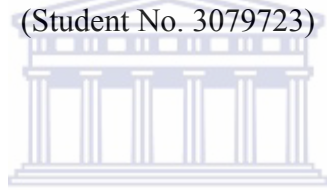


Biography in and of an Archive: the Shelagh Gastrow Collection and South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study is about the recent political history of South Africa. It examined the crucial period of late apartheid, through the political transition into democracy. The study was conducted through the lenses of Shelagh Gastrow's work, whose series of publications titled *Who's Who in South African Politics* traversed the spectrum of a severely polarised South Africa, and earned her the accolade as a "leading authority" in the biographical enterprise of *Who's who*. Gastrow had interviewed people in political office, those in opposition, those hiding from political persecution and even those in exile outside South Africa. It involved about 100 personalities for each of her five volumes.

The study involved examining archival collections, documentary analysis, desktop research and interviews with Shelagh Gastrow. It also examined the Mayibuye Archives, where the Gastrow collection was eventually transferred, as an archive of resistance to apartheid. The study showed that from its origin as a research project about personalities in South Africa's resistance and transition history, the Shelagh Gastrow collection was transformed into a heritage resource. The study examined political collections as heritage resources in the process of remaking the nation, and the contributions they make in the national re-engineering process.

The study drew on the convergence of two theoretical claims. First, Achille Mbembe, among others, has asserted that there is no state without its archives. An indispensable, symbiotic, socio-political relationship exists between the state, actors in the state, and related archives. The second, posited by the likes of Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff, is to the effect that objects have social lives, and that they are formed and transformed through interactions with their related societies. Between the objects and their societies, meanings and values are transmitted, exchanged and retained. Thus, a careful analysis of the formation and transformations (a biographical study) of such objects can reveal the obscure about the societies they relate to.

Consequently, socio-political collections do reveal much about the individuals, groups, and societies they represent. In the case of South Africa, the analysis showed the corpus of Shelagh Gastrow's collection (the object in this study) which included transcripts of political interviews, manuscripts and *Who's who* publications, revealed the transition from apartheid into democracy as a critical historical juncture. Political collections constitute important heritage resources, which contribute to the production of national narratives. They may originate in the past, but their analysis in the present has resonance for the collective future of the nation.

Key Words: Apartheid, Archives, Biographical Study, Heritage Resources, Political Collections, Who's Who

Dedication

I dedicate this work to the memory of my parents Mr William Kwao-Sarbah and Mrs Janet Kwao-Sarbah.



Declaration

I declare that 'Biography in and of an archive: the Shelagh Gastrow Collection and South Africa' is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.



Full name: DAVID KWAO-SARBAH

Date.....

Signed.....

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As I proceed to the Mayibuye Archives where I spent much time to work on the Gastrow collection, the staff, particularly of the Historical Papers section, have been very helpful in allocating the required space to enable me walk in and out like a member of their staff. Andre Mohammed has been of immense help. Peter and Shelagh Gastrow have made it feasible for my work to proceed from a proposal to a completed research project by availing themselves with alacrity as if they owed me the interviews that we had.

Lastly, I am grateful to my wife, Akua Kwao-Sarbah. Those phone calls have been an effective bridge of the physical distance. When all is said and done, this long biographical journey might just end up with our auto-biography.

INTRODUCTION

This is a study about a collection in an archive, about its constitution and its meanings. It entered the Mayibuye archive as the Shelagh Gastrow Collection in 1995. This work seeks to contribute to the field of archival studies in which archives are seen not merely as repositories of collections. As an archival collection it had its own history of meaning formation and changes in meaning. The study will show that from its origin in a research project about personalities in South Africa's resistance and transition history the Shelagh Gastrow Collection was transformed into an archival resource. As an archival collection its meaning changed from that concerned with projecting lives of resistance, repression and transition to that which projected Shelagh and Peter Gastrow as post-apartheid philanthropists and as promoters of democracy. From having begun as a research collection transformed into an archive of transition, the Gastrow Collection came to stand as autobiography of Shelagh and Peter Gastrow. It is a conjoining of their relationship, a meeting of the private and the public, the personal and the political.

This work is a process that began in mid-2011 after I had made up my mind on the direction to take at the point of my academic crossroads. An email conversation I initiated in May 2011 may have looked like any other and probably did not carry much weight, as it attracted no response from the other end. Six months later, we had run full circle and the content of that mail had materialised into a concrete meeting with the author of the five volumes of *Who's Who in South African Politics* which hit the South African book stands between 1985 and 1995. The return mail read, '... you'll meet with Shelagh on Monday 7 November at 09h30.' My mail had been sent on 10 May 2011.

I had chanced upon the Shelagh Gastrow Collection at the UWC-Robben Island Museum Mayibuye archives about a year earlier and the range of personality profiles in the collection had caught my attention. My preliminary research heightened my interest as I looked over the political organisations and personalities that constituted the scope of her publications. The author seemed to have set out to produce lives across the entire political spectrum in the country. Given the experience of South Africa as a nation, such effort carried an additional quality, a nagging sense of the unusual for me.

But, perhaps the most significant single factor that aroused my interest to ascertain more about this collection was the period it represented of the South African experience. My initial research had established that though the first in the series was published in 1985, her research actually started two years earlier. The last book was published a decade later in 1995. Between the two publications, there were three others. In my view, that period represents a critical one in South Africa within which a vital crossroad was reached. For once, the different shades of social interests that are unique to South Africa could engage each other across the complex lines of contention in the five centuries of its life that this part of the continent apparently became a point of crossbreeding for Europe, Africa and Asia, significant enough for it to be seen perhaps as the birth of globalization.¹

The consensus of the early 1990s represented the choice of governance for the first time in what has become known as the transitional period. Though all countries had their own experiences the case of South Africa for me was as a dream that previous generations had looked forward to. It represented a cleared hurdle into an era of civil rights and self-determination for the vast majority of the South African population. Thus the body of

¹ The 'discovery' of the sea route to India by the Portuguese also opened up vibrant communication between the eastern and western hemispheres perceived to be the onset of new global social processes

research work that the activities of Shelagh Gastrow represented drew enough adrenaline for me to take it up for further research.

Finally, my interest was boosted by the mode of her publications. The medium of biography, which Shelagh Gastrow had adopted, was an interesting one that permitted certain kinds of social investigation. Its flexibility enabled a peep into individual lives while at the same time was supportive of investigating whole processes in societies. So it worked with investigations that required an examination of the nook and cranny, whilst at the same time it created no inhibitions for studies with a global perspective.

It also happened to be a time when I had become exposed to the substance in certain arguments gaining grounds about the biography of archives. The chief argument that had grabbed my attention was that the biography of objects can reveal the obscure. If that is the case, having chanced upon this body of exciting work undertaken over that critical period, it appeared the time was ripe to proceed on an interesting journey. The corpus of archival material that I met at the Mayibuye archives constituted an object whose biography, I had adequate reason to believe, would yield interesting results. Perhaps that explains why I persisted with follow up phone calls and emails that resulted in the first interview with the author.

Our physical interactions took three meetings. The first interaction was at her office at Woodstock on 7 November 2011. As I was ushered into her offices about half an hour ahead of schedule, I was served with some coffee. The meeting itself was supposed to last for an hour but at the end she said we could go on. Given the vital role of her husband during the transitional period another meeting was arranged after his arrival from the US.

That meeting was held at their family premises at Newlands over snacks on 23 December 2011. A third meeting was arranged for the eve of his departure back to the US on 9 January 2012. Once again, both of them were involved in this meeting which was recorded with audio visual equipment at the Mayibuye archives. These three meetings proved essential for my study and shed light on a number of aspects. It would not have been feasible to proceed without them.

My interest was also related to the significance of the interaction between the Gastrow Collection and the institution of the Mayibuye Centre for History and Culture as central to the narrative of resistance and oppression, that was later transformed into the premier archive of the new South Africa, the archive of the Robben Island Museum. My interest in this study is to examine the Gastrow Collection from two points of view. The first is to examine it as an object through its formation and transformations and its associated meanings. The second is to examine the collection from the point of collective biographies of *Who's Who*, which constituted the Gastrow project of five publications.

The work is structured in three chapters. Chapter One is an examination of the conceptual and methodological considerations in the field of biography. The various *genera* of biography were looked at with greater attention devoted to those of *collective biography* and *biography of the object* into which it is convenient to categorise the work of Shelagh Gastrow. Chapter Two examines her motivation for the publications as a project and analyses the content of the collection in terms of the materials that were amassed during her research towards the publications. It also examines her publications as a form of collective biography and the purpose which gave birth to the body of materials deposited at the archive. The chapter ends with the donation of the collection. Chapter Three focuses

on the trajectories of both the archival collection and the Mayibuye archives and traces their series of transformations as they play roles in producing narratives of South Africa.



CHAPTER ONE

ARCHIVES, COLLECTIVE BIOGRAPHY AND THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THINGS

This chapter seeks to explain the conceptual terrain of this mini-thesis and is concerned with two central questions: collective biography and the biography of archives. This work examines the way certain *genera* of biography are used as a means of investigating and understanding social patterns and periods. The key question the study engages with is what the biography of a person or grouped biography of a class of persons reveals of South African society, and how differently this genus of biography undertakes its assignment of social investigation. It also engages with the argument gaining ground about the role of objects in society. The view that objects lead social lives gives impetus to the argument that such objects generate perspectives about the societies they represent. Thus an examination of the trajectory of their series of transformations should yield narratives relevant to society. Consequently, the study engages with the biographical genus of the object as a catalyst to eke out representation of certain key periods of South Africa. To achieve the objective of social investigation, it focuses on the concept of representivity. The ability of the genus of biography to investigate a social period depends on how representative it is of that society.

Biography and history

Biography is commonly understood as ‘simply writing a life’¹ and has thus been associated with the life of people. It is common to read the biographies of individuals from bookshelves of community and institutional libraries. With the advent of the so-

¹ Birgitta Svensson, ‘The Power of Biography: Criminal Policy, Prison Life, and the Formation of Critical Identities in the Swedish Welfare State’ in Deborah E. Reed-Danahay (ed.), *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 99.

called information and communication revolution, it is even more common to have access to numerous biographies via the internet. What seems to be the common feature is the prominent role of such biographical subjects in society. It is not uncommon to have access to the biographies of former heads of state and other prominent politicians. Equally common are biographies of people who are associated with major inventions or those who have championed one cause or another and have consequently become in/famous.

However, biography is not limited to the construction of individual lives. Clingman has noted that the work of biography is potentially amenable to other studies such as to assess how such lives influence events or how they in turn are influenced by the events.² The challenge appears to be how such biographies generate social perspectives rather than being limited to individual experiences. Given the view of biography as writing a life, the position that it could be used for social investigation is plausible. But the question remains of what kind of biography would be suitable for such social investigation. Whilst specific persons may be treated as individuals when the focus is on them for purposes of description or for other purposes, individuals live social lives, not in isolation from others.

The role of biography in history appears to have gained currency for its research purposes. The characterisation of a 'biographical turn' signifies a growing preference towards its use for desired ends.³ Whilst conceding that the use of biography as a historical practice has been long favoured, Caine observes that the shift indicates a 'new preoccupation', thus emphasising its value and popularity. Biography has thus been a means of understanding society and continues to feature even more prominently in this role for contemporary

² See Stephen Clingman, 'Biography and Representation: Some Analogies from Fiction', Paper for Presentation at the History Workshop Conference, University of the Witwatersrand, February 1987, 17.

³ The biographical turn is used in reference to the tilt in favour of biography in the humanities and social sciences 'over the last two or three decades'. See Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (London: Macmillan, 2010), 1.

society. It is useful for understanding ‘the whole process of social and historical change’. Besides its apparent ability to illuminate various periods, it is also favoured for harnessing historical information of those seen as marginalised.⁴ Considering that biography is structured to investigate specific lives, its ability to unearth details in various environments, small or large, is feasible. Its uses transcend the barriers between the individual and the social, the great and small, the public and the personal. Thus, the need to analyse changes in social periods appears to provide a new sense of motivation for the use of biography.

Collective biography, exceptionalism and representivity

The phenomenon of the exceptional, which is seen as persistent in narratives of conventional histories, also appears to persist within the practice of biography. Just as representations and constructions of the past are seen as focusing on the roles of great men, the view of biography as the construction of specific lives makes it imperative to look for alternatives to represent the social. The apparent limitation of the study of the individual for social investigation seems to rear its head due to the variety of lives people live in any given society. The apparent limitation of generating social perspectives through the study of such individual lives seems to cause some observers to consider the idea of looking at the experiences of a number of individuals together. For those who consider the idea of the individual as inadequate to reflect society in their study, the collective study of lives seems to offer a better option. For them, the study of a collection of lives is likely to yield greater dividend and open wider perspectives of a given society. Thus, if one life can generate a sliver of social perspective, the study of more lives will generate additional perspectives.

⁴ See Barbara Caine, *Biography and History*, 1.

The question still remains however, whether perspectives from several individuals may necessarily mean an adequate view of developments in such a society. Indeed, the apparent danger of revealing perspectives that diverge rather than to converge may be worthy of highlighting. This has led to the notion that collecting the life stories of a number of individuals, though likely to reflect other shafts of illumination, might only result in several disaggregated experiences and may still not reflect an adequate social perspective. Consequently, other than to indicate that they reflect the lives of a number of individuals, such a study may not do much, and thus fail to generate the social patterns required. The issue of representivity as central in considerations of biography thus informs the appropriate kinds of the collective that might meet the objective of such an investigation.

Collective biographies have been produced in various forms for purposes such as these.

Jenny Uglow's *The Lunar Men*, as an exposition of some twelve personalities in the 18th century, could be seen as being about a group that steered their society, 'tilting it irrevocably away from old patterns of life towards the world we know today'.⁵ Similarly,

Leon Edel locates the 'Bloomsbury Group' in his publication that covers people with background of a culture and likeness. Whilst they are said to commonly deny being a group they appear to be bonded by their abiding belief in the arts, besides living, studying and working together, thereby exerting their collective impact albeit in their various ways. Whilst noting that the lives of this group of 'lions' got intertwined from youth, Edel likens his work on this group of nine characters to beads, that is 'episodic structure ... are strung

⁵ Uglow identifies some twelve personalities as the *Principal Lunar Men* who lived between 1713-1832 including the likes of Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of Charles Darwin of the evolution theory and James Watt of the steam engine fame. They are seen as having led new ideas in their time. See Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men: The Friends who made the Future 1730-1810* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2002), xiii.

together ... and when the string is complete and harmonious, each bead has a relation to other beads on the string.⁶

Then there is the set that reflects relations, perhaps due to their unique association with a particular phenomenon. The undertaking of William St. Claire was a research that yielded an output on two families whose lives converged in his study. As he puts it, the work was not about an individual, it was ‘an account of two generations whose influence on each other was intense’.⁷ Such work, as may seem appropriate, could probably be referred to as collective biography of *kin*. Whilst their familial relationships are clearly apparent, the element of their impact on society comes to the fore along with its feasibility to yield perspectives of the nature of society they operated in. For instance, the work of Edward James et al, published in 1971 could be said to be *gender motivated*, with its title *Notable American Women* easily identifying its gender associations.⁸

Its structure as a biographical dictionary is an exposé described as the ‘first large-scale scholarly work’. But it is also a compilation whose deliberate organization is evident. Given the structure of this production with such sections as *The Colonial Years 1607 – 1775; The Early Republic 1775 – 1825; The Age of Expansion 1825 – 1860; The Civil War and Industry Society 1860 – 1890; The Progressive Era 1890 – 1920; and The 1920s and After*: it seems to identify not merely the chronological arrangement of lives of the periods under consideration and the roles such women played. More importantly, it is employed as

⁶ Edel’s volume covers nine characters, qualifying them as the *principal figures* in the ‘Bloomsbury Group’. See Leon Edel, *Bloomsbury: a House of Lions* (London: Hogarth Press, 1979).

⁷ See William St. Claire, *The Godwins and the Shelleys: The biography of a family* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1989).

⁸ See Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James and Paul S. Boyer, *Notable American Women 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Belknap Press).

a resource for investigating what is perceived as phases in the political development of a nation.

Consequently, the divisions that constitute the structure of this volume are not only related to the women seen as having impacted their society and generation. It is also a deliberate effort to generate narratives using biography as prostheses to inculcate landmarks as notable narratives of the nation. The confirmation of this view is found in the assertion that the articles published ‘constitute a kind of history... for the time span covered’.⁹ Thus, irrespective of what group one focuses on, the potential of collective biographies could be harnessed for generating narratives for a nation.

The Shelagh Gastrow publications could be seen as fitting the genus of collective biographies, given the attempt to fit a number of South Africans together in each publication. Considering the common background of politics as the basis for inclusion in the publications, this provides a specific environment within which these peoples’ lives are presented to its public. But the genus is not a novel enterprise. Collective biographies have been seen as a long established practice that comes in three forms. Keith Thomas identifies these forms as group biography, universal biography and national biography.¹⁰ As far back as classical times the practice of collective biography has been noted as a vibrant literary practice.

Group biography is identified as the first form of collective biography. Its initial application is apparently driven by military considerations with the compilation of the

⁹ The line of argument has been put forward by the editors that biographies of women ‘posed special problems of research and interpretation’, but this has also been linked to social history which is seen as ‘largely unexplored’. See Edward T. James et al, *Notable American Women*, xii-xiii.

¹⁰ See Keith Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography: The Oxford DNB in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

lives of the Caesars and those of the generals by Suetonius and Cornelius Nepo.¹¹ This form of biography is seen as having been widely practised in Italy, before becoming a common literary genre in Europe during the eighteenth century. The rationale for the practice of group biography is perceived to be the establishment of a professional pedigree by emerging groups with ‘scores of collected biographies’ on such groups.¹² Another motivation for group biography was seen as competition among religious bodies across denominations to chart identities of their own through the construction of ‘their own religious canon’.¹³ The first work of group biography in English is observed as the account of Oxford writers to promote the honour of the University of Oxford.¹⁴

The second kind of collective biography which is linked to the work of polymaths in the era of early modern Europe is referred to as universal biography.¹⁵ This is seen as an enterprise fuelled by the advent of printing, thereby making it feasible to compile vast encyclopaedic dictionaries, the impulse being to classify and organise knowledge. This is undertaken with the idea of collecting the lives of ‘all the notable people who had ever lived’. A major project in this regard is a seventeenth century dictionary perceived as an international success.¹⁶ The third category of collective biography has the apparent impetus of nationalism. As noted by Ernest Renan, the emergence of nationalist sentiment required the construction of ‘great men and a heroic past’.¹⁷ But beyond that, nationalist

¹¹ Keith Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography*, 2.

¹² Some of the identified professional groups were ‘actors, administrators, bishops, botanists, dramatists, Gresham professors, learned women, physicians, poets or regicides’. See Keith Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography*, 3.

¹³ Keith Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography*, 3.

¹⁴ The *Athenae Oxonienses* (1691-2) is referred to as the ‘first carefully researched group biography in English’. See Keith Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography*, 3-4.

¹⁵ Keith Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography*, 4.

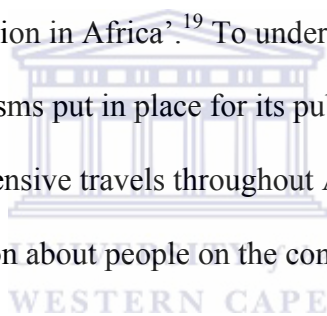
¹⁶ The *Le Grand Dictionnaire Historique* is identified as having been published in 1673. See Keith Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography*, 4.

¹⁷ Ernest Renan, *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?* (1882), cited in Keith Thomas, ‘Changing Conceptions of National Biography’, 9-10.

inclinations also required a literary canon.¹⁸ Consequently, any work based on collective biography is expected to fall within at least one of these three kinds and requires an analysis of the type employed.

Producing Africa through the collective

Collective biographies in Africa have tended to be structured along the argument that the story of Africa has for too long been told by the non-African and has therefore privileged the agenda of the ‘outsider’, thereby demeaning and degrading what is represented about Africa. The *Africa Who’s Who* is structured in this form and supposedly seeks to correct this anomaly. Its publication is seen as ‘one of the most important tasks in the field of general information and education in Africa’.¹⁹ To understand the publication as a feat requires a view of the mechanisms put in place for its publication. As a product of decades of research and a result of ‘extensive travels throughout Africa’, it suggests the provision of a unique depth of information about people on the continent.



Africa Who’s Who is thus a biographical compilation on some 14000 Africans alive from ‘all walks of life’. To underscore its historical significance to the continent, Archbishop Desmond Tutu has asserted that ‘history, like beauty, lies in the eyes of the historian’.²⁰ The Gastrow publications appear to fall within the spirit of Tutu's aversion. Produced by a South African and focusing on lives of South Africans the publications offer the intrinsic opportunity to understand the society and the period they cover. In the foreword to the *Africa who’s who* Desmond Tutu has illustrated how a history textbook they studied in primary school ascribed *stealing* to Xhosas but *capture* to white farmers with regard to

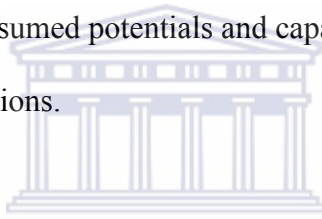
¹⁸ Keith Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography*, 10.

¹⁹ See Raph Uwechue et al, *Africa Who’s Who* (London: Africa Books Ltd, 1996), vii.

