

Towards a definition of postcolonial biographical fiction

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Abstract

In this introduction to the special issue on “Illuminating Lives: The Biographical Impulse in Postcolonial Literatures”, we start by situating the genre of biographical fiction, which has become increasingly popular in postcolonial literatures and beyond, in relation to more “traditional” nonfictional biography. We then examine how postcolonial biofiction might be distinguished from its postmodern avatar, and we tentatively circumscribe some of the tendencies that appear to cluster more systematically in postcolonial biofiction than in other types of writings: the focus on individuals — including artist figures — either forgotten or marginalized in traditional history; the use of the biofictional as a veritable mode of knowledge that allows writers and their critics to explore the philosophical implications of examining human trajectories; and the presence of narrative fragmentation, which often problematizes the possibility of ever fully apprehending an individual life.

Keywords

biofiction, biographical fiction, epistemology, fact and fiction, form, Künstler genre, postcolonialism, postmodernism

The biographical impulse

The last few decades have been marked by the increasing popularity of the (auto)biographical genre and some of its attendant, more creative forms — such as biopics or, in the field of creative writing, biographical fiction (also known as “biofiction”, see Buisine [1991]). The postcolonial world has been no exception to this trend, as suggested, for example, by the plethora of Bollywood films retracing the lives of public figures ranging from sports stars to human rights activists. Postcolonial literary fiction too has witnessed the emergence of works centred on real-life figures, whether famous or not — consider, for instance, Anglo-Caribbean Caryl Phillips’s *Dancing in the Dark* (2005, on vaudeville artiste Bert Williams), New Zealand Paula Morris’s *Rangatira* (2011, on her Maori ancestor, chief Paratene Te Manu), or South African Damon Galgut’s *Arctic Summer* (2014, on writer E. M. Forster). These few examples among many bespeak the growing urge among postcolonial writers to tease out the complexities of human lives, often to illuminate the existences of those marginalized in traditional history.

The novels mentioned above were all published less than two decades ago, but postcolonial (and other) creative writers’ interest in historical figures unsurprisingly predates the twenty-first century, as suggested by works such as Patrick White’s *Voss* (1957), which features a fictionalized version of the life of outback explorer Ludwig Leichhardt. The claim made in this special issue is therefore not that an entirely new form of what might be called “postcolonial biofiction” has emerged in the twenty-first century, but rather that the exponential popularity of the genre among writers in recent times has led to a range of formal, aesthetic, and epistemological developments that have taken biofiction well beyond its initial concerns with the interplay between fact and fiction — an intertwinement already explored in much postmodern criticism on this hybrid form.

It is indeed from a chiefly postmodern perspective that the vast majority of existing scholarly studies of biographical fiction have investigated the genre, which is sometimes also

called fictional biography (for example Schabert, 1982; Buisine, 1991; Keener, 2001; Lackey, 2017).¹ In the postcolonial field, biofiction criticism, which is still relatively scarce, has mostly focused on specific primary texts, while book-length studies have tended to deal with the more general category of life-writing, with a particular emphasis on autobiography (e.g. MacDermott, 1985; Moore-Gilbert, 2009). This special issue thus aims to contribute to bridging the current critical gap between biofiction studies on the one hand, and postcolonial literary scholarship on the other. This is a potentially vast project, all the more so since the scope of this issue is not limited to novels, but extends to poetry and drama, which are “fictional” as well. Despite this generic diversity, the contributors to the volume have all faced similar challenges, starting with determining whether creative texts traditionally categorized as postcolonial display distinctive tendencies when compared to their more visibly postmodern counterparts — all the while keeping in mind the many surface features shared by the postcolonial and the postmodern, despite radically different political agendas (see for example Tiffin, 1988; Maes-Jelinek, 1994). In any case, the scholarly history of biographical fiction demands that any investigation of its postcolonial avatars first retrace postmodern definitions of the genre — even if it is to ultimately redefine its contours.

