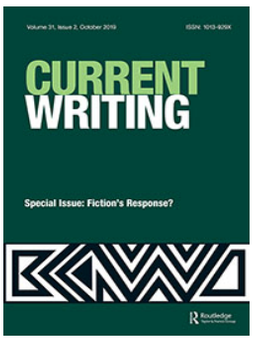

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Experiments with Truth: Narrative Nonfiction in South Africa[1]

Hedley Twidle

In this reflection on his recently published book, Hedley Twidle explores historical and theoretical approaches to the question of non-fiction in South African literature. *Experiments with Truth* reads the country's transition as refracted through an array of documentary modes that are simultaneously refashioned and blurred into each other: long-form analytic journalism and reportage; experiments in oral history, microhistory and archival reconstruction; life-writing, memoir and the personal essay. Its case studies trace the strange and ethically complex process by which actual people, places and events are shuffled, patterned and plotted in long-form prose narrative. While holding in mind the imperatives of testimony and witness so important to the struggle for liberation and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the book is increasingly drawn to a post-TRC aesthetic: to works that engage with difficult, inappropriate or unusable elements of the past, and with the unfinished project of social reconstruction in South Africa. It places southern African materials in a global context, and in dialogue with other important nonfictional traditions that have emerged at moments of social rupture and transition.

Keywords: narrative nonfiction; South African literature; life-writing; literary journalism

> I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth.
> Mohandas K Gandhi

At the beginning of *Fine Lines from the Box* (2007) – a collection of essays and journalism – Njabulo S Ndebele describes discovering a crate of books in his father's garage when he was a boy, at some point in the mid-1960s. It is disguised by unused floor tiles and garden tools; on top are old copies of *Huisgenoot*, *Zonk* and *Drum* magazines, then Ludo and Snakes and Ladders game boards. "But as I got closer to the bottom of the box, my heart leapt with disbelief":

> Here was *Down Second Avenue* by Ezekiel Mphahlele and *Road to Ghana* by Alfred Hutchinson; and *Blame Me on History* by Bloke Modisane; and *Naught for Your Comfort* by Trevor Huddleston; and *Tell Freedom* by Peter Abrahams; […] *Chocolates for My Wife*, by Todd Matshikiza; *South Africa: The Struggle for a Birthright* by Mary Benson; *The Ochre People* by Noni Jabavu; *Ghana: The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah*; *Let My People Go* by Albert Luthuli; *Go Well Stay Well* by Hannah Stanton, copies of *Africa South* magazine, and other lesser known books that I do not remember now. Banned books! (9)

Here was, in other words, a secret archive of nonfiction from southern Africa and beyond, one that marked, he writes, "a turning point in my life" (9). Ndebele describes the thrill of devouring the autobiographies of Bloke Modisane and Es'kia Mphahlele as two very different approaches to the same overriding social and political reality: "It struck me then that oppressed people were far more complex than the collective suffering that sought to reduce them to a single state of pain"

(10). This was the beginning of "a reading and writing journey that has not ended," a process of seeking to understand his native land, and to represent it in prose with an immediacy and directness that he calls "the art of the fine line": "Writing is the one art that compels the writer to explore and express complex feelings and thoughts through an attempt at simplicity and concreteness that are yet able to preserve the complexity" (10).

Life writing in South Africa often returns to this scene of encounter. If one unpacks that half-hidden crate, similar moments can be found nested (like Russian dolls) within the books Ndebele mentions. In *Tell Freedom* (1954), Peter Abrahams recalls discovering WEB du Bois in Johannesburg's Bantu Men's Social Centre in 1937, along with Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes and other writers of the Harlem Renaissance: "I read every one of the books on the shelf marked: American Negro Literature" (197). Mphahlele describes, in his more sardonic way, "the small one-room tin shack the municipality had the sense of humour to call a 'reading room' in the western edge of Marabastad":

> It was stacked with dilapidated books and journals junked by bored ladies from the suburbs – anything from cookery books through boys' and girls' adventures to dream interpretations and astrology. Mostly useless, needless to say. Still, I went through the whole lot indiscriminately, like a termite, just elated with a sense of discovery and of recognition of the printed word mostly connected with the mere skill of reading. (278)

Examples can be multiplied: Mohandas Gandhi receiving John Ruskin's *Unto This Last* in 1904 and being inspired to create his experiments in communal living near Durban and at Tolstoy Farm outside Johannesburg; Nadine Gordimer escaping from a mining town into nineteenth-century Russia via the library in Springs. In "Remembering Texas", JM Coetzee describes coming across the colonial records of German South West Africa while pursuing doctoral research in Austin, a discovery that would eventually lead to a fictional debut, *Dusklands*, as a kind of hoax or parody nonfiction (*Doubling the Point* 2002). *Long Walk to Freedom* is itself a discourse on reading: on Robben Island, Nelson Mandela immerses himself in the memoirs of Anglo-Boer War generals in order to understand the crucible of Afrikaner nationalism, and the historical process by which black South Africans had become the victims of the victims.

