REVIEW ESSAY

PRAISING THE SUBJECT: NEW SOUTH AFRICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Judith Lütge Coullie, ed. *The Closest of Strangers: South African Women's Life Writing*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2004. 386 pp. Maps. Glossary. Sources. Index. $29.95. Paper.

Azaria J. C. Mbatha. *Within Loving Memory of the Century*. Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005. 369 pp. Illustrations. Map. Biography. Bibliography. $89.95. Cloth.

William N. Zulu. *Spring Will Come*. Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005. 334 pp. Illustrations. Map. Genealogy. Glossary. $59.95. Cloth.

IN HER INTRODUCTION to the *izibongo*, or praise poetry, of Nontsizi Mgqwetho, Judith Lütge Coullie claims that such poems "do not always praise their subjects. Rather, they *hail* the subject of the poem[,] . . . identifying characteristics that make the subject special." Furthermore,

> the reciting of *izibongo* is always a communal activity . . . [and] the poems are most accurately described as auto/biographical—with the slash remaining a permanent feature of the nomenclature—since the western distinction between autobiography and biography is usually irrelevant. Not only is it common for a person's praises to be added to or even composed by other members of the community, but they may also be performed by someone other than the subject of the poem in order to honor the person identified in the poem. (64)

This excerpt refers to traditional praise poetry of the Zulu and Xhosa peoples of South Africa, but the criteria Coullie attributes to this style of oral poetry are also applicable to three new South African autobiographical texts: Coullie's edited collection, *The Closest of Strangers: South African Women's Life Writing*, within which Mgqwetho's poetry appears; *Within Loving Memory of the Century*, the autobiography of the Zulu artist and teacher Azaria J. C. Mbatha; and *Spring Will Come*, the autobiography of another artist, William N. Zulu. All three works eschew more conventional understandings of "autobiography" as an individualist, often alienating, under-

https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.2007.0074 Published online by Cambridge University Press

taking—the act of telling the story of the self to the self and, ultimately, if that narrative is accessible enough, to others. Coullie's work, as a collection of women's life writing, is obviously polyphonic, but in both Mbatha's and Zulu's works, despite their status as single-authored narratives, writing the story of the self is also a communal activity, informed by a multitude of players, added to, performed, and, in a very real sense, composed in the collective spirit that informs oral tradition. As Mbatha states in the preface to his work, "I stand on the shoulders of others. . . . I include here many autobiographies that have heralded the miraculous dawn of freedom in South Africa. Greetings, my ancestors and forebears. . . . My river of gratitude to you is deep indeed!" (ix). Similarly, Zulu begins his narrative looking down from the shoulders of others as he chronicles a childhood visit to a Zionist prophetess in search of a cure for his enigmatic illness. During the ceremony, he claims, "many hands suddenly reached up to grab me, shaking me as I floated above a sea of animated sweating faces" (xv), and these many hands—in the form of teachers, doctors, family members, and friends—resonate throughout his story, actively encouraging and supporting his artistic endeavors, aiding him in living an independent and fulfilling life after suffering paralysis, and helping him find a publisher for the three hundred handwritten pages that his autobiography initially comprised.

WILLIAM N. ZULU'S *Spring Will Come* is a linear account that requires the reader "to go a long way back in time[,] . . . all the way to 1879. This was the year that effectively marked the end of the great Zulu empire" (1). Zulu's story, in a sense, writes back to this "end," the invasion of the Zulus as the British crossed the Mzinyathi River at an area where Zulu later studied graphic art at the Rorke's Drift Fine Art School. Its subject is the perseverance of spirit, made possible partly by the assistance of friends, that allowed him to overcome two-and-a-half painful years of hospitalization after he was paralyzed as a result of unnecessary spinal surgery. Zulu, who became a devout Christian in his adult life, writes about the existential crisis that arose because he had no legal right to compensation from Baragwanath Hospital for the botched operation in 1975: "There was no need to pray for there was no God to hear my prayers. Even if He heard, He had shown his true colours as an uncaring God!" (67). *Spring Will Come* is the story of his career as a successful artist whose work, particularly the linocuts that fill the book and provide illustrations to the narrative, has been shown in numerous galleries around the world, including such venues as MoMA in New York. But the text also provides, both through Zulu's words and art—and through the various photographs of his family, friends, and village—a moving portrait of self-sufficiency and self-reliance, the story of a man whose paraplegia as well as his struggle against poverty and apartheid's institutionalized racism failed to quell his boundless and always positive belief in a better tomorrow.

