Weapon of Choice: The Contiguity of Genre in Zubeida Jaffer's *Our Generation*[1]

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Is it a sense of irony, or deep-rooted cynicism that informs Zubeida Jaffer when she prefaces her work, *Our Generation*, with the poetry of Njabulo Ndebele? There are of course other genre at play also. Genre that have no part in either irony or cynicism. One for example, is the autobiographical. To this effect, Di Paice has commented on *Our Generation* as correlative with Isabel Allende's *Paula*, but Jaffer's book would also not be misplaced in such generic company as James Ellroy's *My Dark Places* or Edward Said's *Out Of Place* or perhaps most likely Janet Frame's *An Angel At My Table*. Which is to say that almost immediately, Jaffer discards the resources of such works as William Burroughs's *Junky* or *Queer*, or most appositely Kurt Vonnegut's autobiography-in-science-fiction, *Slaughterhouse 5*. Instead, *Our Generation* keeps its own company of genre, borrowing freely from the unexpected, notably the filmic time-splicing of such movies as Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*.

For Jaffer time is, to illustrate the point, of negotiated value. The first chapter plays out during the labor of Zubeida's first child, but the moment references itself to the years and weeks leading up to this event. It is not only the labor we experience, but Zubeida's arrest, her interrogation, furtive meetings with her husband in hiding from the Apartheid Special Branch, her own time in hiding and the election of a new trade union. These moments do not follow on by any regular kind of logic, rather they intersect at odd angles, lace at strange moments with the text, making for a more cinematic feel. This sense of the cinematic is so strongly reinforced throughout the

book that the imagery she evokes when landing in Port Elizabeth one day before Govan Mbeki's funeral (the moment lives '…as an Imax image in my mind') comes as no surprise. Neither does the book's coda of telling in a few words the rest of the life-stories of the book's principal cast, a technique popularized by biographical movies.

In the final analysis, this cinematic hermeneutic is so evocative that the 'bio' protocol in the autobiographical, begins to slide away almost unmissed in some inky depth. Not to suggest that Jaffer misconstrues the factual element of what she is attempting to convey. On the contrary her writing bears a remarkable familiarity. Spyker van Wyk's interrogation of Claremont Imam Abdullah Haroun; Ashley Kriel's funeral being presided over by both an Anglican archbishop and Muslim moulana; Graeme Bloch announcing to an atheist-oriented UDF gathering inside a church-hall his intent to mount a lone defiance campaign; all these events ring unerringly true to any kind of historical narrative that can be established. It is not that Jaffer blurs the truth, rather that she blurs the experience of the truth. That the self and the writing, the auto- and the –graphical ring most true in a work that has been described as autobiographical.

This is perhaps the most sensible approach to the autobiographical. After all, we live now in an age of newspapers and the internet, if we have not lived in one then. Freedom of information has made the truth of what has happened easier to come by. And as a last resort there remains open to each one of us the path of investigative journalism to establish the truth once and for all. In the autobiographical it is not the detail of life that is interesting, but the detail of the act of witnessing. Of the three

phases of the autobiographical; self, life and writing, in many ways life is the least interesting.

Jaffer's cinematic narration then promotes self and writing, forever locking the two into a moment of crisis, a moment of pain. Ultimately it is memory that mitigates pain, and in no way is this memory an easy or linear one. Each of Jaffer's moment's is a thin veil enmeshing a sequence of strange lineages of other moments. For Zubeida greeting pilgrims leaving for the Holy Lands returns her to memories of her interrogation, memories of her father's special relationship with the imam who presides over the proceedings, memories of imprisoned family and memories of textile workers secretly sewing together ANC flags on rumors of Nelson Mandela's impending release.

This cinematic imperative of showing time as just another veil obfuscating meaning is at times so rich, so skillfully worked that one must question why does Jaffer at all bother to indicate emotion? The text itself is laced with epithets of Zubeida's own emotion, compasses engaging us on moral vectors we should ourselves find and navigate by. This is, I believe the most critical failing in *Our Generation*; that Jaffer chooses to inflect the text with Zubeida's emotion. While an argument could be made for an emotion-rich text promoting reader association, I believe it weakens the kinetic and cinematic structure of the book. With the introduction of the cinematic genre, the burden carried is the burden of time. In many ways the cinematic allows Zubeida's labor to become the central image of the book. The pain felt, is the pain felt in the body, but outside the pain of labor there are the pleasures of motherhood which cannot be expressed by any bodily sensation. 'When he is not speaking, you feel the

pain in his face,' filmmaker Ang Lee has said. This dynamic of felt pain and unfelt pleasure could in many ways be read as the text's own fragmentary treatment of time. Time is problematic, always leading to other even more problematic experiences of time. The text is in this sense nothing more than a drama of fractured apperception. The bodily pain of labor is coterminous with textual pain of time. But actually speaking emotion into the text weakens the dynamic tension of the felt and the unfelt. Paradoxically almost, things are almost more real when we experience them outside of language. Jaffer falls short when she tries to name her emotion.