Mine too is an encounter of books within books, of unexpected encounters with the archive. Henk van Woerden finds the 1966 governmental report into the death of Hendrik Verwoerd, and with it the remarkable life of his assassin Demetrios Tsafendas. As a boy, Jacob Dlamini comes across "The Strange Saga of Mr X1," a notorious collaborator with apartheid's death squads, and someone whose story unravels any simple binary of victim and perpetrator. At the Lenin Institute in Moscow, a young Thabo Mbeki reads Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* as a blueprint for revolution. Panashe Chigumadzi reflects on the literary set-works, like Coetzee's *Disgrace*, that showed up the fragile multi-racialism of her 'born free' schooldays in Limpopo. Sisonke Msimang and Lebogang Mashile work back through the canon of anti-apartheid nonfiction to explore the complexities of inter-racial friendship, and the awkward intimacies of domestic labour.

In tracing encounters like these, I explore how unpredictable, uneasy or even "mostly useless" literary inheritances are put to uses for which they were never intended. They are reminders of how the most important intellectual work in or about the country has often taken place outside formal institutions: in marginalised, covert or exile spaces. This kind of autodidactic, unaffiliated intellectual labour is a deep theme in nonfiction from South Africa. It requires attention to how specific literary encounters and cultural texts are woven into the trajectory of individual lives; and how certain forms of reflective nonfiction (so powerfully in the case of Ndebele and

Mphahlele) are able to rehearse the intimate and sometimes arbitrary 'backstory' of how one comes to know what one knows, and think what one thinks. These are written modes where the mediation of the personal voice is not effaced or denied but put to work, where the 'I' becomes a risky but vital intellectual tool.

* * *

Nonfiction: where to start with such a vague, negatively defined concept? Saying nonfiction is like calling a whole wardrobe of clothes non-socks or using the apartheid term 'non-white.' It takes a minority identity as a reference point to categorise a majority, and so implies a hierarchy of values. Most pieces of writing in existence, from recipes to tax returns to Wikipedia pages, are broadly nonfictional: that is, their makers and readers assume the function of words referring to actually existing elements of the world in which such texts are embedded.

And so, in order to narrow the focus of enquiry, an adjective is added: narrative nonfiction, creative nonfiction, literary nonfiction. Each of these multiplies the complications. Narrative nonfiction is non-specific; creative nonfiction sounds limited to the output of creative writing programmes. Literary nonfiction seems outdated and elitist, risking the discredited idea that literariness should be searched for as some privileged arena of discourse, or special added value. The object of enquiry is one that I have found hard to bring into focus or keep still. But I hope that such unsettledness can be generative, and that it might speak to a difficult place at a difficult time. The place is South Africa, the time two decades and counting since the country's first democratic elections in 1994. During this period of social and political transition, some of the most ambitious and compelling writing published within and about the country has emerged in nonfictive modes. The work of writers like Panashe Chigumadzi, Jacob Dlamini, Mark Gevisser, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, Antjie Krog, Sisonke Msimang, Njabulo S Ndebele, Jonny Steinberg, Ivan Vladislavić and many others forms a body of cultural production that is ambitious, textured, imaginative and self-aware; that is sometimes experimental, often risky and troubling, often divisive – and worthy of more critical attention than it has received. What lies behind this perceived nonfiction boom? What cultural or psychic function is it serving? How can it be theorised and historicised?

Nonfiction is often discussed in terms of relevance and topicality: its ability to render the contemporary moment, the 'now.' Its relatively high sales in South Africa (and globally) are linked to its perceived role of taking socio-political readings of a world in flux: dust jacket copy promises state-of-the nation reports more credible than those of politicians or the media; but my account attempts a longer historical perspective. The recent wave of "experiments with truth" (to adapt the title of Mohandas K Gandhi's 1927 autobiography) is read in mind of precursors across the twentieth century. Landmark works of black life writing and political memoir; the essays, reportage and New Journalism *avant la lettre* of the 1950s *Drum* writers; the extensive sub-genre of South African prison writing; the techniques of social and oral history 'from below' that migrate from academic to more public registers – all of these emerge as possible forerunners of more recent works.

In reading across the twentieth century for the most influential works of narrative nonfiction from a part of the continent known blandly as "South Africa," three books surely stand out: Solomon T Plaatje's account of the consequences of the 1913 Natives Land Act, *Native Life in South Africa* (1916); the articles and addresses by Steve Biko collected in *I Write What I Like* (1978); and then Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994), originary text of the new nation and our most exemplary life. Beyond this, there are the various literary responses to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* (1998), for example, and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's *A Human Being Died That Night* (2003) – and then the TRC archive itself: that vast release of narrative into the public domain.