²⁰ See Raph Uwechue et al, *Africa Who’s Who*, vii.

each other's cattle during what became known as the frontier wars between the two sides.²¹ Desmond Tutu's history textbook does not appear to have been produced by an author who identified with the Xhosa.

This posturing in historical narratives involving Africans appear to have influenced views from the continent who have, albeit belatedly, taken to the field of historical narration in an attempt to write from the perspective of the *self* without having to create a derogatory *other*. For those who claim to speak for Africa, more notably from the second half of the twentieth century, the arguments have tended to follow a popular refrain of Africa's abilities to hold its own against the powers of hegemony and continued adversity. From its disadvantaged position, the presumed potentials and capabilities of Africa are highly touted among the comity of nations.



The apparent style is to structure such narratives along lines of Africa being no longer a 'playfield' or a 'mere laboratory for ... experiments of solutions'.²² The refrain continues with the suggestion that whilst those whose biographical details have been presented are involved in a kind of championing the re-emergence of a society of people long stigmatised with the disadvantaged *otherness*, they are little known. Positing a few subjectivities about 'bridging the gap' between 'underdevelopment and industrialism' and having progressed from 'mere objects of academic debate to active dialogue in determining the destiny of the entire human race', the arguments seem to establish Africa as a progressive society with significant achievement, sometimes unprecedented, making

²¹ See Raph Uwechue et al, *Africa Who's Who*, vii.

²² See A. P. J. Van Rensburg, *Contemporary Leaders of Africa* (Cape Town: HAUM, 1975), ix.

those projected as contemporary activists worthy of the sort of attention the collective biography seeks to achieve.²³

Thus the category is created on the basis of exemplary heroism justified by achievements requiring recognition beyond what they have ever been accorded. The tone is thus set to present the construction of lives on the platform of such publications. The objective of such exercise would normally be ‘an attempt to assemble’ the specific group thus categorised, ‘under one blanket’.²⁴ Additionally, the view that many such biographies are constructed with biographical detail and ‘background material’ provided by the biographees themselves, raises the question of where to draw the line between the afore-stated objective of biography and the agency of autobiography.

Such projects thus draw attention to their need for another reading in the attempt to eke out the possible objective of collusion between author and biographee. It also involves whether it is feasible to differentiate between biography and autobiography as to the role of biographers to undertake an independent project on their biographees. It is thus instructive for the level of praise singing in such publication in which every person appears to have been provided an appellation of some achievement.

But if such accolades as ‘the African who speaks for the third world’, ‘a cool head in the rough seas of southern Africa’, ‘he had to be tough and ruthless to survive’, ‘the soldier of Africa’, ‘the bulldozer of Africa’, ‘a rock in the troubled seas of Africa’ and ‘a man for all seasons’ to mention just few were deemed a necessity for the construction of their

²³ See A. P. J. Van Rensburg, *Contemporary Leaders*, ix.

²⁴ See A. P. J. Van Rensburg, *Contemporary Leaders of Africa*, ix.

biographies, then their accompanying narratives could be seen as hero worship.²⁵

Consequently, the crop of people in such publication appears to be limited to the top brass of political leadership on the continent. Given that such a project featured only heads of states, the project apparently depicts an exclusive class of the exceptional in Africa.

But perhaps by far the most comprehensive production of lives as a representation of African achievement is the 2011 publication of the *Dictionary of African Biography*.²⁶ It takes the form of universal biography and could be seen as an endeavour to construct a holistic narrative of African peoples. The publishers have indicated that whilst there have been some previous successes in the production of African lives these have been isolated, giving an incomplete view of Africa's history, its people and their legacy, and that 'no single resource provides comprehensive coverage'.²⁷ They have further observed that previous works relating to the African continent are structured in terms of 'the colonial period, European adventurers and Egyptian dynasties'. Thus the strength of the *Dictionary of African Biography* is its attempt to cover notable African personalities 'from all eras and walks of life'.²⁸

Placed in the category of notable collective biographical projects published by the Oxford University Press such as the *Dictionary for National Biography*, *American National*

²⁵ These are accolades that accompanied the biographies of Houari Boumediene of Algeria, Seretse Khama of Botswana, Michel Micombero of Burundi, Jean-Bedel Bokassa of Central African Republic, Idi Amin of Uganda, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya and Yakubu Gowon of Nigeria. (I selected these leaders among their peers in the publication on the basis of regional representation in terms of northern, southern, central, eastern and western parts of Africa). See A. P. J. Van Rensburg, *Contemporary Leaders of Africa* (Cape Town: HAUM, 1975), v – viii.

²⁶ See Emmanuel Acheampong and Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Dictionary of African Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁷ Elena Vezzadini, 'H-Net Discussion Networks-Pub: New Titles 539', 17 February 2012 (accessed 30 October 2012).

²⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research, 'Dictionary of African Biography Project', <http://dubois.fas.harvard.edu/DAB> (accessed 30 October 2012).

Biography and the *African American National Biography*, this publication on Africa is regarded as ‘a ground breaking resource’. It claims to cover ‘from the Pharaohs to Fanon’ and wide in coverage across the length and breadth of the continent. Claiming to ‘encompass the full scope’ of Africa’s history, it engages in the production of lives from as far back as Queen Hatsheput of Egypt (1490 – 1468 BC) to more contemporary lives such as Nelson Mandela. It is therefore supposed to increase the understanding of the continent and contribute significantly to education and research.²⁹

But the *Dictionary of African Biography* could be seen as related in some way to the ancestry of previous projects. While it may not be out of place to relate its direct parentage to the *Africana: the Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, both can be said to draw a longer inspirational, but also tangible lineage from the lifetime project of W. E. B. Du Bois. The *Encyclopedia Africana* was apparently the brainchild of the man touted as ‘the father of Pan-Africanism’ by the dynamic Pan-Africanist, Kwame Nkrumah.³⁰ Du Bois had initially conceived of the *Encyclopedia Africana* as far back as in 1909 to serve the ‘nation’ of black peoples by projecting their contribution to world civilisation and to counter negative images by which they had been portrayed. But, given the apparent encounter with challenges including the inadequacy of finance, the undertaking was not feasible until his relocation to Ghana where Nkrumah provided him with the necessary support for the project. Again, the unfulfilled dream was manifested as he died in 27 August 1963.³¹

²⁹ Oxford University Press, ‘Dictionary of African Biography’, <http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/Reference/?view=usa&ci=9780195382075> (accessed 30 October 2012).

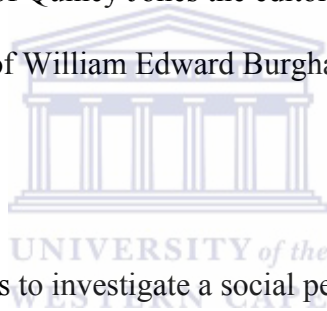
³⁰ The accolade was attributed to Nkrumah who saw Du Bois’ first visit to Ghana in June 1960 as ‘the personification of the outlook for a United States of Africa’. See Clarence G. Contee, the *Encyclopedia Africana* Project of W. E. B. Du Bois, *African Historical Studies*, IV, 1 (1971), 88.

³¹ Clarence G. Contee, the *Encyclopedia Africana* Project of W.E.B. Du Bois, 90.

The apparent failure to realise the completion of a project that spanned over half a century of his life did not get the dream buried with its visionary. Du Bois' death saw others take on the project, to produce an Africa through the lives of its people that would be more favourable than what has been portrayed in other media. The eventual publication in 1999 of the *Africana: the Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* is perceived as a completion of that dream. On the cover of the publication echoes the words of the Grammy award winner, Quincy Jones:

At the beginning of the twentieth century W. E. B. Du Bois imagined an *Encyclopedia Africana* to do for the black world what the *Britannica* had done for the white world. Now at the end of the century, two professors from Harvard his alma mater have made that dream a reality.

As if in response to the words of Quincy Jones the editors have acknowledged in the publication, '[t]o the memory of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois and Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela'.³²



The quest to use collective lives to investigate a social period also necessitates a look at prosopography. The centrality of representivity in collective life study could be recalled in the construction of social narratives. Given that the focus of the exercise is to understand a social period, it is imperative to examine whether the mere collection of lives is capable of undertaking that task. The argument that an analysis of a collection of lives may just result in the discovery of various disaggregated experiences, thereby defeating the purpose of such a study may offer prosopography the chance to overcome this anomaly. Keats-Rohan has asserted that prosopography is a 'multi-layered approach to the analysis of whole societies in defined regions and times'.³³ Given this outlook for such analysis, it appears

³² See Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Africana: the Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999).

³³ Katherine S. Keats-Rohan, 'Progress or Perversion? Current Issues in Prosopography: an Introduction' in *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England* (2003), 3: published at the site <http://www.pase.ac.uk/index.html> on 18 August 2010 (accessed, 30 April 2012). According to the site, the Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon

to provide the basis, not only to pursue the analysis of particular geographic locations, but within specific time frames as well.

The assertion of outcomes based on the use of prosopography to unravel desired outcomes has apparently been successful in its association to specific periods. The value of prosopography appears to be its effectiveness in correcting a flawed view, though such views may have been long held.³⁴ Others seem to acknowledge its role as vital and deem it as ‘one of the most valuable...techniques of the research historian’.³⁵ In certain observations:

prosopography permits the combination of political history, the history constructed around a series of events, with the more anonymous social history concerned with evolutionary change over the long-term, because it links the study of persons who sustained both.³⁶

Thus, prosopography could be said to be of key value to the issue of representivity and hence worthy of employment for purposes of social investigation. Therefore, considerations about life writing will be incomplete without reference to prosopography, much as it is not synonymous to biography. Whereas collective biography retains consideration of the individual lives that constitute the collective, prosopography is interested in specific common elements in the aggregate qualities emanating from the study of the collective lives. But the commonality of collective lives as a suitable means of

England (PASE) is a database which aims to provide structured information relating to all the recorded inhabitants of England from the late sixth to the late eleventh century and is intended to serve as a research tool for users with interest in this period.

³⁴ Focusing on origins of the ‘nobility of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem’, Murray apparently overturns the perceived ‘scholarly consensus’ of their related European counterparts as owing much of their origins to Lotharingia. The analysis enables him to draw conclusions that such association of the nobility with Lotharingia was an ‘assumed character’ and that ‘in the first two decades of the kingdom Lotharingians made up only one significant element of the nobility’ along with nobles from several other states. Other places from which European nobles have originated within the first two decades have included Flanders, Picardy, Normandy, the Ile-de-France, as well as ‘Germans, Italians and Provençals’. See Alan V. Murray, *Prosopographical Research on the Crusader States, the Prosopon Newsletter*, 4 (January 1996), 1.

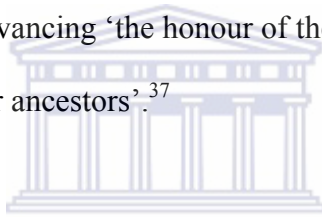
³⁵ See Lawrence Stone, ‘Prosopography’, *Daedalus*, Vol. 100, No. 1, *Historical Studies Today* (Winter 1971), 46.

³⁶ Cited in Katherine Rohan-Keats, *Progress or Perversion? Current Issues in Prosopography: An Introduction*, (2003), 2.

highlighting social periods is illustrative of how the Gastrow study becomes a story of the transition in South Africa.

South Africa, collective biographies and who's who

Collective biographies appear to have constituted a prominent instrument in the quest to illustrate political actors in narratives of the nation. The Gastrow publications could be seen as a project that had the impetus of such considerations, given the apparent focus on members of the various political organisations of the time. But engaging in the production of narratives for shaping the destiny of a country could also be seen as an engagement in a nationalist project. As posited by Keith Thomas the character of national biographies has involved such sentiments as advancing 'the honour of the realm', 'the reputation of our country' and 'the honour of our ancestors'.³⁷



The compilation of dictionaries of national biography falls within this category. In South Africa the *Dictionary of South African Biography* appears to be the first project of this genus of biography with the title of *dictionary*. From its emergence in 1968 through its four volumes it apparently seeks to contribute to the pride of a nation by producing, through articles, the lives of people perceived to be of 'historical importance' and hence 'deserve a place', in narratives of South Africa. It thereby lays claim to lives as far back as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³⁸ The production of 3,400 lives by the publication of the four volumes between 1968 and 1981 is seen as an accomplishment of the inclusion of 'all the important figures who lived before the twentieth century'.³⁹

³⁷ Keith Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography*, 10, 13.

³⁸ See Daniel Wilhelmus Kruger et al, Preface, *Dictionary of South African Biography* (Pretoria:HSRC, 1968-1981).

³⁹ See Daniel Wilhelmus Kruger et al, Preface, *Dictionary of South African Biography* Vol. 4 (Pretoria:HSRC, 1981).

If the nationalist project of the *Dictionary of South African Biography* attests to having covered the lives of those who deserve a place, the *New Dictionary of South African Biography* published decades later in 1995 appears to chart a new course. It seems to identify the *Dictionary of South African Biography* as unrepresentative, concentrating on ‘white establishment’ and ‘male-dominated’ leadership and espouses the need to move away from such tendencies.⁴⁰ In an apparent expression of its capacity to fulfil the aspirations of the social historian, Nelson Mandela has observed that the *New Dictionary of South African Biography* offers the possibility to ‘both record and commemorate the role of the many hitherto unacclaimed people whose work and struggle have contributed so much to the future of our nation’.⁴¹

But it does not succeed in freeing itself entirely from the features of conventional biography. In contrasting itself with the *Dictionary of South African Biography* it claims to provide a platform for such lives as extra-parliamentary political leaders thereby including such lives as those who may not have been that prominent. In addition to the attempt to cover those from ‘all spheres of the marginalised communities’, it also claims to feature ‘women who significantly influenced an essentially male-dominated world’.⁴² If, as Mandela has asserted, it ‘rescues unsung heroes from oblivion and restores them to role models for our future endeavours’, then it claims to undertake the role of social history by positioning itself on the side of the marginalised.

But Rassool has demonstrated that it takes more than claims to rescue the marginal figure from the periphery for the production of biography to stand the test of time. In examining

⁴⁰ E. J. Verwey, *New Dictionary of South African Biography*, (Pretoria: HSRC, 1995), vi.

⁴¹ E. J. Verwey, *New Dictionary of South African Biography*, v.

⁴² E. J. Verwey, *New Dictionary of South African Biography*, vi.

the character of biographical constructions in South Africa, he observes that the Karis and Carter project also makes the claim to ‘rescue from obscurity, the voices of protest in South Africa’.⁴³ Yet the conventional features of such constructions include the focus on the public lives of their subjects almost to the exclusion of their private lives, for which reason it becomes necessary to transcend such constructions. The claim of the *New Dictionary of South African Biography* to focus on ‘aspects of lives that constituted a significant contribution to history’, appears to highlight such focus on public life, and justifies concerns raised about limitations imposed by such provisos to a more theoretically informed way around narrative.⁴⁴

The *Concise Dictionary of South African Biography* published in 1999, merely four years after the *New Dictionary of South African Biography*, lays claim to the feat of ‘extending through the entire spectrum of human activity’.⁴⁵ As observed by Thomas, the preoccupation of dictionaries of national biography has been with ‘creating national unity out of disparate ingredients’.⁴⁶ The lives presented in this endeavour are those of men and women portrayed as prominent in the ‘colonial annals and in the story of South African indigenous peoples’, as well as from other fields of endeavour. Moreover, their prominence is linked to what is seen as their contribution to the birth and growth of South African nationhood.⁴⁷ Although arranged in alphabetical order, its structure along familiar dictates of ‘pre-colonial and colonial times’, ‘apartheid and resistance’, ‘modern government and public affairs’ among others points to an overarching purpose of the

⁴³ See Ciraj Rassool, Rethinking Documentary History in South African Political Biography’, *South African Review of Sociology*, 41 (1), 2010, 31.

⁴⁴ Rassool asserts that conventional biographies cast in ‘realist’ projects do not help in exploring questions around the various complexities around biography such as the relationship between ‘subjects and discursive practices’. See Ciraj Rassool, Rethinking Documentary History in South African Political Biography’, 30.

⁴⁵ See Peter Joyce, *A concise Dictionary of South African Biography* (Cape Town: Francolin, 1999), 6.

⁴⁶ Keith Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography*, 16.

⁴⁷ Peter Joyce, *A Concise Dictionary of South African Biography*, 6.

construction of South African narrative perhaps for affirming familiar tropes.⁴⁸ In this regard, it demonstrates similarities with the afore-mentioned *Notable American Women* as a biographical dictionary with an apparently specific periodic structure of a country's experience.

The biographical dictionary is not the only vehicle employed in South African political discourse. The medium of group biography could be seen as a favoured endeavour in the biographical enterprise by which lives are produced to negotiate details of the national narrative.⁴⁹ In the case of Shelagh Gastrow, the version of a *Who's Who* became the preferred choice to tell the story of the transition through the lives of her subjects perhaps because it had been a favoured medium in South Africa for a century. The 1911 publication of *Who's Who in the Union Parliament* could be seen as one of such projects of group biography.



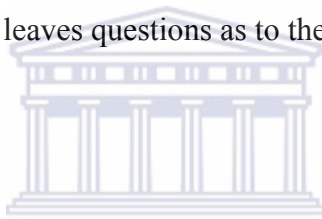
Its distinct character is as an elitist project, focused on members of the two houses of the first parliament in the 'Union' of South Africa. The publication tasks every 'good' South African with the need to know the constitution of the two houses of parliament and follows the usual refrain of claiming that 'comparatively few' know about the members who functioned in these chambers. Whilst acknowledging that the publication concerned persons serving in the two chambers, Gale claims that the inadequate knowledge about

⁴⁸ The blurb indicates the themes that informed the selection of lives produced in the publication.

⁴⁹ Group biography is identified with the establishment of occupational pedigree by emerging groups. It is seen as the first kind of collective biography. See Keith Thomas, 'Changing Conceptions of National Biography', 2.

proceedings in parliament makes it imperative for the publication to ‘supply such information within reasonable compass’.⁵⁰

But, compiling collective biographies of the first parliament is also indicative of the political situation at the time of publication. It was an index to who was inclusive and who was excluded in running the affairs of state. A cursory look at the structure reveals members purporting to speak for the four political provinces of the Cape, Natal, the Transvaal and Orange Free State constituting the Senate and the House of Assembly.⁵¹ The publication of *Who’s Who in the Union Parliament* could thus be seen as providing opportunity for the generation of narratives of the ruling class, but an analysis of this class featured in the publication also leaves questions as to their mandate from the vast majority of South Africans at the time.



A retrospective look from the dawn of universal franchise at the situation represented by the South African legislature in the *Who’s Who in the Union Parliament* is suggestive of not only the dearth of representivity of the representatives in the affairs of state at the time. It also reflects the depth of the situation. Apparently starved of an adequate voice of national representation for centuries, a discussion document espousing the views carried to the remarkable negotiation process in 1992 appears to convey the aspirations of previously disenfranchised actors in a nation. The first subheading of ‘Why we need a united South Africa’ appears to fly in the face of what was once ‘the Union Parliament’. The main title

⁵⁰ This publication features those seen as the foremost political office holders a year after the formation of the Union of South Africa. See Frank Holderness Gale, *Who’s Who in the Union Parliament* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: Cape Times Limited, 1911), 1-2.

⁵¹ Frank Holderness Gale, *Who’s Who in the Union Parliament*, 3-4.

of the document couched in the words *South Africa: an Illegitimate Regime* appears to sum up affairs of state.⁵²

In similar vein the publication of *Some South African Politicians* in 1929 could be seen as an extension of the elitist project in a polarised society through group biography. Whilst this extended project is cast in formulations about a collection of elitist personalities, it is structured to highlight roles in shaping the destiny of South Africa from the onset. The two publications could thus be seen as means of producing narratives to prop up a national character and sustain the features it is designed to portray. At one level, the collection of eleven cabinet ministers, juxtaposed with eleven ex/parliamentarians is perhaps indicative of the political game that South Africa was subjected to in the formation of the caricature of a union that privileged those designated as white whilst still bandying the rhetoric of a *united* nation.⁵³ At the same time, the scheming of what a nation should be at the time was apparently the depiction of an excluded majority in the territory within its borders of administration.

The coverage of different facets of society in the Gastrow project is quite a departure from that of polarisation that these two publications appear structured to achieve. The focus on an extra ten ex-cabinet ministers in the *Some South African Politicians* could be likened to complete a reserve set of players, akin to the contemporary soccer match of thirty-two players including reserves who devise various means of gaining as much advantage to

⁵² The basis for the negotiations as all-inclusiveness in the affairs of state appears to have been captured in the document titled 'South Africa: the illegitimate regime'. It is among the Albie Sachs collection at the Mayibuye Archives.

⁵³ The number of eleven for each of the afore-mentioned arms of government is akin to a game of soccer that requires eleven players for each side. Though clearly belonging to different fields of endeavour, there are similarities in the intrigues required to win in each case which is not lost on me.

themselves as possible.⁵⁴ Except that this time the schemes are not mere games for recreation and entertainment but of serious business of identity, status and who gets what. Under the tactical agreement creating the 'Union' and subsequent policies which are perceived as couched in deceptive nuances, the 'two streams policy' could be seen as a characteristic jargon employed in the design to allot privileges to an already privileged few over the deprived majority.⁵⁵

If the *Who's Who in the Union Parliament* holds itself as a legitimate vessel for pronouncing the character of a nation at birth it cannot lay claim to pioneering the title of *Who's Who* in South African narrative. Touting biography as 'the most universally pleasant, universally profitably of all reading',⁵⁶ *The South African Who's Who* has apparently provided a platform for collective biographies through three publications since it was launched in 1907 before the realisation of the 'Union of South Africa' in 1910.⁵⁷ Perhaps to highlight its earlier birth, the language portrays an objective of a project to cover 'our Colonial life', thereby reminding the reader, albeit retrospectively, of the prevailing political system at a time that South Africa as a nation was still no more than a foetus.

