

Freedom on a Frontier?
The Double Bind of (White)
Postapartheid South African Literature
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Abstract: The trend in analyses of postapartheid South African literature is to see a body of writing that is largely “freed from the past” and exhibits a wide range of divergences from “struggle” writing. This article provides a differently nuanced conceptualisation and argues that some of the literature’s key dynamics are founded in “mashed-up temporalities.” My analysis borrows from Ashraf Jamal’s appropriation of art historian Hal Foster’s “future anterior” or a “will have been.” In my reading, emblematic strands of postapartheid writing are less “free from the past” than trading in an anxiety about never having begun. The body of literature in question—in this case, white post-transitional writing—is inescapably bound to the idea of the time of before, so much so that it compulsively iterates certain immemorial literary tropes such as those of the frontier and the journey of discovery. Further, I suggest that much postapartheid literature written in what I call “detection mode”—providing accounts of “crime” and other social ills—is distinguished by disjunctive continuity rather than linear or near-linear discontinuity with pre-transition literature, yet exhibits features of authorial voice and affect that place it within a distinctly postapartheid zone of author-reader interlocution.

Keywords: postapartheid literature, South African literary history, transition, post-transition, crime

In many areas of study about South Africa, including literary studies, Nelson Mandela’s release from prison in 1990 is seen as the opening

of a gate often typified, in abbreviated form, as the “transition” to democracy. Somewhere around the year 2000 or soon thereafter, if we are to believe senior South African literary scholars, the “transition” period morphed into something researchers have variously come to call “post-transition” (Frenkel and MacKenzie 1–2), “post-anti-apartheid” (Kruger 35), or post-postapartheid (Chapman 15). These have all proved useful concepts. Loren Kruger’s compound neologism means both temporally beyond apartheid *and* delivered, at last, from being “anti”—having to go against apartheid’s manifest social content in fictional plotting and sentiment, whether moral, ethical, or political. This sense of remission from the prison house of the past is key to the way the term “post-apartheid” is understood in South African culture at large: as a deliverance from the restraints—indeed the shackles—of tirelessly opposing legislated segregation, states of emergency, prejudicial attitudes, twisted mentalities, racial paranoia, race-class-gender torsions, a culture of assassinations and torture; indeed, the whole litany of banal evil that was apartheid. Eventually, such restrictedly oppositional or “struggle” writing became so deadly and so dreary that Albie Sachs (revolutionary, writer, and constitutional court judge) famously suggested a provisional ban on the notion of culture as a “weapon of the struggle” in his 1990 African National Congress (ANC) working paper “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom.”

Indeed, if there is one common thread in published research on post-apartheid South African writing, it is the sense that the country’s writing, always next to impossible to classify as a result of its “unresolved heterogeneity” (de Kock, “Introduction” 273), has now become even more impossibly diverse and hydra-headed, a state befitting its new-found liberty or deliverance from what one might call the closure of apartheid logocentrism. In keeping with this new script about the literature of postapartheid, Ronit Frenkel and Craig MacKenzie affirm that “scores of writers [in the years 1999–2009] have produced works of extraordinary range and diversity” (1). They suggest that authors have “heeded Albie Sachs’s call to free themselves from the ‘ghettos of the apartheid imagination’” with “new South African literature accordingly [reflecting] a wide range of concerns and styles” (1). This literature is

“unfettered to the past, but may still consider it in new ways” or “ignore it altogether” (Frenkel and MacKenzie 2).