The triumvirate of Plaatje, Biko and Mandela can be taken as metonymic of three deep currents of nonfiction that recur in many of the more recent works considered here. Plaatje's work is a complex mosaic of different styles and genres, but it is anchored in the practice of narrative journalism, reportage and testimony, particularly as these pertain to violations of human rights and human dignity. Biko, in drawing on the passionate anti-colonial forms (and psychological registers) of Frantz Fanon, refines the critical and political essay into a form of great concision, frankness and rhetorical power. Mandela attaches his famous name to a collective exercise in life writing that is also explicitly a national allegory: a utopian writing-into-being of a new, democratic South Africa, and one in which every aspect of his subjectivity is made to do political work. This is a "life," in other words, which is both an actual, individual existence in time and its writing up for global consumption as a textual product and commodity.

These three non-fictive impulses are drawn on, woven together and reimagined in more recent South African writing: (1) literary journalism, testimonial narrative and reportage; (2) the critical essay as a form of narrative thinking able to braid together personal and political histories; (3) life writing in its many forms and registers, from 'definitive' biographies of public figures to more private modes like memoir, diaries, personal narrative and autobiographical confession. Yet even as it names various tropes or genres within the field of nonfiction, my approach is ultimately more interested in those works that seem to be in flight from, or writing their way out of, recognisable templates and pre-established narrative modes. In Krog's acclaimed but contentious account of covering the TRC as a radio journalist, the three non-fictive codes above are scrambled together, and all sorts of liberties taken in search of a greater emotional and explanatory force on the page: "I cut and paste the upper layer, in order to get the second layer told" (70–1). The result is a hybrid work that is deeply suspicious of universalised truth, and always alert to the gendered assumptions that form around notions of 'objective' versus 'personal' forms of writing. In Gobodo-Madikizela's account of coming to know the imprisoned Eugene de Kock (once the commander of apartheid's most notorious death squads), questions of expedient truths and revealing lies are still more charged. Published three years into the twenty-first century, *A Human Being Died That Night* is perhaps the first work of nonfiction in which a South African woman of colour writes extensively, and psycho-biographically, about a white man. (See Coullie et al. 2006: 19). It is a startling reminder that questions of narrative nonfiction can never be divorced from those of narrative power: who can write about whom; which stories are told across history; what comes to be heard or forgotten, and why?

On the one hand, I attempt to understand the "surge of narrative energy" surrounding nonfictional modes in a particular time and place (McGregor and Nuttall 2007: 10). On the other, I hope to avoid an insular approach, as well as the narrative of exceptionalism in which many texts about South Africa's political 'miracle' find themselves implicated. Any account of prose nonfiction today must also consider a broader turn towards what Rob Nixon calls the "cultural industrialisation of the real" (30). The last decades have seen an immense shift from analogue to digital worlds, from books to screens, and the emergence, across verbal, aural and visual platforms, of "a new normal that places a great creative and commercial premium on making a show of reality" (30).

This massive increase in narrative possibility – in technologies for the scripting, screening and staging of real life – is perhaps one of the greatest shifts in communication and consciousness within human history. Its full consequences for ideas of truth and the self are still unfolding, and perhaps only dimly understood at this point. At a time when phrases like "post-truth," "fake news" and "alternative facts" have become commonplace in public discussion, it seems there is a need for more powerful and creative tools to distinguish between the different orders of information folded into narrative nonfiction. Yet the stubborn binary embedded within this negative definition remains.

"Awakening on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth." The first sentence of Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* is perhaps the most famous and often-quoted opening line in this country's literature. Mothobi Mutloatse, Njabulo S Ndebele and Kader Asmal all begin their reflections on Plaatje's account of the consequences of the 1913 Natives Land Act by reproducing it. In retrospect, it serves as preliminary not only to the book but also to the South African century. Reaching for a loan word, "pariah," from the other major theatre of English-speaking colonialism in the global South, Plaatje evokes the fundamental denial of reality that underlay the creation of a new country in 1910: a reconciliation of Boer and Briton following the South African War (the Anglo-Boer War), but one premised on the disavowal – social, political, cultural – of the lives of most inhabitants of the geographical space south of the Limpopo and Orange rivers. For Asmal, writing a Foreword to the 2007 Picador edition, it is "one of the most powerful and memorable first paragraphs in literature" (xi).

