

Tracing the Seam: Narrative Journalism and Imaginings in South African Literature

Nick Mulgrew
Independent scholar, South Africa

ABSTRACT: The epistemic violence that has replaced South Africa's violent past has for many reasons brought forth a multitude of texts that seek to portray South Africa and its fractured population, fusing literary modes with journalistic sensibility to create a body of work that is becoming entrenched as one of South Africa's most dynamic and celebrated literary genres. This paper provides a wide-ranging portrait of narrative journalism in South Africa: its differing relations to the country's fiction and journalism; its place within the contexts of postcolonialism, postmodernity, and media tabloidization; and its potential as a means of adequately depicting, articulating, and laying bare South Africa's scenes of unresolved cultural, political, and epistemological difference. This paper will also focus on the work of journalist Jonny Steinberg, whose heightened levels of narrative self-awareness and preoccupation with the internal lives of both narrator and subject can be argued to be typical features of South African narrative journalism and, in particular, the genre's engagement with—and navigation of—representational crises.

It has arguably become cliché to preface any attempt at providing a coherent overview of literature in South Africa—or any facet of it, for that matter—by labeling it as an ultimately quixotic endeavor. Such is the proliferation and entrenchment of this trope that a leading scholar of literature in South Africa felt the need to draw attention to it at the turn of the last century: “Introductions to South African literary culture conceived as an entity have a peculiar trademark,” writes Leon de Kock. “They apologize for attempting to do the impossible and then go ahead anyway.”¹ To crib from Gareth Cornwell's introduction to the *Columbia Guide to South African Literature in English Since 1945*, any introduction to any aspect of literature in South Africa must “necessarily negotiat[e] the shadow of its own impossibility.”²

This rather self-effacing tradition of “rhetorical genuflection,”³ in which one must consider the impossibility of coherently representing literature in South Africa while trying to represent it, is most likely linked to impossibilities and limitations of representation and imagination within many of the texts that make it up, particularly in works of fiction. As argued by Robert Thornton, “South African identities cross-cut each other in multiple ways and in multiple contexts,” meaning that “there is no fundamental identity that any South African clings to in common with all, or even most other South Africans.”⁴ This multiplicity, fragmentation, and seeming irreconcilability of identities within the population of the country seeps into representations of individuals or groups of South Africans in literature. In relation to this instability and fractiousness of representation, de Kock chooses to explore the metaphor of the “seam,” loquaciously arguing that any effort at bringing together or “suturing the incommensurate [in] an attempt to close the gap that defines it as incommensurate unavoidably bears the mark of its own crisis.”⁵ In other words, works of South African literature readily become sites of “simultaneous convergence and divergence . . . where a representational seam is the paradox qualifying any attempt to imagine organicism or unity” between individuals or groups;⁶ or “where difference and sameness are hitched together [and] brought to self-awareness, denied or displaced into third terms.”⁷

South Africa’s histories of colonialism and apartheid, of separation and rejoining, find a concomitant in the fabric of its literature, or literatures: a patchwork of representation of cultures, languages, identities, and traditions, as much notable for its attempts at its components’ coexistence as it is for their individual existence. It is in this way that narrative journalism/non-fiction plays an important role in literature and literature studies in South Africa, not because it can provide immediate solutions to issues of representation and imagination in the country’s literature, nor because it can easily unravel the conditions that underpin its culture of rhetorical genuflection; but because it can better or more lucidly accomplish what fictional modes of representation and imaginings do not or, perhaps, cannot in South Africa at this point in time. Rather than making the seam invisible, it traces the seam, delineating the points of suture and the places—to continue the “stitching” better than “sewing” metaphor—at which the suture is strained or unraveled. The result of this quality contributes to “the indisputable fact,” as Rob Nixon argues, “that nonfiction has proven over the past twenty years to be South Africa’s most dynamic, inventive literary genre.”⁸ Further, the remark of author Marlene van Niekerk that narrative journalism “almost convinces one that fiction has become redundant in this country,”⁹ made on the dust jacket of

Antony Albeker's true-crime *Fruit of a Poisoned Tree* (2010), is one of a sort that is becoming increasingly prominent and increasingly debated.

In this paper, I will explore the virtues and limitations of narrative journalism and nonfiction—as well as the genres' foregrounding of these virtues and limitations in the works that best define it—in comparison with conventional fictional modes as part of the literary effort to uncover and understand South Africa's social divisions. In doing so, I will reflect briefly on the work of one of South Africa's most influential narrative journalists, Jonny Steinberg, as an illustration of these points, while attempting to bring together a wide-ranging portrait of the genre as it currently exists in South Africa. Chiefly, however, I will argue that narrative journalism/nonfiction allows new and more developed expositions of the architecture underlying representations and imaginations, both popular and personal, that delineate and inform South Africa's ongoing cultural schisms.

THE ORDINARY STATE OF SOUTH AFRICA(N LITERATURE)

South Africa's transition from pariah state to democratic society can be conceived of—to skew Nelson Mandela's “long walk to freedom”—as a “long walk to ordinariness.”¹⁰ In the decades after the dissolution of the apartheid state, the country has gradually become just another African postcolony: another country engaging with the “task of wresting the continent of Africa from the discursive grasp of the West”; or another country reimagining its identity in the shadow of an “inglorious past”;¹¹ or, to the outside world, another rather unexceptional place. The seeming incomprehensibility or tragedy of some events in the country's recent history, such as former president Thabo Mbeki's AIDS denialism, threats of media suppression surrounding the tabling of the Protection of State Information Bill, and continually high murder and rape statistics, has, in Rob Nixon's words, “hastened South Africa's slide toward just one more strange foreign place, another unredemptive, unengaging elsewhere.”¹²

The material and corporeal violence of South Africa's political and social history has been matched by a literary “violence of representation” within the country itself.¹³ In the transitional period from apartheid to democracy, the “bloody nightmares” of colonialism and apartheid became usurped by countrywide violence: not in the guise of civil war, as much of the world had expected, and not just in the form of widespread violent crime, but an epistemic violence, one driven chiefly by contentions about how South Africans should—or, for that matter, could—reconcile their identities with that of the new nation. Difficulties arose in many South Africans' attempts to identify with their countrymen, people with whom they may consider to share very little other than the landscape they inhabit.¹⁴

