Looking in New Ways at Frontiers for Literary Journalism

At the Faultline: Writing White in South African Literary Journalism
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The study of nonfiction writing in its variety of forms has not had an established disciplinary home in South Africa and, indeed, the very definition of what is being studied, where, is still open to discussion. As other writers in this journal have noted repeatedly over the last decade, English literature departments in many countries have studied fiction, poetry, and theater, with nonfiction rarely given the nod. This has been true of South African universities too, where, as Leon de Kock wrote in *South Africa in the Global Imaginary* in 2004, literature departments until the late 1970s had been "smugly Anglophile and dismissive of the 'local' " (6).

Journalism programs, a potential disciplinary home for literary journalism, have tended to focus on preparing students for work in the media sector. With South Africa having so few platforms for literary and longform journalism, little attention has been given to these forms beyond feature writing and magazine courses. Nonfiction writing must necessarily find its way into the academy through other disciplines. It has done so through African literature, history, library sciences, and the more recently emerging creative *writing* programs. It is also being ushered into local scholarship via the particular research interests of individual scholars.

Thus, although South Africa historically has had a rich set of writers of literary nonfiction, some of whom have been internationally recognized, their study is fragmented over academic disciplines. For example, Olive Schreiner's novel, *Story of an African Farm*, might be studied in English departments, but not her many nonfiction works, which received wide attention when they were published in the 1900s. The nonfiction of journalist/writers such as Sol Plaatje, Bessie Head, Noni Jabavu, and Ezekiel Mphahlele might be studied in an African literature department or find their way into history reading lists. The ways in which their works are journalistic is overdetermined by the focus on how they are literary, or historical, and, I would argue, the emphasis on the *literary* in literary journalism over the journalistic continues. So does the fragmentation across disciplines.

Claire Scott's book, *At the Faultline: Writing White in South African Literary Journalism*, comes, therefore, at an interesting time. She establishes her book firmly as a study of literary journalism, a nod to the emerging courses, studies, and programs that are starting to explore literary journalism as a potential area of interest. She locates her work also in whiteness studies, a growing area of scholarship in South Africa.

Scott proposes to investigate representations of whiteness through looking at four key texts—Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart* (1990), Kevin Bloom's *Ways of Staying* (2009), Jonny Steinberg's *Midlands* (2002), and Antjie Krog's *Begging to Be Black* (2009), the last book in a trilogy that started with *Country of My Skull* (1998). Simultaneously, she seeks to examine the ways in which the writers attempt to find new narrative forms to address these complexities (5).

The intersection of literary journalism and whiteness studies extends recent debates on the question of whether the genre of literary journalism can deal better than other writing forms with the racial divides still painfully operative in South Africa in the post-apartheid democracy. This question arises in turn from debates in South African literary studies over the last thirty years, cutting across the fiction/nonfiction divide, about the role of literary writing in telling "the South African story." Thus, concerns about racial division, writing the "frontier," white identity, and the subaltern position of local and black writers have long informed discussions of South African writing.

Scott opens her book by referencing one highly publicized discussion between two of the writers she looks at—Malan and Krog—at the annual Franschhoek Literary Festival in 2010, where each argued a different position on white South Africans in the post-apartheid era. "Malan argued that white South Africans were excluded from the national conversation due to their white skin, while Krog countered that South African whiteness continued to enjoy unwarranted privilege and protection" (2). Their debate was picked by the news media and continued to reverberate in talk shows and opinion pages.

As Hedley Twidle noted in 2012 in *Safundi* ("In a Country Where You Couldn't Make This Shit Up?"), the claim has also been made that nonfiction had outstripped fiction as a cultural phenomenon. It was *the* genre from which to write post-apartheid South Africa. (Do we hear an echo of Tom Wolfe's similar claim for journalism written like fiction in his 1973 writing of *The New Journalism*?) The question was also asked whether nonfiction was a way to cross the boundaries that still exist between communities in post-colonial and post-apartheid South Africa. Steinberg, Malan, Krog, and Bloom have often been heralded as frontrunners of this *new* literary nonfiction.

Scott designates the nonfiction books produced by these writers as literary journalism and argues for the importance of the choice of genre for the negotiation of whiteness. Her most basic claim is that the writers were all journalists, and—in the case especially of Krog and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—thus witnessed and reported critical events in the transitional period. This may seem at first glance an obvious point, but given the assiduously policed separate worlds created

by apartheid, and the regulated veil drawn over the horrors committed in Black communities, the act of going to *what really happened,* reporting it, and reflecting on it, has an emotional charge and authenticity for readers.