Towards a definition of biographical fiction: The postmodern and beyond

In *Biography and the Postmodern Historical Novel*, John F. Keener defines biographical fiction as “all narrative that applies ‘novelistic’ discourse to the representation of an historical life” (2001: 183). Keener’s definition provides a useful conceptual anchor, as it situates the creative contribution of the genre at the level of writerly technique. However, prior to formulating his definition, Keener had cautiously reminded his readers, following historian Hayden White, that “history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation” (White, 1976: 122; cited in Keener, 2001: 160). The awareness of such blurring between the historical

and biographical domains on the one hand, and the fictional and novelistic ones on the other, has been commonplace since the advent of both postmodernism and postcolonialism. In this spirit, Ina Schabert speaks of a “contamination” between nonfictional and fictional embodiments of the biographical genre. Anticipating Keener by two decades, she sees the main difference between the two as being aesthetic rather than based on any sense of factuality. According to her, both nonfictional and fictional biographies are “conceived in a process of interpreting the evidence” and they are simply “governed by different laws of establishing coherence” (1982: 3, 7). Indeed, where the biographical novelist uses techniques such as “stream of consciousness [...] in order to imagine a complex inner life for the historical individual who is their subject”, “[t]he author of a factual biography establishes a context for the data according to conventions of historiography”, “evaluating the data, as well as the achievements of previous scholarship” (1982: 8–9). Such a view, which maintains that “[b]oth factual and fictional biographies are [...] made up, and in this sense are fictions” (1982: 7), stands in sharp contrast with earlier assessments of the relationship between fact and fiction, most notably modernist writer Virginia Woolf’s, who famously declared them to be as different as granite and rainbow (1958/1927: 149) and called the combination of the two in literary works “unworkable” (1942: 123) — a fact that did not stop her from attempting life-writing experiments of her own, most notably in the imaginary biographies *Orlando* (1928), modelled on the life of Vita Sackville-West, and *Flush* (1933), focusing on Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s dog.

Contemporary critics of biographical fiction have largely departed from the idea that fact and fiction are incompatible, but many still abide by the idea that a fundamental distinction can be made between biographical fiction and conventional (that is, factual) biography. For example, Michael Lackey emphasizes that authors of biographical fiction have a freedom to invent elements in their historical subjects’ lives, while biographers do not: “The authors of

biofiction unapologetically change facts”, Lackey writes, whereas “[b]iographers cannot simply alter established fact in order to make what they consider a more important intellectual point” (2017: 8–9). David Lodge makes a similar distinction between imaginative freedom and biographical fact when he defines the biographical novel as one that “takes a real person and their real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration, using the novel’s techniques for representing subjectivity *rather than the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography*” (2006: 8, italics added). If Schabert, Lackey, and Lodge all concur in their insistence on the idea that biographical fiction entails the use of a method that is different from that of biography, Lackey’s and Lodge’s claims betray an objectivist view of history that is bound to raise more than one postcolonial eyebrow.

Ironically, it is precisely such objectivism that is responsible for the troubled history of biographical fiction itself. As Naomi Jacobs reminds us, the form was “long considered subliterate”, and its incarnations were regarded as “popularized or sensationalized low-brow substitutes for scholarly biographies” (1986: n.p.). In the first part of the twentieth century, biographical fiction found one of its fiercest opponents in Marxist critic Georg Lukács, who argued that successful *historical* novels were able to portray “the totality of the objective social-historical determinants” of a given historical moment, whereas *biographical* novels made “the personal, the purely psychological and biographical acquire a disproportionate breadth, a false preponderance”, leading “the real objective causes and factors of the [biographical subject’s] historical mission” to be “inevitably omitted” (1969/1937: 374, 388, 380). Lukács’s condemnation of biographical fiction had clear Marxist undertones, for the critic deplored that “the alienation which modern writers feel from popular life” had led them to neglect “immediate causation” in favour of “biographical-psychological causation” (1969/1937: 376). In other words, biographical fiction, to Lukács, was but a manifestation of the “psychologism of declining bourgeois literature” (1969/1937: 388).

Lukács’s damning comments on the biographical novel have been extensively discussed by Michael Lackey (for example 2016; 2017), who, opposing the Marxist critic, has shown that biographical fiction can successfully depict the “unstable” and “provisional” nature of “human subjectivity” (2016: 53). Lackey, in his effort to counter Lukács and rehabilitate the biographical novel, has gone as far as to assert that this genre has now all but supplanted the historical novel (2016). From a postcolonial perspective at least, such a proposition seems difficult to uphold, considering the number of historical novels — centring on past events and imaginary characters — that are still being published to great critical acclaim, from Andrea Levy’s *Small Island* (2004) to Kim Scott’s *That Deadman Dance* (2010). No matter one’s view of Lackey’s provocative speculations, the crux of the matter is that the American scholar aligns himself with the clear-cut idea that the move from the historical to the biographical novel represents a “shift from the *objective* external world to the *subjective* internal world” (2016: 54, italics added), while we hold that these two poles are far more difficult to distinguish.