But it has also proved to be the most enduring of the endeavour of *Who's Who* in South Africa. From various angles it could be seen as a publication that is different from the others in the enterprise of group biography in South Africa. At one level, it has proved to be the only publication that straddles the century old journey of South Africa as a nation

⁵⁴ The publication featured eleven cabinet ministers, eleven ex/parliamentarians and ten ex-cabinet ministers. See Lawrence Elwin Neame, *Some South African Politicians* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller, 1929)

⁵⁵ The 'two streams policy' is observed as a policy of reconciliation between the British and Boers whilst limiting the right of those designated as blacks. See T. Dunbar Moondie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid and the Afrikaner Civil Religion* (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1975), 76.

⁵⁶ The quote is an epigraph carried by the series of *The South African Who's Who*. It is ascribed to Carlyle.

⁵⁷ There was a publication each year with the 3rd edition published in 1909.

state from birth. Indeed, having preceded the formation of South Africa it has virtually travelled every decade of the journey of its life.⁵⁸ It could thus be referred to as a traveling companion of South Africa that has produced up-to-date narratives thereby making it a unique resource to unearth the high and low points in the life of a nation.

A notable feature of this publication is the spread of its coverage. Unlike other publications with the title of *Who's Who*, it departs into a form of universalism within the country. In order to give room for a wide range of actors in the country, it appears to have undertaken a break from tradition, thereby producing lives of 'a Carpenter...a Butcher, a Baker, and a Candlestick maker'. The apparent difference in the position of the *South African Who's Who* is illustrated by the criticism that the work is 'not a "WHO'S WHO" at all'. For such critics a *Who's Who* should be reserved for the prominent in society.⁵⁹ But, perhaps demonstrating its statement that 'pride or modesty will keep nobody out' it also features the photograph of 'His Majesty King George V'.⁶⁰ The *South African Who's Who* could thus be said to produce lives representing those seen as low in society, but also for the high.

Unlike the Gastrow project and the others produced in South Africa, Mweli Skota's *Who's Who* dubbed *The African Yearly Register* was a production with a continental focus. It held itself as a champion for the cause of Africa disadvantaged by virtue of its misrepresentations of historians who tended to describe Africans in unsavoury terms. Consequently, the recognition of Africa, in those publications was not the relevance of its

⁵⁸ Whilst *The South African Who's Who* has not succeeded in being published every year it has been published every decade since 1907.

⁵⁹ Ken Donaldson (ed), *South African Who's Who* (Durban: South African Who's Who, 1913), iii.

⁶⁰ As a nation prior to attaining the status of a republic, South Africa had the monarchy of Great Britain as the Head of State. See Ken Donaldson (ed), *South African Who's Who*, iii.

leaders but its enormous mineral wealth.⁶¹ The view was that these descriptions in history books tended to nurse feelings of resentment and contempt in school children for their leaders. Consequently, the purpose of the publication was to arrest misconceptions about the leader in Africa by providing a ‘genuine historical summary’ to show the ‘qualities of these sons of Africa’. It was thus a rescue project that saw itself as embarking on a mission to salvage African leadership since ‘little or nothing is known of her people’.⁶²

At another level, it could be seen as a reflection of a continent in transition. Its structure is reflective of the transitions of a society in various respects. The focus was perhaps to reflect the continent’s path through colonialism, and the struggle for self-determination and democracy. Its references to Abyssinia, North and South Rhodesia perhaps reflected a tracking of Africa’s experience in the interactions with European interests, the struggle against foreign domination and the trajectory through the quest for decolonisation.⁶³ But the apparent tracking was not done in isolation. In order to situate the continent within the global geopolitical system, events and deliberations of the UN were captured as focusing on evaluating situations on the continent. The tracing of UN deliberations in terms of the introduction of apartheid at the formal assembly of the international community could be seen as a testimony to the transformations the continent had undergone in its quest to deal with colonialism and settler domination, and its desire for self determination. The review of manuscripts and the decision to withhold publication of material implied not only the sensitivity to such changes but the priority given to them.⁶⁴

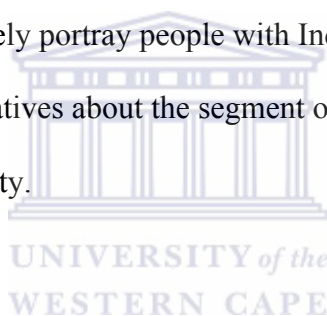
⁶¹ The descriptions ascribed to these historians include Africans as ‘savages...and other vices credited to barbarians’. See Mweli Skota, *The African Yearly Register* (Johannesburg: R L Esson and Co, 1930), xiii.

⁶² Mweli Skota, *The African Yearly Register*, xiii.

⁶³ Countries in Africa are referred to as having ‘gained sovereign independence and membership of the United Nations in rapid succession’. See Mweli Skota, *The African Yearly Register*, xiii.

⁶⁴ Skota mentions he had to hold on to manuscripts prepared for publication because deliberations on apartheid were ‘charged with terrible violent reaction’ hence he had to wait for ‘a better day and

If its predecessors appear to produce lives that fail to reflect the different shades of South African society and favour a ruling class made up of a particular designation, the 1939 publication of *The South African Indian Who's Who* appears to answer such tendencies. But in this apparent attempt to fill a void created by previous projects the approach differs from the Gastrow project of all-inclusiveness. It could be seen as the production of lives as a sectarian project and could perhaps be read as reflecting a society deeply steeped in a sectarian architecture of socio political administration. The segregationist policies of pre-democratic South Africa have inculcated classificatory mechanisms about people based on which individual and collective rights have been structured. In some ways the publication, which is structured to exclusively portray people with Indian background,⁶⁵ could be read as a project for producing narratives about the segment of the population with the label of 'Indian' in South African society.



The production of sectarian publications in the period preceding democratic South Africa in the manner of *Who's Who* could also be associated with other identifiable groups. The project of *Black South Africans, a Who's Who* in 1978 is another enterprise with focus on a specific section of the population.⁶⁶ Thus, such projects constitute an apparent rescue effort, but with specific classificatory focus. Deane has averred that the publication is meant 'first of all to fill a gap' created because there are already books about 'Whites'. Hence, for her,

understanding between the peoples of the continent'. See Mweliso Skota, 'Preface' in *The African Yearly Register* (Johannesburg: R. L. Essonans Co, 1966).

⁶⁵ The publication is predominated by Indians. See Dhane Bramdaw, *The South African Indian Who's Who and Commercial Directory 1938-40* (Pietermaritzburg: The Natal Witness, 1939).

⁶⁶ In the South African classificatory system of people, those featured in the publication were labelled as Blacks. See Dee Shirley Deane, *Black South Africans: A Who's Who* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1978) xviii.

‘[t]his book is about Black people’.⁶⁷ It could therefore be seen as an attempt to highlight the role of people whose contributions have been seen as not adequately acknowledged.

At another level what these sectarian projects reveal is perhaps an ongoing struggle among the various groups affected by the classificatory schemes of aristocracy. It appears an attempt at countering the silences that characterise the colonial archive. As noted by Jacques Depelchin, history has been shaped by the dominant forces of confrontation, whether these are open confrontations or muted.⁶⁸ Given that those labelled as ‘Blacks’ or ‘Indians’ are among those seen as having borne the brunt of South African colonialist and apartheid policies, such productions could perhaps be read as part of the social struggles of the time. The effort to highlight personalities in sectarian publications specifically labelled for such social groups could therefore be seen as attempts at generating counter narratives to dominant narratives about people classified as white. Deane asserts that *Black South Africans: a Who’s Who*, constitutes ‘a dimension of this country’s history which otherwise might become lost’.⁶⁹

A striking feature of the *South African Indian Who’s Who* is its organisation of lives into families. The usual character of similar publications is the concentration on individual personalities and what is put across as their qualities that merit inclusion for such collective biography. Hence it is the individual detached from the family who is usually represented. Instead, this project significantly identifies personalities within the family setting. Thus it is as a family that people are presented with the family name clearly

⁶⁷ Dee Shirley Deane, *Black South Africans* xviii.

⁶⁸ Jacques Depelchin, *Silences in African History: Between the Syndromes of Discovery and Abolition* (Dar es-Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2005), 1.

⁶⁹ Dee Shirley Deane, *Black South Africans* xviii.

written at the top of the page where the portraits of the biographees are shown.⁷⁰ Then the profiles of family members accompanied by passport size portraits usually neatly dressed, many in tie and suit would follow. This might perhaps be to provide a sense of the value attached to family relations by people from India. It also seeks to present Indians as industrious people with a variety of engagements. The purpose of the publication is presented as a form of directory providing ‘reference regarding Indians engaged in trade, commerce and in the professions’.⁷¹ Hence the *South African Indian Who’s Who* is also a commercial directory highlighting the occupational venture of those it presents.

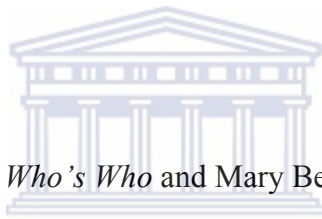
But at a different level the organisation of persons in the *South African Indian Who’s Who* could be seen as a near-exclusive club. Given the overwhelming weight on men, it is significant that the publication creates an apparently limited room for the inclusion of women. The publication leaves it inexplicable, why it has chosen to skew its organisation that sharply. Perhaps females are simply disproportionately few within those regarded as belonging to the Indian ‘community’ in South Africa. The unique feature of this publication in presenting people as families however gives the impression of representing the full membership of each family mentioned. However the inclusion of only three females among the first one hundred biographies suggests perhaps a masculinist inclination.

The apparent imbalance in specific social periods could be read in productions focused on specific facets of the South African political experience. Mary Benson’s 1981 publication could be read as an effort to challenge white supremacist policies in South Africa through

⁷⁰ People are presented as ‘Bandhu Gangadeen Family’, ‘The Bhaba Family’, ‘The Bhoola Family’, and so on. See Dhane Bramdaw, *The South African Indian Who’s Who and Commercial Directory*.

⁷¹ See Dhane Bramdaw, *The South African Indian Who’s Who and Commercial Directory*, 27.

the judicial trials of apartheid. In style and focus, it shares similarities with the Gastrow productions. Given the time of publication the two projects could be read as having been inspired by the socio political environment of the decade.⁷² Perhaps her title *The Sun will Rise*⁷³ is prophetic of the eventual ‘triumph of the human spirit over oppression’ that has turned out to be a reality about two decades later.⁷⁴ It is a unique selection of ten political activists whose statements were to reflect the apparent lop-sidedness of apartheid law as a prism for the ‘hundreds of men and women [who] went directly from perceived infamous trials to long terms hard labour.’⁷⁵ It is a reproduction of aspects of key defence statements made during the trial of these selected figures. As a kind of *Who’s Who*, these men are made to ‘speak for all the thousands of men and women brought to trial in South Africa since 1960.’⁷⁶



But if the *South African Indian Who’s Who* and Mary Benson’s *The Sun Will Rise* could be read in terms of sectarianism and imbalances in the South African socio political environment, Gevisser’s *Portraits of Power* could be seen as an attempt at a cure to such social imperfections. Its attractive outlook of laminated cover in mild pleasant colour featuring the twenty faces constitute the parameters for the title, but also appear to provide eloquent testimony of the quality it apparently provides within. For its fluid approach in style of writing and abundance of metaphor, perhaps its claims of not being a *Who’s Who*

⁷² Both Benson and Gastrow projects are produced in the 1980s, though the Gastrow publications extend into the 1990s. There is similarity in specific personalities portrayed as victims of apartheid policies.

⁷³ See Mary Benson (ed), *The Sun will Rise: Statements from the Dock* (London: IDAF, 1981).

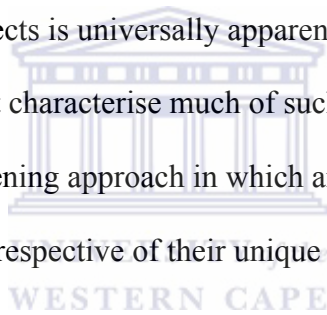
⁷⁴ The triumph of the human spirit over oppression, ascribed to Ahmed Kathrada, is seen as a reflection of end to injustice meted to victims of oppression sent to the Robben Island. It has become the maxim of the Island as a museum.

⁷⁵ Mary Benson (ed), *The Sun will Rise: Statements from the Dock* (London: IDAF), 5.

⁷⁶ Mary Benson (ed), *The Sun will Rise: Statements from the Dock* (London: IDAF), 4.

could be more related to its unique flexibility than qualification for the endeavour. Its value has been observed as ‘serious analytical writing in the guise of profiles’.⁷⁷

Its immediate outlook is a world apart from similar publications, and gives a strong indication of looking at a novel. And in a sense, it is. Gevisser’s story of the transition. He does not present the lives he produces to speak for themselves. As he points out, ‘my approach rather is to recreate the experience of meeting my subject so that my readers can live the experience through me’.⁷⁸ The photographs of the lives produced come in various forms, usually full portraits, with many in a pose of relaxation as opposed to the rigid, passport size that is indicative of such publications. The flexible feel of a sense of production apart from the subjects is universally apparent. Thus, it also diverges from the one-paragraph productions that characterise much of such endeavour in South Africa and contrasts sharply with the flattening approach in which an iron box is created into which each of the subjects must fit, irrespective of their unique qualities.



The *Portraits of Power* appears to complement the work of Shelagh Gastrow in some ways. For one thing, the *Who’s Who in South African Politics* wound up because with the end of processes that led to the elections in 1994, Shelagh Gastrow had considered it ‘no more necessary to continue with the publications’,⁷⁹ thereby undertaking her last publication in 1995. By now the work of Shelagh Gastrow had shifted from being a collective biography to being placed in an archive. The publication of Gevisser a year later enabled him produce lives as post-apartheid achievers. Mark Fish for instance was featured for his role in South Africa’s continental presence in the field of sports. To

⁷⁷ The observation was made in the foreword by Professor Kader Asmal who was Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry. See Mark Gevisser, *Portraits of Power: Profiles in a Changing South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996), ix.

⁷⁸ See Mark Gevisser, *Portraits of Power*, xiv.

⁷⁹ David Kwao-Sarbah, Interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7 November 2011.

illustrate the profound relationship between himself, Fish and the country at the time, Gevisser writes, ‘if I exposed Fish as a plagiarist, perhaps he’d fall apart and we’d lose the finals. I kept quiet. We won.’ Perhaps the gesture is clearer as one of altruism with his claim that ‘I’m neither a sports spectator nor a soccer fan’.⁸⁰

Furthermore, Gevisser’s work appears to speak to Shelagh Gastrow’s in relation to her concerns about the apparent gender imbalance that others have raised about her own publications which for her, reflects the situation within political organisations at the time. For him,

One of my agendas has been to track the phenomenal increase, in South Africa, of women in power since the transition began ... all the women profiled talk to each other, in fascinating ways about gender and power.⁸¹

Thus, his work could be seen as a production of narratives to project the growing influence of women in national life that had been a concern to the likes of Gastrow, a phenomenon which had also been the focus of criticism of the likes of Mary Evans, observed elsewhere in this chapter.

The two also seem to share a sense of personal attachment with the people they attempted to produce. Whilst Shelagh Gastrow mentioned the development of ‘emotional attachment’ with the people she interviewed, which influenced her production at some stage,⁸² Gevisser wrote, ‘you develop a certain level of empathy – not patronising, just human – with your subject.’⁸³ Thus there is an apparent affinity between these two productions which perhaps reflects, the transitional period into democracy, quite apart

⁸⁰ See Mark Gevisser, *Portraits of Power*, 172.

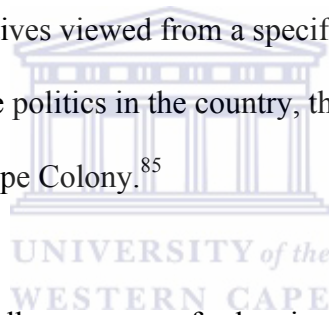
⁸¹ See Mark Gevisser, *Portraits of Power*, xvi.

⁸² Shelagh Gastrow indicated that after the Lusaka interview of ANC exiles her language became emotive and her publishers drew her attention to it. David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7 November 2012.

⁸³ See Mark Gevisser, *Portraits of Power*, xv.

from the previous works identified. Together, they constitute a more comprehensive story of the South African experience of the transition.

The Gastrow collection fits into the phenomenon of group political biographies as an example of South African history as *'Who is who'*. This project which involved a series of five publications between 1985 and 1995 follows the genus of the idea of collective biography as undertaken by Karis and Carter in the 1970s.⁸⁴ But the strand of *Who's who* in collective biography has also tended to have its own methodological variations with significant implications for generating social narratives. The Karis and Carter tradition in South African historical narrative has been perceived as fundamental to the structure of South African resistance narratives viewed from a specific perspective. In claiming to promote the cause of resistance politics in the country, they have indicated the worsened condition of Africans in the Cape Colony.⁸⁵



The publications were supposedly a process of salvaging records during a period of volatile political environment. Deliberate destruction of official records and documents deemed injurious to the ruling regime seemed the order of the day of which resistance campaigners claimed to be 'painfully aware'. The volumes were thus the result of documents 'dug up in gardens, uncovered in chimneys or brought under cover of darkness from hiding places threatened with disclosure'. Thus the selection of documents deemed suitable for publication have supposedly focused on African political activity in order to

⁸⁴ Thomas Karis and Gwendolen Carter were editors of the publication of four volumes on political figures under the title, *From Protest to Challenge* which was undertaken between 1972 and 1977. See Ciraj Rassool, 'The Individual, Auto/biography and History in South Africa' (PHD, UWC, 2004), 115-138.

⁸⁵ They have argued that the limited rights of 'non racial franchise' that Africans shared with whites had been taken away by 1960. See Thomas Karis and Gwendolen Carter (eds), *From Protest to Challenge* Vol. I (California: Hoover Institution, 1972), xv.

provide resources for producing alternative narratives.⁸⁶ The publications are thus claimed to reflect a resource of ‘rich materials’, presumed to offer the basis for an unchallenged narrative of South Africa.⁸⁷ The eventual mission of the publications could be said to be an attempted rescue project given its stated aims, thus claiming the voice of authority for the voiceless.⁸⁸

Rassool has noted that these publications on South Africa have had a major impact on the methodology of resistance narratives by setting up a framework by which such narration was undertaken. By the collection, selection, compiling and availing documents seen to be relevant to the historical narratives of South Africa at a time political movements were perceived to be establishing themselves in exile, the Karis and Carter productions are deemed responsible for ‘the creation of the academic field of black resistance politics in South Africa’.⁸⁹ A feature of the mode is the systematic arrangement of political documents edited to reflect a chronology of events organised thematically. The effect of such projects are seen as constituting an ‘archival sanctity’, while being provided with a scholarly character. Thus the documents constituted the basis for narration of a perceived objective sequence of events where political history is related to political ideas which are ‘read transparently off organisational documents’.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Thomas Karis and Gwendolen Carter (eds), *From Protest to Challenge Vol 1* (California: Hoover Institution, 1972), xv.

⁸⁷ The introductory essays of the publication was supposedly aimed, among others, to ‘describe the main developments in African politics in South Africa’. See Thomas Karis and Gwendolen Carter (eds), *From Protest to Challenge Vol II*(California: Hoover Institution, 1973), xvii.

⁸⁸ The project was supposedly undertaken to ‘rescue from obscurity the voices of protest in South Africa’. See Thomas Karis and Gwendolen Carter (eds), *From Protest to Challenge Vol III* (California: Hoover Institution, 1977), vi.

⁸⁹ See Ciraj Rassool, ‘The Individual, Auto/biography and History in South Africa’ (PhD, UWC, 2004), 118.

⁹⁰ See Ciraj Rassool, ‘Rethinking Documentary History in South African Political Biography’, 30-32.

The final volume of the project focused on the political profiles of personalities in South African politics from 1882 to 1964, seen as a platform ‘giving recognition to the chief personalities’ in the struggle of Africans for rights in white controlled South Africa.⁹¹ Its publication is supposedly an urgent requirement to break open the ‘curtain over a vital segment of South African history’ in the wake of censorship and apparent intimidation of the governing regime against information sympathetic to the struggle for equal rights. With qualification for inclusion based on the triad of ‘political leadership, political influence and political notoriety’,⁹² the project could be seen as targeting the prominent within resistance politics in South Africa.

Archival biographies

Archives and collections do not only contain biographies, they have biographies themselves. Many realise their usefulness for research purposes but fail to realise that at some point they were birthed and have grown through processes of interaction with people. They live according to projects that define their physical and social stature thereby giving them specific individual character. Whilst archives are born to meet specific social needs by which they assume a relationship with the state, their role might grow or diminish along with changes in society as the years go by. With archival collections, they are further subject to the dictates of what Verne Harris calls ‘the shaping power of the archive’.⁹³ Thus, archives and archival collections go through lives of formations and transformations in response to social changes that enable them reveal situations relevant to particular social periods.

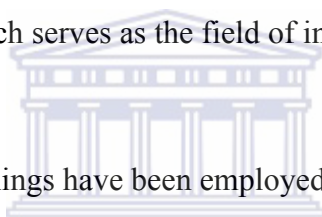
⁹¹ Thomas Karis and Gwendolen Carter (eds), *From Protest to Challenge* Vol. 1 (Californis: Hoover Institution, 1977), xv.