At the beginning of the 1990s—the decade that saw the unbanning of the African National Congress, Mandela’s release from prison, and the first steps toward a democratic dispensation—“the concept of a shared national literature—like that of a shared national culture—beckoned ever more invitingly.”¹⁵ As the decade wore on, however, fictional output from South African writers, both white and black, became a *mélange* of styles with thematic and stylistic concerns influenced by the legacy of apartheid and its effects on different cultural and racial groups. While white writers like André Brink and Ivan Vladislavić abandoned a seeming “oppositional obligation to document [and] to bear witness”¹⁶ in favor of postmodern or magical realist modes, black writers did “not [find] it so easy to dismiss the claims of realism,” instead endeavoring to “[attest] to the social legacy of inequality [and make] a “usable past” out of the years of political struggle.”¹⁷ As such, some black writers produced works of “documentary” fiction, works that testified to the legacy of apartheid as it was and is experienced by those who suffered most under it. Two quintessential examples of such “documentary” fiction are K. Sello Duiker’s *Thirteen Cents*, an exposition of gangsterism, prostitution, and poverty in the postcard city of Cape Town, and Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, a self-styled “Novel of Postapartheid South Africa”—replete with the cutting short of young lives due to violence, xenophobia, and HIV—set in one of Johannesburg’s most violent inner-city areas.¹⁸ Other black writers expanded upon the postapartheid (or post-anti-apartheid) template, such as Zakes Mda, whose blend of folklore, magical realism, and contemporary realist modes in his novels—such as *The Heart of Redness* (2000), *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), and *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe* (2013)—seeks to address the misrepresentation of black histories during the precolonial, colonial, and apartheid eras.

With the stripping of their race’s politically entrenched cultural ascendancy, many white writers found themselves stuck in limbo, as part of a people who were “no longer European [but] not yet African.”¹⁹ In particular, writers of nonfiction, such as Antjie Krog, wrote of a landscape from which they felt excluded by virtue of their whiteness, arguing further that every South African “ha[s] been living apart in such a particular Western or African framework [for so long] that we often do not know what the truth is about ourselves and others.”²⁰ As she insists in *Begging to Be Black*, the third in her triptych of books of journalism and memoir (after *Country of My Skull* and *A Change of Tongue*), any attempts by her to “imagine black [would be] to insult black.”²¹ Elsewhere she states that

I find most imagined works more filled with the preoccupations, perceptions, and prejudices of the writer and his or her white, black, and coloured background than with a real imagined us.²²

Although South African writers may want to present what they think they may know of the country, the only thing they may find themselves certain of is that they lack the authority to present their knowledge or their experience as “truth.”

It must be said that these sorts of representational concerns are not unique to the South African context, nor are they novel in the contexts of postmodernity or globalization, or even within the histories of narrative journalism in other countries. In the United States, for example, the “New Journalism” flourished in the context of the Vietnam War and populist counterculture during the 1960s, when an increasingly literate public turned to “alternative forms of written journalism that could better explain the vertiginous events around them” and “account for [their] new social realities.”²³ In revolution-era Latin America, in which thirty-seven countries underwent 277 changes of government in fifty years,²⁴ a reemergence of militant and political non-fiction within the region’s intelligentsia gave birth to “*testimonio*,” a form of narrative journalism that is “ancillary to and supporting of politics” and was especially politicized in those countries caught in the spread of authoritarian governments.²⁵ Both *testimonio* and the New Journalism, although informed by dissimilar cultures and ideologies,²⁶ attempted to make sense of new political attitudes and dispensations as they occurred.

The South African condition is somewhat different. While narrative journalistic movements such as New Journalism and *testimonio* were founded and found their strongest ideological expression within reasonably well-defined and identified periods of social and political tumult, South African narrative journalism seeks to portray the lingering and more nebulous legacies of such a period. As de Kock argues, the epistemic condition of the South African population is anomalous, simply because it “remains . . . a scene of largely unresolved difference”²⁷ and largely incomplete reconciliation between and within population groups. This is despite the attempts of sites and institutions of national healing such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. One may be tempted to agree with the skeptical commissioner in Krog’s *Country of My Skull*, who states that, despite its undeniable representational shortcomings, it is “only literature [that] can perform this miracle of reconciliation.”²⁸

But what kind of literature, and which texts? One might be tempted, as many have done in the past, to leave aside the inherent contradiction that lies within the positing of literature-affected change in a country in which most of the population has no access to contemporary local literature, whether by consequence of finance, location, epistemology, or even something as simple as the languages in which they are able to read.²⁹ But as Cornwell states,

An obvious consequence of [South Africa's] linguistic and cultural diversity is that South Africa does not have—and has never had, may well never have—a single national literature, in the sense of a coherent body of writings to which all its citizens has access and with whose representations they can all identify.³⁰

In another sobering instance of de Kock's tradition of "rhetorical genuflection," one must qualify all talk of literature-based reconciliation in South Africa with the caveat that not all in South Africa have direct or indirect access to printed literature.