Towards a definition of biographical fiction: Enter the postcolonial

Clearly, statements such as Lackey’s leave a lot of room for postcolonial critique. Any postcolonial reappraisal of biofiction, however, is complicated by the fact that, if one discards Lackey’s distinction between the historical and biographical novels based on the dubious criterion of their levels of objectivity, one is left with the view — shared by the vast majority of commentators — that both genres are to be placed in a relationship of hyponymy, wherein biographical fiction is but one possible incarnation of historical fiction (for example Lukács, 1969/1937; Mujica, 2016). This consensus seems to dominate the postcolonial field as well — for example, Hamish Dalley’s *The Postcolonial Historical Novel* (2014) includes at least three chapters on works that might also be regarded as biographical novels. However, not all representatives of biofiction fit neatly into the category of historical fiction — think, for

example, of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s short stories “The Arrangements” (2016) and “Janelle Asked to the Bedroom” (2017), both of which feature fictionalized versions of Donald Trump’s wife Melania; or of Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet* (1998), which is based on the life and death of jazz musician Billy Tipton, whose popularity peaked in the 1940s and 1950s but who only died in 1989. Interestingly, some critics of biographical fiction would not consider Kay’s novel to be biofictional at all, since the author renames her central figure Joss Moody, and changes both his nationality and race. While Kay has unambiguously identified Billy Tipton as the inspiration for her novel, she has also stated that she had avoided reading great amounts of material on the real historical figure, as she “didn’t want the story of Billy Tipton to get in the way of [her] character” (Jaggi and Dyer, 1999: 19). Still, as Judith Halberstam points out, Kay’s novel thematizes biography and exposes the complexities of the biographical quest (2000: 71–73), a fact that firmly situates Kay’s book in the category of what Ansgar Nünning (2005) has called “fictional metabiography” — one of the “new generic variants of the fictional biography” which, through “self-conscious and self-reflexive” means, “challeng[es] and problematiz[es] the issues of representation and life writing” (2005: 199, 197, 200). In *Trumpet*, the connection to life-writing becomes all the more evident as, unlike white American Billy Tipton, Joss Moody has an African father and a Scottish mother, a family tree that eerily echoes Kay’s genealogy.

What should be clear from the above examples is that there can be no prescriptive definition of biographical fiction, whether postcolonial or not. Establishing such strict boundaries would, in our view, be counterproductive, as a set of strict criteria would lead scholars to exclude from the genre precisely the texts that most boldly experiment with its emergent conventions, as indeed do some of the works examined by the contributors in this issue. Therefore, in line with the suggestion put forward by Hans Renders in *The Biographical Turn* (2017), we prefer to regard the biographical approach more as a “critical method” than as

a category — hence our reference, in the subtitle of this special issue, to the inclusive “biographical impulse in postcolonial literatures” rather than to biographical fiction per se. The implications of this fluid interpretation will become clearer as we proceed. It is also along methodological lines that we formulate our approach to the “postcolonial”, a label known both for its fuzziness and for its inclusion of experiences characterizing vastly different peoples and territories whose only common point is a connection to the consequences of European colonization.

Even as we resist essentialist categorizations, it is clear that the biofictional and the postcolonial potentially have a number of features in common. These include both fields’ interest in specific individuals whose lives have been forgotten or distorted by traditional Western historiography — thus, both domains show a propensity to value the contribution of “microhistory” (see Renders et al., 2017) in re-evaluating the past. In line with this, the biofictional and the postcolonial are both characterized by their engagement with — or, indeed, their frequent mistrust of — master narratives. Clearly, the latter feature is also shared by postmodernism: one thinks, of course, of François Lyotard’s critique of the totalizing nature of the *méta-récit* (metanarrative) in his book *La condition postmoderne* (1979), but also of Linda Hutcheon who, in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, discusses the selective and constructed nature of history: any “experiential event”, says Hutcheon, draws its meaning from its transformation into a “historical fact” (1988: xii); or, to reformulate this using a more extensive selection of Hutcheon’s words, “we name and constitute [...] events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning” (1988: 97). In sum, postcolonialists and postmodernists alike consider historical — and biographical — facts to be discursive *constructions*; however, where postmodernists tend to speak of biographical fiction as a way to highlight epistemological uncertainties in a “posthistorical” world marked by “the demystification, and, ultimately, the death of any authority, be it god, the author, or the canon” (Middeke, 1999: 2,

1), postcolonialists rather tend to speak of competing epistemologies — of the colonizers and the colonized — in a world of “postmemory”, to use the now famous term coined by Marianne Hirsch (2012) in the context of Holocaust studies. Thus, what Martin Middeke writes about feminism could equally apply to postcolonialism: “a theory which has justifiably not tired in pointing to the fact that women [or, for our purposes, postcolonial subjects] have been denied historical agency cannot afford to surrender a utopian perspective to purely deconstructive pluralization, let alone give in to an impression of posthistorical resignation and nothingness” (Middeke, 1999: 11).