Or to put it another way. In what has been called Peter Flanney's magnum opus, his television series *Our Friends In The North*, the four core characters encounter each other again, in the same room they did nearly forty years ago. The closest of friends, they have ruined each others' lives as they have ruined their own, forty years of self-inflicted torment stirs beneath the surface. But nothing is said, no words are exchanged, only meaningless glances and half-hearted smiles. We already know it is racing to the end, even as the characters themselves realize it. It is the final episode of *Our Friends In The North*, simply entitled '1995' and the full weight of forty years' history bears down wordlessly upon characters who by chance find themselves arranged in the same place as they once had been so many years ago, when their lives first began to bloom. Not a word is spoken, and there lies the power. This is the power Jaffer foregoes when she relies on conveying her emotional state, rather than ceding this description to the broader, more intriguing cinematic structure of the book.

Interestingly though, this interrogation of the tensions between writing and self, key in to broader questions of purpose. Why is Jaffer writing this book? Why this book?

Why now? At two separate stages she suggests two different, some might say, contradictory purposes behind the book. While alone in her interrogation cell, she yearns for time alone, for the watchful eyes of the female guard to be turned away. This time she will use to write, because writing has always allowed her to place events in clearer perspective. Later, while she drives through the streets of Athlone, she catches a glimpse of her daughter in the rear-view mirror. The moment, again mitigated by other memories, formulates in her desire to write this book as a record of the momentous events to which her daughter was unknowingly witness.

In these disparate moments, falling on either side of her labor, Jaffer elicits two distinct senses of the phrase 'our generation'. In the jail cell, our generation is of a generative or productive quality. It is ironic that no writing is actually generated, but this is not to say that writing should not be generated. And perhaps cynically, it is also in this instance that Jaffer speaks of another sense of generation, the sense most popularly meant when people speak of 'our generation', the sense that most people take Don MacLean to mean when he speaks of 'here we are all in one place, a generation lost in space,' in his now hyper-visible *American Pie*. For Jaffer a generation is one iteration of a family, and Zubeida's generation finds itself trapped in jail.

The second image Jaffer summons up, a mother furtively stealing a glance of her unknowing daughter, while all around the usual traffic of the world continues, then to secretly pray for a record to signify events for that daughter is perhaps as elegant in its desperation as Art Spiegelman's first volume of *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, cynically or perhaps ironically entitled 'My Father Bleeds History'. Of course the immediate sense

in this image of ‘our generation’, is the pervasive sense of a generation of family, of information being carried by one generation onto another. It is regrettable, as a tangent let me suggest here, that Jaffer fails to elicit the sense that in some ways her own daughter is already a writing of ‘our generation’, meaning Zubeida’s, young Ruschka’s chromosomal material already having been shaped by the events of the past and that all the daughter would need do to understand Zubeida’s generation is understand her own body. Yet, even as this sense eludes Jaffer, she offers up the secondary ideal of ‘our generation’ being the generation of material.

In the one sense, ‘our generation’ expresses an economy of healing. *I will write myself better, even here in jail*, Zubeida pronounces. And by this alone, Jaffer’s writings show a remarkable contiguity with the work of New Zealander Janet Frame who literally saved herself from a frontal lobotomy by winning a prestigious award for excellence in writing on the very morning she was scheduled for the operation. In another sense ‘our generation’ is an indicator for broader community fractured by a fragmentary apperception of time. ‘Our generation’ is a marker for time and space in a way that is not easy to describe, because it is not easy to experience.

And yet there remains, in the final analysis, the mysterious quoting of Ndebele’s poetry, strangely out of place appearing as preface to the entire work. In his seminal essay, *Rediscovery Of The Ordinary*, Ndebele bemoans the lack of the simple, almost rustic elements to South African writing. Writing in the early nineteen eighties, Ndebele sees a slowing and creeping poison entering South African fiction, one that obsesses over the spectacle of inhuman glut that is Apartheid. And in some senses can the same come to be said about this monstrous new genre of confession and piety that

is creeping into South African literature. The confessional has become the weapon of choice for writers from priest to former freedom fighter, to businessmen to trade unionists, in a society that has somehow managed a form of secular piety in the face of a non-existent Inquisition. Architects of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, these are your children. Almost a dime a dozen, these books show none of the irreverent humor of Koos Kombuis's *The Secret Diary of God*, and none of the simple power of Albie Sachs's *The Soft Vengeance Of A Freedom Fighter*.

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[1] Jaffer, Zubeida. 2003. *Our Generation.* Cape Town: Kwela Books.