‘Lives in the Making: The Possibilities and Impossibilities of Autobiography’

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This paper emerges from my experience in assisting Amina Cachalia to write up her memoirs. It conveys my reflections on the process and on a select number of published South African autobiographies, as a way of exploring hypotheses advanced in the critical literature on auto/biography.

As Roland Barthes famously put it: ‘What I write about myself is never the last word’. Scholars writing about this ‘genre’ now often observe that slippage occurs not just in the act of recall but in the way all human beings live their lives through narratives that are shaped by their interactions with others and which are inherently incomplete.

‘Struggle’ autobiographies may be a variation of the established ‘conversion’ narrative, characterised by a ‘stylised trajectory’ and ‘consensual stereotypes’ identified by Wood (2003) in French narratives of the Resistance (and in the Hyslop-Rassool debate 2010). But counter ‘Struggle’ narratives are also apparent, driven, for example by the desire to rescue individuals from political obscurity or by the authors’ longing to exonerate themselves in the eyes of a judgmental public or embittered adult children.

Significant debate rages over whether the ‘genre’ is accommodating to women and the paper attempts to enter the fray. It does so partially by exploring the implications of the stark contrast between AnnMarie Wolpe’s 1994 autobiography in which the latter is reduced almost to petulance by her perception of circumstances in post apartheid South Africa and Ruth First’s much earlier memoir on her period in detention, in which she not only provides a vivid and analytical account of the security regime operative in the mid 1960s but in which she also reenacts the mastery of her inner demons.