Counter-discursive narratives

It should now be clear how the postcolonial relates to — and differs from — the postmodern in the context of biographical fiction. We also hope to have established that the postcolonial and the biofictional converge in their potentially revisionary approach to history, and that they may thus be placed in a fruitful dialogic relationship. The challenging task now at hand is to investigate whether the form that we have been calling “postcolonial biographical fiction” in fact entails the use of any specific approach that would warrant the existence of such a label. Clearly it would be nonsensical to isolate any exclusive distinguishing features for this category, but one might nonetheless, on the basis of the contributions gathered in this issue, tentatively circumscribe some of the tendencies that cluster more systematically in postcolonial biofiction than in other types of writings. In other words, our examination of the genre in what follows will be formulated more in terms of degree than of kind and, ultimately, more in terms of method than of category.

The first and perhaps most obvious feature of postcolonial biographical fiction has already been mentioned above, and it is the frequent focus on historical figures that have been left out of Western, often male-centred historiography, simply because they are not of the

hegemonic race, gender, or class and therefore belong to what Virginia Woolf (1933/1925) famously called “the obscure”. There is obviously a performative dimension to devoting a fictional text to a person whose life has been erased from collective memory, and in that sense the re-inscription into the course of history of individuals consigned to oblivion testifies to the political potential of biographical fiction. Indeed, as in the case of nonfictional life-writing, this re-inscription of forgotten lives “remedies the deficiency of Western historiography” (Moore-Gilbert, 2009: xxii) and can be said to belong to the postcolonial field’s customary culture of resistance and its age-long investment in what Helen Tiffin (1989), following Richard Terdiman, defines as counter-discourse in an essay where she analyses the destabilizing potential of some West Indian autobiographical texts. Such counter-discursive qualities are present — even if not fully actualized — in the early biofictional novels by Australian writers Ernestine Hill and Eleanor Dark, examined in this issue by Catherine Padmore and Kelly Gardiner. Writing in the 1940s, Hill and Dark included in their fiction representations of the Indigenous figure of Woollarawarre Bennelong, a man of the Wangal people who was kidnapped by New South Wales Governor Arthur Phillip. While the novelists’ treatment of Bennelong is far from unproblematic — their descriptions of the Aboriginal man echo racist stereotypes prevalent at the time — Padmore and Gardiner show how the attempt made by Dark in particular to write some of her work from Bennelong’s perspective anticipated more progressive endeavours in the field of Australian biofiction. Importantly, what was still at an embryonic stage in the works of Dark and Hill has taken far less ambiguous forms in later postcolonial texts, some of which are examined in this special issue. Such works, which write back to Western historiography in more or less explicit ways, come close to what Hutcheon (1988) has famously called “historiographic metafiction”.

But there is more. Indeed, focusing on forgotten figures also allows postcolonial authors to validate the subjects at the heart of their work within the Western epistemological framework,

since they often use for their writing the research methods of traditional historiography — even if they ultimately depart from the conclusions drawn by mainstream historians. So, where one could dismiss a historical novel, say on a fictional victim of transatlantic slavery, as the product of the creative imagination, the focus on a person whose life can be documented in traditional historical terms, through archives or other materials, confers a form of authentication that contemporary audiences seem increasingly keen to be provided with (witness the number of stories or films advertised as being based on a “true story”). At the same time, and paradoxically perhaps, the psychological dimension of postcolonial biographical fiction often subverts such apparently objective procedures and exposes how they can also be used to promote various forms of essentialism. Thus, one count on which biographical fiction distinguishes itself from the historical archive on which it is based is through its investment in the individual as a fully-fledged human being, using what biographical novelist Jill Dawson has called a “logic of imagination” (Self, 2009). This type of artistic project is at the heart of Nigerian writer Chika Unigwe’s novel *The Black Messiah*, which focuses on the famous ex-slave and abolitionist Olaudah Equiano. In this special issue, Unigwe reflects on the writing of her book (currently published only in Dutch translation as *De zwarte messias*, 2013) and discusses her attempt to balance the historical record with the imaginative potential left open by the gaps in Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* (2001/1789), including the emotional impact of his marriage to a white woman and his experience as a plantation overseer. Unigwe’s concern in her novel is thus not with a forgotten figure, but rather with aspects of a famous person’s life that have been expunged from the official record. Unigwe’s aim is no doubt to illuminate the past, but also to explore its resonance in the present from a contemporary vantage point; her project, like that of many biographical novelists, is therefore “consciously and strategically bi-temporal” (Lackey, 2017: 10). However, where Lackey claims that “biographical novelists convert their protagonist into a literary symbol” (2017: 10), we would rather argue that successful novelists’ exploration