Except that it is not, strictly speaking, the first paragraph. Before chapter one comes a prologue, which opens as follows:

> We have often read books, written by well-known scholars, who disavow, on behalf of their works, any claim to literary perfection. How much more necessary, then, that a South African native workingman, who has never received any secondary training, should in attempting authorship disclaim on behalf of his work, any title to literary merit. Mine is but a sincere narrative of a melancholy situation, in which, with all its shortcomings, I have endeavoured to describe the difficulties of the South African natives under a very strange law, so as most readily to be understood by the sympathetic reader. (15)

With this very different kind of opening – self-conscious, rhetorical and recursive where the famous first lines are curt, confident and declarative – one senses the kind of torsions that Plaatje had to negotiate in presenting his passionate work of testimony and reportage to a distant public. In its stacked and carefully modulated clauses, the prologue enters the game by which a claim to literary merit is made in the very act of its being disavowed: a longstanding rhetorical device, the apologia, but one now inflected and contaminated by the colonial predicament. Who, after all, are the 'we' of the very first word? Embedded in this wishful, unrealised pronoun is a vortex of tensions concerning authority, audience and representation: tensions that will shape so much documentary writing from this part of the world and will persist into another 'new' South Africa at the far end of the twentieth century.

As the complex rhetorical stance of *Native Life in South Africa* suggests, the matter of nonfiction turns continually on questions of representation, in all the literary and political senses of that word: on access to narrative, authorship, discursive authority and how these relate to histories of dispossession, inequality, racist segregation and resistance across the twentieth century. In traversing this difficult terrain, I have three guiding arguments, or methodological axioms, drawn from the intellectual formations that underlie my approach, respectively: literary and cultural studies; questions of historiography and the archive; critical and postcolonial theory. I shall go on to explore how the question of nonfiction takes shape from each of these different disciplinary vantages.

* * *

First, and from the perspective of literary studies, I pay attention to form and argue for a method of cross-reading which ranges across the fiction/nonfiction boundary, placing works from different genres and even different mediums in dialogue. Literary history too often reads like with like – novels alongside novels, memoir against memoir, poems with poems – rather

than setting different kinds of writing in counterpoint and moving across classifications that are often little more than a publisher's shorthand. The challenge, however, is to do this without dissolving or disavowing the specific truth claims of various modes – each with different techniques for smuggling world onto page; each working out different contracts about accuracy and candour with an implied reader. How, in other words, can one recognise that the experience of reading fiction and nonfiction are different, but also acknowledge the fictive lineaments within even the most truth-directed forms? To extend the question: how can the matter of nonfiction narrative be conceived of as both wrought and received at the same time: that is, as an aesthetic, linguistic effect but also (simultaneously) as something verifiable beyond the text – outside, prior to or independent of any mediation?

Writing in the wake of the critical and postmodern theory that shows up the tacit fictiveness and narrativity inherent in all kinds of discourse, there is of course the temptation to dissolve and blur the fiction/nonfiction divide in all kinds of ways, or even to regard it as hopelessly obsolete. And certainly, a starting premise here is that any approach seeking to account for the full scope of literary production in southern Africa must in some ways move beyond this leaden binary. Yet on the other hand, any approach that entirely dispenses with the different kind of truth-claim (or factual status) assumed by (or attached to), for example, a novel and a work of social history, will remain somehow unsatisfying. Despite their resemblance in structure or technique, "literary nonfiction and fiction are fundamentally different" writes Eric Heyne, and "this difference must be recognised by any theory that hopes to do justice to powerful nonfiction narratives" (480).

This may seem too absolute a binary for theoretically minded literary scholars. Yet in my experience of teaching graduate classes on, say, Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys* (a memoir of living and writing in Johannesburg, classed as NONFICTION on the back cover of the international edition), even those students most ready to dissolve any distinction between fictional and nonfictional status into a postmodern play of signification are likely to find themselves mildly aggrieved on learning, after the fact, that Vladislavić does not really have a brother, that the cranky brother-character Branko in *Portrait* – often a mouthpiece for reactionary or crypto-racist sentiments in the work, and a foil to the more liberal, well-meaning narrator – is a fiction.

If a tendency to dissolve or disavow the nonfiction binary is one problem that I have repeatedly come up against, then the other side of the coin is the problem of rivalry. In Western literary theory from Aristotle onwards, one often sees the construction of a competitive, antagonistic relation in which the creative imagination – "fiction," "the novel" – is set against a more truth-directed adversary, whether "history," "the New Journalism," or the texture of the real itself.

Variations on this theme – that unmediated or merely notated truth is stranger, and stronger, than fiction – permeate South African cultural criticism, stretching from Rian Malan's bestseller *My Traitor's Heart* back via the essays of TT Moyana to the *Drum* journalism of 1950s Johannesburg. Exploring apartheid as "A Daily Exercise in the Absurd," Lewis Nkosi remarked: "At best an account of what a black man goes through in his daily life sounds like an exaggerated Kafka novel" (35). But, as he went on to argue in a well-known polemic ("Fiction by Black South Africans"), few novelists had properly risen to this challenge. Instead, he found only "the journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature" (126): a succession of "ready-made plots" and untransformed "social facts" that make it "difficult to see why we should give up the daily newspaper in favour of creative fiction, for the newspapers would tell us just as much about life" (127).