The argument that literary journalism attains its power from the reader's knowledge that *this is a true story*, combined with the use of literary tactics to bring that story alive, is a relatively simple idea. Scott's thesis, however, goes further: she argues that it is the intersection of storytelling forms, such as fiction, history, and journalism, which provides "moments of indeterminacy [that] destabilize accepted notions of identity and belonging," thus allowing new forms to emerge (2). For Scott, it is "the form of narration" itself that provides possibilities for white South Africans to make sense of the changing social and political milieu and to renegotiate their identity. She suggests that "the literary journalism of Rian Malan, Kevin Bloom, Jonny Steinberg and Antje Krog . . . represents attempts to find this 'form of narration' that will open new rhetorical spaces in which South Africans can learn to converse" (5).

I find this an optimistic perspective; there are other motivations for writers to turn to nonfiction. Nobel laureate J. M. Coetzee's novel, *Disgrace*, tells—in part—the story of a farm attack, including the rape of a white woman, and was widely criticized as representing Black South Africans as violent and primitive. However, as Scott points out, Steinberg, Malan, and Bloom describe similar violent events in their work, but have not been similarly attacked. Fiction writers are vulnerable to the criticism that the works they produce come from an imagination filled with white fears and racial stereotypes, what Krog calls "the preoccupations, perceptions, and prejudices of the writer" (quoted in Scott, 29). Nonfiction writers, choosing *actual events*, are more insulated from such critique, even though selecting such stories to tell is a way of setting the agenda for discussion.

What literary journalism offers these writers is the opportunity to put themselves in dialogue with the difficult events that are being discussed. Scott notes the ways in which each text makes use of first-person narration in order to reflect and comment on the environment. For Malan, writing in the apartheid era, this meant a reckoning with both the violence of his own *tribe*, Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, and the violence (endemic, in his telling) in communities across the country. Krog, some years later, turns the focus fully, in *Country of My Skull,* on the violence committed by white men in the name of the apartheid state. This inaugurates a trilogy of books that reflect upon the place of white South Africans in the new dispensation, their inability to assimilate in a larger "African" culture, and their complicity with the deeds done to privilege them in the society.

Kevin Bloom reflects on violence too, both through the personal loss of a family member to violent crime and the recounting of other stories of violence. He uses this as an occasion to reflect on whether whites can *stay* and under what conditions. And Jonny Steinberg investigates the murder of a white farmer in an area of the country charged with the historical significance of colonial dispossession and frontier wars. Seemingly an outlier, with a book that appears at first to be a meticulously reported story of a white community feeling under threat rather than a set of personal reflections, Steinberg also explores the condition of no longer feeling at home that

white communities experience, and finds himself unable to enter Black experience of this ancient frontier conflict.

Scott thus shows, as others have before her, the ways in which white identity has, in these books, become uncertain, how complicity is surfaced as an important issue to be dealt with, and how whites struggle with ways to narrate a place for themselves in South Africa.

However, the question of whiteness that she poses in her work seems harder to parse. If whiteness is the invisible, taken-for-granted landscape from which white South Africans operate, a landscape powerfully connected to global whiteness, then these texts confront the same conundrum of whiteness studies, in which the very focus on making visible the deep assumptions and entitlement of whiteness can move Black experience once again to the margins.

The recent proliferation of nonfiction books by Black writers—some identifiably journalism, some generically closer to memoir and personal life writing—provides an opportunity to imaginatively cross the boundaries that have prevented South Africans from knowing each other's lived experience. But before white South Africans can properly engage with such narratives, whiteness must be destabilized and—in Scott's words—"move out from under the umbrella of its global sanctity and into 'folded-together-ness' with its many 'others' " (179). Scott argues that Bloom, Malan, Krog, and Steinberg have managed to use literary journalism to create "narrative instability"—to reveal the "anxiety and possibility of 'in-between' " (179).

I am not as optimistic that these texts have the liberating potential Scott sees in them, but she raises important questions around the ways in which literary journalism can deal with South Africa's intractable whiteness. Such questions may also be relevant to other former colonies and their settler nations.