While I do not suggest that Frenkel and Mackenzie are wrong,¹ I nevertheless propose an alternative argument that departs from the now-common theme of being “freed from the past.” I argue that a strong body of postapartheid literature is less liberated from the past than it is inclined toward the somewhat less-accentuated qualifier in Frenkel and Mackenzie’s proposition, namely “reconsider[ing] it in new ways.” In “South African Literary Cartographies: A Post-Transitional Palimpsest,” Frenkel suggestively offers the figure of the palimpsest to explain how post-transitional writing allows for “a reading of the new in a way in which the layers of the past are still reflected through it” (25). I argue for an even stronger emphasis of this point and contend that in the hands of Kevin Bloom and Jonny Steinberg, the two white writers discussed in this article, as well as others, postapartheid literature is inescapably bound to the time of before. A compulsive reiteration of certain immemorial South African literary tropes is evident in their work, particularly those of the frontier and the journey of discovery. Further, I argue that much postapartheid literature written in what I call “detection mode” is distinguished by strong rather than weak or merely vestigial continuity with the past. Such (re)cycling—decidedly against the grain of a widely vaunted rupture with the past—runs counter to theses that postapartheid literature is mostly novel, or substantially different from earlier South African writing. However, it is also true that the cycling I hope to demonstrate gives rise to features of authorial voice that are identifiable as belonging to a postapartheid generation of writing, for reasons I elaborate below. The argument about continuity or discontinuity between apartheid and postapartheid in South African literature, I suggest, needs deeper conceptual treatment of how past and present are disjunctively conjoined within a disenchanting anticipation of a looming future;² the time of now-going-forward and the time of history, I argue, are mashed together in a way that suggests the widespread conception of a split temporality—the bad “before” of apartheid and the better “after” of postapartheid—is perhaps an overdone disposition, despite its softening by qualifiers about nonlinearity. It might, I argue, be more

accurate to describe what occurs “in” postapartheid as a reconfigured temporality in which art historian Hal Foster’s “future-anterior,” or the “will have been,” persistently surfaces. Foster’s proposition is invoked by South African writer-critic Ashraf Jamal in a fiery critique of teleological conceptions of South African literature. Jamal writes:

My reason for this emphasis [on the future-anterior] rests on the assumption that South African literature in English has elected to sanctify and memorialize its intent, producing a literature informed by a messianic, liberatory, or reactive drive, hence a struggle literature (which precedes liberation from apartheid) and a post-apartheid literature (which establishes a democratic state of play). These phases, however, are hallucinatory projections, or candid attempts to generate a cultural transparency: see where we have come from; see where we now are; see where we are going. The logic is overdetermined, teleological, and in effect diminishes our ability to grasp that which is impermanent, hybrid. (11)

Jamal identifies what he perceives to be a major fault in conceptions of South African writing: a fixation with going somewhere, of getting from a dead-heavy past to an orchestrated future. Instead, Jamal proposes that the South African literary imaginary contains “a latent sensation that South Africa as a country suffers *the unease of never having begun*” (16; emphasis in original). Following Raymond Williams, Jamal argues that if nineteenth-century realism stems from the presumption of a “knowable community, such a hermetic logic fails to apply to a heterogeneous outpost such as South Africa” (17). In a similar vein, Meg Samuelson, working on the basis of theorisations of the uncanny, suggests that the concept of “transition” in South African literary culture enables “thinking about being-at-home that is at the same time inherently liminal . . . entering the house that locates one on a perpetual threshold” (34).

It is with a comparable sense of unknowability amid a scene of unresolved heterogeneity in South African culture at large that the texts I examine in this article, Bloom’s *Ways of Staying* and Steinberg’s *Midlands*, take on their burden of (re)discovery, as if nothing can be taken as

known, again and as always. Indeed a felt anxiety, again and anew, about “never [quite] having begun” lies at the base of the affective charge in the two texts and many others like them; now, however, the *notion* of post-apartheid, and the widely shared social imperative of a desired teleology, a clean break from the past, raises the stakes considerably, rendering the writing unusually sharp and unsentimental but suffused with consternation about the everywhere-evident material failure of postapartheid’s (benevolent and desired) grand narrative. This is despite the attempts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to set the country’s story on the right track, so to speak. As Shane Graham comments in his book on the TRC and the South African literature that came in its wake, the commission ultimately succeeded in setting up what should be seen as a “contrapuntal dialogue” that enables a “reconceptualization of such fundamental spatio-temporal constructs as the dichotomies between public and private, past and present” (33). Here, indeed, is a necessary form of “plot loss” (Troost), a corrective to the always-looming teleology inherent in the very signifier “post-”, whether we read it as “post-transitional” or “post-apartheid.” Periodicity in its more commonly understood sense, as in the named phases of time marked as “transitional,” “post-transitional,” and so on, thus runs into a mash-up of temporalities in which the time of before intrudes jarringly as an anticipated “will have been” of a febrile present.³ In using the term “mash-up,” I draw on both the literal meaning of a violent collision of forces implicit in the verb “mash” and on the composite term’s use in music and video as “blend, bootleg and bastard pop/rock” in a song or composition created by blending two or more pre-recorded songs (“Mashup (music)”). The “bastard” blend of temporalities in this description exhibits a violently reintegrated (mashed, or smashed) character whose pulpiness defies pre-vised or distinct shapes.