In a later decade, Ndebele set about refining and complicating this cliché of rivalry between the creative and the documentary, suggesting that Nkosi "did not go far enough in his analysis of the problem" (2006 [1991]: 16). Writing in *Staffrider* magazine in 1984, he theorised a tension that is not locked into the question of fiction versus nonfiction, but instead plays across all kinds of narrative modes: the relation between "the journalistic, informational ambience on the

one hand, and the storytelling, narrative ambience on the other" (24; his emphasis). It is this space of dynamic tension that ambitious and aesthetically crafted nonfictions must navigate – the "conflict between the aim of storytelling and that of imparting social information" (16) – while also embedding their own intra-textual reflections on what Ndebele calls "the phenomenon of information" itself (16).

Writing in mind of the 1970s Information Scandal (in which the apartheid government secretly founded, funded and bribed media outlets in an effort to change South Africa's global image), Ndebele points to the nature of information in a capitalist society not as raw material but as an ideological commodity and manufactured product, its nature hinging "on such issues as who produces the information, who interprets it, and who disseminates it" (16). In articulating what one might frame as a tension between knowledge and information, Ndebele's diagnosis of apartheid as a deliberate and cynical exercise in denying reality still resonates in the twenty-first century.

The Trump/Putin era has seen the apogee of a project in which media conglomerates, even in the 'free world,' blatantly arrange and disseminate information in ways that correspond to predetermined ideological positions, positions that may well be ludicrous or cynical, but which serve the market and an elite with vested interests, nonetheless. In a world of politically engineered social media feeds and well-funded digital misinformation, the result is a widespread sense of a damaged or debased real, and a cultural predicament that the traditional tools of critical and postmodern theory seem ill-equipped to address.

Another often-cited example of a supposed rivalry between imaginative and documentary modes in South African literature is JM Coetzee's address, "The Novel Today." Speaking at the height of the anti-apartheid struggle, the author and academic argued strongly against his chosen form being seen as a lesser form of discourse to be checked against the "answer script" of history as if by a censorious schoolmistress: the novel as mere "supplement" or handmaiden to the master discourse of historical materialism (pub. 1988: 2). Yet the problem with invoking "The Novel Today" is that it tends to reinforce precisely the binary that is seen as so limiting at the outset. As Rita Barnard comments, it has often been taken up as "a kind of holy writ, a parable about the supremacy of fiction and storytelling" (1). Because its metaphors are so extreme (the novelist feeling "colonised" by the master narrative of Marxian and liberationist historiography) we are left with an after-image of this antagonistic opposition – "the novel" versus "history" – that overshadows the wider import of the address. That is: when History has been demythologised and revealed as a text among other texts, there exists a whole spectrum of different narratives and writings competing for legitimacy and primacy, making their different claims on the real.

In short, any simple notion of rivalry (or indivisibility) between fictive and nonfictive writing is inadequate. It cannot account for the flowering of both the novelistic nonfiction, and the historically textured novel-writing, that has characterised South African writing since the 1990s. Strains of fiction and nonfiction here have for a long time been in an unusually intense, intimate and constitutive dialogue with each other, and any attempt to engage South African writing in its fullest sense needs to find ways of addressing this complex and cross-stitched relationship. "Is it fair to weave fictions out of the lives of real people?" asks Vladislavić in *The Loss Library*: "How else are fictions to be made? All fiction is the factual refracted" (30). As such, my challenge here is to read an array of different modes in critical counterpoint – literary journalism, fiction, life writing, drama, social history, poetry, documentary film, political biography, narrative essays, online posts, even conceptual art installations – with a sensitivity to how specific narrative techniques and rhetorical tactics are drawn on, refashioned and blurred into each other in the event of writing and reading.

Second, I am interested in how certain strains of nonfiction narrate an encounter with the past unlike that produced by dominant (and often reductive) forms of public, post-apartheid or

nationalist historiography. A "usable past" is a familiar phrase, coined by the American literary critic and biographer Van Wyck Brooks. Writing in 1918, he opposed the conservative reflex by which scholars invoked the past to disparage the present, asking instead for a more dynamic approach in which history is better imagined as "an inexhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals" (331). "If we need another past so badly," he went on, "is it inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one?" (339)

The invention of a usable past is of course an important project in newly liberated, transitional or decolonising societies where various political and cultural actors are trying to recover silenced histories: a moment (like South Africa in the 1990s) when textbooks must be rewritten and the basic contours of a new national narrative imagined into being. But what lies beyond that culturally sanctioned, politically appropriate moment of retrieval, reconstruction and remembering? What about an inappropriate, unpredictable or unusable past?