⁹² Thomas Karis and Gwendolen Carter (eds), *From Protest to Challenge* Vol. 1 (Californis: Hoover Institution, 1972), xviii.

⁹³ Harris was referring to the inner workings of the archive by which archivists determine what to include, what to exclude and what to destroy in line with specific ideologies. See Harris, ‘The Archival Sliver’, 144-145.

Thus, to address the ‘central problem’ of representation and the ‘decisive liability’⁹⁴ of the apparent nature of biography of individuals from the social perspective, it seems necessary to consider Igor Kopytoff’s prescription which also seems the suitable option to offer freedom, in the words of Clingman, ‘from the anxiety of the exceptional’ individual.⁹⁵

Whilst acknowledging that besides addressing questions of ownership biography of things may also concentrate on innumerable other matters and events, Kopytoff asserts that the ‘biography of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure’.⁹⁶ In the same vein, Nesje has also observed that objects are ‘recontextualised, researched and annotated with new conceptual frameworks that add further dimensions to the objects concerned’ in the museum which serves as the field of interaction.⁹⁷



Thus besides people, various things have been employed to illuminate what is seen as social realities at various times. Whilst Reddy has suggested a cultural crisis preceding the French Revolution through the analysis of cloth literature within the period some 200

⁹⁴ From a social historical point of view, Clingman identifies the *central problem* of biography as its representivity and expresses the fear that the *decisive liability* of biography is its propensity to be unrepresentative. See Stephen Clingman, ‘Biography and Representation: Some Analogies from Fiction’, Paper for Presentation at the History Workshop Conference, University of the Witwatersrand, February 1987, 1.

⁹⁵ Clingman identifies that much of the focus of biography is on individuals who are exceptional in some way thereby making them seem unrepresentative for historians seeking to use biography to understand social patterns. He suggests that the awareness of typicality – the possibility of exceptionality of the individual as condensing a wider potential in society – may enable the historians see their subjects in a different light of representation. See Stephen Clingman, ‘Biography and Representation’, 10.

⁹⁶ Kopytoff argues that in situations of cultural contact things can show what is significant about the adoption of alien objects in the way they are culturally redefined and put to use rather than the fact that they are adopted. See Igor Kopytoff, ‘The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditisation as a Process’, in Appadurai A. (ed.), 1986. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 67.

⁹⁷ See Pernille Nesje, ‘Representing the Past in the Present with the Future in Mind: A Close Reading of the Cell Stories Exhibition at the Robben Island Museum’ (M.A: UWC, 2005), 29.

years after it had happened,⁹⁸ Bayly has demonstrated the transmission of social value between cloth and people in Indian society.⁹⁹ The two illustrations underscore that apart from persons, things can be representative of social periods, thereby being useful for exploring specific times in various societies. In analysing the circulation of necklaces and arm shells in the kula system of New Guinea, Appadurai observes how objects lead social lives and thus acquire specific biographies as they move from place to place.¹⁰⁰

Such symbiotic relationships between people and the objects they associate with suggest that objects constitute powerful tools for revealing social dynamics in human relationships. Consequently, a good analysis in the study of archives appears favourable to trace the formation and processes of transformation of the archives rather than to accept them as given. As Stoler aptly points out, it is important to shift from things to their making as part of a 'wider impulse'. Thus, the archive should be seen in terms of 'archiving as a process rather than archives as things'.¹⁰¹ In other words, archives and archival collections are not acceptable when viewed merely as a given.

The advantages of the biography of objects in general, but archives in particular make it favourable to examine social patterns representative of the South African political spectrum with the analysis of the archive. John Randolph identifies at least two advantages

⁹⁸ See William Reddy, 'The structure of a cultural crisis: thinking about cloth in France before and after the Revolution' in A. Appadurai (ed), *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*, (New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 261-284.

⁹⁹ C. A. Bayly, 'The origins of swadeshi (home industry): cloth and Indian society, 1700-1930' in A. Appadurai (ed), *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*, (New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 285-321.

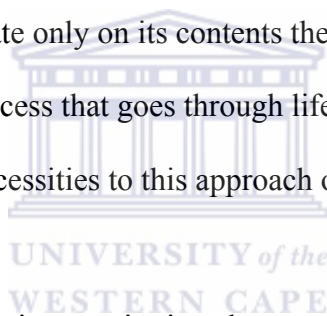
¹⁰⁰ The kula is referred to as a 'non-monetized' exchange system of practice in New Guinea. See Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction: commodities and the politics of value', in A. Appadurai (ed), *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*, (New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 18.

¹⁰¹ Ann Stoler, 'Colonial archives and the arts of governance' in Carolyn Hamilton et al (eds), *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philips, 2002), 83.

of the biography of an object. He asserts that archives as objects gather meanings over time. Also, archives act as subjects of history whereby their evolving historical presence makes certain kinds of actions and meanings possible.¹⁰² The analysis of the archive through the trajectory of its formation and transformations as well as its content is basis for revealing social relationships of the periods it represents.

The archive is not merely a storehouse for documents that have lost their usefulness. It is a space of life and activity whose vibrancy demonstrates what Verne Harris calls ‘a space where energies dance’.¹⁰³ Thus the biographical approach to the study of the archive for what it reveals makes it more favourable to examine them from various perspectives.

Hence, rather than to concentrate only on its contents the biographical approach requires that the archive is seen as a process that goes through life’s journey. Its formation, growth and transformation are vital necessities to this approach of analysis.



The archive is transformed with its constitutive elements both physically and conceptually. It is modified as the product of archival work through which it is shaped according to the ‘historical visions’¹⁰⁴ of the archivist. Importantly, the archive is also transformed according to the prevailing socio-political environment. Consequently, the archive grows or shrinks in response to the rate of inclusions and exclusions of artifacts as well as the meanings attached to it over time. If the biographical approach to the archive thereby offers opportunity to engage in ‘emerging public discourses’ by prying open areas that appear to have been taken for granted, then it challenges realist projects that ‘re-constitute

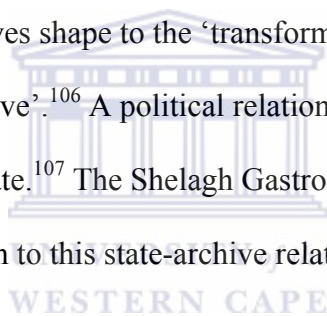
¹⁰² See John Randolph, ‘On the Biography of the Bakunin Family Archive’ in A. Burton (ed.) *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions and the Writing of History* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 210.

¹⁰³ Harris uses the metaphor to refer to the activity and changes that archives respond to as researchers interact with them. See Verne Harris, ‘The Archival Sliver: A Perspective on the Construction of Social Memory in Archives and the Transition from Apartheid to Democracy’ in Carolyn Hamilton et al (eds), *Reconfiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002), 136.

¹⁰⁴ John Randolph, ‘On the Biography of the Bakunin Family Archive’, 221.

the subjects of history’ and the ‘field of History’, as documented by the same subjects who have been portrayed, thereby having significant implications for projecting the past. In South African historiography, the biographical approach also holds promise for the future in that they move forward ‘History already captured and defined’ by the dominant forces of power.¹⁰⁵

Thus the archive generates responses to changes in society as such changes necessitate interactions between archival researchers and social forces. Hence, it may embody the various social and political changes in its environment enabling it to respond to such trajectories. Relative to the South African situation Harris argues that the very identity of the archive is the target that gives shape to the ‘transformation discourse’ in what he calls ‘the shaping power of the archive’.¹⁰⁶ A political relationship is thus indispensable between the archive and the state.¹⁰⁷ The Shelagh Gastrow collection which this work seeks to analyse is no exception to this state-archive relationship.



Furthermore, an analysis of the UWC-Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archives (hereinafter Mayibuye Archives) which took physical custody of the collection provides opportunity to identify not only the new roles the Gastrow collection plays and the values added to it. The study also offers opportunities for assessing its own roles in the production of alternative narratives through the vibration of energies between itself and its collections on the one hand and the relationships it builds with South Africa on the other. The study of

¹⁰⁵ Ciraj Rassool and Gary Minkley, Leon Levson’s *Camera Studies of Native Life in South Africa*, 197.

¹⁰⁶ Harris uses transformation discourse for discourses related to the period of transition between apartheid and democratic South Africa. See Verne Harris, ‘The Archival Sliver’, 144 - 145.

¹⁰⁷ Mbembe avers that there is no state without its archives. See Archille Mbembe, ‘The power of the archive and its limits’ in Carolyn Hamilton et al (eds), *Reconfiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002), 23.

the two archives using the biographical approach anticipates the social dynamics that unfold from the political processes of South Africa.



CHAPTER TWO

THE INVENTION OF AN ARCHIVAL COLLECTION

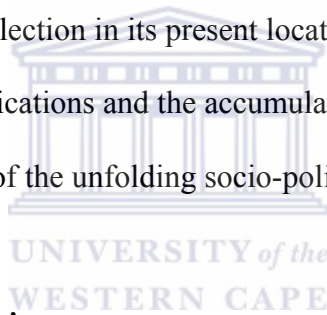
This chapter is a form of pre-history of an archival collection. In order to produce the five volumes that constitute a version of *Who's Who*, Shelagh Gastrow apparently undertook the task of researching a number of personalities for her project. Her focus had been on how to negotiate a delicate balance between people who saw themselves as victims of the exercise of state power on one hand and those perceived as claiming the divine right to run the affairs of state. It is quite logical to expect that the meticulous tact required to execute such balance in producing lives across the socio-political polarity would demand the total effort of anyone engaged in such an endeavour. Bearing in mind the level of hostility between these parties within the last ten years of apartheid, it is perhaps intriguing to imagine the inherent complexity and audacity of an individual engaging people across the divide for an enterprise that would become public.

Unaware of what was happening under her desk as she strove to meet such nerve-racking demand, the enterprise had set in motion a growing body of by-products. The research had resulted in a growing corpus of photographs, paper cuttings, and various profiles from which to rethink and rework the lives that she had set out to produce. But for Gastrow, they were products she proudly pointed at: 'these were my research papers'.¹ But, at the time of the last publication, this body of documents and images had not yet been conceived as materials to be donated to take its place among the myriad of archival collections in the public domain at the Mayibuye archives. To enable an understanding of the character it had grown to assume, it is desirable to employ the biographical approach for analysis in

¹ David Kwao-Sarbah, Interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7 November 2011.

anticipation of its revelations. The chapter therefore traces not only the motivation for and conception of the research project. It also traces the activities that resulted in the formation of an archival collection that she did not intend. It focuses on the process and its resultant product, the creation of an accidental archive.

In travelling the trajectory of this collection, this chapter takes a look at the impetus for the project and follows up with a brief look at the publications as they constitute the aim for which the collection was amassed. The chapter ends with the donation of the collection to the Mayibuye Archives in separate parts. To place this trajectory in appropriate perspective, I have decided to precede the afore-mentioned trajectory with a look at the composition of the archival collection in its present location. Through the biographical approach of analysing the publications and the accumulated documents amassed in the process, one can view aspects of the unfolding socio-political situation of the time.



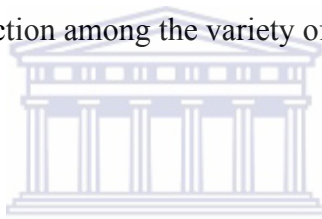
Anatomy of an archival collection

The Gastrow collection currently makes its physical appearance at the Historical Papers section of the Mayibuye Archives. In medium-sized white boxes, they appear to the casual observer as an object without much activity, very much in an archive-as-sepulchre.² It resides in the serene atmosphere that characterizes the section of the archives. As one approaches the cabinet on which it is located one's attention is drawn to the boxes, as they appear to grow larger with each step. But its identity as distinct from other collections is not that readily apparent. Indeed, from barely a metre of the cabinet on which they are

² Mbembe likens the archive to a sepulchre that treats the archival document as a form of confinement to burial by laying it to rest. See Archille Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and its Limits' in Carolyn Hamilton et al (eds) *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002), 22.

shelved, they don't look any different from the several other collections from different donors.

As a result, it is quite easy to by-pass them even though one may be seeking an understanding of certain events and processes in the transition to democracy in South Africa. The value it possesses as a collection from which socio-political narratives are generated may not be readily apparent unless one takes more careful steps in the approach to the boxes. In addition to the necessary steps of caution the approaching figure needs to sharpen his or her gaze and be on the lookout for them. With such a combination in one's posture the chances of locating the collection are brighter, and it is practicable for one to become conscious of this collection among the variety of others deliberately organised in the section.



Obviously, a faster and more efficient means of locating the collection is feasible with the use of the printed catalogues on display at the section. The catalogues are designed to offer a guide to visitors on the quest to locate specific collections at the archive. With such facility the tendency of stealth in order to locate the appropriate collection may now be an issue of choice and no longer a necessity. In any case, the archive is a place where care for materials is a cherished practice because preservation, categorization and classification is sacrosanct. Thus, with this kind of mediated access to facilities there is no basis for any careless rummaging through archival material. The catalogue to the Gastrow collection readily indicates the unique identification of the collection.

The Gastrow catalogue is located among a host of others printed in black and white and artistically arranged on a low brown sturdy wooden table, flanked on two sides by an

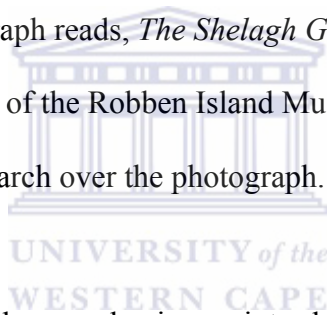
armchair and a sofa to enable visitors gain a quick sense of direction to the collections of their choice. The open space to the table provided by the other two sides without seats appears to give a strong indication of its own. The easy access this space provides to the table appears to be a statement that the table is the practical way to the collections in the holdings of the Mayibuye archives. In a sense, there is the paradoxical twist to this visual communication that it must take a stopover at this table to make the quickest identification of the collection of one's choice. A paradox of less haste, more speed.

The arrangement of the catalogues on the table, which at first looks like the product of an aesthetic priority, is apparently meant to provide space for the easily overburdened table which carries no less than fifteen catalogues at a time. In order to make room for each of the catalogues they are placed on each other in a staggered formation such that one can see only about a fifth of each cover vertically. The alternative would have been to place each on top of the others so that only the one on top shows or alternatively, to limit the number placed on the table by about four-fifths. What this arrangement seems to facilitate is that whilst it enables the relatively small table to take all the catalogues, it also allows an immediate view of portions of each of the front cover and enables the visitor to identify their preferred catalogue without much difficulty.

Thus, the catalogues are a means of signifying a sense of archive-ness. They are also a way of identifying the boxes and the contents in each box, thereby giving a good view of the size of a particular collection. A well-structured catalogue would guide the user in terms of their individual identification features that makes it feasible to locate such items with particular ease. Thus in facilitating the location and identification, of boxes and the items they contain, the catalogue minimizes the inconvenience involved in getting to the visitor's

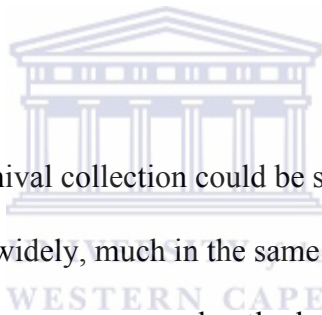
object for coming to the archives, and helps them to locate their collection without much delay. The apparent effect is the efficiency that the process enables in seeking items in the form of images, documents and other publications.

The Gastrow collection has its corresponding catalogue among those found on the table. The cover has the title in upper case, typewritten in bold lettering and placed in a white background. A photograph of the donor with a warm, feminine, welcoming smile is centred in the middle of the cover. The portraiture shows her figure from the waist upwards thereby making it uncertain about whether she was being postured as standing or sitting. But she appears to be about a metre away from a brick wall. An inscription placed immediately above the photograph reads, *The Shelagh Gastrow Collection Catalogue*. Above the inscription, the logo of the Robben Island Museum is conspicuously placed such that it appears to form an arch over the photograph.



It is a well-structured guide to the user, having an introduction divided into two parts. The first part provides brief information about the donor whilst the second part is an explanation to the structure of the catalogue and how it leads to the constituent items in the collection. The two sections are appropriately subtitled ‘About the Donor – Shelagh Gastrow’ and ‘About the Collection’ respectively. In a sense the catalogue acts as a conductor to the visitor and schools the user in grasping the nature of the Gastrow collection. Its competent organization makes one become conscious of its essential role as one begins an interaction with the collection. It is an introduction to the discipline of the archive and so its institutional nature, as much as it is an introduction to the collection.

To show what lies in the pages of the catalogue, a ‘table of contents’ page has been provided, indicating its structure. Here, the boxes that contain the collection are listed in order of chronology and have been matched against the corresponding pages where users can take a look at what can be found in each of the boxes. The labels match the inscriptions on the actual boxes and enable the user have an immediate sense of the size of the Gastrow collection. The ‘contents’ page shows the catalogue as having forty-three pages in all, and clearly indicates that the collection is located in thirty boxes on the shelves. The catalogue thus operates as a form of compass to navigate the maze of collections in the holdings of the Mayibuye archives. Thus in the hands of the navigator, the visitor is led to the specific location to pick out boxes containing specific items of interest.



In many ways the Gastrow archival collection could be seen as having many parts. The number of files per box varies widely, much in the same way as the items held in each of the files.³ The photographs have a pre-arranged outlook as they follow in alphabetical order of A-L, M, and N-Z. These are kept within the first three files of the first box. The photographs were apparently utilized for the construction of lives in the process of developing narratives of persons seen as active in the political dispensation of South Africa. In this factory from which emanated the five products in the fashion of *Who's who*, the conversion was executed by matching text with photograph which gave the production a semblance of reality.

³ Whilst ‘Box 1’ has a one hundred and eighty items in five files, ‘Box 2’ contains forty-three items in seven files with ‘Box 3’ containing sixty-seven items in four boxes. Even within the same boxes there is marked variation of items. The items in Box 1 are dominated by visual images of people in the form of photographs, negatives and contact sheets with only one of the five files in the box containing documents made up of profiles of political leaders.

The intra-box heterogeneity also plays out as one attempts an inter-box observation of the thirty medium-sized white archive boxes currently arranged on the second, third and fourth shelves of cabinet number 31, which also has collections from other donors. Whilst the first box is dominated by visual images, the second and third are dominated by paper cuttings, profiles and biographies on political leaders. The contents of the fourth box are mainly focused on political organisations in South Africa.⁴ And so the contents of each box vary from those of the others. Even with the exemption of the first box that is the only one with visual images, the composition of documents in the twenty-nine others is not in similar proportions.

The physical appearance of the collection as it sits in the thirty boxes appears to convey an aura of serenity, almost as though it has been in hibernation since its incorporation into the Mayibuye Archives. But, the Gastrow collection is not an inert object. It is the composition of a life that has seen a series of transformations already. Out of the composition of photographs and documents the production of five books through a vital period of the South African experience has made it feasible to transcend the Mayibuye archives where some physical presence of the collection could be engaged with. And behind the collection, as we read it, lies its prehistory as research materials and photographs marshalled in the service of the transition or collective biography.

Perhaps, its very position could be read as an index to what it represents. The boxes containing the Gastrow collection are presently placed on a colossal cabinet, whose sheer size and metallic frame appears to convey a message of the significance it represents to the bigger picture of the South African story. Cabinet number thirty-one is a huge frame with a

⁴ Apart from government documents, the contents were made up of documents that identify the ANC, IFP, NP, PAC, DP, CP, AZAPO and SACP.

shiny silvery outlook that perhaps emphasizes its strength. It is divided into eight parts by shelves that run from one end of the cabinet to the other in a left-to-right orientation, creating suitable spacing for eight big rows of boxes at the top, middle and bottom. Each row takes about twenty boxes of archival collections and has provided a platform for the Gastrow collections in the middle rows. The availability of stepladders emphasizes how high one has to reach to pick boxes from the top shelf.

In striking such a calm partnership with the cabinet, it appears the message being conveyed by the archival collection is that of an enduring narrative. Constructing narratives about South Africa could be seen as a long and twisting path with numerous crossroads that provide direction for journeys of ‘Long walk[s] to freedom’, ‘Black Politics in South Africa’, and ‘Bargaining for Peace’⁵ among others. In the case of the Gastrow collection, the boxes could be seen as playing a role in the construction of such a narrative at a critical stage of the South African experience. The Gastrow project was apparently aimed at producing lives and structuring narratives of direct relevance to a ten to twelve year period. Within that period the experiences of heightened apartheid, transitional period and the onset of democracy were told through lives represented as ‘the leadership of political activity’ within those critical years.⁶

In addition, the partnership with cabinet number thirty-one also appears to give an indication of the dual perspective of what the Gastrow project came to represent. The ‘Janus face’ of the cabinet on which it is located might well be read as simultaneously looking behind and ahead, thereby testifying to perspective of both past and future

⁵ These are few of the publications constructed as narratives representing the political environment of South Africa in various social periods. These are publications by Nelson Mandela, Tom Lodge and Peter Gastrow respectively. Their common feature is the reflection of the struggle for political freedom.

⁶ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh and Peter Gastrow, Newlands, Cape Town, 23 December 2012.

aspirations.⁷ Previous aspirations have been seen as an engagement in the struggle against supremacist policies over centuries which have preceded the formation of the Union of South Africa through the policies of apartheid. At the same time, it could be seen as looking forward to other aspirations by which hopes would be fulfilled. It became representative of a nation in transition towards a new decade of civil rights. Thus the collection could be seen as straddling that point of convergence connecting the past and the future, now placed on the shelves of cabinet number thirty-one in the Mayibuye Archives as the receiving space of this paradox.

