

The Historical Dimension of South African Autobiography

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South African autobiographical writing has a long and varied history. Dating back to the colonial era marked by such historically distinctive works as Kingsley Fairbridge's *The Autobiography of Kingsley Fairbridge* (1927) and Francis Carey Slater's *Settler's Heritage* (1954), autobiographical self-representation has undergone various mutations and the autobiographical form itself has assumed many sub-genres. The essays collected in this issue cover such diverse forms of life writing as fictional autobiography, autobiographical fiction, life-stories, conventional autobiographies and collaborative autobiography. Mainly because of its strong historical dimension, autobiography serves the crucial function of reflecting, analysing and interpreting the racial, ethnic, class and gender differences in the South Africa community. As shown in the articles in this issue, writers of autobiographies, life-stories, autobiographical novels and other forms of life-writing have offered personalized interpretations of and challenges to hegemonic ideologies and institutional practices in the history of South Africa. Thus while (re)writing history, autobiographers also provide invaluable insights and perspectives into the complex history of South Africa.

This long overdue special issue on South African life-writing seeks to provoke critical and theoretical debate about the social (historical and political) functions of autobiography. By focussing on the life-histories of formerly marginalised autobiographers this issue seeks to foreground the capacity of the autobiographical form to play a key role in the construction of new post-apartheid self-empowering subjectivities.

The eight articles collected here examine the use of autobiography to (re)construct individual and collective identities. As evidenced by their pluralistic theoretical approaches all contributors seem to agree that any attempt to recover and reconstruct the past through narrative is essentially an act of interpretation 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. Jerome Bruner's (1993:38) conception of the autobiographical process has a particular

pertinence to the understanding of autobiography underpinning most arguments raised in this special issue:

I take the view that there is no such thing as a "life as lived" to be referred to. On this view, a life is created or constructed by the act of autobiography. It is a way of construing experience - and of reconstruing and reconstruing it until our breath or our pen fails us. Construal and reconstrual are interpretive. Like all forms of interpretation, how we construe our lives is subject to our intentions, to the interpretive conventions available to us, and to the meanings imposed upon us by the usages of our culture and language.

Most of the articles in this issue focus on the autobiographies of black women written and published during the apartheid era. Perhaps this is an index of the extent to which women have relied on autobiographical narratives to create and sustain a sense of identity in the face of their double marginalisation as blacks and as women. Gina Wisker's wide-ranging analysis of counter-hegemonic self-representation explores the function of autobiographical 'fiction' in the struggle of women to construct 'authentic' self-identities and to challenge those identities imposed on them by the dominant discourses of race and patriarchy. Similarly, Nancy Bazin's article tackles the various modes of self-representation within the mode of fiction in the novels of Nadine Gordimer.

The new political dispensation in South Africa has made it possible for South Africans of all races to begin to discern and articulate interconnections between ethnic, racial and linguistic divisions in order to create a sense of shared 'nationhood'. South African critics and writers have a lot to learn from postcolonial theorists and critics who have provided us with a useful constellation of concepts, ideas and theoretical approaches with which we can begin to understand and describe the complex condition of South African multiculturalism. Premised on the notion of cultural hybridity, J.U. Jacobs's article interrogates the concept of cross-cultural translation in South African autobiographical writing from a postcolonial theoretical perspective. Jacobs debunks the myth of ethnic essentialism and demonstrates how the black South African autobiographers reflect the cultural and linguistic interchange that is a feature of South African cultural life. Graeme Rosenberg's carefully researched essay on the versatile writer and thinker Jordan Ngubane, illustrates the multiple identities of a black man who in many ways anticipated the cultural hybridity of the post-apartheid era in South Africa in his conscious combination of Zulu nationalism, African nationalism and liberal values. The issue of multiple sites of identity formation also constitutes the theme of Stephen Meyer's essay on Johnny Masilela's autobiographical stories, *Deliver Us from Evil*.

Vanessa Farr's insightful article looks at the interrelationships between

feminist theory and collaborative autobiography. Farr's essay is not simply a formal explication of selected life-stories but also serves to highlight the often neglected issues relating to the production, publishing and marketing of the life-stories of illiterate or semi-literate women. Thengani H. Ngwenya's article on ideology and self-representation challenges the application of some postcolonial theoretical concepts such as 'transculturation' to the description of cross-cultural relations during the early stages of the colonial encounter.

As shown in most articles in this issue some autobiographers tend to see themselves as members of social groupings created by the convergence between dominant ideologies and material circumstances. Thus most autobiographers define themselves in racial, ethnic, gender and class categories. These are not analytical paradigms imposed by critics and analysts on these texts but they are the logical consequences of a political ideology premised on racial and ethnic division. Thomas Thale's essay examines autobiographical self-portrayal in which the autobiographical self is presented as a member of a fairly distinct social group.

What became increasingly clear to me as I prepared this issue was the remarkable flexibility of autobiography as a form of writing and field of research. I was reminded of James Olney's (1986:64) remarks about the inherently 'hybrid' nature of autobiography:

As to its literary status, I should think autobiography is doubtless the most impure of any writing performance that can make any sort of claim at all to being 'literature'; but the saving grace here is that if autobiography is forever an impurity in the realm of literature, it also insinuates itself into all sorts of other disciplines and endeavors—history, psychology, anthropology, sociology—and contaminates them to such a degree that they can hardly sustain any claim to being 'science' (Olney 1986:64).

As I read these articles in the eight months it has taken me to edit this special issue I was struck by autobiography's unprecedented capacity to foster a truly interdisciplinary understanding and co-operation between apparently distinct disciplines.

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References

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