In her far-reaching reflections on slave memory in the post-apartheid moment, *What Is Slavery to Me?* (2010), Pumla Gqola reminds the reader that processes of public remembering and forgetting always exist side by side, and that imaginative renderings of history must themselves be historicised in order to understand "the relationships of entanglement between the forms of memory found and the timing of their public rehearsal" (7). In tracing how the slave past "moves from the obscured to the well recognised" (5), she nonetheless stresses the more discordant and difficult elements of this process: how a historical consciousness of slavery and its violence might have been masked by subsequent generations as a matter of survival; how archival traces of the disremembered reside in "modes that do not easily give up the stories" (4). "The relationship of historiography to memory," she writes, "is one of containment" (7).

At a still greater distance from South Africa's first democratic elections, I would suggest that the idea of a too easily usable past carries a more dubious charge (one not dissimilar to the sceptical, Marxist notion of an invented tradition). It is a moment when the decolonial impulse to retrieve previously unvoiced histories can be co-opted by new forms of distorting nationalism; and when even the most self-confidently progressive engagements with the archive might risk 'using' – by which I mean instrumentalising, or conscripting – past existences that should properly retain more resistance to the designs of the present. In circling around the phrase 'unusable pasts,' I am concerned with all those awkward, ill-fitting, untimely histories that cannot be made to perform a simple or immediately recognisable political gesture. "Non-political" prisoners, con men, collaborators, askaris, HIV/AIDS denialists, betrayers, 'ordinary' lives in extraordinary times – these are persons and predicaments that do not yield any easy political capital, but which for that very reason may be all the more powerful in understanding what it has meant for South Africans to make sense of their lives in, through, and despite politics.

Thirdly, can the category nonfiction be theorised, can it even be imagined, without reference to colonialism and its aftermaths? After all, it sounds odd to speak of the myriad different kinds of knowledge encoded in southern African societies in forms other than the written document as "nonfiction." Yet as Stephen Gray remarked in 1985, the shift from the spoken to the written persists as our major literary event: across all kinds of southern African texts, the narrator is continually positioned as "amanuensis of the spoken word" (10). Works like Charles van Onselen's *The Seed Is Mine* and Steinberg's *The Number* are exercises in cultural translation on a massive scale: enormous projects of transcribing, sifting and arranging the words of non-elite (and sometimes non-literate) narrators.

From this point of departure (one not always considered by influential Euro-American approaches to literary journalism), the whole question of nonfiction is inseparably bound up with power, racialised difference, and the particular forms of knowledge production that took shape in the colonial contact zone: logbooks of maritime exploration; trading company reports; projects of terrestrial surveying, prospecting and cataloguing; the archives of natural history,

ethnography and colonial administration. That vast and oppressive collection, in other words, of "Narratives," "Accounts," "Travels," and "Descriptions" that make up what VY Mudimbe has called "the colonial library" (213). This genealogy of the documentary carries with it the knowledge techniques and technologies of colonial modernity: the invention of orthography and comparative philology; the global circulation of information via imperial networks intent on producing comparable sets of data; the reduction of African languages and life-worlds to print; the biopolitics of anthropometric photography, identity documents, census taking and pass books. In this context, 'nonfiction' comes to signify less a universalised debate about the nature of truth and falsehood than a particular set of textual practices and print cultures that make landfall from the fifteenth century onwards, and then undergo manifold transformations and contestations.[2] As with many other postcolonies, South Africa's is "a literature that has developed from exogenous sources and has ever since been through innumerable processes of adaptation and indigenisation" (Attwell 2005: 19).

It is from one of the most famous examples of this process that I borrow my title. Writing from his ashram at Sabarmati, Gujarat, on 26 November 1925, the 56-year-old Mohandas K Gandhi – once a London-trained barrister in a suit, now a khadi-wearing Mahatma – begins his autobiography with a note of scepticism toward the whole idea of a written life. Some of his nearest co-workers (we are told) had prevailed on him to embark on the project; but "a God-fearing friend has his doubts": "What has set you on this adventure?" he asked,

> Writing an autobiography is a practice peculiar to the West. I know of nobody in the East having written one, except amongst those who come under Western influence. And what will you write? Supposing you reject tomorrow the things you hold as principles today, or supposing you revise in the future your plans of today, is it not likely that the men who shape their conduct on the authority of your word, spoken or written, may be misled? (14)

This argument, Gandhi writes, "had some effect on me. But it is not my purpose to attempt a real autobiography":

> I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but those experiments, it is true that the story will take the shape of an autobiography. (14)

This "Author's Introduction" was the first of a series of articles published between 1925 and 1929 in Gandhi's own newspaper, *Navajivan* ("Young India"), the successor to *Indian Opinion*, which he had established in 1903 at the Phoenix settlement outside Durban. And so, what the English-speaking reader today encounters as "An Autobiography" first appeared in Gujarati as a long-running serialisation under the title "The Story of My Experiments with Truth."