Conceiving a project

The 1980s and the 1990s could be seen as a landmark period in the narratives of South Africa. For one thing, the 1980s represent the last decade prior to a major shift in policy to include the entire social spectrum. The decade was apparently characterized by a flurry of political activities leading to intensification of already existing hostilities. For all the centuries of supremacist policies with its associated inequalities, this period has been noted as a demonstration of the height of such policies and could perhaps speak for all the years that have preceded it. As by Peter Gastrow observed:

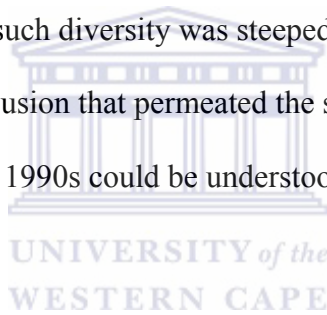
violent state oppression and popular resistance revolt had reached unprecedented levels in the 1970s and 1980s. The White minority government responded with coercive security measures in its efforts to cling to power, while the antiapartheid struggle changed its focus from political protest to popular insurrection and the ‘armed struggle’.⁸

⁷ The cabinet has two sides of same dimensions facing opposite directions.

⁸ The author was head of the transitional council on Law and Order, Stability and Security, as part of the arrangements to run the country in early 1994 until the elections that ushered in what is seen as the first democratically elected government in South Africa. He had also played other political roles previously. See Peter Gastrow, *Bargaining for Peace*, (Washington DC: US Institute for Peace, 1995), 3.

Thus the period represents a kind of condensation of the social struggles and political juggling that, until the 1990s, has come to characterise South Africa among the community of nations.

For the life of South Africa, the period of the 1980s and 1990s is unique. The social period it represents could be seen as epoch making. The complex story of South Africa which picks its source from 1488 is not one of a single country. Leslie Witz has noted that the commemoration of the ‘quincentenary of the rounding of the Cape of Good Hope’ in 1988 had the agenda of South Africa constituted by a “rich diversity of cultures” that emanated from the contact and interaction between Eastern, Western and African cultures in this part of the world.’⁹ But, given that such diversity was steeped in deliberate policies of social inequality and practices of exclusion that permeated the social spectrum over the centuries, the advent of democracy in the 1990s could be understood as a major reference point for endless generations.



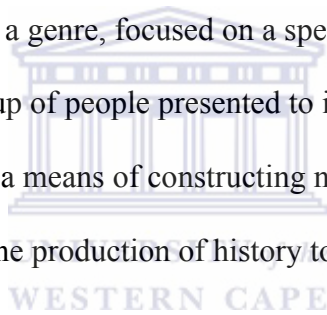
At another level, it could be seen as the realisation of a dream that only remained a dream for most of the protagonists who bore the brunt of the dominant forces of interaction. The five hundred years or so that the tail of Africa¹⁰ has provided a stage for the historical drama of interaction between people seen as originating from the continent and those described as epitomising the ‘settler heritage’ can be viewed as acts and scenes of an

⁹ Witz was making reference to the significance of 1488 in an era of exploration as a time that a sea route to India was ‘discovered’, thereby opening up vital communication avenues between Europe, Africa and Asia that would speed up a redefinition of global relations. See Leslie Witz, ‘Eventless history at the end of apartheid: The making of the 1988 Dias festival’, *Kronos*, 32, November 2006, 163-164.

¹⁰ My imagery of a tail relates to the narrow shape that is South Africa on the map of Africa, a stray into physical geography. One gets a visual impression of a *tail end* of Africa beyond which is only water.

unequal relationship ‘dominated by a settler heritage’.¹¹ The period is a point of convergence. It is a point in a historical journey that succeeding generations and preceding generations alike can only point to in their minds’ eye at what the eyes of current generations have witnessed. It is another critical historical juncture.¹²

Consequently, any project, which demonstrates a representation of the period, is significant in the attempt to analyse the South African experience. The Gastrow project could be seen as an apparent attempt to fill in a gap in the social spectrum. One reason for embarking on the project was to highlight a number of socio-political actors in South Africa.¹³ This is apparent even with a superficial assessment of the project. The *Who’s Who* endeavour is perceived as a genre, focused on a specific category of people and instructive in identifying a group of people presented to its audience as a particular pedigree. Thus the project was a means of constructing narratives, which, supposedly, were to establish a balance in the production of history to reflect South African experience.



In the midst of the volatile situation in the 1980s it was still feasible to sense a changing national landscape and to reason that the change was imminent. However, an attempt to look into the future from that period constitutes an apparent uphill task. Shelagh Gastrow has indicated that her motivation for embarking on the project in the first place was to

¹¹ Borrowed from Stapleton who describes South African history as ‘dominated by a settler heritage’. See Timothy Stapleton, *The Memory of Maqoma: An Assessment of Jingqi Oral Tradition in Ciskei and Transkei* in *History in Africa*, Vol. 20 (1993), 321.

¹² Van Onselen has noted the period between the first world war (1914-1918) and the second world war (1939-1945) as a critical historical juncture in South African narratives when the country was in transition from a simple agrarian economy characterized by master-servant relations on white owned farms to a more complex society with new forms of unequal relations. It is my view that the period under discussion in this study (the 1980s – early 1990s) is even more significant as a historical juncture. See Charles van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine a South African Sharecropper* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1996), 4.

¹³ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town 7 November 2011.

identify leadership of the political parties that were not visible at the time.¹⁴ Thus her work could be seen as a rescue project to recover the marginalised. Consequently, the project was an attempt to locate people seen as future leaders of the country. Viewed from such a perspective, the work is apparently a platform created to present narratives supposedly representative of the time. It could be seen as providing dynamic narratives of a period that anticipated the advent of democracy.

But such a project also involved negotiating the situation of first identifying the people who played leadership roles within the political organisations. The volatile situation meant that

it was unclear to people who were the leaders of such organisations as the ANC and the AZAPO. There was nothing in the newspapers. Everything was seen through the prism of the white cabinet.¹⁵

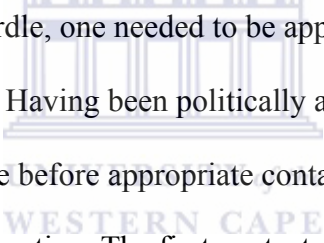
Given the prevailing socio political situation it was necessary to 'identify who the next generation of politicians were going to be'.¹⁶ However, with the prevailing environment, the task of accomplishing the demands of this enterprise was not an easy one to imagine. The apparent tight controls over information exercised by the ruling regime about political opponents appear to present the initial challenge of identifying the personalities that commanded leadership. Furthermore, and perhaps more formidable, was the ban placed on political organisations and individuals. Thus, whilst the ANC operated outside the country with its most visible leadership, others who still resided in the country had to operate underground making them difficult to reach.

¹⁴ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7 November 2011.

¹⁵ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7 November 2011.

¹⁶ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7 November 2011.

Thus the research led to newspaper libraries to search for publication on figures in the news in an attempt to garner enough details for the assignment at hand. But in such times, information did not seem to come easy. Thus leading personalities who should easily have been present with information about them in numerous newspaper publications did not seem to make an appearance. What was also apparent was that the lack of presence in the news by such figures engaged in political activities did not appear to be a wilful abhorrence for the environment offered by the spotlight. Such a phenomenon appeared to be the orchestration of the power of the state to eclipse its perceived opponents. The invisible hand of governance seemed to reach far in its attempt to suffocate all information about such personalities in the public domain.

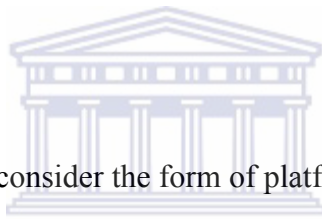


In order to overcome such a hurdle, one needed to be appropriately connected to facilitate contact with such personalities. Having been politically active in the affairs of state at the time, it was just a matter of time before appropriate contacts were established to begin opening doors for personal interaction. The first contact was thus a willing widow whose husband had been assassinated for being perceived as an opponent of the state. Perhaps the case of Victoria Mxenge, who was also assassinated after having provided contact to other personalities operating underground illustrates the extent of hostility towards those seen as opponents.¹⁷ As the project started to unfold, contacting new people became relatively easier as those already contacted led to others.

But the hand of the state is also a powerful hand. Government had its agencies countrywide, and as much as some were operating in disguise and functioning

¹⁷ Shelagh Gastrow's husband, Peter Gastrow, was a lawyer colleague with Victoria's husband, Griffiths, and his connections as a Democratic Party parliamentarian also helped to establish networks that Shelagh used in contacting people. David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh and Peter Gastrow, Newlands, Cape Town, 23 December 2011.

underground, not even the weight of the ground under which they operated was fool proof enough to conceal their presence and offer them the needed protection. For such, their only option was to operate at an arm's length from their country of birth. And so as Shelagh Gastrow sought information on some members of the leadership of banned organisations she was compelled to travel out of the country to have a meeting. That accounts for those about whom there is such a dearth of information that she did not have details to structure a narrative. In 1985, a trip to Lusaka in Zambia made it feasible to engage the likes of Thabo Mbeki and Joe Modise in their office that was 'modest to say the least. Stuff were lying on the floor with a little manual typewriter, and no fax machine'. Life, it seemed, was far from cozy for the leadership in exile and, for Gastrow, it was 'such an eye opener'.¹⁸



Another hurdle to clear was to consider the form of platform on which to place the personalities in the public realm. Shelagh Gastrow's search proved productive as she chanced upon a the publication of a form of *Who's Who* that highlighted the role of people engaged in the liberation struggle of Zimbabwe. Her inclination was an instant recognition of the kind of publication that would be required for her enterprise. Having found this publication to be suitable for her own publications the disposition was to immediately adopt the format employed in this publication for her enterprise.¹⁹

The adoption of the biographical genus of *Who's who*, far from being a novelty in South Africa, appears an established practice to collectively feature personalities belonging to

¹⁸ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow (with Peter Gastrow in attendance), UWC, Cape Town, 9 January 2012.

¹⁹ She does not remember the title of the book but indicates that it was a kind of *Who's Who* of the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe. Most likely, it is: Diana Mitchell, *African Nationalist Liberation Leaders in Zimbabwe Who's Who* (Salisbury: Diana Mitchell, 1980). David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7 November 2011.

specific categorization.²⁰ If the interested reader wants to approach the *Who's who in South African politics* publications from the perspective of what the publications have to offer they might do so with certain preliminary questions. Motivation of the writer, scope of coverage and the basis for qualifying to be featured on the platform of *Who's who* could be few of such questions.

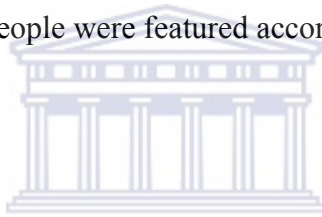
An analysis of the work in such terms is instructive for how representative the publications are of the social period they represent. The first publication in 1995 featured 110 persons, a number which included people of such common public knowledge as Nelson Mandela to such others as General Magnus Malan. Whilst Mandela even in prison transcended the borders of South Africa and indeed Africa, Malan who as head of the Defence Force became architect of the 'total solution' against the 'total onslaught' in the 1980s was only perceived as a 'murky' figure.²¹ The other volumes have similar features and focused on people who were playing roles in the politics of South Africa. As Gastrow pointed out, the initial inspiration was to highlight those in the leadership of black political organisations but later decided to cover all organisations and individuals deemed to be playing roles that define the course of the country.²²

²⁰ Among others, there are such publications as Kenneth M. Donaldson's *South African who's who*, Dee Shirley Dean's *Black South Africans, a who's who*, and Hillary Toffoli and Gus Silber's *Who's really who in South Africa*.

²¹ The total onslaught refers to the internal and external pressure on the apartheid government in the 1980s to introduce democracy in South Africa. The apartheid regime introduced counter measures, which involved seemingly conciliatory reforms together with what was seen as repressive measures in South Africa and neighbouring countries. General Malan, then as Defence Minister after being the chief of the Defence Force, operated these counter measures as the 'total solution'. See the online publication *The Telegraph* of 19 July 2011 at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/8648347/General-Magnus-Malan.html>, accessed 2 July 2012. See also Shelagh Gastrow, *Who's who in South African Politics* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), 153.

²² David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7 November 2011.

The subsequent volumes were published in 1988, 1990, 1992 and 1995. They have basically similar features and never shifted from the objective of covering all organisations and personalities deemed active. The publications are handy, in paperback, with each having between 300 and 500 pages of newsprint, and featured passport size photographs of the subjects covered. The basic difference in each publication is in the personalities that changed from volume to volume. She had to 'take the hard decisions of who to drop in subsequent editions as new personalities became visibly active in the national politics of the time'. This was particularly necessary due to the decision to produce about 100 lives per publication. Thus, whilst personalities such as Sathasivan Cooper was produced in the first publication, Roelof Frederick 'Pik' Botha was featured throughout the publications. Between these two extremes, people were featured according to Gastrow's discretion of relevant political activity.²³



The development of the archival material was undertaken as a domestic activity as she worked from home. In a 1990 interview, Gastrow spoke about how her children influenced her work in Cape Town while her husband was in Durban.

I was limited by the children and constantly moving between Cape Town and Durban, so I hit on the idea of writing from home And then began the person to person interview, again witnessed by young Claudia ... I've often thought of writing a book called 'Who I've breastfed in front of!'²⁴

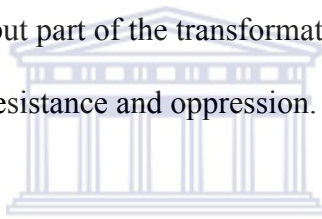
Thus through the interviews, she accumulated hand written notes in addition to the papers and images that she brought home from the newspaper libraries. This body of essential materials, necessary for the project of life production took on a new status as the years progressed. Having determined that the continued production of lives was no longer

²³ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7 November 2011.

²⁴ UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives, Shelagh Gastrow Collection MCH 300, Box 7, File No. 5 Item No 2, Probing into politics (Interview published in the *Natal Mercury* 31 October 1990).

necessary in 1995 their meaning had also changed and they had become the detritus of the publications.

With the idea of transferring the materials to a public archives, its meaning was being reconstituted through the process of association with the identity of an institution of public research and national relevance. The choice of archive for the collection was therefore an important part of this process of transformation which entails the remaking of a collection through the subjection of the collection to the professional dictates of archival practice. The collection is thereby reconstituted into assuming a new identity and an act of rechristening of a collection that becomes an archival collection. Thus, the choice of Mayibuye is not a neutral act, but part of the transformation process of reproducing the collection into a collection of resistance and oppression.



In dealing with the biographies of people and of things Shelag Gastrow could also be seen as dealing with the biography of herself. From birth on 14 November 1949 till completion of High School in 1966, Gastrow lived with her parents in Harare Zimbabwe, and moved to Durban for her University education the following year. Her first employment in Durban at the University of Natal was for secretarial duties a skill which she had acquired through professional training a year after graduating in 1969. She is identified as having got involved in political activity in the Progressive Party from the early 1970s till in 1981 when her husband, Peter Gastrow became Member of Parliament. Their involvement in political activity appears to have given her the advantage in the new chosen field of political life production by 1983 when she began.²⁵

²⁵ UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives, Shelagh Gastrow Collection MCH 300, Box 7, File No. 5 Item No 6.

Biography and history in South Africa

To have a good look at the Gastrow biographies necessitates a look at views on biographies in South Africa. The character of South African biographies has been subjected to analysis over the years. In writing the life of people seen as ordinary, a section of social historians have apparently window dressed their work to conceal the power relations involved in authorial mediation. In a review of Van Onselen's *The Seed is Mine*,²⁶ Minkley and Rassool posit that such practitioners have 'imposed themselves and their radical methods on "ordinary people"', thereby giving their work a semblance of the voice of the ordinary.²⁷

In her review of the same publication Kros observes that South African historiography has been influenced by the 'middle style of declamation'²⁸ from American scholarship.

Drawing on Colin Bundy and Hayden Whyte among others she questions the notion of history as a practice which lays claim to the application of 'rigorous rules of evidence to the historical record' in an attempt to portray it as an objective field of endeavour. To distinguish it from prose fiction practitioners are supposedly required to 'discipline their imagination' by telling 'objective truth', such that the past will 'speak for itself'.²⁹

Consequently, Kros points out that the author has ironically not proceeded on the 'salvage

²⁶ The full title of the publication which is said to have taken twenty-five years (fifteen years to research and ten to write) is *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Share Cropper, 1894 - 1985* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996). See Colin Bundy, 'Comparatively Speaking: Kas Maine and South African Agrarian History' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 23, Number 2, June 1997, 363.

²⁷ Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool, 'Orality, Memory and Social History in South Africa' in Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (eds), *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998), 94.

²⁸ Ascribed to the coinage of Hayden Whyte, the Middle Style of historical practice is seen as a product of the influence of the 'physical sciences which functioned as paradigm for all cognitive disciplines'. See Cynthia Kros, 'Farewell to the Middle Style? Reflections on *The Seed is Mine*', *South African Historical Journal* 37, Nov 1997, 179.

²⁹ See Cynthia Kros, *Farewell to the Middle Style?* 180.

mission' he had set for himself as justification for the publication. She asserts that a careful analysis reveals the deliberate attempts at the concealment of the authorial tracks which are evident throughout the text.³⁰

Minkley and Rassool have proceeded further in their analysis, that historical narratives produced in South Africa have tended to employ oral testimony as the 'voice of authenticity', where memory is portrayed as 'transparent'. This appears an endeavor to justify a practice being put forward as objective. Despite the various claims of attention to detail and the 'critical energy' required for such exposition, such publications are noted as not more than offering certain new insights. Memory is approached as a 'storehouse of oral knowledge' with the implication that it is transparent. It is also seen as 'prior to history' and thus, subject to the rigours of tests and verifications.³¹ In pointing to the irony of the authorial role in such historical practice the situation of those seen as 'hidden from history',³² are further deepened. They eventually point out that Van Onselen's work is his own story.³³

In what appears a more comprehensive outlook on South African historiography, Rassool employs biography to criticize what he describes as the conventional, modernist approach. Such projects bear a celebratory outlook on lives, seen as lived in public spaces apart from their private lives and focus on events rather than experience. They tend to follow a linear structure constituted by chronological narratives and give the impression of the

³⁰ Cynthia Kros, Farewell to the Middle Style? 181.

³¹ Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool, 'Orality, Memory and Social History in South Africa', 97.

³² The coinage of the term *hidden from history* is a reference to the marginalization of those seen generally seen as ordinary people.

³³ Apart from the voice of the biographer which is seen as muted in the publication to give a semblance of the protagonist speaking for himself, there are important parallels between the lives of biographer and protagonist of *The Seed is Mine*. See Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool, 'Orality, Memory and Social History in South Africa', 98.

authenticity of life. Driven by the documentary impulse, the methodology for such approaches is to see documents on political statements, speeches, minutes and the writings of such individuals as deposits of facts for narratives of resistance. Such documents are seen as ‘unmediated windows on their ideas’.³⁴

Identified as an import based on the Karis and Carter³⁵ legacy, a main concern raised about this approach is the lack of theorization in the production of such lives, in spite of the centrality of leadership in the construction of national narratives where leaders are made to speak as subjects through resistance history. The tradition was perceived as an enduring one in South Africa further taken up by political scientists and historians, with the key element being the chronological narrative of political lives understood as ‘prisms’ through which to shed light on political ideas and strategies as well as on social conditions.³⁶

Consequently, the character of the Gastrow publications could be viewed not only from the perspective of the discursive regimes it might locate itself in terms of content. In some ways it can also be read in terms of the methodological approach with which the work was undertaken.

Gastrow as collective biography

In looking at how the analysis of the Gastrow collection could reveal the experiences of the transitional period the collection can be examined from two viewpoints. Firstly, it is

³⁴ Ciraj Rassool, ‘Rethinking Documentary History and South African Political Biography’, *South African Review of Sociology*, 41 (1), 2010, 29.

³⁵ Thomas Karis and Gwendolen Carter were editors of the publication of three volumes on political documents and one on political figures under the title, *From Protest to Challenge* which was undertaken between 1972 and 1977. See Ciraj Rassool, ‘The Individual, Auto/biography and History in South Africa’ (PHD, UWC, 2004), 115-138.

³⁶ The likes of Allison Drew and Robert Edgar have been noted to have taken after the Karis and Carter approach in their work. See Ciraj Rassool, ‘Rethinking Documentary History and South African Political Biography’, 34-36.

constituted by the result of deliberate human activity not only to seek and find. The process has gone further to seek, find, add, subtract, and engage with, in a process of interpretation to create and re-create, resulting in the accumulation of the physical, but also the non-physical features of the Gastrow collection. MCH 300 is just a visual component of a process that unfolded in the construction of selected lives in the South African socio-political environment.³⁷ Thus, the accumulated composition of MCH 300 transcends its perceived location at the Mayibuye archives.