https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.2007.0074 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While he situates his narrative's "beginning" at the "end" of the Zulu Empire, Zulu's personal trials began nearly a century later, with his birth in 1956 as "the first illegitimate child in [his] family's history" (3). Subsequent lean times and the threat of hunger required that the boy be sent away from his village, Emondlo, to live with his farming aunt and uncle in Nsengeni. In school, Zulu was acutely aware of the lack of any discourse of black history, with the exception of requisite information about kings Shaka and Dingane. He records the fatigue and feelings of isolation and loneliness that he suffered as a child; this loneliness became compounded when, as an adult, his confinement to a wheelchair and subsequent depression turned him into a recluse who emerged only on weekends from the cement house he built for himself after being unable, in a wheelchair, to safely navigate the dirt floor of his hut. Paralyzed at the age of eighteen, he also underwent operations to treat bedsores and was later tricked into going to Kwabadala, a mission for homeless people, from which he subsequently escaped. When he tried to enroll in Madadeni Training College, he was rejected as a result of his disability. Zulu describes charged historical political moments in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, including the Soweto Revolt of 1976, as events that took place somewhere outside his hospital window, outside his house, somewhere generally inaccessible to him except through his interactions with individuals directly involved in these events.

In Zulu's narrative, the public events of the '70s and '80s that led to the end of apartheid in the 1990s remain, if not peripheral to Zulu's life, then situated outside of a personal history of hardship and physical trauma that he depicts as affected and complicated by, but not directly resulting from, apartheid. He essentially makes the political personal, and comments, with the positive attitude that characterizes the entire text, on the ways he received political information while on the "inside":

> I was twenty years old and had experienced the tough side of life. But my experiences had also broadened and matured me. I knew things I couldn't have known had I not come to Bara. I could speak Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi, isiTsonga and isiXhosa with reasonable fluency. I also knew the township tsotsi taal and had developed a good command of English. Through my exposure to newspapers and radio I was now politicized, with an understanding of events that I doubted any of my Emondlo friends had. These abilities would stand me in good stead in the world outside. (91)

Spring Will Come is the story of one man's triumph—artistically, personally, and politically—over specific hardships, but Zulu's work is also collaborative, filled with praise and appreciation for the men and women of various races and nationalities who supported him, encouraged him, and believed in his artistic and personal accomplishments. These people include Mr. Maxwell, who successfully treated Zulu's chronic bedsores; Gogo Manguse,

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an Emondlo matriarch and "taboo-breaker, way ahead of her times in her emancipated attitudes" (141); his German friends Bernd, Christa, and Helmut, who worked tirelessly to make his German exhibition a success; and Getty Masondo, who involved Zulu in work with the Sukumani Disabled People's Organization. As evidenced by the praise he lavishes on these people, as well as on Ma Frieda Ngqambela, the woman who cared for him during his extensive hospital stay and to whom he dedicates his autobiography, Zulu's work is indicative of the truly accepting and tolerant perspective that characterizes both the African and Christian tradition. Belief in the ancestors, the ideology of the Zionist prophetess, and a visit by the Jehovah's Witnesses who come to challenge Zulu's initial belief that their religion was "the white man's brainwashing of the black people, imposed in the course of stealing our lands from us" (212) are treated in this narrative with equal respect and understanding.

The narrative ends with moderated hopefulness; the author is neither excessively optimistic nor unwilling to believe in the possibility of better times ahead. The artist returns from showing his work in Germany and becomes a member of FUBA, the Federation of Urban Black Artists. He buys a car and moves to Johannesburg, able to make a living from the sale of his works in Germany, and he marries Philisiwe in a Christian ceremony: "Although I respected the customs of my people, I felt that I had come to a crossroads, and that I had to choose either God's way or the ancestral customs. In the end I chose God's way" (306). Although the final chapter in Zulu's narrative is entitled "Spring Does Come," the linocuts that are situated throughout the last part of the narrative—like the ones that precede them—are illustrative of the pain that persists in both Zulu's life and in South Africa in general. Many of these images are violent depictions of peoples at war, abandoned, suffering from AIDS, asking for a cure, for change, for help. The final image seems to contradict Zulu's statement that South Africa has achieved emancipation: the image is ambiguous, a linocut with the caption "ten years of freedom" written at the bottom. A dove flies overhead with an olive branch in its mouth; a family consisting of a man, woman, and child walk together toward an open doorway, leading, perhaps, into a church. But behind them is another person on hands and knees with a child strapped to his or her back, a being crawling on all fours through broken boards, a solitary traveler who is headed toward a different door and, perhaps, a different tomorrow.