JONNY STEINBERG AND THE "PATH INWARD"

Taking all this into account, one may be able to identify nonfiction as the literary form that is most useful with regard to any attempts to negotiate the gaps of imagination left by apartheid, that is, within contexts in which the printed word possesses any sort of cultural power in this country. It cannot be ignored that the commercial and critical popularity of nonfiction has been increasing on scales both local and global. This is purportedly in response to an increasingly influential global postmodernity: scholars in the field of narrative studies state, for example, that the issues of the postmodern world can no longer be employed

within the traditional genres of tragedy, *Bildungsroman*, adventure story, triumphalist narrative, and so on. As we move into the heart of the post-modern condition, the challenge of achieving some measure of narrative integrity, far from being obviated, may in fact become intensified. Moreover, the very attempt to move away from the self may in fact lead toward it. How, in the face of such multiplicitous array of possible selves, is one to find direction about how best to live? And how, in the face of so voluminous a library of possible narratives, is one to determine how best to tell one's story? At times the "path inward" may appear to be the only one to take.³¹

This engagement with the "path inward"—a sustained engagement with one's inner self—is a feature of many South African narrative journalistic texts. This is for reasons that are postcolonial as well as postmodernist: the "multiplicitous array of possible selves" might not just refer to the possible selves of the writer and the reader in the fictional space—in the genres of *Bildungsroman*, tragedy, and so on—but might also be extended to the selves of the subject as they are viewed and constructed in the nonfictional space. In postcolonial contexts, and especially South Africa's, political and social forces create a space in which individual and social identity is both fractured and in flux, leaving issues of representation at the center of the challenge of achieving narrative integrity or verisimilitude. In cases of both postcolonial

and postmodern nonfiction, the “path inward” becomes a technique for both grounding a narrative and negotiating the multiplicity of inner selves, social positions, and identities of the actors in that narrative. In doing so, the author might establish a context based on an actor’s (or actors’) experience in which the narrative can position itself and be said to attain some form of subjective integrity or verity, a basis from which broader social insights or hypotheses might be drawn and tested.

In no South African nonfiction writer’s work is the “path inward”—appearing as both preoccupation and narrative technique—more apparent than Jonny Steinberg’s. Steinberg is one of South African nonfiction’s heavyweights, best known for his book-length narrative nonfiction, including *Midlands* (2002) and *The Number* (2004)—which both won South Africa’s most illustrious nonfiction prize, the *Sunday Times* Alan Paton Award—as well as *Three Letter Plague* (2008) and *Little Liberia* (2010). His narrative agility in particular allows him to construct terse and delicate mappings of seemingly opaque social phenomena throughout South Africa’s many provinces—witchcraft and HIV stigma in the rural villages of Eastern Cape, centuries-old prison gangs in the Western Cape, racially-charged land disputes in Kwazulu-Natal—as well as the lives of the Liberian diaspora in New York City.

Steinberg’s work is characterized by an at-times overwhelming narrative presence, founded on—and driven by—his relationships with his subjects. Over and above their intricate navigations of their subjects, his books provide an illuminating study of a journalist negotiating the transactions of intimate emotions and interiors between himself and the people about whom he writes. In both *Midlands* and his later work, Steinberg seeks, by his own admission, to show the “unloved and unlovable parts” of his subjects.³² Although he argues that the exposure of the unloved and unlovable parts of a subject is a tenet of all nonfiction writing,³³ its purpose is not entirely voyeuristic, and stands in opposition to the ways in which reality television or tabloid journalism also expose the unlovable parts of people. Away from what Nixon describes as the mainstream media’s creative and financial commodification of reality,³⁴ Steinberg’s exposure of his subjects—and himself, as we will see—is an attempt to fruitfully tell larger truths about the people about which, and the places in which, he writes.

Steinberg’s books are founded on extensive portraits of people whose lives give strong articulation to prominent social issues, doing so as he travels through the country’s prisons, townships, informal settlements, HIV-ravaged villages, and other hotbeds of personal and collective strife. Not seeking to only uncover the angst or misfortune of his subjects, Steinberg also engages with the political and social mechanics behind subjects of national impor-

tance or occurrence—in his books set in South Africa, themes such as land redistribution, racism, prison life, poverty, HIV, and witchcraft, things that South Africans talk about “all the time”³⁵ but usually only in “special languages”—of jargon, journalese, or conceptual terminology—that “speak . . . abstractly” about social ills.³⁶

In light of this, Steinberg seeks to tell the “untold”³⁷ personal manifestations of South Africa’s social ills, giving expression to the disappointment and shame that typify the life experiences of many in postapartheid South Africa, lives in which democratic rights to and ambitions toward freedom, comfort, and safety have not adequately materialized. As much as South Africa is a complicated place, Steinberg’s depictions of South African realities are complex and manifold and, as such, are often thematically and spatially disconnected from each other. Running through all of his work, however, is Steinberg’s belief that “narrative gets to shame quicker than any other device”:³⁸ Steinberg’s rather scholarly sounding expositions of the broader topic of each book, of which they take up sizable portions, are grounded by the personal narratives, remembered experiences, and emotions—in other words, the “inward” lives—of each of the books’ human subjects. The strategy would seem, then, that a useful and persuasive mapping of shame or disappointment in South African lives must be connected to the actual lived experience of a South African, in order to circumvent the abstractions and conjecture that characterize much of the discourse surrounding South Africa’s social ills, to tell the societal through the individual, and vice versa.

Another large feature of Steinberg’s work is an acute self-awareness on the part of the narrator—a self-awareness that often leaks into the action of the narrative itself. Rather than merely showing the process of constructing and writing his stories, Steinberg often chooses to make that process the story itself. In *Three Letter Plague*, for instance, he attempts to empathize with the victims of social stigma and public shame surrounding HIV and AIDS by invoking his own HIV-related shame from his youth, attempting to use his own experiences—of the process of testing for HIV after a sexual encounter while he was a student—to fluently “describe the architecture of shame”:³⁹ “I thought to myself,” he says to the man whose reluctance to test for HIV he is trying to understand, “if I can relive my own experience, I can understand yours better.”⁴⁰

One need only look to the sort of caveat that regularly prefaces his books⁴¹ to note that Steinberg’s narratives, above and beyond being narratives constructed about his subjects, are also very much narratives constructed about himself. Aware of his own professional and personal shortcomings of

empathy and understanding, Steinberg's qualification of the perceived faults in his narratives is an interesting narrative device, enabling him to dwell on the ethics of "special transgressions" and transactions, such as the process of "a black man selling his interior to a white man"—the intricate and invasive process of his writing about his subject—that he perceives to be one of the principal narrative forces in *Three Letter Plague*.⁴² They are also a tactical means of imbuing his narratives with apparent verisimilitude and, therefore, trustworthiness. Somewhat contradictorily, by pointing out his narratives' faults and his shortcomings in providing a perfect or comprehensive rendering of his subjects, he attempts to draw attention to what about them approximates the truth (at least in a subjective sense); or rather, by constructing himself as a morally aware consciousness that is sensitive to any potential ethical lapses in his journalism, he invites, and intends to keep, the trust of the reader.