Secondly, in setting out with a clear objective to feature a number of persons as a particular category in South Africa on the platform of *Who's Who*, the producer states an unambiguous claim. The claim is a revelation of figures that shaped the destiny of the state and the work towards that objective is portrayed as the beginning of a process of identification to reveal certain features and details of those lives. Consequently, the publications constitute part of the Gastrow collection. Spanning the period of ten years within which they were produced, the publications apparently brought to fore the players seen as active in the socio-political process at the time. The work to feature about one hundred political figures in each issue, was an apparent design to 'introduce to the general public, South African politicians and some individuals who have a significant impact on political events' in the country.³⁸

Publications of a socio-political nature tend to retain connection with their source collection, which, at some point, translates into an archival collection. Carolyn Hamilton has observed the relationship between a collection of archival papers and publications

³⁷ MCH 300 is used interchangeably with the Gastrow collection at the Mayibuye archives. It is a unique tag assigned by the archives to the collection, for purposes of identification and easy access.

³⁸ Shelagh Gastrow, *Who's Who in South African Politics*, (Braamfontein: Ravan Press, 1985), xiii.

based on such papers from which these publications metamorphose.³⁹ In her discussion of the James Stuart archive, she points out as ‘the most dramatic change’, the publication of the *James Stuart Archive* and the papers from which the publication was undertaken.⁴⁰ Given that the biographic approach to the study of archives may enable the realization of ‘key studies and interventions pregnant with important effects for academic, public and political discourse and practice’, the symbiotic relationship between the two is demonstrated such that the potential significance of the papers prompts further attention to such publications.⁴¹

There is an essential bond between MCH 300 and the five publications and the collection and the publications cannot be divorced from each other. The research documents and images that became the archival collection saw a steady accumulation since 1983 as Gastrow apparently sought information from various places and research institutions to enable her to access details about the persons she deemed important for her work. On the strength of information gathered about specific individuals, she had then set out to arrange meetings to interact with such people as a follow up. In other cases, and rather astonishingly for her, the research yielded no printed information on certain persons seen to be prominent leaders of major organisations, making her direct interaction with them the only source from which she could publish information about them. To have ‘no single file’ on such leaders as Thabo Mbeki and Joe Modise, smacked of the deliberate machinations of state in the mid 1980s to stifle information about people seen as political opponents.⁴² It

³⁹ See Carolyn Hamilton, ‘Back Story, Biography, and the Life of the James Stuart Archive’, *History in Africa*, Vol. 38, 2011, 335-336.

⁴⁰ Hamilton makes a distinction between the papers in the Stuart collection, which she calls his ‘notes’ and the publications based on the collection, the *James Stuart Archive*. See Carolyn Hamilton, ‘Back Story, Biography, and the Life of the James Stuart Archive’, 321.

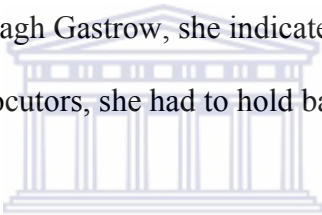
⁴¹ See Carolyn Hamilton, ‘Back Story, Biography, and the Life of the James Stuart Archive’, 336

⁴² It appears there was a deliberate effort from the apartheid regime to stifle information from being circulated in the public media about perceived opponents. At the time of her research Joe Modise was

also spoke of the deliberate ways in which leaders of a liberation movement shunned any publicity as part of basic security.

Consequently, what was eventually accumulated as MCH 300 is valuable resource that was constituted over different research phases preceding each publication, thus providing background material for the personalities. But the interviews themselves constituted another whole endeavour as they apparently tended to yield details that quite frequently superseded the information she had originally set out to eke out. As relationships were built over time between personalities and producer, some of the biographees apparently confided certain details to her that were not meant for purposes of public production.

During an interaction with Shelagh Gastrow, she indicated that in order to ethically protect the confidentiality of her interlocutors, she had to hold back on part of the information they had provided.



There's quite a lot I didn't publish. When somebody says "look, I'm going to explain to you this in confidence", then you stick with their request. A lot of people told me stuff so that I could understand what was happening but didn't want me to record, and I stuck with that.⁴³

Within the anatomy of this visual appearance, therefore, there is unused information in the collection that was considered too sensitive at the time for space in the publications.⁴⁴

head of the military wing of the ANC whilst Thabo Mbeki later became the first Vice President after the 1994 elections, and subsequently the next president after the 1999 elections. Joe Modise at the time of the research was head of the military wing of the ANC. The realization was a result of her search at newspaper libraries. David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow (with Peter Gastrow in attendance), University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, 9 January 2012.

⁴³ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town 7 November 2011.

⁴⁴ Shelagh Gastrow indicates how the oppressive environment of the time made her give her word on several occasions not to publish what her interlocutors had confided in her due to their sensitive nature. To illustrate, she indicated how some of her meetings with people operating *underground* against the apartheid regime were held in obscure places at odd hours to shield their identity. In some cases, their disguises were so accomplished she could not recognize people she knew. David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Newlands, Capetown, 23 December 2011.

Shelagh Gastrow has shed some light on the kind of biographies she intended to produce.

One of the functions of biography is to facilitate the understanding of a particular social period. This is pointed out in her first publication

the biographical information in this collection can help us to understand the system and how it works. From it we can learn what sort of people govern our lives, what kinds of interests they can be reasonably expected to favour or oppose, what issues to them may be ones of principle or expediency.... Similarly, by looking at the careers and personalities of those who oppose the holders of power we can begin to make informed guesses about the type of alternative future society they represent.⁴⁵

In what appears in tune with Clingman's question of biography of the 'exceptional individual' and the extent to which they posed a challenge to the historian's quest to be socially representative,⁴⁶ Shelagh Gastrow posits, 'I haven't interviewed Tutu or Mandela'.⁴⁷ This is a fundamental problem as far as Clingman's perspectives are concerned. For such, and for the social historian, the experience being represented must reflect the social relations within that society. Thus in the case of Tutu or Mandela the tendency has been the perception that they are portrayed as heroes being presented to their perceived constituencies across the status bar which identifies them as followers. The constituencies are thus depicted as lending support to their heroes with the expectation that such personalities will most likely 'represent their views' by articulating their aspirations.

But Shelagh Gastrow appeared to have taken the position of not pursuing an interview with people in the category of the two personalities for different considerations. Her objective appears to agree with the assertion of Kopytoff, that biography could be used to reveal the obscure. For her, the construction of lives as a medium to generate narratives relevant to

⁴⁵ Shelagh Gastrow, *Who's Who in South African Politics*, (Braamfontein: Ravan Press Ltd, 1985), 2. The introduction from which the words were quoted was written by Tom Lodge.

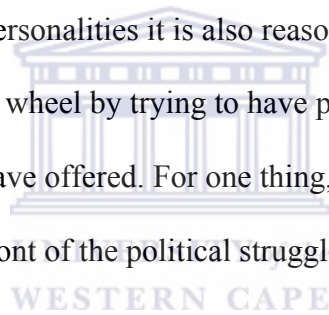
⁴⁶ Stephen Clingman, 'Biography and Representation: Some Analogies from Fiction', Paper for Presentation at the History Workshop Conference, University of the Witwatersrand, February 1987, 10.

⁴⁷ *The Natal Mercury*, 31st October 1990.

the transitional period was also an exercise to reveal the active leadership in the front of a changing socio-political environment. As she put it,

If you could envisage the situation in the 1980s, it was evident that the change was coming. But it was difficult to identify the leadership of the various political organisations. Hence I started the project because I thought ‘someone needs to do this and show those really involved in the struggle.’⁴⁸

Thus whilst her attention has been directed at various people involved in the struggle for democracy she did not find it necessary to engage the two leaders in her interviews because ‘so much has been written about them already’. Apparently, she could get adequate information on the two personalities without much trouble. An exercise to undertake an interview with such personalities was thus based on considerations of necessity. With the public image carved by such personalities it is also reasonable to suggest that one would only have been reinventing the wheel by trying to have personal interactions for any additional details they might have offered. For one thing, they had been in the news for ages and had been at the forefront of the political struggle in South Africa over the decades.

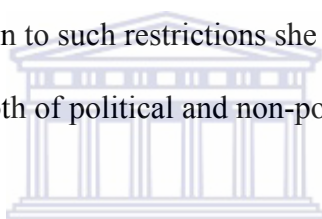


As Igor Kopytoff contends, biographies, whether of people or objects can reveal the social system of a period.⁴⁹ Thus the narratives appear to offer glimpses into the political dispensation that the archive seems to represent. The common feature of the narratives is South African resistance history as the operations of the apartheid machinery attempted to stifle opposing views. It also outlines the socio-political environment within which people operated. A common narrative produced in the publications was the operation of the oppressive forces of the state on perceived opposition. Under what was termed ‘emergency regulations’, men and women were subjected to various forms of persecution.

⁴⁸ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7 November 2011.

⁴⁹ Igor Kopytoff, ‘The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process’, in Arjun. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 89.

The case of Frances Baard appears to be more of the norm than the exception. The series of arrests and detention meted out to her does not appear to be an isolated incident. Between 1956 and 1969, she had suffered series of arrests and trials for participation in protests. By 1963 she had apparently been a victim of a twelve-month solitary confinement, jail term and a ban.⁵⁰ Cheryl Carolus, on her part, appears to have caught the attention of the state as early as her student days when she suffered detention in 1976. Under emergency regulations, the likes of Carolus did not escape arbitrary arrests as she was identified as having been detained for daring to travel to Sweden in 1986 followed by restrictions that defined her territory of freedom as a confined zone beyond which she was not allowed to move. In addition to such restrictions she was supposedly prevented from entering specific institutions both of political and non-political in character.⁵¹



The Gastrow publications appear to have the character of conventional history. As Rassool has noted the ‘framework for the narration of South African resistance history’ is characterised by chronological narratives based on a realist conception of political history and transparent reading of political documents in relation to action.⁵² The collection of Gastrow’s biographies appear framed in this mode with the narratives of life from date of birth, period in school, occupation and participation in politics. But a major criticism of this feature is that it does not facilitate a more nuanced understanding about people with their untheorised approaches to life history as chronological narrative.⁵³ Apparently, the subjects

⁵⁰ See Shelagh Gastrow, *Who's Who in South African Politics*, Vol. 1 (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), 30-32.

⁵¹ See Shelagh Gastrow, *Who's Who in South African Politics*, Vol 5 (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1995), 27-27.

⁵² Ciraj Rassool, ‘Rethinking Documentary History and South African Political Biography’, *South African Review of Sociology*, 41 (1), 2010, 32.

⁵³ Ciraj Rassool, ‘The Individual, Auto/biography and History in South Africa’ (PHD, UWC, 2004), 12.

have been presented in their public roles suggesting that the narratives largely ignore crucial personal dimensions of their lives.

Such suggestions would however have to be measured against the production of lives through collective biography. In the particular case of the *Who's Who*, it might be unrealistic to expect a more detailed production of a life beyond the highlights of birth, education and career, and standout moments of resistance and repression.

In an attempt to feature about a hundred lives in each publication, the average number of pages for the production of each life was about three. For the genus of *Who's Who* – the South African experience – the Gastrow publication could be seen as providing greater depth than publications in the same undertaking. Rassool has noted that the Karis and Carter project has influenced the academic production of lives in South Africa with its conventional approach.⁵⁴ One of the features of the political profiles produced by in the fourth volume of their publications was the short length, usually not more than one paragraph in each case.⁵⁵ This also appears to be the case of many biographical projects such as the *Who's Who in the Union Parliament*, *Who's Who of Southern Africa*, *The South African Indian Who's Who* and the *A Concise Dictionary of South African Biography*.⁵⁶ Thus the Gastrow project provides further details that include aspects of private lives that the three pages might allow.

The Gastrow archive also reveals the existing complex relationships within which the struggles were undertaken. Robbins avers that cosmopolitanism can be embraced as ‘an

⁵⁴ See Chapter One.

⁵⁵ See Thomas Karis and Gwendolen Carter (eds), *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1964: Political Profiles, 1882-1964* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, 1977).

⁵⁶ See these publications in Chapter One.

impulse to knowledge that is shared with others, a striving to transcend partiality that is itself partial, but no more so than the similar cognitive strivings of many diverse peoples'.⁵⁷ The South African political struggle appears to be a convergence of various political movements in a more or less united front against apartheid. The likes of Sam Shilowa have been represented as a cross-breed of approaches with simultaneous positions in both the ANC and the SACP after the organisations were unbanned.⁵⁸

Furthermore, activities in South Africa continued to be influenced by activities elsewhere by South Africans in exile coupled with activities of other nations that had been involved in putting pressure on the regime to grant civil rights and liberties. These activities from other countries suggested common grounds against apartheid across continents.⁵⁹ As suggested by Clifford, the term diaspora is not simply a signifier of trans-nationality and movement, but of 'political struggles to define the local as distinctive community in historical contexts of displacement'.⁶⁰ The Gastrow archive reveals the South African struggle against apartheid from within and without the country was thus a transnational struggle against the denial of human rights.

Concerned about gender associations, Mary Evans has criticised conventional biographies as a vehicle for discrimination by indulging in portraying male lives. Irrespective of the gender of the biographers she posits that such projects are masculinist in nature, organised

⁵⁷ Bruce Robbins, *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture* (London, New York: Verso Press, 1993), 194.

⁵⁸ Sam Shilowa held simultaneous positions in the ANC and the SACP in the early 1990s when the organizations were unbanned. See Shelagh Gastrow, *Who's Who in South African Politics*, 1995, 268.

⁵⁹ See the biography excerpts of Cheryl Carolus presented above where she reunites with key leaders of the banned ANC executive committee members Alfred Nzo, Thomas Nkobi and Thabo Mbeki though her trip was at the invitation of the International Centre for the Swedish Labour Movement.

⁶⁰ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 252.

in chronological patterns.⁶¹ An examination of the Gastrow publications appears to reveal a highly skewed work in favour of the construction of male lives. Gastrow's work apparently gave little coverage to women in the publications with the number of women featured in the publications accounting for the minority.⁶² However she has suggested that the inclusion of their comparatively small numbers was a reflection of their low participation in leadership positions. As she put it

on the issue of women, I always battle because while people expect you to do a kind of fifty-fifty between men and women, if I was really honest with myself, there wasn't many women leaders, though the impact of women's work on politics was huge.⁶³

The conventional traces in her project were apparently expressive of the social environment of the time. Conscious of the volatility of the period she had created a framework into which she fitted the production of her personalities. It appears this was even more imperative as the project was an endeavour to place people from various political persuasions on the same platform. But the other determining factor could be related to the influence of the publishers. The directive from the Ravan Press to conform to a certain level of uniformity in standard supposedly contributed to a flattening effect on the lives produced.⁶⁴

Becoming an archive

This is not so much a collective biography of transition as a collective biography of resistance and repression, rooted in the 1980s and the early 1990s. It is a collective biography of transition, then it is one of the early transition. Indeed, in presenting information about the lives of resistance leaders, it was part of the creation of conditions of

⁶¹ See Mary Evans, 'Masculine and Feminine Biography', in David Ellis (ed), *Imitating Art*, cited in Ciraj Rassool, 'The Individual, Auto/biography and History in South Africa' (PHD, UWC, 2004), 20.

⁶² Shelagh Gastrow, *Who's Who in South African Politics* (1985),

⁶³ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7 November 2011.

⁶⁴ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7 November 2011.

transition itself. Shelagh Gastrow has become one of the birth mothers of the transition. The publisher, Ravan Press had a long track record as a publisher of resistance history, popular education and popular culture. It entered into partnerships with education and cultural NGOs and developed a substantial people profile in the 1980s. By the 1990s it was a spent force and the new business conditions of the transition proved difficult to negotiate. Gastrow's *Who's Who*, it seems, was one of its final publications. In these volumes with Ravan and its resistance pedigree, Shelagh Gastrow sought to acquire a profile of resistance herself.

The Shelagh Gastrow archival collection was constituted through a process. By 1983, she had made up her mind to undertake the generation of political narratives on South Africa via the public production of lives. Her first inclination was to focus on leadership of organisations commonly referred to as black. For her the reason was the dearth of information on such leadership. In that period when it had become apparent that the change was imminent 'there was little information on particularly black politics'. If there was going to be a change of governance to those designated as blacks then it was imperative that people knew the leaders who were going to be in charge of the affairs of state in the foreseeable future. Eventually, the decision was amended to cover the whole leadership of politics in South Africa in order to represent the entirety of political activity.⁶⁵

The research had led her to newspaper libraries with high expectations on finding adequate information on political leaders from where she started collecting required details for her work. This initial process apparently provided information on some of the personalities,

⁶⁵ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7 November 2011.

making it feasible to begin taking notes. Having pieced such notes together further appointments were subsequently made for interviews, particularly, where the information was found to be inadequate. In the process, personal connections became vital for reaching out to political leaders. Having undertaken the first interview with Victoria Mxenge due to the advantage of earlier friendship between the two families, many doors apparently opened for further interviews as she helped to connect other people to the project. Using the Pitman's shorthand she had managed to keep pace with the conversations in her interviews.⁶⁶

But, this research process also began to accumulate material in the form of paper cuttings, photographs and notes taken on each person interviewed. Looking back, what was merely a by-product of her research began to take on a new quality as the years progressed. By the time of the first publication in 1985, two years after the beginning of her research, the collection had begun to take on a new value. 'I did not know how useful they'd be', she indicated in reference to the earlier stages of her research. But now the papers had taken on a new quality as she began to see the papers as her 'most important source materials'. From these she began the publications in 1985. By 1995 the collection had taken on a different dimension and she had designated them as a 'collection', albeit of a pre-archival nature.

For the next ten years her pre-archival collection grew in stature and value to her project. They became indispensable as she gained access to numerous persons whom she interviewed. By 1995, her last publication had been undertaken and she could now have an overview of the whole collection. Her apparent estimation was that she had started off

⁶⁶ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7 November 2011.

rather hesitantly. ‘When I look back, my interviews were patchy at the beginning but as you go along, you gain knowledge and also you start picking things so they start getting richer and richer.’ Her collection was also indicative of the process of change in technologies of the time as she did her initial drafts with a manual typewriter resulting in the growth of the collection with the speedy accumulation of several drafts of manuscripts.⁶⁷

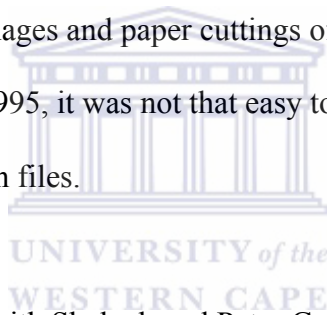
If South African politics allowed the participation of all as equals for the first time in the democratic process with the unbanning of political organisations and people in 1990 leading to a change in the system of governance in 1994, then any findings that relate to that period should be of key interest to the various shades of researchers. The Gastrow collection straddled this significant period with one foot in apartheid whilst its other foot found space in the early democratic South Africa. In-between the two legs were the intrigues that told the story of South Africa. Thus the Gastrow collection could lay claim to maturity, having experienced the political upheavals required within its span of life to reveal the sharp contrasts representative of the five hundred or so years of South African narratives.

The height of such value as a private collection eventually took on a new outlook as the last publication was produced in 1995. All collections can be traced through their stages of transformation from the pre-archival stage. In her discussion, Hamilton has observed that the James Stuart notes actually began to earn the formal status of an archive when her widow sold the papers to an established collector thereby transferring their identity from that of a private collection of notes. After the 1995 publication, Gastrow deemed her work

⁶⁷ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7 November 2011.

done. The change had finally arrived and her collection no longer carried the same necessity for her as research materials. It was her view that the collection should now leave her private custody to a suitable space where others would have access to conduct further research.

For her, the choice of Mayibuye archives for the collection was based on the ‘philosophical fit’ between her personal objectives and what she perceived the archives to be trying to achieve in terms of ‘holding the history of the change and the follow through about that’.⁶⁸ In deciding to send the collection to the Mayibuye archives, however, there were some of the documents that she still decided to keep due to their sensitivity. Much as it was quite easy to send the images and paper cuttings of newspapers and magazines to the archives as far back as in 1995, it was not that easy to let go of other materials that had been more carefully arranged in files.



Nevertheless, the interactions with Shelagh and Peter Gastrow as part of this thesis perhaps enhanced a process of relocating their last collections to the Mayibuye archives. Peter Gastrow also decided to deposit his collection alongside his wife’s collections on 9 January 2012 in the company of Shelagh Gastrow for another interview towards this thesis. His was a collection relating to his role as head of the transitional sub-council on law and order stability and security, during the transitional period which he deposited at the Mayibuye archives on the eve of his departure back to the US where he currently works. At noon on 24 April 2012, Shelagh Gastrow conveyed the last consignment of what could be called the Gastrow family archival collection to the Mayibuye archives. The collection that began as the Shelagh Gastrow collection has become the Gastrow archival

⁶⁸ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7 November 2011.

collection. This represents a fundamental change in meaning of the collection and epitomises the conjoining of the intellectual partnership, completing the transition in the meaning of the Shelagh Gastrow collection now as the Gastrow collection.

Peter Gastrow's collection also comes with its own narratives of transitions. Prior to his involvement in political activity he had opened his law firm in 1975. His election to parliament in 1981 to represent Durban Central constituency on the ticket of the Progressive Federal Party which styled itself as a liberal party appeared to reflect the direction of activity as the 1980s drew to a close. Peter Gastrow was associated with the suggestion to pass a law of amnesty for perpetrators of anti-social acts based on full disclosure such perpetrators may have played.⁶⁹ His appointment to the position of head of the transitional sub-council on law and order, stability and security is apparently central during the transition from which he saved a number of documents that the subcommittee dealt with.⁷⁰ Like his wife, Peter Gastrow took his step across the threshold to become associated with anti-apartheid resistance in South Africa.

