

Finding a Voice

Women's Life Writing Interrogating History & Politics

Brittany Lynk

CAS405X Race, Culture, and Identity in Africa

Professor Noëleen Murray

26 September 2005

“Until the lion has its own historian,
the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.”
–African Proverb

Introduction

From a painting on the side of a cave in Botswana to the latest biography found in Barnes and Noble, people since the beginning of time have found or created ways to tell their stories and document their lives. In all times—past, present, and future—there has been, continues to be, and will remain a natural tendency to understand the past, which can help create a present that can be passed on and effect future generations. Time and place live on as the determinants, establishing *how* people have passed down their stories, which includes their politics, ideas, and how they understand the world.

This paper will be addressing times and places where people have used a written word form of documenting their history. It will first briefly discuss the problematic issues of both terminology around the naming of such histories written under genre names such as biography, autobiography, life writing, life history, and memoir, as well as the all-important issue around *history* and *herstory*—who’s doing the writing and how that effects what information lives on. It will then explore how the writings of three women in the book, “The Closest of Strangers: South African Women’s Life Writing,” are used to interrogate and portray the politics and history of South Africa and how biography can give the marginalized a voice.

Problematic Terminology and Gender Bias in Writing

Biography, autobiography, life writing, life history, and memoir? What is the difference? Defined, these terms begin to mesh and become synonymous. All are an account of a person’s life, or historical events written from personal knowledge, either by the person who the material is about or by another person. There are great debates within and between disciplines, highlighting the differences between the terminologies. “Life history” or “life writing” has most commonly been taken up by anthropologists, with oral history forming the base (Rassool 17). It has become a way of both “illustrating or portraying culture or some aspect of culture change” as well as giving often silenced voices a greater place in the world where written word is most highly valued (Rassool 7). From a cultural anthropology perspective, I have discovered that people are similar the world over and vary more within a culture than cross-culturally. With the differences in

people come different ways of creating and passing down history. Biography is most commonly associated with literature and political history, understood to be stories of important people, who have “risen high...who have done something”—who are white European men (Rassool 10). Along with debates between disciplines come diverging themes within the literary fields themselves. For example, writing on biography, William Epstein comments, “Biography is a remarkable discursive formation: venerable and youthful, insensitive and empathetic, inflexible and resilient, predictable and erratic, inscrutable and articulate” (Epstein 6). These powerfully descriptive oppositions, I would argue, can be found in the other genres as well, and come about because people, who are the subject of such literatures, are equally as confusing and opposing in thought. These oppositions come between people as well as within people. It is from a non-literary perspective that I am able to make the claim that these different genres with only minor intricacies and conventions in writing styles can be classified together. Biography might be seen as the major genre, with life writing, autobiography, and memoir as different styles of biography. It is from this understanding that this paper will interchangeably use the terms biography and life writing.

This now brings us to the problem of who is doing the writing of biographies and life histories and the inherent bias in most historical and political accounts. It is obvious in reading history texts and looking at the biographies available that “women’s lives and contributions to history have long been obscured, both through deliberate design and unwitting neglect” (Coullie 10) and although women are more often being included in African history in recent times, all history is still gendered (Sheldon 465). It is hard to find biographies or autobiographies written about women and by women. Most often in the past the women who got written about were those who “were removed from their African society and integrated to some degree into the developing European coastal settlements” and any information about them was written by European men (Sheldon 468-9). Women in Africa’s past have carried very important roles and in a handful of places, societies have run on a matrilineal system, but as oral history is passed down and as outsiders come in and begin documenting this oral history, the male narrative is given a much greater precedence, which often completely ignored “the female interpretation of historical experiences” (Sheldon 472) and eventually their important roles were lost over time (Sheldon 470).

I find it increasingly important for women’s voices to be heard, and especially those of marginalized women. Before the 1960s, there is no record of any

autobiographical text by black South African women (Coullie 7), which I feel gives history a very fragmented, one-sided account of what happened and how it happened. Toward the 1980s up to the present, there has been a much bigger promulgation of not only black literate South African women writing their own stories, but opportunities giving illiterate or semi-literate women outlets for the “most disempowered to articulate their own stories” and find their voice (Coullie 8).

Women Finding Their Voice

The history and politics of South Africa have been especially portrayed and interrogated through the stories chosen for “The Closest of Strangers” in a way that I have not seen in any other books I have read. The book is composed of excerpts and writings from fifty-two South African women coming from different time periods and different experiences. The book is split up into time periods of between 10 and 20 years, starting with 1895 and ending with 2000. The stories these women have been able to document brilliantly portray and convey a history of South Africa that is otherwise hard to find and understand fully due to the one-sided and biased history texts that overwhelm library book shelves.