In *Ways of Staying* and *Midlands*, the felt torsion of oneself becoming implicated in such destabilising mash-ups, and of seeing others also going into their fearful grind, is almost obsessively focused on a single, though contested, signifier: that ultimate scare-word for South Africans of all persuasions, “crime.” Not only is “crime” an everyday matter, as ubiquitous as the daily newsfeed with which it is indissolubly mixed—

and with which, as the “media a priori,” it is complicit in what Mark Seltzer calls the constitution of a “wound culture” (11)—but it is also widely perceived to have the potential to wreck the progress, the socially and economically necessary teleology, of the “rainbow nation.” The specter of “crime” is, indeed, the joker in the pack for South Africa’s negotiated revolution, creating as it does uncomfortable copulas with the apartheid past, both in everyday life and in the realm that more immediately concerns us, namely the felt imaginaries discernible in “transitional” or “post-transitional” writing.

Given the extraordinary communicative and expressive saturation of the signifier “crime” in postapartheid South Africa, a more-than-cursory look at social discourse in relation to this resonant (though problematic) term is necessary. The bogey of “crime” has possibly been one of the most prevalent facts of life in South Africa over the past twenty years, as scholars such as Steinberg, Anthony Altbecker, Gary Kynoch, and others have shown. Ask anyone in the streets of Johannesburg, Durban, or Cape Town what the country’s biggest “problems” are and they are likely to answer by using the term “crime” and adding that other “c”-word, “corruption.” As Jean and John Comaroff argue in *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, perceptions of criminal corruption—and conditions in which the “felonious state” can thrive (20)—are common and growing apace in the world’s postcolonies, which now include postapartheid South Africa.

I have used the qualifiers “specter” and “bogey” in relation to crime because, although the statistical incidence of crime in postapartheid South Africa has been almost impossible to pin down exactly, the fear of it grew massively in South Africa’s social imaginary during the transition, particularly but by no means only among whites. As Sisonke Msimang writes in the South African news source the *Daily Maverick*, “[i]t is only possible to be haunted by the death of a stranger when you are convinced that he could have been you or one of yours. Perhaps this is why South Africans are obsessed with crime. It looms large because although it disproportionately affects poor black people, it also affects enough middle-class people for it to have become a ‘national question.’”

Crime, with or without the scare-quotes, has over the past two decades replaced “apartheid” as one of the country’s most conspicuous, and contested, terms. Steinberg, a leading “transitional” (now surely “post-transitional”) author, argues that white fears of crime as a form of retribution have been endemic but greatly exaggerated in the postapartheid period, although he nevertheless acknowledges the high incidence of criminal violence in the country as a whole (“Crime” 25–27). Altbeker, another nonfiction stylist and a noted crime researcher, similarly accedes to the existence of an exceptionally high rate of crime but casts doubt on the popular myth that South Africa is the world’s “crime capital” (8). However, like Steinberg, Altbeker adds that the country’s murder rates are “far higher than those of the industrialized world” (8). Assessments such as these, which acknowledge an unusually high crime rate (“near the top of the world rankings” [8], Altbeker grants) but cast doubt on what one might call “urban legends” about crime, are fairly typical in South African security studies scholarship.⁴ This is because research findings in this area understandably seek to distance themselves from what the Comaroffs, in relation to South African crime discourse, call “mythostats” (“Figuring Crime” 215).