A case in point is Steinberg's dislike of *Midlands*' primary character, a white farmer mourning the apparently racially motivated murder of his son on his farm. This provided a number of dilemmas for Steinberg, who was aware of the fact that his depiction of the farmer was less than flattering. In the book's preface he notes: "Every journalist hurts the person about whom he writes. . . . Everybody who is written about has an image of what he will look like on the printed page. He is always disappointed."⁴³ This caveat, and many more like it in the book, is a strategy of mitigation, a means of cover-up attempting to work against any potential perceptions of bias or unfairness on his part by the reader. Steinberg addressed this tendency of his to qualify his perceptions of his subjects in his books by arguing that, although media and literature trends are placing a premium on the exposure of the unloved and unlovable parts of people, these depictions must be seen as fairly developed:

A narrative non-fiction writer who writes about a real living person will have readers who expect to confront a specific literary construction and, if he or she doesn't see it, they will close the book, and perhaps even accuse the writer of an ethical lapse.⁴⁴

By conforming to these expected constructions of the unlovable parts of people or communities, that is, ostensibly fair and well-grounded opinions and analysis of these things, an author invites the readers' trust, engaging them in a form of contract or relationship. Although the contract between author and reader exists alongside a similar contract between author and subject—that is, the subject expects to be depicted fairly in exchange for his or her story⁴⁵—Steinberg states that there is "not much of a choice [between the two] as the reader cannot be betrayed. Without the reader, there is no book."⁴⁶

This does not only apply to those subjects that the author obviously dislikes, however. The intensity of his interactions (approximating a friendship) with ex-prison-gangster Magadien Wentzel in *The Number* necessitates that significant passages of the book are dedicated to various professional dilemmas: Steinberg dwells and writes almost monologically on, among other things, the ethics of paying his subjects for their stories;⁴⁷ the ethics of informing Wentzel that many of his memories about his life—such as his enrollment at a university—were actually false;⁴⁸ and the ethics of the exchanges of money and gifts between the two men that occur.⁴⁹ Steinberg’s journalistic awareness in his first book transforms into a hyperawareness in the one that follows: whereas his professional considerations in *Midlands* are mostly contained in its preface and in short reflective phrases—he states at one point that he “messed up [an] interview pretty badly,” for example⁵⁰—his involvement in the life of his subject in *The Number*, spending hours in his prison cell before his release and in the various houses in which he lives afterward, causes his interior monologue to sometimes become conflated with the book’s greater narrative. Steinberg argues that his personal involvement in the events of *The Number* is a result of his own shyness and development of a close (if difficult) relationship with Wentzel, not a result of a dominant disposition that one would readily assume would precipitate such a presence: “Because I find people get very uncomfortable having spent a year reading their life story out,” he says of Wentzel, “my own presence [and] the measure of my own personal presence shaped the story I wrote.”⁵¹ Regardless of his reasons for it, however, this turning inward creates an effect of narrative grounding: by offering the inner selves of both writer and subject to the reader, and delineating the path along which the relationship between writer and subject travels throughout the course of the narrative, Steinberg is able to offer their differing cultural, social, and epistemological positions, to expose them and explain them, so as to attempt to imbue the narrative with a sense of authorial honesty and, in turn, verisimilitude. In taking the inward path, the path toward both his and his subject’s inner selves, Steinberg chooses not to resolve the differences between writer and subject, but instead unmask them, laying them bare. As such, the narrative—in de Kock’s terminology—bears the mark of its own crisis, both reflecting and placing itself among South Africa’s many sites of unresolved difference.

IMAGINATIONS AND RECEPTIONS

This concurrent focus on the interior of both author and subject finds echo in South African narrative journalism broadly, and especially in its most recent waves. This great interior turn is not a uniquely South African

phenomenon, however. In addition to its relation to the concerns of post-modernity and the status of the postcolony, it also reflects a global tendency toward the concurrent exposure of the interior selves of subject and author, primarily driven by a shift in audience tastes and expectations, in response (in turn) to changes in technology in the modern era.

In South African narrative journalism there exists a tendency—as in Steinberg’s work—for memoir or facets of memoir to creep into or be used as an investigative device during works of broader exposition. As part of *Native Nostalgia* (2009), for example, Jacob Dlamini explores his own township childhood as part of an investigation into the seemingly discomfiting possibility that black South Africans can remember their youths during apartheid with fondness. Hugh Lewin’s *Stones Against the Mirror* (2012) is a recollection of the author’s betrayal—and subsequent incarceration as a political prisoner—by a close comrade, while additionally placing and contextualizing the role and motivations of white activists during the Struggle. And one of the most famous works of South African nonfiction, Rian Malan’s *My Traitor’s Heart* (1990), is memoir and tribal history running both in tandem and in opposition to each other, as the author attempts to reconcile his emotional connection to his Boer lineage while attempting to disavow his tribe’s history of racism and cruelty.

