historical] representation” in Kuzwayo and Magona “locates the two writers at a site of collocation of the ‘I’ of the self and other women, such that the individual experience becomes textually populated with bodies and ideas that project desire in collective utterances and connected fluxes of womanhood” (Masemola 2017, 111–112). It is this insight that Magona’s writing, her work beyond her autobiography more especially, brings to bear on how we may re-read her autobiography today, both as a personal narrative and as alternative history with the capacity to contest other versions of the past.

Conclusion

What I have demonstrated in this study are the intersections between Magona’s recent collection of essays *I Write the Yawning Void* (2023) and the scholarship of autobiographical writing in South Africa, especially in the 1990s. I have argued that Magona’s reflections on the writing of her two-volume autobiography reinforce and are reinforced by the critical-theoretical research that saw the genre moving to the centre of South African writing. With Black women taking part in autobiographical writing, a

new sense of selfhood emerged, and the abiding concern in the scholarship of Black women's autobiographical writing was to tease out the dialectic between the autobiographer's personal account and the collective position from which she wrote. It is this dialectic that Magona's recent work dramatises, beyond her autobiography, and it is to this dimension of her writing that contemporary scholars have turned. To this end, I have discussed the implications of re-reading Magona's autobiography primarily through the prism of her recent collection of essays and, in particular, her reflections on her autobiography in the context of her other works. I have argued that *To My Children's Children* can be read as a symbolic and affective record of the unwritten history for the generations to come. As she puts it in *To My Children's Children*, her concern in writing her autobiography is to register "the dying [oral] tradition of my people," before it fades out of memory, a point that she also makes in "Why I Write Children's Stories." It is on this future trajectory that she sets the history of her childhood and youth, through her strategic invocation of both her "child of my child of my child" (Magona 1990, 23) and of an implied generic listener/interlocutor for whom her experience will resonate with theirs. And the tradition of "tales ... handed down, by word of mouth, from generation to generation" (Magona 1990, 8) lends significance to this future anterior that her life-narrative lays claim to. From this perspective, I have suggested that her extra-textual interventions assert the status of Black South African women's self-narratives as metonymic, located between self and community, rather than as narratives about a singular self pursuing a unique destiny. As I noted with regard to Daymond's proposition, this means that the meanings of these self-narratives can most productively be discerned in the encounter between the autobiographer and her readers, an encounter that Magona's autobiography explicitly anticipates. Not only was this evident in the responses to the autobiographies by Black women around the time of their publication, as Daymond notes in her account of the 1990 "Workshop on Black Women's Writing and Reading" that I cited in my discussion, but it has become the subject of more recent scholarly returns to the archives of Black women's writing. To this end, I alluded to recent publications in which the significance of works by earlier writers—Black women writers in particular—is now being reassessed and acknowledged, a further testimony to their enduring legacy and collective meanings.

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