As Rassool brings up, “biography...and the representation of lives in politics can be seen as a way of confronting the theoretical...questions” that history cannot answer alone, but can effectively tackle with the inclusion of political science, anthropology, and other disciplines (Rassool 1). Although not all the women in the book were involved in active politics, all essentially had a political message to convey. To show how politics and history have been experienced and conveyed, we will look at the excerpts of Prue Smith, Maggie Resha, and Mamphela Ramphele, all of which are taken from their own autobiographies.

Prue Smith was born in South Africa in 1923 to English parents and was educated at both University of Witwatersrand and Oxford. She was not formally involved in South African politics, but her excerpt takes us through some childhood experiences that would have been extremely political. She had a deep connection with her nanny, but did not understand the institutional racism the nation-state was enforcing. As a child, she only understood that her nanny loved and cared for her, and that she felt the same. They would often go to the zoo, as that was the only place black and white people could be together, and looking back at the situation, she talks about the steps they needed to take to even get to go on the bus together to get there. The political situation

is interrogated in a childhood, simple experience where one can begin to actually feel and understand how apartheid affected everyday people. (Coullie 67-75)

Maggie Resha was born in South Africa around 1926 to Bafokeng parents and was trained to be a nurse. She was extremely active in the political struggle and was a key figure in the ANC. Her excerpt goes through the very historically important women's demonstration of 1956 that aimed to get rid of the law requiring women to carry pass books. This excerpt gives a very historically significant understanding of the event, both its organization and the complexities in carrying it out, from someone who was integrally involved. Politics at a number of different levels was in effect, and as a black woman, her perspective and understanding into the situation carries a great deal more potency and truth than anyone else could write. (Coullie 149-155)

Lastly, Mamphela Ramphele was born in South Africa in 1947 to black South African parents and was highly educated as a medical doctor, anthropologist, and activist. She became extremely politically active, falling in love with Steve Biko and following him in his Black Consciousness Movement. As a South African, she has done a great deal to contribute to the progress of the nation. Her excerpt goes through intense political times involving jailing, police harassment, and the death of Biko. Being connected with such a well-known political man in South African and world history, her story has often been overpowered and could easily be forgotten in societies overvaluing of men's stories. She even mentions that in the film, *Cry Freedom*, "the peripheral role in which I was cast belied the centrality of my relationship, both personal and political, with Steve" (Coullie 267). Yet it is through her powerful voice and society's changing times that women's political involvements and contributions to history are being shown. (Coullie 258-269)

Rassool argues that, "biography can develop ways of going beyond untheorised chronological narrative procedures and take seriously the existence of multiple narrations of lives" (Rassool 4). The excerpts from the book proved just that, showing the multiple narrations of events, experiences, and ways of interpreting history and politics.

Conclusion

History needs to continue to be explored through the lens of personal narratives or auto/biographies. Too often historical accounts of events found in the majority of books only give a certain perspective, making it hard for most readers to be able to identify with the event and make a change in the future. The inclusion of people into the account of history is especially important in South Africa I feel because of the incredible

diversity of experiences people have lived through. Mark Gevisser writes, “describing a life, and someone’s subjectivity through the South African transition, [seems] to me the richest way—actually, the only way—to make sense of the otherwise-indecribable time we were going through in the ’90s,” (Nuttall 106) which also goes for all the intense years previous to that from the beginning of the nation-state at the dawn of the 20th century.

The importance biography holds for the future is for making often silenced voices heard...so for women and people in marginalized racial categories. History can become *herstory*, and everybody’s stories, and politics can involve more than those whose faces are seen on television ads and posted around town. With increasingly more opportunities opening up for people, there is more that needs to be done to connect people with resources and those opportunities they can benefit from. If that happens to be the opportunity to tell their story, either through someone else or on their own, that is hugely important for giving the next generation a more well-rounded idea of the present. In her introduction, Coullie writes, “My hope is that these extracts may teach us how to transcend our own narrow concerns and engage with experiences and truths that may differ from our own, even though such imaginative engagements can only ever be partial, fragmentary and crude. In the words of Magona, ‘although another may sympathize when I bleed, the tears can only be mine’” (Coullie 3).

In the process of hearing differing truths, we learn. The historian of the lion has much to say after years of being silenced.

Works Cited

- Coullie, Judith Lütge. (2004) *The Closest of Strangers: South African Women's Life Writing*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Epstein, William H. ed. (1991) *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*. Indiana: Purdue University Press.
- Nuttall, Sarah. (2004) "Writing Biography: An interview with Jon Hyslop, John Matshikiza and Mark Gevisser" in *Social Dynamics*, vol. 30, no. 2, Summer 2004, pp. 105-113.
- Rassool, Ciraj. (2004) "Auto/biography, narrative and the production of history." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation: University of the Western Cape. (pp. 1-28)
- Sheldon, Kathleen. (2005) "Writing About Women: Approaches to a Gendered Perspective in African History" in Philips, J. ed. *Writing African History*. New York: University of Rochester Press. (pp. 465-489)