In Krog’s *A Change of Tongue*, the author’s brother Andries relays a rather domestic rendering of the reasons that authors and readers increasingly take the “path inward” in their consumption and construction of narratives. Paraphrasing his mother, he says:

In the old days, fiction could free you to go to a different place. But nowadays this larger world is so incessantly present in your yard and on your *stoep* [porch] and in your guest room and in your kitchen, it takes up so many seats at your table, it always has a whole mouthful to say about your food. Because of television and newspapers, you are now saddled with this other world. . . . You wonder desperately how you are going to overcome it. Intimacy with your own world is the one thing that enables you to survive this ever-present other world.⁵²

In a colloquium on narrative journalism at the University of Cape Town, Steinberg relayed similar reasons for this shift in global and local audiences’ media consumption habits from fictional modes to nonfiction:

On a very simple, almost banal level, I think it has a lot to do with television and how personalized it became in the 1960s. The idea of sitting in your living room and having a real person’s life laid before you is something that is culturally profound.⁵³

Both make a pertinent point. In addition to the decidedly highbrow considerations of postmodernity, there has undoubtedly also been a more domestic force at work. The televisual mediation of people's personal lives into other people's living rooms around the world has in many ways changed "the texture and sensuality of our experience and how we live and understand our lives."⁵⁴ Although television only made its first appearances in South African homes in 1975, its cultural repercussions were felt in other media before that. Whereas popular magazines like *Fair Lady* and *Drum* used to regularly publish short stories and excerpts of novels during the 1950s and '60s, in later decades the editorial emphasis of magazines began to shift toward the dissemination of "real-life" stories that showed, as Steinberg paraphrased Israeli novelist David Grossman, a person's "shattered soul and crumbled consciousness."⁵⁵ "Today," Steinberg added, "you'd never dream of seeing a piece of fiction published in *Fair Lady*."⁵⁶ Further, Nixon argues that "the twenty-first century has witnessed—across visual, aural and verbal media—a new normal that places a great creative and commercial premium on making a show of reality."⁵⁷

A similar trend can be seen in the rise of the South African tabloid press since 2000. The *Daily Sun*, an English-language tabloid launched in 2002, is currently South Africa's most-read newspaper, with an estimated daily readership of five million people,⁵⁸ around ten percent of the current estimated South African population. The *Sun's* publisher, Deon du Plessis, claims that there exists a functioning second-hand market for the paper in some communities,⁵⁹ such is the demand for tabloid news and its modes of "personalisation and [its] focus on private concerns,"⁶⁰ the mapping of the specific and intimate occurrences of broader social and political phenomena. While a popular perception of tabloid journalism is that it "lowers the standards of public discourse,"⁶¹ a less snobbish viewpoint is that, in South Africa especially, tabloids adopt conversational modes to tell stories that engage with a wider public on a personal and more relatable level. Such is its effectiveness, write Larry Strelitz and Lynette Steenveld, that "the mainstream press are increasingly using these same techniques . . . and so the lines between some tabloids and some of the mainstream press are becoming increasingly blurred."⁶²

This means that the narrativization of personal lives in local literature is matched by a similar trend in the press. And it so happens that a shift of tastes from fiction to nonfiction narratives also provides writers with different and more useful means and modes of exploring South African topics. Steinberg posits that narrative trends—in narrative nonfiction and journalism broadly—focus on the "unloved and unlovable parts of people,"⁶³ but this seems like too much a cynical viewpoint to accept unreservedly. A better

qualification of trends can perhaps be found with Krog, who insists that what is being experienced is a reversal of past narrative trends: “Where we initially used facts to enable our fiction to arrive at the truth, we now use . . . fictional elements . . . to enable our facts to arrive at the truth.”⁶⁴

THE MATTER OF DISTANCE

But what exactly constitutes a South African truth? Such a notion is patently problematic, not only because the idea of a universal “truth” is somewhat asinine, and not only because of the latent historical prevalence of “unresolved difference” between social groups, but also because of, in the words of Malvern van Wyk Smith, a related trend of “Southern African writers [tending to keep a] distance from cultures other than their own,”⁶⁵ limiting their abilities to reliably render cultures other than their own. Compounding this, writers might also feel uneasy straying into contested cultural or social territories in the first place, as authors with the gumption to stray into other imaginative territories often found themselves on the end of some rather heavy-handed criticism: for example, Pamela Jooste’s fictional depiction of Cape colored life under apartheid, *Dance with a Poor Man’s Daughter* (1998), was dismissed by some reviewers as a contradictorily racialized attempt at an antiracial narrative vision.⁶⁶ Interestingly, imaginings or reimaginings of one’s own culture might have also attracted criticism. In the years before the release of *Dance with a Poor Man’s Daughter*, reviewers commented on a wave of novels by white writers—such as Justin Cartwright, Mark Behr, and Peter Godwin—who looked to “describe the memories of . . . the loss of white innocence and the bitterness brought on by apartheid,” but instead created works about which “nothing . . . seem[ed] real.”⁶⁷ Reviewer Ronald Suresh Roberts termed this “New White Writing” as, variously, “more of a malaise than a genre”; “the language more of the suburban or the expatriate self-help manual than of literature”; and writing that “tends to erase adulthood among the privileged, if adulthood means actively reckoning with responsibility.”⁶⁸ Under particular scrutiny from Roberts was Jo-Anne Richards’s *The Innocence of Roast Chicken* (1996), a novel about the life of a half-English, half-Afrikaans family on a farm in the Eastern Cape, alternately narrated through the eyes of a young girl and those of her older, married self in the late 1980s. The book, a best seller in South African terms, was said by Roberts to be characterized by “a peculiarly South African whingeing” through which runs “the idea that white apartheid childhood was an untroubled time of rubber duckies and wholesomeness; pure life,” naive, and devoid of ethical quandary.⁶⁹

While Roberts’s critique was itself met with opposition, a point still stands: there exists a preoccupation in South African letters with the politics

(and apolitics) of identity, remembrance, and the veracity of imagination, whether one is imagining one's own culture or the culture of another. This is exacerbated by the country's history of cultural and racial separation, which informs the not particularly surprising assertion that literature in South Africa—particularly fiction—has been and is a “fertile ground for foundational binary inscription,” especially “blatant dualisms” between—and this list is by no means exhaustive—white and black, oppressor and oppressed, liberator and liberated and, increasingly, rich and poor.⁷⁰