of their characters’ interiority prevents any sort of typification and confers on biofictional subjects a singularity that “defies the generalizing impulse of the sociological imagination” (Chakrabarty, 2000: 82; cited in Dalley, 2014: 28).

Epistemological implications

The intimate biofictional portrait that emerges from this creative process largely depends on writers’ interpretation of historical evidence. In this respect, several contributions to this special issue show that the biofictional is not just a source of knowledge but that it can act as a veritable *mode of knowledge*, as an opportunity for postcolonial writers and their critics to explore the philosophical implications of examining human trajectories. This approach is encapsulated in the term “biofictive” that Stephen Clingman adopts in his contribution on Caryl Phillips’s *The Lost Child* (2015), and which he places into fruitful dialogue with the biopolitical, a concept that cannot be dissociated from issues of power. For Clingman, Phillips’s narratives, whether fiction or nonfiction, offer through the biofictive an alternative and resistant means of understanding the complexities and inequalities of the postcolonial world. A similar theoretical slant can be found in Madhu Krishnan’s piece, which examines three examples of life-writing from Kenya that question the production of knowledge about Africa — knowledge that is usually based on the Enlightenment-inspired categories of reason and rationality. (Auto)biographical material and its generic uncertainties, Krishnan argues, can foster reflection on the way the continent is discursively constructed in the global imaginary through the circulation of its image in the literary marketplace. Delphine Munos too touches upon the role of the marketplace in the reception of biographical writing through her discussion of Hanif Kureishi’s *My Ear at His Heart: Reading My Father* (2004). In her essay, Munos more particularly addresses the way the author of mixed Pakistani and British descent, both as a reader and as a writer, problematizes the fallacy of biographical authenticity that still shapes

the expectations of many (particularly Western) readers of postcolonial texts. Clearly, the biographical triggers a self-reflexive process whose ramifications go well beyond the mere retelling of somebody’s life.

Biofiction and the Künstler genre

Another striking characteristic of postcolonial biographical fiction has to do with the ill-defined boundary between biography and autobiography, which finds an indirect expression in the many postcolonial texts that might be said to belong to the Künstler genre. Such biographical explorations focus on famous but marginalized artist figures, whose legitimacy is contested for various reasons including race, religion, gender, or sexuality, and who could very well be seen as alter-egos of the postcolonial writers who have given them a literary life, as it were. For instance, one could mention Lawrence Scott’s *Light Falling on Bamboo* (2012), which is devoted to Trinidadian painter Michel-Jean Cazabon, or Zadie Smith’s recent short piece, “Crazy They Call Me” (2017), a second-person narrative which gives a fictional voice to the famous jazz singer Billie Holiday. Another example involving a musical artist is Michael Ondaatje’s evocation of the African American musician Buddy Bolden in the novel *Coming through Slaughter* (1976), which, as Naomi Jacobs has shown, relies to some extent on a “confusion of author and subject”, with the consequence that “the project of understanding another becomes equally the project of understanding oneself” (1986: n.p.). Indeed, one could argue that such biographical explorations have an added value for postcolonial writers who all too easily find themselves labelled as spokespersons for their own ethnic or national group. For these authors, emphasizing the singularity of the artist figures they portray is a way of vicariously liberating themselves from the burden of representation that they are made to bear, while also expressing empathy for their subjects’ predicament.