IF ZULU'S STORY IS characterized by its straightforward linearity, Azaria J. C. Mbatha's *Within Loving Memory of the Century* is a cyclical gyre, a map, according to A. D. Botha's introduction, of the "vortex of what life has meant for him and his people, in moments of actual living" (xi). The first image, a linocut at the beginning of book 1, is round, a crocodile and two zebras surrounded by a circle that could be either the tail of the reptile or the stripes of the zebra, and this circularity is characteristic of the entire

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text. Mbatha's writing is esoteric and scholarly, containing two academically inclined introductions and composed in a narrative style infused with dreams, poems, parables, visions, and orality; it is writing clearly influenced by thirty-seven years spent in the West. Mbatha, a Zulu born in 1941 in Ensukazi to Christian parents, moved permanently to Sweden in 1969, returning to South Africa in 1992 and again in 1995.

He characterizes himself as marked by a dual identity because his parents gave him two names, Azariah and Azaria: "Azariah is a boy's name, of Hebrew origin, meaning *helped by God.* . . . Azaria . . . is a girl's name . . . meaning *blessed by God.* Each of these names was given to me, as my parents wanted to be helped *and* blessed by God. Since I was a boy, however, they wrote Azaria Mbatha, so that I could have both names. Yet they knew that I, their son, was Azariah" (3). These Christian names are again paired with "two other names" (3), the Zulu names Celumusa and Jabulani, and Mbatha says he would rather be "Azarea" and avoid all the confusion. This state of confusion, this searching for a singular identity among multiple names, nationalities, religions, and cultures remains an issue throughout his life. When, at the end of the narrative, he claims "I identify myself as an international citizen, first of all, and, secondly, as one of the Nguni people of South Africa" (318), Mbatha indicates that he has come to some conclusion about the construct known as "Azaria," about whom he often writes in the third person.

The chief metaphor that infuses the narrative is of weaving. The "rich tapestry of traditional Nguni life" (9) that Mbatha describes early in his story is also apparent in the tapestries the women weavers at Sandlwane Art School "adapted . . . from Zulu mats or pottery" (309) and the blankets and robes discussed in the parable of the African man who tries to imitate the white man: "An African man covers his body with a European blanket, only to find that the blanket is full of holes. He mends the tears, not realizing that it would be cheaper to buy a new blanket" (261). The oral histories of South Africans born in the 1880s, including Mbatha's father, "are like the silk in the morning gown I am weaving" (225). He questions and explores the nature of memory and its fallibility, claiming that it too is a tapestry, a fabric created out of magic, dreams, and interactions with people, both living and dead: "What I call autobiography is interwoven with a variety of miraculous things that exist around me. My brain restores those things without even knowing that they were there" (14). Later, memory becomes a river that "flows in fits and starts . . . and in different temporal channels" (136). Memory is not exact or scientific, and many of Mbatha's memories, he claims, "are fictionalized as dreams" (225) throughout the text. His history, like Zulu's, is a personal narrative about his family, particularly his dead sister who appears to him in dreams, and about his success as an artist. But unlike Zulu, Mbatha is concerned with the mythical, the individual challenged to define himself in the face of a larger collective history that is both ahistorical and nonlinear.