On initial reading, many contemporary South African nonfiction texts do very little to change the perception that South African writers prefer to keep an imaginative distance from cultures other than the ones with which they are immediately familiar. This, however, may come down to a crucial shift in ideology and methodology: instead of employing prescriptive viewpoints of “other” cultures, authors are more readily employing descriptive immersive modes more readily associated with journalistic practice in order to more faithfully describe the disposition of other cultures. Further, some writers have developed an acute awareness of their own epistemic and empathetic shortcomings, often translating it into a feature of their writing. Whereas Jooste attempted to employ a voice that was not her own to describe events that were not her own, authors are increasingly focalizing the experience through their own cultural lenses, often attempting to mitigate any potential interpretative *faux pas* with a great deal of self-reflexivity, self-awareness, and self-censure. Steinberg, as was mentioned earlier, inserts caveat upon caveat of his personal and professional shortcomings in each of his book-length works of narrative journalism. In the acknowledgments of *Three Letter Plague*, for example, he states, “I needn't have to add, but will nonetheless, that all errors of fact and foolishness of perspective are my own.”⁷¹ By utilizing such techniques the author is able to paint “an ambitious social canvas”⁷² that is qualified not by any claims to truth, but rather by a recognition of the limitations of the author, ostensibly imbuing his or her narrative with honesty and verisimilitude. As such, they proudly bear what de Kock might call the “mark of the seam”:⁷³ the acknowledgment that representation of South African narratives exists in a “shadow of doubleness”⁷⁴—or another instance of rhetorical genuflection, writ large.

THE PROMISE OF NONFICTION?

One of the principal literary means of rendering postapartheid South Africa has therefore shifted away from attempts at comprehensive imaginings of the racial or cultural “other” to dedicated attempts at understanding the other through immersive, fundamentally journalistic techniques. One might look to Krog, who has the singular distinction of working and earning

critical acclamation as a poet, author, and journalist, for substantiation of this: she asserts that the daily happenings of South African society, in contexts both personal and collective, simply cannot be imagined, as the happenings in one community are usually beyond the comprehensive understanding of the members of another community.⁷⁵ To quote Steinberg, and to put the matter much more indelicately, South Africa remains a country in which “you couldn’t make this shit up.”⁷⁶

This might initially seem to lend weight to the tired axiom that truth is stranger than fiction. In practice, however, one must be careful not to catalog the shortcomings of fiction and imagination in contemporary South Africa without considering the successes of some South African authors in creating telling fictive domains in their work. As such, the failure of imaginings as discussed in this paper should not be taken as a general indictment of the capacity of South African fiction to fulfill reconciliatory or representative functions in the ways in which nonfiction is purported to do. Indeed, in a recent discussion of creative nonfiction, Duncan Brown, the Dean of Arts at the University of the Western Cape, argued that it would be foolish to “make the argument that creative non-fiction can do things that fiction cannot in South Africa.”⁷⁷ Cornwell argued in an interview that this might seem to be the case to some observers because South African “readers are under-educated and lazy, and [the country’s] writers are on the whole not that interesting, or not as interesting as” its nonfiction writers.⁷⁸

Whether or not Cornwell’s remark is correct, one should still consider those fictive domains in South African fiction that can engage with South African realities in affecting ways. The ways in which they do so, moreover, are telling with regard to the role and success of imagination in South African literary works. J. M. Coetzee is a case in point. Examining his oeuvre, one might argue that South African fiction can—and does—readily engage with the country’s political and social psyches, as well as its underwritten history: one need only look to public debates about perceived racism and pessimism surrounding the Booker Prize-winning *Disgrace* (1999), the master/slave dynamics of *Dusklands* (1974), or the meditation on authority and torture that is *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) as a gauge of the level of nuanced engagement that fiction can attain with the country’s past and present. There is a caveat here, however: Coetzee does not engage with history in the same ways as Krog or Steinberg does, nor in the same way as other white writers like Jooste or Richards. Much the same as the Magistrate views and attempts to relate to the naked body of a “barbarian” girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee treats the history of South Africa as one that is impenetrable and unknowable: it “lies before [him] in the dust, disembodied, monstrous.”⁷⁹ Coetzee’s

awareness of the limitations of articulation and empathy leads him away from attempts to “mimetically reproduc[e] the historical content of apartheid,”⁸⁰ and toward engagement with its underwritten—and often corporeal—effects: David Lurie’s failed attempts to empathize with his daughter’s rape in her own home by a group of young black youths in *Disgrace*; Jacobus Coetzee’s massacre of a “Hottentot” village in *Dusklands*; and the Magistrate’s failed empathetic connections with the scarred barbarian girl and her tribe in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. In “confronting the ethical problem of aesthetization”⁸¹ in apartheid history and choosing to render it “untranslatable,”⁸² Coetzee’s fiction is an exception that proves the rule.

In South African fiction, it may very well be the case that, as Coetzee’s Magistrate postulates, “whatever can be articulated is falsely put,” and that “which has not been articulated has to be lived through.”⁸³ The truth may be that writers, in any conceivable social position, simply “don’t know this country well enough to write fiction about it,” no matter how strongly they may hope to understand it.⁸⁴ The author of fiction who hopes to articulate the experience of another South African “other” may find him- or herself in the position of Egan, the protagonist of “Afritude Sauce,” one of four stories that make up Vladislavič’s *The Exploded View*. At the story’s midpoint, white Egan finds himself dining in a kitschy African restaurant in the company of a number of black men. As his companions shift the language of conversation from English to Sotho, Egan, who does not know a word of the language and is therefore thrust to the peripheries of the discussion, indulges in a quintessentially white South African fantasy:

He imagined himself at the end of the evening, as they were parting in the soothingly lit lobby of the hotel, putting out a hand to Louis Bhengu and saying in perfect Sotho, ‘Well, gentlemen, thank you for a very entertaining evening.’ But he couldn’t even guess at the shape of the words in his mouth.⁸⁵

Writers of nonfiction do not need to guess at unfamiliar syllables, nor do they need to attempt to articulate an unknown reality in an unknown tongue, under the guise of a different skin. “That is why I stay with nonfiction,” writes Krog in *Begging to Be Black*,

listening, engaging, observing [and] translating, until one can hopefully begin to sense a thinning of the skin, negotiate possible small openings at places where imaginings can begin to begin.⁸⁶