Two articles in this special issue deal more particularly with artist figures. The first piece, by Marie Herbillon, explores J. M. Coetzee’s approach to fellow writer Fyodor Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg* (2004/1994), a novel that engages with issues of artistic filiation but also addresses the thin line between the public and the private that is part and parcel of the life-writing genre. The second essay, by Maria Cristina Fumagalli, features a discussion of Derek Walcott’s book-length poem *Tiepolo’s Hound* (2000). Walcott’s focus on the Caribbean-born painter of Jewish descent, Jacob Camille Pissarro, provides the St Lucian Nobel Prize winner with an opportunity to ponder his own artistic career and demonstrates once again how difficult it is to disentangle the biographical from the autobiographical.

The question of form

A final defining element of postcolonial biographical fiction that might be brought to the fore is that of form. Structural and stylistic matters in biofiction have been broached, mainly by narratologists, to try and ascertain how the genre might differ from more traditional biographies in terms of literary technique. For example, in line with Schabert’s abovementioned assertion that biographical novelists often use stream of consciousness (1982: 8), Dorrit Cohn (1999: 26–30; cited in Novak, 2017: 8) has suggested that the use of a device such as free indirect discourse marked a text as fictional; however, Novak (2017: 8) provides at least one counter-example showing that such a tendency can by no means be considered a general rule. The same might be said of a feature such as narrative fragmentation, which is often one of the most visible formal elements in postcolonial biographical novels (and in postmodern biofiction, but to a different effect, as explained above), but can also occur in nonfictional biographies. These partial overlaps should encourage us to see biography and biofiction “as a continuum rather than a dichotomy” (Keener 2001:1; cited in Novak 2017: 11). Nonetheless, one might also pursue the idea that similar formal features may be the expression of different concerns: whereas

narrative fragmentation in nonfictional biographies tends to “register as a structural echo of the documents (un)available to the biographer” (Novak, 2017: 16), the presence of a dislocated form in biographical fiction can often be viewed as the echo of the shattering experiences of individuals whose life stories are marked by disruption and absence and can therefore hardly be told in linear, straightforward fashion. But fragmentation has more philosophical meanings: among other things, it problematizes the possibility of ever fully apprehending an individual life regardless of the documentation available, thus apparently undermining any biographical undertaking. In that sense, biofiction stands in opposition to attempts to define human identity as monolithic or unitary — attempts which, in the postcolonial context (and beyond), have been associated with colonizing or discriminating impulses. To put it differently, it seems to us important to pay attention to the literariness of postcolonial biofiction, for *how* a life is told is as significant as *what* is said about that life.

At the end of an essay questioning the purpose of biography and concluding to its growing respectability as a literary genre, Ruth Scurr (2018) points out that “there is still something deeply rebellious, revolutionary even, about the biographical impulse. Perhaps it comes down to the fact that each new life is a fresh start — one that might need a new form of writing to describe it”. If all the biographical texts examined in this issue testify to this need to explore content through form, some of them go as far as making the decoding of form a prerequisite to the understanding of their content. This is certainly the case of Mojisola Adebayo’s *Moj of the Antarctic: An African Odyssey* (2008). As Suzanne Scafe demonstrates in her contribution, Adebayo’s one-woman performance consists in a textual revision of Ellen Craft’s famous slave narrative; one of the aims of this generic metamorphosis is to deconstruct the various categories — such as gender or race — on which biographies are usually based. The interview with Caryl Phillips contained in this issue also addresses formal issues, notably in relation to his recent fictionalization of Caribbean writer Jean Rhys’s life, *A View of the Empire*

at Sunset (2018). Among other aspects of his prose, Phillips explains his lexical choices, which are meant not only to match his subjects’ specific historical and social backgrounds but also to fit their personalities, in particular the emotional vulnerability that his fiction sets out to capture.

In the afterword that closes this special issue, Liz Stanley considers how some of the questions tackled in the various contributions might serve as a stepping stone to expand the scholarly reflection on the interface between fact and fiction. Focusing on textual examples from South Africa, Stanley reflects on a series of key issues in postcolonial life-writing as a whole, including questions of representation and referentiality, and matters involving the position of readers. Stanley’s background in the social sciences leads her to present us with yet another approach to the biographical impulse in postcolonial literatures, intimating that the avenues of research into this phenomenon are almost as numerous as the lives, still in the shadows, that are yet to be illuminated under the creative spotlight of postcolonial writers.

Note

1. This postmodern focus is hardly surprising, but it must be pointed out that experimental life-writing “reaches back further than the ‘postmodernism’ label would suggest”, as the genre was “clearly prefigured by the work of modernist authors, who challenged the conventions of biography and autobiography” (Novak, 2017).

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