At Sabarmati, Gandhi had already completed the political history of his South African years, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (1928). It is a work that, not unlike Plaatje's *Native Life*, tells the story of a frustrated appeal to the ideal of a global imperial subject; this is then abandoned for the different political strategy of satyagraha: often translated as "passive resistance" but literally "truth-force," "truth insistence" or "firmness in truth." In his characteristically mercurial style as editor, writer and leader, Gandhi hybridises and adapts supposedly 'Western' forms of print culture and autobiography for his own purposes, blurring the traditional liberal distinction of individual and political, and writing even the most intimate details of his bodily functions – his diet, his bowels, his sexual urges – into his autobiographical experiments.[3]

Along with Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, Gandhi's life must rank as the one of the most widely read autobiographies in the world. Mandela's *Long Walk* is strenuously allegorical, secular and collective: the 'autobiography' of a movement in which every detail has the feel of having been comprehensively reverse-engineered to serve the political parable. Partly the product of a

team of ghostwriters at an American publisher, Mandela's 'I' is less the trace of a confiding, historical subject than a strategy to write a new nation into being. Gandhi's *Experiments* are more personal and piecemeal, imbued with the gnomic, otherworldly or unknowable truths of religious thought. "The instruments for the quest of truth are as simple as they are difficult," he writes towards the end of the Introduction: "The seeker after truth should be humbler than the dust. The world crushes the dust under its feet, but the seeker after truth should so humble himself that even the dust could crush him" (16).

Yet saints, as George Orwell remarked in his "Reflections on Gandhi" should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent (451); and the idea of experimenting with truth takes on a more dubious connotation in the larger Gandhian story. Arundhati Roy's polemic, "The Doctor and the Saint," decries the unseemly loyalty demonstrated by the young Gandhi to the British Empire, particularly during the brutal suppression of the Bambatha Rebellion of 1906. With the help of other dissenting scholars, she traces how his autobiography elides the segregationist and anti-black sentiments of his South African years. The fact that his vision of satyagraha was not extended to black South Africans during his Durban and Johannesburg years has led to a diametrically revisionist idea of Gandhi in some circles. This cultural shift from him being claimed by the ANC as one of the fathers of the liberation struggle to being written off as racist makes him an example of an awkward or ambivalent figure from history: someone who has changed from being a usable icon to a more unpredictable, unstable element of the South African past.

Nonetheless, both Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* and Gandhi's *Autobiography* remain global emblems of how it is in testimonial nonfictional forms that one finds the counter-voice that has always accompanied colonial conquest and political injustice: the humanitarian objection, mediated via texts that rely on documentary techniques even as they contest the uses to which these have previously been put. In this sense, the colonial library in southern Africa also holds works by writers like François Le Vaillant, John Philip, Thomas Pringle, Tiyo Soga, Olive Schreiner, Emily Hobhouse, John Tengo Jabavu, William Wellington Gqoba, John Langalibalele Dube, HIE Dhlomo and, of course, Sol T Plaatje – producers of critical, corrective or anti-colonial nonfiction in a globalising imperial world, and precursors of the kinds of reportage and literary journalism that underwrite the twentieth-century liberation struggle. Prolific writers and editors of the New African Movement like Dhlomo were, Ntongela Masilela has argued, the crucial figures in "constructing the theoretical, political and epistemological instrumentarium" for understanding and shaping a black South African modernity on its own terms (5).

With all this in mind, the bringing together of 'nonfiction' and 'non-white' in an earlier passage was no accident. When viewed from southern Africa, the claims to objectivity and documentary truth involved in writing up the lives of others are implicated in a long and painful history of producing (in the sense of producing knowledge about) the 'non-white': a history in which whiteness is the fiction that passes as normative fact. Objectivity, as Fanon remarked in *The Wretched of the Earth*, is always wielded against the native (75). The long shadow of that colonial ethnography, and what poet Gabeba Baderoon calls "the hurt of the Non" (58), must surely be held in mind when considering how the nonfiction text creates a reality it claims only to describe. And as Fanon, Biko and Edward Said have all shown in different ways, the discourse of the powerful is not simply a matter of silencing, effacing and ignoring other life-worlds. It is also a productive endeavour: an encyclopaedic, proliferating corpus of information techniques that are used to 'know' and to govern the subject (who becomes an object) of enquiry.

"One of the most difficult things to do these days is to talk with authority on anything to do with African culture"; so runs the opening line of a 1971 address by Biko, who goes on to critique the unreality and hypocrisy of a certain strain of white-dominated intellectual production that,

even in its most liberal variants, professed an opposition to racial inequality while nonetheless assuming an undue epistemic command over the lives of others:

> Somehow Africans are not expected to have any deep understanding of their own culture or even themselves. Other people have become authorities on all aspects of African life or to be more accurate on BANTU life. Thus, we have the thickest volumes on some of the strangest subjects – even the 'feeding habits of the Urban Africans', a publication by a fairly 'liberal' group, Institute of Race Relations. (44)

Any theorisation of nonfiction from the postcolony can hardly forget this history, and this challenge: the need for a "truth-force" that will counter a demeaning objectivity; for frank talk that will contest a racialised knowingness; for vernacular knowledge that will resist official or authoritarian information-gathering. Written into a context of material inequality and unresolved difference, narrative nonfiction in contemporary South Africa must (if it is equal to its situation) grapple in particularly charged ways with the power imbalances and risks involved in writing up the lives of others, even as it does evolve ways of telling that do make a strong claim on the real, and on real bodies.