Because of this increased sense of self-awareness and limitation, narrative journalism, in addition to its obligation to factual representation,⁸⁷ “also seeks to understand feelings, emotions, and expectations”; in other words, “the consciousness behind events and actions that can provide reflexive cultural insights into other times and places.”⁸⁸

For the duration in which fictional imaginings remain impossible or even simply inadequate, Krog argues, nonfiction will continue to be a more reliable medium for telling South African truths than fiction, a medium in which writers can more readily make sense of the country's complex social dynamics. This is not to say that fiction does not have the potential to render South African truths, but the failure of imaginings and empathy in many cases implores the writer of fiction to appeal to the country's underwritten history, as in Coetzee's case, to "leave us with the terrible, irreconcilable sight of the abused body, stripped bare of the explanatory narratives of [history]." ⁸⁹ Furthermore, the journalistic impetus behind the creation of nonfiction texts in a transitional society, whether they are rendered in the traditions of fictional texts or not, remains as strong as ever. As Steinberg argues,

We have lived through historic times and we need to record them. South Africa's rules are being rewritten. . . . I wanted to write it down: Why? How? Nothing happens here *sui generis*.⁹⁰

Only when the rules are explained, and the differences become even slightly less opaque, can imaginings between South Africans "begin to begin." Without these epistemic connections and attempts at resolving difference, South Africans may continue to "have very little understanding of the full conditions in which [they] live," and, as Rian Malan perhaps hyperbolically argues, "if we don't have the ability to look at [this] truth long enough, salvation will never be revealed."⁹¹ For now, the imperative may be—in fiction, nonfiction and the spaces between the two—for writers to give their imaginings less credence (unless, of course, their purpose is to decry their own impossibilities) in their engaging with South Africa in its still-early stages of self-definition.

CONCLUSION

In the face of a multiplicity of disconnected realities, narrative journalism is one of the most—if not the most—fruitful means for delineating the contours along which these realities run, and where the disconnections between them occur. Although South Africa's history may necessitate that the country and all depictions of it will always carry the mark of the seam—that the sutures in South African society will forever be visible in the works that try to depict it or parts of it—narrative journalism arguably enables one to get as close as possible to the edge of the epistemic and ontological precipices that divide segments of South Africa's population from one other. This is often done by the means of its writers taking the path inward: by declaring their own limitations in the construction of their narratives. Even in bringing

light to the “secret pieces” of people,⁹² to their unloved and unlovable parts, narrative journalism in South Africa likely won't show South Africans to be similar to each other, or even that one day South Africa's scenes of unresolved difference may be reconciled. It may, however, show the parts of the country that one day might be.

Nick Mulgrew studied English and journalism at Rhodes University and the University of Cape Town. He has worked as a journalist for the Sunday Times and Mail & Guardian, and is a former contributing editor of the Rhodes Journalism Review. He is also an associate editor of the literary magazine Prufrock. He lives in Cape Town.



NOTES

1. Leon De Kock, “South Africa in the Global Imaginary: An Introduction,” *Poetics Today* 22, no. 2 (2001): 263.
2. Gareth Cornwell, “Long Walk to Ordinarity: South African Literature in English since 1945,” in *The Columbia Guide to South African Literature in English since 1945*, Gareth Cornwell, Dirk Klopper, and Craig Mackenzie (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
3. De Kock, “Global Imaginary,” 263.
4. Robert Thornton, “The Potentials of Boundaries in South Africa: Steps towards a Theory of the Social Edge,” in *Postcolonial Identities in Africa*, eds. Richard Werbner and Terence Ranger (London: Zed Books, 1998), quoted in De Kock, “Global Imaginary,” 277.
5. De Kock, “Global Imaginary,” 276.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 277.
8. Rob Nixon, “Non-fiction Booms, North and South: A Transatlantic Perspective,” *Safundi* 1–2, no. 12 (2012): 29.
9. Antony Albeker, *Fruit of a Poisoned Tree: A True Story of Murder and the Miscarriage of Justice* (Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers SA, 2010).
10. Cornwell, “Long Walk to Ordinarity,” 35.
11. *Ibid.*, 34.
12. Nixon, “Non-fiction Booms,” 29.

13. Leon de Kock, "Does South African Literature Still Exist? Or: South African Literature Is Dead, Long Live Literature in South Africa," *English in Africa* 32, no. 2 (2005): 74.

14. De Kock, "Global Imaginary," 289.

15. Cornwell, "Long Walk to Ordinarity," 2.

16. *Ibid.*, 31.

17. *Ibid.*, 32.

18. Mpe and Duiker, like many of their subjects, both died young, and within one month of each other. Mpe was thirty-four when he died in December 2004; Duiker was thirty when he hanged himself in January 2005.

19. Carli Coetzee, "'They Never Wept, the Men of My Race': Antjie Krog's 'Country of My Skull' and the White South African Signature," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27, no. 4 (2001): 686.

20. Antjie Krog, "Fact Bordering Fiction and the Honesty of 'I,'" *River Teeth: A Journal of Nonfiction Narrative* 8, no. 2 (2007): 35.

21. Antjie Krog, *Begging to be Black* (Cape Town: Random House Struik, 2009), 268.

22. Krog, "Fact Bordering Fiction," 37–38.

23. Pablo Calvi, "Latin America's Own 'New Journalism,'" *Literary Journalism Studies* 2, no. 2 (2010): 64.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, 77.

26. While the New Journalism, for example, claimed in many cases to be chiefly an artistic form of literature, *testimonio* was overtly a political form that had to adapt to often-tumultuous political climates: Latin American authors often retreated to allegorical modes, and therefore not strictly nonfictional modes, "in order to portray current social conditions without unduly exposing themselves to persecution." Calvi, "Latin America's Own 'New Journalism,'" 77.

27. De Kock, "Global Imaginary," 264.

28. Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (Cape Town: Random House, 1998), 18.