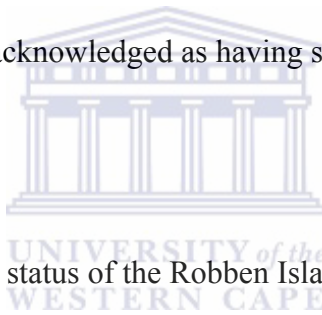
⁶⁹ South African history on line, In summary: South African Politician and former Parliamentarian. <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/peter-hans-paul-gastrow>, accessed, 1 November 2012.

⁷⁰ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Peter Gastrow, UWC, Cape Town, 9 January 2012.

CHAPTER THREE

ARCHIVE AS BIOGAPHY

Considering the importance of the Gastrow collection to this study, its biographical information becomes imperative, making it necessary to pursue its physical progress to its present state through its formation, and transformations. Given its present association with UWC-Robben Island Museum Mayibuye archives, a look at the archives as repository for the collection is equally essential. The Mayibuye archives operates as the official archive for the Robben Island Museum. As a world heritage site Robben Island situated on the southwestern coast of South Africa and the African continent commands resources of both tangible and intangible nature acknowledged as having significant *cultural* and *natural* value to humanity.¹



This uniqueness of the heritage status of the Robben Island is captured in the words, ‘the triumph of the human spirit over oppression’.² For this spirit, the human spirit is significant as a battleground between the forces of domination and resistance that have characterized the South African experience over centuries. For this study, a critical period could be seen as a culmination of these centuries of interaction between these opposing forces of hegemony and the subaltern. The Gastrow archival collection and the Mayibuye archive are thus active partakers of the critical historical juncture³ of the South African experience. Thus the attempt to employ the biographical approach in assessing the role of

¹ Cultural and natural heritage values are commonly used in reference to such heritage resources that have been formed or modified by human activity or by nature

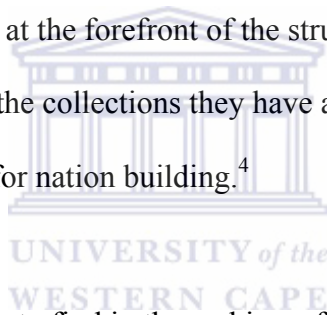
² An apparent appraisal of activities related to the island over the centuries has supposedly culminated in a ‘statement of significance’ for its heritage status. See the integrated conservation management plan of the Robben Island

³ See chapter two.

an archival collection and its associated archive is in anticipation of the meanings they offer to this period in South Africa that radiates the centuries of South African experience.

The role of an archive

The Mayibuye archives welcomes collections of various kinds for the Museum and provides space for donations of known figures of the anti apartheid struggle such as Albie Sachs, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Ahmed Kathrada. These personalities have apparently found it a fitting space and in it, an indispensable companion in the role of redefining a nation. Such collaborative roles do not end with individuals. Organisations such as the African National Congress and the South African Congress of Trade Unions, that are perceived to have been at the forefront of the struggle also appear to find in the archive, a fitting sanctuary for the collections they have amassed over the decades that have become fertile resources for nation building.⁴

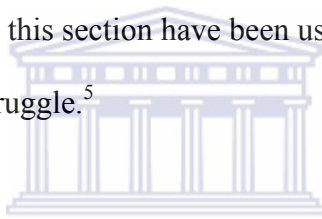


But beyond that, they also seem to find in the archive a fitting partnership in the continued enterprise of the production of narratives in the delicate art of navigating a nation. The structure of these collections also include those donated by coalitions of forces such as the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the United Democratic Front which have apparently found the archives as suitable place for their donations. This reputation of the Mayibuye archive as an anti-apartheid entity has apparently been transferred into the post-apartheid period where it appears to continue to attract further donations from individuals and organisations. For the Gastrow collection, a donation in a post apartheid South Africa

⁴ Garth King et al, *UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives: a Guide to the Collections of the Robben Island Museum*, Cape Town: Robben Island Museum, 2001.

to the archive was a statement of common purpose and shared vision between an archive and its allied archival collection.

To perform its functions effectively, the archive is divided into four sections; the historical papers section, the photographic section, the audiovisual section, and the art, artifacts, posters and banners section. The photographs section is supposedly structured to reach out and build interrelationships with community networks on cooperative projects. Described as the ‘largest and most comprehensive of its kind’ it has over a hundred and ten thousand collections made up of negatives, prints and ‘transparencies’ and was built by the then London based International Aid and Defence Fund. Information about the archives suggests that photographs from this section have been used in numerous publications and productions in the resistance struggle.⁵



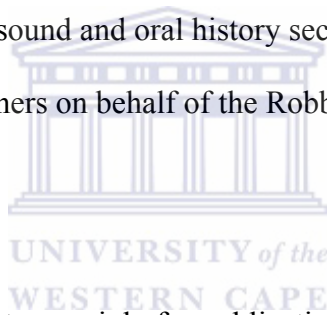
Like the photographs section, the core of the audiovisual collections is also associated with IDAF in its campaign against the apartheid regime. Its activities supposedly won it international solidarity, giving the organization the platform to network internationally in its quest to create awareness against the regime. Most of these collections, which were banned under apartheid, constituted a library and archive with thousands of documentary recordings. It also keeps hundreds of hours of stock and news footage of films and video production projects together with a catalogue and shot list to facilitate access. This section is set up with recording, viewing and dubbing equipment ‘appropriate to all video formats’. Besides, there are other related videos, feature films, non-South African documentaries, and other audiovisual resources.⁶ In the construction of narratives of South Africa, the Robben Island Museum, through the films and videos section retains

⁵ See Garth King et al, *UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives*, 9

⁶ See Garth King et al, *UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives*, 10

distribution rights over video series deemed as providing ‘a deeper insight into and an understanding of the history of our country’.⁷

The sound and oral history section controls what is seen as ‘remarkable stories of courage and human suffering, which were part of the liberation struggle’ on cassettes, tape and in other forms of collections.⁸ These involve recorded stories told during interviews with exiles and ex-political prisoners in the oral history collections. It also takes custody of recordings of speeches and interview with activists from the various social and political representations in South Africa. Its focus appears to be to record events and conferences seen as ‘instrumental in bringing about a new social order’.⁹ As part of the Robben Island’s *Memories Project* the sound and oral history section has undertaken in depth interviews of ex-political prisoners on behalf of the Robben Island Museum.¹⁰



Space of illusory tranquility

The historical papers section caters mainly for publications of various kinds as well as typed and handwritten notes and diaries. A wide variety of issues are covered in these collections including the profiles of individuals, groups and organisations. These include notices, minutes and reports on meetings, seminars and conferences as well as reports in newspapers and magazines. Emanating from a wide range of sources internationally and across continents the resources span several decades and are at various stages of processing, depending, to some degree, on their time of donation. This section is located

⁷ The 50 series dubbed ‘Freedom Struggle Video Series’ is described as ‘unique and invaluable’. See Garth King et al, *UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives*, 10

⁸ Garth King et al, *UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives*, 12

⁹ Garth King et al, *UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives*, 12

¹⁰ The Memories Project is the Museum’s initiative to record what is regarded as intangible heritage for its artifact collections. See G. H. Fredericks and C. J. Van Wyk, ‘Using memory as a tool to build museum collections with special reference to the UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives: the Robben Island Memories Project, 2006, 269

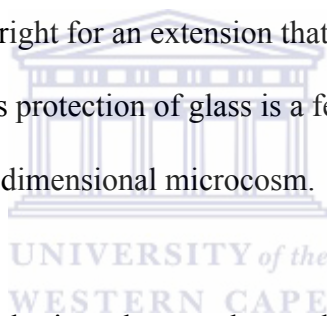
on the second floor of the main library building of the University of the Western Cape furnished with neatly stacked archival boxes with the collections the shelves of 110 metal cabinets arranged in a wall-to-wall formation, and breadthwise on either side of the space provided for the section.

This arrangement leaves a sizable rectangular space in the middle which is used as seating office for staff of the section and provides access to catalogues of the collections for researchers as well. The arrangement of cabinets on either side of the room changes the orientation of the space left from breadthwise to lengthwise as the cabinets take space on either side of each of the two glass doors provided for the section. These doors function as entry and exit to the rectangular seating area and a reading space beyond the second door respectively. Close to the door leading to the reading space for researchers, a low table with two comfortable armchairs serves as place for catalogues to the collections. The historical papers section of the archives is air conditioned for maintaining a constant temperature of 18°C, deemed suitable for the preservation of the collections in their holdings. Furthermore, suitable lighting lining up the ceiling uniformly illuminates the section, ensuring that no part of the section is either too dark or too bright.

There are two main ways of entering the Mayibuye archives. One may enter either through the main campus library or through its own entrance from the northern side of the library building. The main entrance is an architectural design that beckons the entrant from below the building by first having to descend a flight of stairs, perhaps indicative of the philosophy of the archives as representative of histories from below as they relate to apartheid. The doors thus give the impression of the mouth of a creature waiting to swallow its victim into its belly. But the serenity of atmosphere once one is inside can

incite one's imagination, transposing the person into the position of the biblical Jonah who, having been swallowed by a whale, yet had the luxury to work out the synopsis of his project and how to eventually present the result of his research to his supervisor.¹¹

From the entrance one enters a heavily padded interior that also serves as a corridor, leading away from the reception to the offices after a right-turn. The padded floor conveys the impression of the need to move with stealth as if to prevent one from disturbing the peace of the exhibitions that perpetually line up the walls on either side of the corridor, or of the collections which, by that assumption, might be too brittle to stand the sound of footsteps. Midway along this corridor, one is confronted by a unique exhibition as the corridor suddenly opens to the right for an extension that also provides space for its glass-protected attraction. Within this protection of glass is a feature of the Robben Island prison gorgeously moulded in a three-dimensional microcosm.

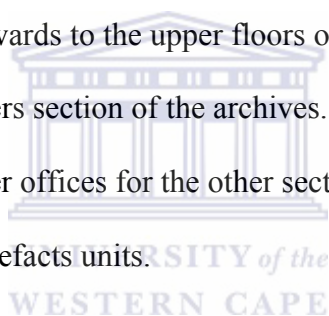


But the miniature Robben Island prison does not have additional meaning for only those who appreciate works of art and for previous visitors to the Island. Perhaps the most significant meaning it ever invokes is of the former prisoners who were incarcerated on the Island for daring to oppose the regime. For such, the memories invoked might be those of separation from family and loved ones, limitation of freedom and subjection to daily routines of a rigid system of daily work. It is also of compelling regimes of dawn-to-dusk activities of wake, wash, eat, work, sleep routines, determined and enforced on them in a system that they must involuntarily comply. For such, the Island invokes memories of oppression.

¹¹ The Jonah experience is an analogy based on the Biblical story in the book of Jonah found in the Old Testament in which the protagonist was given an assignment by God who, in this instance, is the 'supervisor'. According to the story, Jonah was swallowed by a big fish and was vomitted on the coast of the city he had been sent to go and carry out his assignment

But it also represents the birthplace of a new South Africa. From there, many apparently got their political education, though they lived as prisoners. It also facilitated the building of comradeships and enhanced their resolve to continue the fight for equal rights in the political dispensation of the country. It is seen as a place that housed not only the current president of the nation, but also the first democratically elected president of the country as political prisoners. Thus the designation of the Island as depicting the triumph of the human spirit over oppression appears to affirm the view of a national birthplace.¹²

One progresses to an electronically regulated glass double door from which one enters a serpentine corridor leading upwards to the upper floors of the library. This winding slope also leads to the historical papers section of the archives. Between the reception and the glass doors are located the other offices for the other sections such as the photographic, audio-visual and the art and artefacts units.

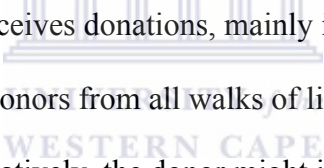


The second entrance to the archives through the library opens at level five of the building from which one descends the winding corridors three levels to the historical papers section. The additional dimness of this corridor between the historical papers section at level two and the electronic doors at level one generates an eerie sense of being engulfed in the belly of a huge coiled serpent. Though without the crushing weight of the inner abdominal walls with which the victim of the creature is said to be crushed prior to digestion, there is an undeniable sense of suction as one's progress appears to be induced

¹² The symbolic value of the Island as a heritage site is captured in those terms as a place where the oppressed did not succumb to the persecution they faced on the Island over the centuries but maintained a spirit of strength that eventually triumphed over 'forces of evil'.

towards the double glass doors that separate the first floor from the Historical Papers section due, most certainly, to the downward slope.

Beyond this point, one is confronted with the electronically operated double glass doors through which one enters the padded floor of the corridor leading to the other offices, this time the reception being the last point before one exits through the main entrance of the archives on the left. The corridor between the main entrance and the electronic doors also serves as space for exhibitions. The two walls that flank the observer as one walks along the corridor have pictures and text telling one story or another, mainly about South Africa. A permanent exhibition on the walls has the title, *Apartheid and Resistance: an exhibition prepared by the Mayibuye Centre for History and Culture in South Africa.*



The historical papers section receives donations, mainly in the form of loose papers and publications and images from donors from all walks of life. The donor may transport such donations to the archive. Alternatively, the donor might inform management of the archive about the existence of the collections, in which case they will arrange to go for it. In the historical papers section the donations received go through a range of processing that include the cataloguing of such materials donated in order to make it easily accessible to users. An ideal catalogue at the archive would entail the recording of each item in the collection by computer in MS Excel. This means that loose papers would have to be identified together with the files into which they are located for purposes of preservation. Because these files are placed in boxes, both the files and the boxes are also identified with unique identification numbers to facilitate the location of items of interest.

The life, operations and political career of an archive

Constructing a narrative of South African journey from apartheid into democracy could be seen as incomplete without acknowledging the role of the Mayibuye archives. Achille Mbembe has observed the indispensable roles of archives with his assertion that ‘there is no state without its archives’.¹³ This reciprocity could be clearly identified between the Mayibuye archives and South Africa. The story of its foundation is that of an establishment looking forward to a desired society of South Africa, whilst acknowledging its antagonistic past. The very mandate of the notion of a ‘holocaust museum’ as the objective for setting it up in the first place epitomizes its role.

The leadership of the University of the Western Cape, described as having played ‘a prominent part in the apartheid struggles’ in the 1980s¹⁴ is acknowledged as having set it up as a centre active in contributing to the national direction of South Africa.¹⁵ If the concept of a holocaust museum is an indication of the level of operation it was expected to play in the socio-political spectacle of the country, the efforts that went into the setting up of the archive could be seen as an index of its anticipated participation in shaping the political future of South Africa. The two years apparently spent in Europe examining the operation of heritage institutions and the related association with the ANC and the IDAF is an apparent exercise envisaged for fashioning the bedrock of a country ready to overhaul its very identity.¹⁶

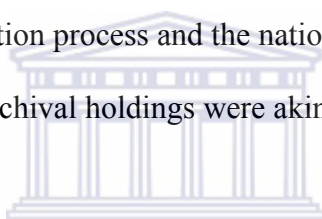
¹³ Achille Mbembe, ‘The power of the archive and its limits’ in Carolyn Hamilton et al (eds), *Reconfiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002), 24

¹⁴ The Rector of UWC at the time is observed as having constituted and charged a committee to undertake a feasibility of an apartheid holocaust museum which saw Dr Odendaal travelling to Europe for the knowledge and experience for 2 years before starting the set up in 1990. See UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye archives, 22

¹⁵ Garth King et al, *UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives*, 22

¹⁶ Between 1988 and 1989 Dr Odendaal undertook the trip abroad in the quest to ‘carry forward’ the work of the committee set up by the Rector before setting up the archives between 1990 and 1992. See Garth King et al, *UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives*, 22

The archive was established as the Mayibuye Centre for History and Culture in 1992 and has been in the centre of activity, apparently contributing towards consolidating the gains of the political liberation struggle in South Africa. It used to engage in relevant socio political publications, using resources from its own collections.¹⁷ The unbanning of political activity including opposition politics in the country culminated in the return and deposition of collections by the IDAF in 1992 to constitute the core of collections to be held by the then Mayibuye Centre, perhaps the premier resistance archive in South Africa.¹⁸ The further development of the archive occurred in April 2000 as the product of a ‘comprehensive cooperation between the Robben Island Museum and UWC’. This marked another stage in the transformation process and the national character it acquired, as part of a national museum. Now the archival holdings were akin to a national museum collection.



Unlike in the early 1990s when the establishment owed its initial setting up as a centre to the academic leadership of the UWC, its transformation in the second half of the 1990s owed its formulation to the national political leadership. This character is traceable to cabinet decision in September 1996 for the establishment of the Robben Island Museum as a heritage institution which concurrently recommended the incorporation of the IDAF and other Mayibuye collections into the museum, thus opening up negotiation between the museum and the educational institution. The successful negotiation between the two institutions of was grounds to disband the centre and operate officially as an archive. The official opening of the archives on 13 June 2001 with the then Deputy Vice President in

¹⁷ This information was provided in an interaction with Andre Mohammed, management member of the Mayibuye archives

¹⁸ A leaflet at the reception identifies the establishment of the International Aid and Defence Fund in the 1950s to contribute towards the struggle against apartheid. Given the threat by government of the time, they operated in exile from the UK until the unbanning of political when they relocated their collections to South Africa to form the core of the archives located at UWC.

attendance is ample testimony of its importance to the nation. The date of opening which coincided with the eve of the 25th anniversary of the Soweto uprisings could itself be seen as a victorious glance at the national struggle for liberation, a glance over the shoulder at how far the national journey has come.

At another level, the hand of the archives could be seen in the fashioning of the post apartheid country of South Africa in its story of transformation. The mid 1990s represented a period when, having emerged from the elections the structures for running the state needed to be put in place anew to address the paradigm shift. It also meant old structures needed to be transformed and refocused for the requirements of a new direction. This role of Mayibuye is acknowledged in the process of shaping the ‘new direction’ as ‘representatives of the Centre’ were seen as ‘actively involved in the cultural structures and planning processes of the new government’. The fashioning of national policies by the Arts and Culture Task Group, the writing of committees for heritage legislation and the pieces of advise on national projects were apparently undertaken with the involvement of the centre which was also tasked by government to set up the Robben Island Museum.¹⁹

The initial activities of the Mayibuye Centre for History and Culture as it was then known could immediately be seen as significant as it was perceived as a ‘pioneering alternative project’. Its activities constituted a major anti-apartheid campaign. It

built up a large collection of multi-media material on apartheid and the struggle. Through its conferences, exhibitions, publications, lobbying activity and policy input, the Centre played an important role in the heritage and cultural sectors during the build-up to democracy.²⁰

¹⁹ Garth King et al, *UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives*, 22-23

²⁰ Garth King et al, *UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives*, 22

Several exhibitions produced by the Centre apparently contributed towards mobilising international pressure on the apartheid regime and, in 1994, fourteen of these travelled abroad, besides canvassing for local support through the towns and cities they travelled in South Africa. Other programmes included the History and Literature series perceived as ‘one of the biggest university-based publishing ventures in the country’.²¹

The nature of the collections could thus be said to be indicative of the aims of the archives. The initial collections consisted of much of materials IDAF had accumulated over the period the organisation had been operating since its formation in the 1950s. Given the role of IDAF in the political struggle as a key anti apartheid campaigner and the designation of their holdings as the ‘core collection of IDAF’, the archives could thus be said to have been at the forefront of the anticipated new course of South Africa. The archive sees itself as provider of ‘unique and often fragile documentary records of South African history and culture, particularly with regard to the apartheid period, freedom struggle and political imprisonment’.²² Thus the archive has continued to feature in the construction of narratives of South Africa in particular with much of its holdings seen as records that reflect the repressive activities of that period. As has been the condition of the period, taking details of activities deemed unfavourable to the regime were dangerous undertakings, often, at the peril of the lives of individuals and organisations involved.²³

Given the identity carved for itself from inception, the archive appears a space prepared for attracting collections from donors, and it seemed natural for donors with collections covering organisations and people who operated against the apartheid regime to choose the

²¹ Garth King et al, *UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives*, 22

²² Garth King et al, *UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives*, 4

²³ The Guide to the collections of the archives illustrates the situation was so precarious that that ‘Mandela’s name scratched on a coffee cup could get you four years in jail.’ See Garth King et al, *UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives*, 4

archives which had positioned itself as an archives of resistance against apartheid. The trajectory of collections within the holdings of the archive begins at conception with the donor as a thought is translated into action and an offspring is produced. In the case of the Gastrow collection, its accumulation could be said to be more spontaneous than deliberate. Archival collections can thus be said to be a product of a process with a lifespan that begins outside the jurisdiction of the archives.

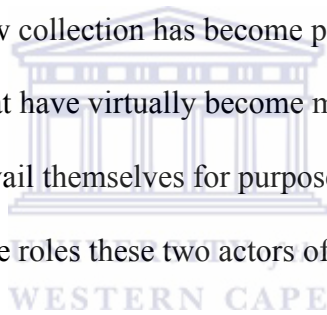
Text is the dominant form with holdings of the historical papers section, as the activity generated from a planned programme is often transmitted into print, some works of art or other tangible forms. Such productions may be in the form of working papers, photographs, audio-visual recordings and other forms of artefacts which may usually be accumulated by the donor as they continue to be engaged in their fields of endeavour. Others may accumulate their collections as a by-product of an undertaking the donor may have been assigned by an appointing authority over a specific period of time. Over time, they may come to the position where they deem the collections would no longer be of value to them, or simply that such collections are better kept by an institution equipped to preserve them.

