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Introduction

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In the piece 'Creative Non-Fiction: A Conversation', we argued that 'creative non-fiction has become in a sense "the genre" of South African writing, […] writing which makes its meanings at the unstable fault line of the literary and journalistic, the maginative and the reportorial' (2011: 57): recently, the work of Sihle Khumalo, Jacob Dlamini, Max du Preez, Rian Malan, Kevin Bloom, Denis Beckett, Shaun Johnson, Antjie Krog, Jonny Steinberg, Stephen Otter, John Carlin, Njabulo S. Ndebele, Jeff Opland, Julia Martin, Sarah Nuttall, Liz McGregor, Hedley Twidle, Duncan Brown; historically, Sol T. Plaatje, Can Themba, Nat Nakasa, Todd Matshikiza, Alan Paton, H. I. E Dhlomo, and many more. Perhaps more broadly, and recognising the important work of 'Northern' writers in this genre, we would argue that creative non-fiction has become a particularly significant genre of the global 'South', in which its imaginative engagement with 'truth telling' has been profoundly enabling in narrating pasts and presents characterised by injustice, inequality, division, and the need to 'uncover'. It has also enabled writers to bring their own singular life and surroundings into an imagined narrative.

Hence this Special Issue of the journal *Multilingual Margins* on 'Creative Non-Fiction South'. This is deliberately a collection of diverse authors writing in the genre, rather than critics reflecting on the genre, one of the strange contradictions of creative non-fiction being that – despite its traction among readers – it is extremely difficult to find publication in its shorter forms. We are grateful to the standing editors for opening space in this journal for writing of this kind.

This Special Issue originated in a workshop, held in 2021 as part of the A. W. Mellon funded project on 'Rethinking South African Literature(s)'. The workshop focused on the writing of creative non-fiction and all its variants, (auto)biographical non-fiction, recently joined by the term autobiographical fiction, faction as well as 'academic' writing in which some scholars sought to write more creatively about their research. There was a difference in approach and emphasis evident in the various contributions, with writers like Jonny Steinberg and Mark Gevisser using immense amounts of impeccable research, but insisting on the format of sticking to facts according to the demands of non-fiction, while scholars like Michael Chapman, Anthea Garman and Julia Martin sought to devise ways to break out of the strict (some might say staid) conventions of academic writing to capture some of the more nuanced and troubling uncertainties they found present in their research, using multiple genres in one text (interviews, poems, stories, dialogue).

We want at this point to share some illuminating discussion and debate that occurred in the first session of the workshop, chiefly involving Jonny Steinberg and Mark Gevisser, as they shed light on the approaches of many of the authors in this Special Issue, especially those with a biographical emphasis.

Steinberg presented on 'Nelson and Winnie Mandela: February 1990', pointing to some of the 'eternal problems' of writing a biography. In his manuscript about the marriage of Nelson Mandela and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela (recently published), his research had shown that Mandela was experiencing a substantial change in his inner being at a particular point. The question was: how does a biographer get to that inner being? S/he cannot simply

use fiction's codes because the text will lose authority if it does, and yet without those, it cannot get close. Steinberg argued:

> I am writing a straitlaced biography of a marriage. I am barely in it. I use classic sources. But the book is only worth reading if it can reach the inner states of the two characters in that marriage – yet the form does not allow it. Can one use such a conservative form and talk about a man's interior? It never goes inside and yet it needs to go inside for it to work! That is the conundrum I want to throw out.

A further difficulty he underlined was that Nelson Mandela's character was recognisable despite the famous shrouding of himself behind all sorts of masks, while Steinberg regarded Winnie as the biggest challenge of his writing career. He tried to solve this in various ways: an enormous amount of research, including going into the minutiae of the Soweto time; speaking to everybody who lived with or visited Winnie in Soweto; engaging with psychologists about her who told him that she was unknowable to him, he would not be able to get inside her head. It was an enormous writing challenge. In the end he built up a thick exterior as substitute for an interior that hopefully could lead the reader to imagine her inner state.