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The Xhosa Cattle Killing of 1857–58, for example, an event that has had deep and lasting cultural and literary resonance for the Xhosa and Zulu peoples, is chronicled in Mbatha's narrative as occurring in a kind of simultaneous, never-ending continuum. Because entire generations were lost as a result of the killing, this event "prevented the accumulation of knowledge from the past—the custodians of the old secrets could no longer pass them down" (164). Mbatha allows the major players in the killing to speak in the present, to exist in contemporary South Africa, alongside the living Azaria Mbatha and his dead sister, Ganana Rebecca. In this way, Mbatha is able to create a mythology that vanished with the people who starved during the killing and to conjure, like a diviner, "an almost palpable link between the living and the dead" (164). When he claims "one can compare different stories, collate them with the available evidence, interpret them as reconstruction and not as factual records" (9), the reader is immediately reminded of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children.* Like Rushdie's fictional persona, Saleem, Mbatha speaks to the reader, apologizes and explains his artistic license, and, most important, realizes that history is a malleable narrative, no more or less true than fiction. He—"Azaria, Azariah, Azarea" (11)—does not claim to speak for the entirety of his people, the Nguni; nonetheless, the spirit of Nguni communal culture shapes his many stories.

Along with the larger and mythical historical events that he chronicles in his writing, Mbatha also tells the story of his life as a boxer in the 1960s, a man who was married and divorced thirteen years later in the 1980s, a father of three daughters, and an artist keenly aware—even while living in Sweden—of the struggles that black South African artists have had to endure. For example, he writes of student uprisings at the Sandlwane Art School in the 1980s when students challenged their teachers, "some of whom described the African art as geometric and African culture as dynamic [and] expressed in music only" (308). He tells of his own artistic influences, of the benefits of being an exile, able to formulate and shape his South African experiences into art that "assimilates new impulses" (288). His work is hybridized, reflecting the influence of both Africa and Europe: "Cultural differences have lent my art its own perspective—it is a matter of distance in time and space" (288). It is equally influenced by universal themes of life, death, and love as well as by biblical teachings and the graphic idiom characteristic of Zulu society.

But *Within Loving Memory of the Century* is as much about storytelling as it is about telling the story of Mbatha's life and career, and it is as much about the process of creation as it is about that which has been created over the course of a singular life. One clearly sees evidence of the Nguni notion of *ubuntu,* that one becomes a person through other people, in the construction and shape of this text as well as within Mbatha's art. The doubleness inherent in Mbatha's early discussion of his name is manifest throughout his work, reflecting the author's identity as both South African and

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Swedish, his art as hybridized, his faith as both ancestral and Christian. Near the end of his story, he quotes his father: "Everything in twos . . . and I give thanks for that by day and night. Water cannot flow without trees, people cannot live without water, trees cannot live without water. Rabbits need not follow lions into the valleys. Let the rabbit pause, question the lion's morality and challenge his values" (369). Mbatha both embraces and challenges conceptions of history, memory, and truth in his autobiography, and the result—like the graphic art that complements the writing—is lyrical, magical, and utterly provocative.

THE CONCEPT OF *Izibongo* is expressed in both Mbatha and Zulu's narratives; Mbatha's work begins with "Azaria's Praises," in both Zulu and English, and Zulu's narrative ends with praises for the people who populate his life and his writing, including his wife Philisiwe and his English, German, and North American friends. Because these single-author narratives pay tribute to and are informed by this multitude—made up of the living and the dead—one can easily see an affinity between them and the anthology of women's life writing, spanning a period of 105 years from 1895 to 2000, edited by Judith Lütge Coullie. The South African women whose work appears in *The Closest of Strangers* are from varied racial, historical, and socioeconomic strata; their testimonies take the form of journal entries, letters, oral interviews, and the aforementioned *izibongo*.

For Coullie, however, *The Closest of Strangers* does not represent an attempt at unification through writing; "the lack of ordinary social contact between members of different race groups . . . ," she says, "is reflected in almost all of the life writing collected here" (1). Despite the fact that there appears to be "no cross-cultural sisterhood, no shared intimacy" (2) among women of different races, there is, nevertheless, a communal resonance in their work. As she comments in her introduction, "It was common for women to experience long-term mutual dependencies" (2) across the color bar, even if more intimate relationships seemed impossible during apartheid, and in the later writing that is included in the collection, there is perhaps some feminist collaboration between black and white voices. In 1985, for example, the worker testimony of Mildred Mjekula, Maureen Sithole, Ma Dlomo Lugogo, and Dolly was compiled and published by white researchers. The comment of Mjekula that, because she can come home only once a year to see her baby, "my child does not remember that I am her mother" (285) is recorded by a white woman but nonetheless situates the locus of apartheid's legacy within the narratives of individual black women who, through poverty and oppression, are alienated from their families, their labor, and their homeland.