Another reason for donating may be to make such collections available to researchers and the general public through an institution with the wherewithal to competently play the role of keeping and availing such collections as appropriate. The Mayibuye Archives is a recipient from various personalities and corporate bodies. Some donors inform the archives of the existence of collections they would want to donate and ask management to come for them. Others bring the collections themselves to the archives where they are met by management who would then receive the collections. Donation is thus a process of

transaction between donor and recipient which involves the filling of a deed form, thereby providing records of provenance and meeting other requirements including special requests from donors about the collection such as limited access of the public to that collection.

Transformations of an archival collection

The companionship between the Mayibuye archives and the Gastrow collection is a journey spanning a period of some seventeen years. The main part of the collection is currently located on the shelves of the archive. At this stage, it is available for public access and use, as people seek information for their varied projects. Currently located at on cabinet number 31, the Gastrow collection has become part of the archive itself. It sits among the other collections that have virtually become members of the archive for which people from all walks of life avail themselves for purposes of research. Thus a sense of partnership has been built in the roles these two actors of state have chosen to travel.



In certain ways, such partnership has meant another stage in the life of the collection. Its association with the Mayibuye archives has contributed to further processing, resulting in some additional features. It might appear that a sense of incorporation into family life must inevitably call for the acquisition of analogous features with other members of the family. The collection has been organised in consonance with archival practice thereby making it conform to the family standards of the Mayibuye archives. With its location among other collections it now opens up to the public after following the protocol of archival request for specific collections administered by the archive.

Its location at the archive has been accomplished as the destination of a complex journey which also serves as trajectories of transformation. As asserted by Randolph, ‘an archive is not a unified autonomous agent ... at any point it is subject to dismemberment and integration into some new entity’.²⁴ Its journey from the donor to its present location has apparently contributed to its transformation, as has been the process of cataloguing which has re-christened the individual ‘members’ (documents and images) of the archive in the form of unique identification numbers. Out of this process is the production of both electronic and hard copies of the catalogue titled, ‘The Gastrow Collection’.²⁵

With the completion of the process of transition the objective of the publications was deemed to have been accomplished and it was now ‘clear who the leadership was, particularly of black politics’.²⁶ Apparently sticking to that objective the decision to wind down on subsequent publications of the *Who’s Who* series was effected. The participation of all political organisations and people previously banned was generally seen as a success of the transitional processes leading to democracy. As a result of the unique 1994 general elections there emerged what had been perceived over the decades as the deprived sections of the South African society. Thus the last production of lives through the series was considered done with the fifth publication in 1995.²⁷

With the impetus for the production of lives now over it at became apparent to redefine the role of the corpus of material amassed over the period. But a redefinition of the role of a collection that has reached out to a hundred lives per publication and been progressively enriched over a twelve year period does not come easy. Consequently, such decision is

²⁴ John Randolph, ‘On the Biography of the Bakunin Family Archive’, 211

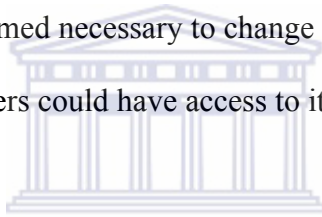
²⁵ The collection was catalogued in May/June 2011 and has both print and electronic forms available at the Mayibuye Archives

²⁶ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town 7 November 2011.

²⁷ See Shelagh Gastrow, *Who’s Who in South African Politics* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1995).

made conscious of the many dimensions that the materials have come to relate to. A relevant consideration was that of relocation. For, if she no longer has to keep poring over them for long hours as has been the case over the years, then it might be necessary to shift its position from the comfort zone of the domestic space it has enjoyed.

Another consideration apparently factored into the decision has been the question of access. The question relates to whether it should remain in private custody or whether it has now matured enough to have a life of independence where it could open to engagement with society. That decision itself has a subsection for considering whether it should still have restrictions to sections of society or that it should be universally open to society at large. Subsequently, it was deemed necessary to change the location of the corpus of materials to ‘a place where others could have access to it whenever they wished’.²⁸

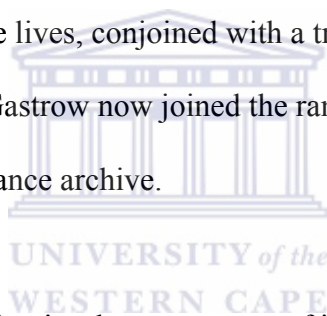


But relocating the collection does not mean ending an objective that has taken over a decade to follow through. The life of the collection by this time has gained its own identity with associated meanings and required that any treatment of this life needed considerations further considerations. Of key consideration was compatibility with members of the new society it was to be relocated. Thus the eventual decision to relocate the Gastrow collection to the Mayibuye archives was a hard thought one with several considerations that included what the archive appeared to be its objectives for being in existence. Eventually Gastrow found in Mayibuye a ‘philosophical fit’ between the activities of the archive and her own objectives. Explaining further she averred, ‘what I saw in Mayibuye was, holding the history of the change and the follow through about that’.²⁹

²⁸ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town 7 November 2011.

²⁹ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town 7 November 2011.

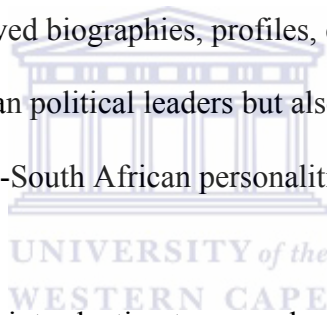
The acceptance of the Gastrow collection at Mayibuye thus gave it an instant change of identity from a privately held collection to a public-oriented institution. Thus the question of access had become translated from that of individual access to a collection that the public are able to access quite at will. Moreover, it had joined by same virtue a family of anti-apartheid society where various collections of individuals, organisations and coalitions found suitable space on the shelves. What was common among these family members was their stance against the spirit and letter of apartheid. Then the processing of this collection at the archive could be seen as one serving different purposes. It served to transform the private collection into an archival collection in accordance with the professional processes of archival practice. Secondly, it was transformed into a public archival collection of resistance lives, conjoined with a transnational history of anti-apartheid resistance. Shelagh Gastrow now joined the ranks of Mayibuye's anti-apartheid donors, a benefactor of a resistance archive.



But the story of its transformation is a larger account of its changes. That process could be seen as the mere beginning of a new stage in its life. For about fifteen years between 1995 and early May in 2010, not much had happened to it. It could probably be referred to as a period of hibernation. Within this period, access was restricted, not out of a deliberate policy to do so. Whilst its contents were still in the boxes, it had no catalogue among those at the archive to provide information to researchers who may have been interested in what it contained, but who did not know about its existence. For those who could have access to it, it is most probably because they were already aware of its presence. For the coordinator

of the section the collection was confined to hibernation due to the inadequacy of staff to process it in time.³⁰

The opportunity for the transformation process to proceed to the next level eventually arrived with the arrival of two students on the post graduate diploma in museum and heritage studies to undertake internship. The students from UWC finally woke the Gastrow archive from its hibernation in a two-month period from 10 May 2010 to 9 July 2012 during which fifteen boxes of archival material were catalogued. Within that period the materials were captured item-by-item, during which each material was re-christened with a unique numbering label in pencil. These labels were also captured in an electronic numbering system. They involved biographies, profiles, curriculum vitae, and paper cuttings of mainly South African political leaders but also some businessmen and clergymen as well as some non-South African personalities.³¹



What this means is an apparent introduction to a new level of greater public access, giving the collection greater interactive opportunity with larger numbers of people. This has become feasible with the catalogue to the Gastrow collection finding its space among its colleagues on the wooden table from where there is greater potential for awareness from users. By virtue of this new level it is poised to play a greater social role as researchers, students and the general public identify their needs through the catalogue and follow up with the location of specific items in the collection for further production of knowledge. Like a living person, it is perhaps realistic to imagine that the greater interactive role is

³⁰ Andre Mohammed is the Coordinator of the Historical Papers Section of the Mayibuye Archives. David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Andre Mohammed, UWC, Cape Town, 30 November 2011.

³¹ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Andre Mohammed, UWC, Cape Town, 30 November 2011.

likely to bring smiles to the lips of the Gastrow collection due to public appreciation for the increased support it is able to offer than before.

But perhaps the greatest transformation of the Shelagh Gastrow archival collection was the transition in name from the *Shelagh Gastrow collection* to the *Gastrow collection*. The processes for the change of name could be traced to the 7 November 2011 meeting with Shelagh Gastrow in her offices when in the midst of the interview she paused suddenly to ask,

can I just say something ... my husband was involved in the transitional process as head of the transitional council on law and order. His collection connected to his role on the council is still available; will you want to meet him when he returns from the US next month?³²

The unexpected offer set the tone for a meeting with Mr and Mrs Gastrow on 23 December 2011 during which it was arranged that he would donate his collection to the Mayibuye archives before his return to the US the following month. The donation of Peter Gastrow collection with the request that it be located alongside that of his wife could be seen as an intervention that introduced another angle to the transformation processes of the Shelagh Gastrow collection.

At 10 O'clock in the morning of 9 January 2012, the Gastrow family car arrived in front of the Mayibuye archives with the author of this research seated at the back, having been picked at a pre-arranged spot, while Peter and Shelagh Gastrow sat in front with Peter at the wheel. Occupying the right hand side of the back seat away from the author is a collection of documents in brown flat files, each bearing a white label centred at the top. The white slip of paper on each file had cellulose tape holding the four edges to the file. This served as background for the printed title in black, 'Document Pack for the

³² David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7 November 2011.

Subcouncil on Law and Order, Peter Gastrow'. Due to an earlier notice about the visit, officials of the Mayibuye archives were on hand to meet the donor, resulting in the transfer of his collection to the archive followed by a recorded interview by the author, using audio-visual equipment of the archive.

Some two hours later, the Gastrows were gone after the formalities of donating a collection that included the signing of deed forms, whilst the interview had also ended. But the request to add Peter Gastrow's collection to the previous one has since left a profound transformation on the latter's collection, despite the seventeen years that separated the two. Peter Gastrow had placed the request with a view of their children in mind. 'Will our children have access to the collections?' If their children would have access to the collections then it would be better to make it easier for them to have access to both collections.³³ Two of the major changes that have resulted from this additional donation have been the physical size of the Gastrow collection and the textual identity of the collection.

The processing of the Peter Gastrow collection began within a month after it was donated and took note of the request to put it together with Gastrow's. From the onset, it gained recognition as MCH 300, thereby reflecting its dual nature. By the end of the first half of the year, it had been completed. Its processing in line with the demands of the donor meant the resumption of certain process previously deemed to have been completed. One such process was the extension of the catalogue. As the items in Peter Gastrow's Collection were captured, they served to increase the number of pages that the electronic catalogue

³³ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Peter Gastrow, UWC, Cape Town, 9 January 20212.

originally had. Whilst MCH 300 originally ended in forty-three pages, the new entries from Peter Gastrow's collection reflected as a continuation from page forty-four.

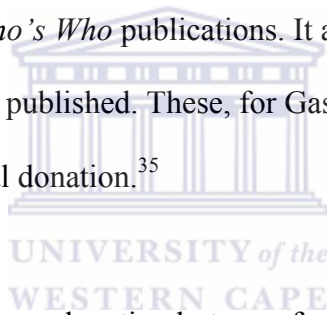
The growth in the collection also reflected in the serial numbering of MCH 300. Whilst box one to box fifteen represented Shelagh Gastrow's collection, Peter Gastrow's collection began from box number sixteen and strangely ended at thirty, the fifteen apiece perhaps indicating a relationship of equality. Thus MCH 300 now occupies exactly twice the space it used to, prior to Peter Gastrow's donation. The current uniqueness of MCH 300 is the apparent the relationship of two individuals from separate origins that have found compatible union under one roof. It is a replay of a domestic relationship that has taken shape in an archival space, making MCH 300 different from the other collections at the archive.



What this union has also meant is a deepening in the archival value of the collection in relation to the transitional period of South Africa. As head of the transitional sub-council on law and order, Peter Gastrow had apparently handled sensitive issues that had to be dealt with on the trot. As he put it, 'a glance at the documents in front of you shows crises, crises, crises'. He had revealed the pressure on his sub-council to deal with two categories of issues. One category being urgent issues such as attempted coup in Bophuthatswana, Kwa Zulu police refusing to operate within their mandate and the abuse of power by the South African police. As it turned out, they also had to deal with 'more sensitive issues' such as the dilemma of the sub-council to recommend detention without trial due to right-wing violence raising fears of an atmosphere that might not allow the elections to take

place.³⁴ Thus his collection adds further dimensions to the narratives Shelagh generates through the lives she produces.

But the transformation of the collection did not end with the addition of the Peter Gastrow collection. The initial donation of fifteen boxes to the Mayibuye archives did not represent the whole collection in Shelagh Gastrow's possession at the time. These represented the accumulated material from the newspaper libraries and elsewhere in the form of paper cuttings and photocopies of publications on the personalities that she had set herself to produce. What she still had in her possession were manuscripts of the actual interviews she had done with the people and the typewritten scripts of the final and near final versions that were translated into the *Who's Who* publications. It also involved details they had mutually agreed were not to be published. These, for Gastrow, were too sensitive to leave her custody at the time of initial donation.³⁵

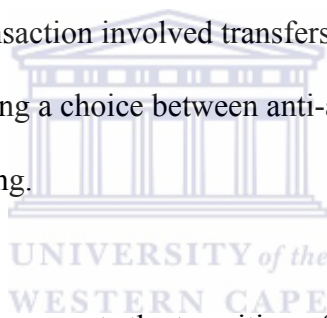


The collection was taken there as a donation but seen from a certain perspective, the gesture constitutes a cultural act. The donation of Shelagh Gastrow was not done with ceremony to herald the activity of a beneficial gesture. Rather than to shout in the public media about having finally decided to integrate the collection into a public space of preservation and research Shelagh Gastrow resorted to the silent option of a handset and its receiver. A phone call to the archive set in motion a process that took officials of the archive to her stated address to transfer background material of the *Who's Who* publications for incorporation into the Mayibuye Archives. It is therefore most suitably seen as a gesture of altruism, and an act of philanthropy.

³⁴ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Peter Gastrow, UWC, Cape Town, 9 January 2012.

³⁵ David Kwao-Sarbah, interview with Shelagh Gastrow, UWC, Cape Town, 9 January 2012.

At one level, it is also worthy to note that the donation was a gesture towards a resistance archive. The donation was undertaken at the time that the Mayibuye Centre was seen as a pioneering archive of resistance. It occurred before the formation of the UWC-Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archives. This was the Cabinet decision in September 1996 to establish the Robben Island Museum as a heritage institution, the essential decision that set other processes in motion to realise the transformation of the Mayibuye Centre for History and Culture into the Mayibuye Archives in April 2000.³⁶ Thus 1995 represented the pre-eminence of the resistance archive of South Africa, not yet formally christened an *archive*. In operating as a centre for history and culture the place was under the control of the IDAF which, in certain ways, was in the forefront of the resistance struggle, as opposed to other archives. Thus, an archival transaction involved transfers and new incorporations constituted a gesture representing a choice between anti-apartheid resistance movement rather than for a liberal posturing.



At another level, the donation represents the transition of a unique life in the story of transitions that this thesis represents. The transition of the life of a nation and that of lives produced through the pages of a *Who's Who* in the form of collective biographies are part of the story for which the project contributed narratives. But it is also a story of the transition of a life that stands outside the pages of the five publications with the tag of an observer status. Whilst the choice of lives to produce and the location for donation amplify the narration of the transition through resistance to democracy, the combination of archival donations into one collection in an archival space could also be seen as a narrative of the affirmation of the domestic relationship, a retelling of the story of matrimony. It completed the transition of the meaning of the archive ironically, confirming the transition from one

³⁶ See Garth King et al, *UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives*, 4.

about collective biography to one that sought to place Shelagh Gastrow into the new South Africa as an enabler, an altruist and a philanthropist. With the addition of the Peter Gastrow papers to the collection, the transition in meaning was complete. Now it stood as a conjoined collection signifying the work of liberation and philanthropy in South Africa.



CONCLUSION

In this study I have tried to examine the work of Shelagh Gastrow in terms of her five publications as well as the archival collection that was formed as a result of the publications she had undertaken. In doing so, I have been sensitive to the practice of biography and its growing concerns as well as the new areas of interest where it appears to be gaining grounds. The key area of interest for this study is how biography is suitable as a tool for understanding specific periods in society. For such a consideration the relevant concern is its ability to be representative of the society that it is being used to study.

Thus the various genera of life writing such as collective biography, biography of the individual, biography of objects and prosopography have been considered in this work. For each of them the relevant issue is the ability to undertake an adequate investigation of society. Of these concerns, the ones that resonate most with the study are the biography of objects and collective biography. This is due to the peculiar nature of the Shelagh Gastrow archival collection and the production of lives through the publications on which the study focuses.

A historical analysis places the practice of collective biography as a vehicle for compiling categories of lives as far back as in classical times. Its popularity has grown rapidly and has developed into group biography, universal biography and national biography. In Africa in general, the use of group biography has apparently favoured those in prominent position, particularly, the politician whose stature is further boosted through such endeavour. In South Africa the practice of collective biography predates the formation of the Union of South Africa but has blossomed progressively in the twentieth century,

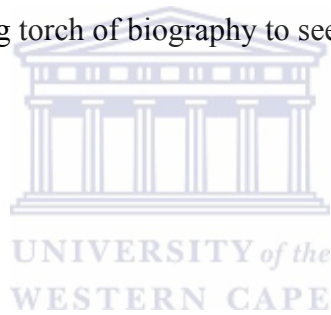
reflecting the different socio political interests that the country has acquired over the decades.

Thus, Shelagh Gastrow's undertaking to produce the lives of South Africans across the political spectrum which has critical racial implications gives it a certain kind of significance. Another feature that makes the project significant is the transitional period that it encompasses. The beginning of her project in the first half of the 1980s represents a political era of hostility between political opponents. By the end of the project in 1995, the country was experiencing democracy after it has run the full course of the transitional process. This is what identifies the period as historically unique and her associated project as equally unique.



The relevance of the archival collection is viewed in this perspective as an object which is related to that period. Here the argument is that objects have lives because they interact with society. As socio-political entities their interactions tend to imbue them with the values and characteristics of such societies making them able to reveal these characteristics of the societies they represent. Furthermore, the biographical approach for analysing objects has been identified as a favourable means for drawing out hidden characteristics of societies from the objects under consideration. Thus the adoption of the biographical approach for the analysis of the Gastrow collection, along with the Mayibuye archives has consequently revealed the series of transformations that these archival entities have experienced. What is important is that every twist or turn of the transformation process has a social relevance.

Representivity as the central concern of biography finds expression in the practice of social history. Whilst social history may set out to recover the lives of the marginal figure it is ultimately aimed at representing society. The inherent difficulty in using biography of human beings as a means of adequately representing society makes it necessary to consider the biography of things. The Gastrow archive is a unique character. It combines the qualities of human lives and yet qualifies as an object. It strolls liberally, transcending rigid boundaries and refuses to be encapsulated by the separate compartments imposed on humans and objects. The thing is not; it becomes. And it is particularly this process of conferring value to them that enables them to represent the society by radiating back to the meticulous hunter the transformations of such things as one travels along the trajectory of their social life with the craving torch of biography to seek and find.



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Interview with Shelagh Gastrow, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7 November 2011.

Interview with Shelagh and Peter Gastrow, Newlands, Cape Town, 23 December 2011.

Interview with Shelagh and Peter Gastrow, UWC, Cape Town, 9 January 2012.

2. UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye archives, Shelagh Gastrow Collection (MCH 300)

a. *Photographs*

Joe Modise witnessing a wreath laying ceremony – 1.1.1 (Box 1).

Dane Smuts – 1.3.1 (Box 1).

Peter Gastrow – 1.3.5 (Box 1).

John Wiley – 1.3.7 (Box 1).

2 photos of Jacob Zuma – 1.3.20 (Box 1).

2 photos of Cyril Ramaphosa – 1.3.27 (Box 1).

Joe Slovo – 1.3.30 (Box 1).

Oliver Tambo – 1.3.38 (Box 1).

Desmond Tutu – 1.3.40 (Box 1).

Nkosazana Zuma – 1.3.60 (Box 1).

4 photos of Mangosuthu Buthelezi – 1.4.1 (Box 1).

b. *Documents*

CV of Mary Ellen Metcalfe – 3.3.1 (Box 3).

Profiles of Thabo Mbeki and Frederick Willem de Klerk – 3.3.2 (Box 3).

ANC list of elected members – 4.1.1 (Box 4).

ANC Natal Midrand Executive Committee for 1992 – 4.1.2 (Box 4).

ANC Ex-Officio National Executive Committee members – 418 (Box 4).

ANC National Executive Committee: top 5 positions – 419 (Box 4).

Transkei ANC regional structure – 410 (Box 4).

ANC elects 26-member 'shadow cabinet' – 411 (Box 4).

Ex-Officio members elected already – 412 (Box 4).

Final list for National Executive Committee – 413 (Box 4).

National Party public representatives list 1993 – 4.4.2 (Box 4).

A Who's Who of the new Africanist leaders – 4.5.1 (Box 4).

MK guerrillas take lead in Transkei's new SACP team – 4.5.2 (Box 4).

Contact addresses – 4.5.3 (Box 4).

National Executive Members – address and contact list 4.5.4 (Box 4).

Contact list, PAC NEC members – 4.5.5 (Box 4).

PAC Natal, November 1991 – 4.5.6 (Box 4).

Shelagh Gastrow – 7.5.6 (Box 7).

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