29. Research from the South African Book Development Council suggests that less than one percent of the South African population "regularly buy books," and only fourteen percent "regularly read books." Nick Mulgrew, "Literacy: Once Upon a Time, Parents Taught Their Children to Read," *Mail & Guardian*, October 19, 2012, <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-10-19-00-once-upon-a-time-parents-taught>.

30. Cornwell, "Long Walk to Ordinarity," 2.

31. Mark Freeman and Jens Brockmeier, "Narrative Integrity: Autobiographical Identity and the Meaning of the 'Good Life,'" in *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*, eds. Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2001), 92.

32. Jonny Steinberg, "The Ethics of Narrative Non-fiction in a Voyeuristic Age," (seminar, HUMA: Institute for Humanities in Africa, University of Cape Town, July 26, 2011).

33. Ibid.
34. Nixon, "Non-fiction Booms."
35. Jonny Steinberg, "An Eerie Silence," in *Foreign Policy*, April 25, 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/04/25/an_eerie_silence/.
36. Ibid.
37. "Jonny Steinberg on *The Number*," April 11, 2011, Centre for Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town.
38. "Jonny Steinberg on *Three Letter Plague*," May 11, 2011, Department of English, University of Cape Town.
39. Jonny Steinberg, *Three Letter Plague* (Jeppestown, SA: Jonathan Ball, 2008), 293.
40. Ibid., 296.
41. See, for example, Steinberg, *Three Letter Plague*, viii.
42. "Jonny Steinberg on *Three-Letter Plague*."
43. Jonny Steinberg, *Midlands* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2002), x.
44. Steinberg, "Ethics of Narrative Non-fiction."
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Jonny Steinberg, *The Number* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2004), 385.
48. Ibid., 135.
49. Ibid., 387.
50. Steinberg, *Midlands*, 39.
51. "Jonny Steinberg on *The Number*."
52. Antjie Krog, *A Change of Tongue* (Cape Town: Random House Struik, 2003), 362.
53. Steinberg, "The Ethics of Narrative Non-fiction."
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Rob Nixon, "Non-fiction Booms."
58. Media24, "Daily Sun," <http://www.media24.com/en/newspapers/emerging-markets/daily-sun.html>.
59. Herman Wasserman, *Tabloid Journalism in South Africa: True Story!* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).
60. Jostein Grisprud, "The Aesthetics and Politics of Melodrama," in Larry Strelitz and Lynette Steenveld, "Thinking about South African Tabloid Newspapers," *Ecquid Novi*: 26, no. 2 (2005): 267. Originally published in *Journalism and Popular Culture*, eds. Peter Dahlgren and Colin Sparks (London: Sage, 1992).
61. H. Örnebring and A.M. Jönsson, "Tabloid Journalism and the Public Sphere: A Historical Perspective on Tabloid Journalism," in Strelitz and Steenveld, "Thinking about South African Tabloid Newspapers," 266. Originally published in *Journalism Studies* 5, no. 3 (2004): 283.
62. Larry Strelitz and Lynette Steenveld, "Thinking about South African Tabloid Newspapers," *Ecquid Novi* 26, no. 2 (2005): 267.

63. Steinberg, "Ethics of Narrative Non-fiction."
64. Krog, "Fact Bordering Fiction," 36.
65. Malvern van Wyk Smith, "White Writing/Writing Black: The Anxiety of Non-Influence," in *Rethinking South African Literary History*, eds. Johannes A. Smit, Johan van Wyk, and Jean-Philippe Wade (Durban: Y Press, 1996), 83.
66. Carolyn Basset, "Review: Whose Dance?" <http://www.africafiles.org/article.asp?ID=3771/>.
67. Lourens Ackermann, "The Dreadfulness of Roast Chicken—and What It Says about SA," *Sunday Times*, April 13, 1997, 21.
68. Ronald Suresh Roberts, "New White Writing Lauanders Apartheid Childhood, Packing It with Roast Chickens and Rubber Duckies," *Saturday Independent*, April 12, 1996, 22.
69. Ibid.
70. De Kock, "Global Imaginary," 285.
71. Steinberg, *Three Letter Plague*, viii.
72. Nixon, "Non-fiction Booms."
73. De Kock, "Global Imaginary," 289.
74. Ibid., 289.
75. Krog, "Fact Bordering Fiction," 38.
76. "Antjie Krog, Jonny Steinberg, and Duncan Brown in Conversation on Creative Non-fiction," March 1, 2011, Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape. Moreover, it is interesting to note once again that this is not a case of South African exceptionalism. Steinberg has also remarked that there are plenty of other countries in which "you couldn't make this shit up," most notably Liberia, the country that provides the backdrop for his fifth narrative journalistic book, *Little Liberia*.
77. Ibid.
78. Gareth Cornwell, email interview with author, October 19, 2011.
79. J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1980), 87.
80. Samuel Durrant, "Bearing Witness to Apartheid: J.M. Coetzee's Inconsolable Works of Mourning," *Contemporary Literature* 40, no. 3 (1999): 460.
81. Ibid., 434.
82. Ibid.
83. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 64.
84. "Antjie Krog, Jonny Steinberg, and Duncan Brown in Conversation on Creative Non-fiction."
85. Ivan Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* (Johannesburg: Random House, 2004), 88.
86. Krog, *Begging to be Black*, 268.
87. The veracity of these facts, of course, might change from writer to writer and work to work.
88. Norman Sims, "The Problem and Promise of Literary Journalism Studies," *Literary Journalism Studies* 1, no. 1 (2009): 8.
89. Durrant, "Bearing Witness," 460.

90. “Antjie Krog, Jonny Steinberg, and Duncan Brown in Conversation on Creative Non-fiction.”

91. Kevin Bloom, “Analysis: Are Journalism Schools to Blame for ‘Bad Media,’” *The Daily Maverick*, <http://dailymaverick.co.za/article/2010-08-26-analysis-are-journalism-schools-to-blame-for-bad-media/>.

92. Jonny Steinberg, *Little Liberia* (Jeppestown, SA: Jonathan Ball, 2011), 264.