Coullie's text is arranged chronologically, divided into nine sections from "1895 to 1910: The Birth of South Africa" to "1990 to 2000: The New South Africa." At the beginning of each section Coullie provides the historical context for the pieces contained therein. Photos of the women pre-

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cede their writing, and this homage to the visual also links *The Closest of Strangers* to both Mbatha and Zulu's works, filled as they are with linocuts and etchings created by both writers. Coullie's collection contains works by women of various races as well as by immigrants from countries outside of South Africa, and the text feels like a mosaic of sorts, filled with various types of discourse—oral, written, and visual. The women included in the first section include Sarah Raal, an Afrikaner woman who fought in the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902, and the Budapest-born Leotine Sagan, a Jewish woman who became an actress in Germany and England. Sagan claims, "After Europe, Johannesburg seemed very shabby and monotonous. The contrast was too painful. Johannesburg served only one god—Gold" (38). Maybe these are not the same ancestors that Mbatha thanks in his writing, but women who were writing and living in South Africa before 1910—when there was no unified South African state—provide the context for reading their later counterparts like Phyllis Ntantala, a Xhosa member of the black landed gentry that came into existence in South Africa during the first half of the twentieth century. During the 1930s and '40s, according to Coullie, women of all races were removed from public view and "domesticity was a cornerstone in both settler and indigenous gender systems" (76). Women's subversion of this lack of public influence is apparent in the writing of women like Kesaveloo Naidoo, an immigrant from South India who obtained her medical degree in Scotland and was repeatedly imprisoned for her role in the Indian Passive Resistance movement of 1946.

Racial and political tensions are highlighted in the words of women who were writing just before and during the first years of apartheid. Pauline Podbrey, for example, immigrated to South Africa from Lithuania in the 1930s, helped develop a black trade union, and married an Indian South African. Of her relationship with him, she says, "in the wider world outside our circle we continued to pretend that our association was purely political. Politics alone were enough to rouse the ire and hostility of most people without introducing the explosive subject of sex across the racial barrier" (100). Norma Kitson was an apartheid activist, and Bertha Solomon, a native Russian who moved to South Africa as a young child, fought for women's suffrage. The names of the black and mixed-race women whose work is included in the sections from the 1950s through the 1970s are at times familiar: Winnie Madikizela-Mandela; the novelists Sindiwe Magona and Bessie Head; Gillian Slovo, Ruth First, Hilda Bernstein, and Helen Suzman, all white antiapartheid activists. Others, like Maggie Besha, wrote about their activism as well: Besha organized a demonstration against the planned extension of pass laws to women in 1956. "The secretary to the Prime Minister," she writes, "told the delegation that his boss was unavailable. The women, in their anger, dumped the petition outside his office" (154).

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Much of the women's writing that is included from the 1980s on focuses on the legacy of apartheid; along with independence there is a resonant need to understand and explain what happened, a need for women, like Marike de Klerk, once the wife of former South African president F. W. de Klerk, to attempt an explanation to her grandchildren. There is much violence, either overt or implicit, in the writings of women during this time period. For example, de Klerk was raped and murdered in 2002, and Anne Paton, the wife of Alan Paton, left South Africa in the 1990s after being the victim of numerous crimes. The journalist Charlene Smith recounts the narrative of her rape. In her story, as in the narrative of Maria Ndlovu, the specter of AIDS looms large. The postapartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission, covered by the journalist Antjie Krog, gave the entire nation a similar chance to explain, to listen, and often to forgive the crimes committed during apartheid. Of the TRC, Krog writes, "Week after week; voice after voice; account after account. It is like traveling on a rainy night behind a huge truck—images of devastation breaking in sheets on the windscreen. You can't overtake, because you can't see; and you can't slow down or stop because then you will never get anywhere" (352–53).

The Closest of Strangers provides its readers with a similar imperative to keep listening—particularly to the often unheard words of women, whose stories are not just about the quest for equality, but also about the larger quest of survival throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in South Africa.

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https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.2007.0074 Published online by Cambridge University Press