Self-reflexivity and an explicit foregrounding of subject-position and the authorial presence, the narrating 'I,' is one method of doing so; but it is not, I hope, the only method, or necessarily the most sincere, 'honest' or convincing. My book, *Experiments with Truth*, tries to widen and make more open-ended this discussion about epistemic authority and narrative method, moving away from limiting versions of identity or identitarian politics which position individuals as simply emblematic of the past, rather than complexly symptomatic of it. It also questions those forms of cultural policing which seek to decree, before the fact and often censoriously, who can write about what, and how. One of my main aims is to widen and make more interesting the debate about narrative authority. In reading across a series of risky nonfiction texts, I have hoped to show that there is far more to the question of documentary ethics than simply placing an author in a classificatory system that can look very much like a mirror image of apartheid categories. And furthermore, that those kinds of cultural intervention which self-consciously brandish (or wring hands over) their "subject position" might in fact be less adequate responses to the challenge than those works which take up such crucial questions of representation in less explicit but more considered ways, routing them through a matrix of voice, style, plotting and narrative construction across the *longue durée* of a book.

In reading and thinking about a diverse selection of nonfiction, I return to a haunting and mysterious phrase that Bloke Modisane, Lewis Nkosi and other autobiographers of the 1950s circle back to: what it means to "write yourself out of a situation." At the time, a "situation" was the ironic name given to those black South Africans, often educated at English mission schools, who could apply to the 'Situation Vacant' advertisements in white Johannesburg: the writer as alienated in-betweener in a divided society. This task of being a cultural broker between the ongoing apartness of southern African lives has reappeared in all kinds of guises; so too has the matter of the English language itself, and the question of to what extent this bland, flattened lingua franca of governance, business and trade nonfiction can register the impress of the social worlds it exists among and intercedes between.

But there seems still more to it than that. "The whole literary enterprise was a compromise between several desperate drives and urges," Mphahlele writes in one of his most powerful essays, "something even more profound than what is often referred to as 'writing yourself out of a situation'" (279). The nonfictions of South Africa's transition emerge from, are written out of, a historically particular and often densely personal situation. Yet at the same time, they enact a reckoning in language with a bitter and compromised past, drawing its poison, writing it out.

Notes on Contributor

Hedley Twidle is a writer, teacher and researcher based at the University of Cape Town. He specialises in twentieth-century, southern African and world literatures, as well as creative non-fiction and the environmental humanities. His essay collection, *Firepool: Experiences in an Abnormal World*, was published in 2017. His book, *Experiments with Truth*, on narrative non-fiction and the South African transition, appeared in 2019.

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Notes

1. For the extended argument see Twidle's *Experiments with Truth: Narrative Non-fiction and the Coming of Democracy in South Africa*, where the reader can source the full publishing details of all texts mentioned in this article.
2. To give a very literal example of a colonial documentary form making landfall: in an outline of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) writing system, Adrien Delmas shows how the *Daghregister* (diary) of Jan van Riebeeck was first and fundamentally a nautical form, requiring a daily log of conditions for navigation and dead reckoning at sea. At the southern tip of Africa, the seventeenth-century *Daghregister*, "begun with the casting-off from Texel, would not […] be stopped, and would continue its narrative for the next one hundred and fifty years of the VOC's presence at the Cape of Good Hope" (106). Once on land, the Company directives about logging daily events were equally insistent: "Of all that occurs in your neighbourhood, you will keep accurate notes and a diary", instructed Amsterdam on the eve of Van Riebeeck's departure, "and shall not fail in this point" (qtd in Moodie, 8). Such records have since formed the archival grain for several historical, postcolonial, post-apartheid novels set in the early Cape Colony.
3. See Moore-Gilbert, in which he remarks that "from the outset, *An Autobiography* conjoins 'reform' of Gandhi's individual body with the struggle against foreign domination. Indeed, his desire for mastery of bodily appetites provides a template for developing the self-control and self-discipline necessary not just to attain self-rule in the political sphere, but to remain worthy of it" (38). Moore-Gilbert introduces his book by showing how slave narratives like that of Olaudah Equiano ("a precursor form of postcolonial life writing") begin to circulate from as early as 1770: "This is roughly the same moment as Rousseau's *Confessions*, widely regarded as the inaugural instance of Western autobiography in a recognisably modern form" (xi). As such, the question of empire is present at the founding moment of modern autobiography, if one widens the angle of vision.

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