Steinberg stressed that what mattered for him was the question of what codes he was obeying when writing non-fiction. The latter was linked to a form of self-discipline, he said, and he was not criticising the boundaries – 'I enjoy the discipline but constantly reflect what you are doing when you do that – how much is genuine connected reflection, how much is fantasy […] the conservative codes of non-fiction confront one with important epistemic questions.'

During a discussion on Gayatri Spivak's proposal that the subaltern can only be heard when 'the respondents inhabit something like normality', Steinberg suggested the opposite: 'the more abnormal, the more interesting the intersubjective terrain becomes, the closer, the more chaotic, the messier, the more the insight…'.

In his paper 'Aunty and Me: On Becoming Part of the Story', Mark Gevisser emphasised that writing creative non-fiction (for his students) has a singular obsession around voice and subjectivity. How does one, should one, insert oneself in creative non-fiction? It has become the main characteristic of this new genre, he argued – the subjective voice which is frowned upon in journalism. He said that when setting out on any research process, the image that came to him was that he was looking out over a swamp of infinite data and had to negotiate his way through that – 'this in the end becomes the narrative armature of what I am writing' – leading the reader through that swamp. He was in a sense the captain of a ship, but the question was: did the reader need to see him?

Gevisser set out his work method:

> There are three stages of work. The first is going out into the field and that is always a thrilling adventure, always. The third part is really ... I feel why I live. The moment when the ideas are flowing from the brain through the hand into the fingers on the keys feels like nearly automatic writing – the deep involvement with the prose, the craft, the plotting, the revising, editing, all of it exasperating, but when it is good, it is thrilling! The really difficult stage is the second. The processing stage – the stage where I want to kill myself. Taking all the stuff you found, sifting through it, ordering it, finding things, links, contrasts … I am afraid that is actually the creative stage and I wish it weren't so – it is in the ordering of the material that the synapses fire and the connections are made that imagine the plot and how the themes can build it. So I work through immense files, headings, subheadings, bold letters, stars. From this second stage files come the hard work, to see them as more than cataloguing, but see them as creating.

Both Steinberg and Gevisser agreed that one cannot determine beforehand how much one 'uses' oneself in the writing of non-fiction. The question cannot be answered in the abstract – it is an intuitive decision of the moment. Gevisser pointed out that in his biography of Thabo Mbeki, the subject gave him so little access to his inner life that Mbeki's own journey could not be the narrative driver, therefore the author had to be on some kind of quest:

> So, I put myself in that story. I only involved myself in *Pinkline* in the sense that my own subjectivity is actually part of the theme and one of the many powerful vectors. I am less present as three dimensional but more as an observer. The 'I' as the observer – sometimes the 'I' as protagonist.

Approaching the genre of creative non-fiction from a more scholarly perspective, Julia Martin's insights are illuminating. She uses the genre which she calls 'literary non-fiction' to explore issues of place, identity and environment, but her approach also has wider significance and implications for academic writing in the Humanities. In an essay entitled 'Imagination and the Eco-Social Crisis' (2020), she asks the question: 'what do literary texts enable us to say or do in relation to the eco-social crisis that is not so readily expressed in other forms of discourse?' (219). It is not a question which admits of a single answer, and she reflects on her own work and practice in providing some responses. She talks of 'extend[ing] the reach of my writing beyond the limited readership of traditional academic discourse […] to admit such radical modes of knowing as may only be expressed through literature' (219); and of 'negotiating between the narrative approaches of memoir and the prose styles of the literary essay in an attempt to unsettle binary or absolutist thinking, and to reveal in its place inextricability and ecological interconnectedness' (219). It is an approach to writing which 'considers stylistic choices to be a significant vehicle of meaning, offers a standpoint for situated truth claims while making ample room for ambiguity and ambivalence, and places trust in the imagination as a way of knowing' (219).

Although the differences in emphases that we have explored between the biographical and scholarly approaches to creative non-fiction are present in this selection, there are also interesting attempts to narrow the spaces among the different approaches. None of what is presented here is overtly academic, non-fictional or creative, but all comprise interesting mixes. What is visible is the attention to minute detail both in observation as well as expression – whether observing a mountain or a parent, a homeless person or a piece of sponge, whether experiencing illness, time or a journey, the attention is opening up for the reader a broader, richer world of being and beingness.

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