Benjamin Disraeli’s “lies, damned lies, and statistics” are certainly at issue in the many twists of plot conjured up by disgruntled whites in the “new South Africa” deal, launching as they did a prolonged howl of protest about “crime” in the years after 1994. South Africans of a more scholarly persuasion, however, tended to see the frequent invocation of crime statistics out of context as a sort of “white whine,” or an updated version of the immemorial “black peril” metanarrative in colonial and neocolonial South Africa.⁵ Reading this narrative of fearfulness sympathetically, Kynoch comments that “[t]he crime epidemic is the most visceral reminder for fearful whites of their diminishing status, and protestations against crime can provide an outlet for articulating anxieties about the new order without openly resorting to racist attacks” (“Fear and Alienation” [2013] 439). Altbeker, in turn, argues that “fear of crime has sometimes become a conveniently ‘apolitical’ vehicle through which a disenfranchised elite can mourn its loss of power without sounding nostalgic for an unjust past” (64). Kynoch concurs, contending that

“[h]igh crime rates have been a feature of life in many black townships and informal settlements for the past hundred years or more” (“Fear and Alienation” [2012] 3). He notes that this is a history that has been charted in a significant number of scholarly works in which an urban African population is victimised by police, criminals, and politicised conflicts (3).⁶ Steinberg also makes this point, arguing that the flip side of whites getting off so easily in what came to be known as the negotiated revolution—“no expropriation, no nationalisation, not even a tax increase”—was that “a criminal culture whose appetite for commodities and violence was legendary in the townships arrived in the [white] suburbs” (“Crime” 26). Crime, according to Steinberg, began to haunt white South Africans such that around dinner tables

a very different story about South Africa’s transition began to circulate, and, while the finer details varied, the heart of the tale did not: it was about somebody who had been held up at gunpoint, another who had been shot, another who had been kidnapped in her own car. The anecdotes of guns and blood spread like an airborne disease, becoming something of a contagion. By the end of the millennium, much of white South Africa had died a thousand deaths in their own homes, around their own dinner tables. . . . Many whites believed that Mandela’s discourse of reconciliation was rendered irrelevant by a far deeper, congenital hostility to the presence of whites at the end of the continent, and that this hostility found expression in violent crime. (26)

Steinberg convincingly demonstrates that this “diagnosis of crime” was “spectacularly wrong” (27).⁷ The real deal, he countered with evidence, was that white South Africans were far *less* likely to be killed in their own homes than their black counterparts, who by all accounts continued to bear the brunt of crime in the postapartheid period (27). And yet even Steinberg’s finely balanced account makes the familiar gesture of offering an additional qualifier about crime in general being epidemic in South Africa, regardless of race:

Levels of middle-class victimisation, both black and white, are high enough for just about the entire middle class to have experienced violent crime at close quarters. It is no exaggeration to say that almost every South African, whether poor or rich, has either had a gun shoved in her face, or has witnessed the trauma of a loved one who has had a gun shoved in her face. (27–28)

In view of this qualification, one can deduce two points: first, that whatever the real crime levels are, and regardless of the relative distribution of this “epidemic” (as it is often called) between white, black, and other South Africans, discourse about crime—especially emanating from whites—undoubtedly accelerated significantly in the transition period, justifying terms such as “mythostats.” Second, even once the element of white discursive amplification has been skeptically accommodated in the analysis, it is beyond doubt that social violence in South Africa in the transition period (as in previous periods), manifested in the form of criminal behaviour, was in fact “epidemic” by comparison with most other countries.⁸ Paradoxically, then, this also means that although, from a critical or scholarly point of view, one should not give undue credence to the exaggerations of white discourse about crime, this discourse nevertheless provides evidence of a state of imagined being, and of feeling, that is itself an important fact. Steinberg, leading up to the following description, goes so far as to call it a “white phenomenology of crime”:

For a milieu in which the idea of mortality has always been hitched exclusively to the elderly and the frail, the constant threat of lethal violence is akin to an earthquake. The profundity of the fear of crime is deep enough to go all the way down, to the existential itself, to the cornerstones of one’s relation to the world. . . . “Crime” has nestled inside the most exquisitely intimate and private domains of white experience. It has taken its place among the categories through which people experience the fundamentals of their existence. (28)

If one adds to this newly amped-up sense of existential fragility, Steinberg comments, the fact that, as J. M. Coetzee writes in his novel *Youth*, white South Africans in general inhabit the country on the “shakiest of pretexts” (Coetzee 17), then one gets a sense of abysmal dislocation in the experience of such South Africans. Coetzee’s young Cape Town protagonist in *Youth* implicitly knows that he “must be a simpleton, in need of protection, if he imagines he can get by on the basis of straight looks and honourable dealings when the ground beneath his feet is soaked with blood and the vast backward depth of history rings with shouts of anger” (17).

In the discussion that follows, I deal with two nonfiction narratives of postapartheid conditions by white writers as a way of investigating changing modes of address in the greater category of “postapartheid” writing. In making claims on this basis, I look at one of several seams—white creative nonfiction in what I call “detection mode”—in the greater patchwork of postapartheid literary culture. While one is loath to reintroduce racial categorisation, racial determination in the manner and matter of writing remains a stubbornly persistent feature and must be kept in view if one is not to lose sight of the literature’s content. As it was with pre-postapartheid literary culture, totalizing claims on the basis of a limited number of writers—especially in terms of race—are sure to founder. At best, in describing parts of an imagined whole, one details diverse and divergent acts of writing under a nominal but ultimately (and necessarily) obscure totality in which particular renderings are both distinctive as parts *and* definitive in their own right, like bright threads in an otherwise jarringly-stranded composite. In this case, I am particularly interested in Steinberg’s “white phenomenology of crime” and how (transformed, transforming?) white writers of the generation after Nadine Gordimer and Coetzee deal with this condition. It is a state of affairs that has loomed large since 1994, and it seems appropriate to ask whether and how it reconnects with or disconnects from the *longue durée* of the colonial, neocolonial-segregationist, and apartheid past. Naturally, a view of black writing in which crime and corruption emerge as major themes, in texts such as *Thirteen Cents* and *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* by K. Sello Duiker, *Dog Eat Dog* and *Way Back Home*

by Niq Mhlongo, *Black Diamond* by Zakes Mda, *The Lost Colours of the Chameleon* by Mandla Langa, *Bitter Fruit* by Achmat Dangor, *Counting the Coffins* by Diale Tlholwe, and *High Low In-between* by Imraan Coovadia, for example, would result in a differently nuanced version of postapartheid writing that disrupts any coherent sense of totality. Part and whole, and the relationship between the two, remain as vexed a conjunction as ever in South African writing.

It is precisely the conspicuously *white* “soft spot” in the postapartheid imaginary described above—an accelerated risk of random personal harm on top of an immemorial sense of not belonging—that both Bloom’s and Steinberg’s texts deal with. It is a sore area that Bloom (b. 1973) hits upon emphatically in his 2009 nonfiction work, *Ways of Staying* (the title is a play on Mda’s 1995 novel of the transition, *Ways of Dying*).⁹ Bloom’s book is noteworthy both because it homes in on the condition of existential shakiness identified by Coetzee and Steinberg and because it cannot fairly be described as the work of a “white whiner.” The book grew out of an event that shook Bloom’s life to its core—the apparently senseless murder of his cousin, fashion designer Richard Bloom, aged twenty-seven, along with actor Brett Goldin, who was twenty-eight. The circumstances of the murder make for gory reading, regardless of class and race. According to the account by United Kingdom-based South African writer and actor Anthony Sher, who researched the incident for a documentary, Goldin and Bloom were carjacked as they approached their vehicles to go home after a dinner party in Bakoven on the Atlantic shore of Cape Town. The year was 2006, a good twelve years into postapartheid. Their abducters were a band of young men high on crystal meth (or “tik” as it is known in the Cape) looking for a car to steal. Sher takes up the story:

The group held them up at gunpoint, stole one of their cars, stripped and bound them, and forced them into the boot. They then drove to a motorway a few miles away, and onto a traffic island. Perhaps they were intending to abandon Brett and Richard alive and make their getaway, but the car got stuck in sand. After a long, frenzied struggle to free it, during which

their naked victims were forced to help, they shot them dead. Either the mixture of frustration and intoxication led to the murderous act, or—as the men later claimed in their confessions—their victims cried out and had to be silenced.

Sher's subsequent comment distinguishes his sense of horror from the more routine kind of white discourse about crime. The story is chilling, Sher continues, "because it isn't about racism or sex, or anything other than chance." The timing of Goldin and Bloom's departure from the party "just happened to coincide with the group driving past." The targets could have been "[a]ny of the other guests . . . someone in the next street, it could have been you or me." The renowned Shakespearean actor turned writer concludes that his "birthplace seemed changed in a way that I didn't like. Nowhere felt safe any more."

Such a feeling of unhomeliness, with the added seasoning of a real, and often visceral, fear for one's life, created a strong sense among many South Africans during the early postapartheid years that the revolution had conclusively lost its bearings, at least as far as their own safety was concerned. Certainly, the Constitution's guarantee of the rule of law, and more specifically the right to "be free from all forms of violence from either public or private sources" (article 12. 1. c), appeared to be unenforceable for the most part, and particularly for victims of what came to be called "random violence" (also the title of a crime novel by Johannesburg writer Jassie MacKenzie). It is therefore no surprise that Bloom's *Ways of Staying*, written partly during a writing fellowship at the University of the Witwatersrand's Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER), struck such a receptive chord. The book made the shortlists of both the Sunday Times Alan Paton and the University of Johannesburg literary prizes, garnered enthusiastic reviews, and found republication in London via Portobello Books. It also won an unusual amount of transnational media exposure for a locally published South African writer. This uncommonly resounding reception should not be attributed merely to Bloom's striking while the iron was hot. By any critical account, the writing, in the subgenre of creative nonfiction, is sharp and probing and combines compassionate enquiry into the lives

of others, people “out there,” with thoroughly clinical diction. It is a style that is in some ways similar to that of Bloom’s mentor and friend Rian Malan. Surprisingly, in view of the circumstances that gave rise to the book, Bloom effectively writes *against* inward-looking white talk. He uses the occasion of his cousin’s randomly brutal murder, and the personal as well as family shock it occasioned, as a kind of defamiliarising medium, a heuristic opportunity to approach “the as-yet unanswered question of what I now feel towards my own country” (Bloom 14). This sentiment is key because it reveals the felt sense, common in the transition years, of having become a stranger in one’s own time and place, dislocated from a familiar sense of home and timeliness.

Bloom’s narrative is cast in an interrogative-conjectural mood, taking the reader along as he travels up and down both the city of Johannesburg and the country at large as if for the first time. This act of narrative journeying through and across the country and its cities, again, and anew, as if the country has changed—or not changed—such that fresh journeys of reconnaissance are necessary, is a leitmotif of much postapartheid writing and is evident in nonfiction works such as Steinberg’s *Midlands*, *The Number*, and *Three Letter Plague* and Ivan Vladisavic’s *Portrait with Keys* as well as fiction such as Deon Meyer’s *Heart of the Hunter*, Coovadia’s *High Low In-between*, Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to our Hillbrow*, and Mda’s *Ways of Dying*. Bloom underlines his interrogative mood when he writes, early on in *Ways of Staying*: “[T]he change in my attitude to South Africa has revealed itself gradually, like a jigsaw puzzle materializing piece by piece at the edges. I see a picture emerging, but I can’t yet say what it is” (14). His change in “attitude” is a result of estrangement: the hopefully postapartheid country he thought he lived in no longer seems to exist. His response is to set out on a quest to rediscover the “new,” or newly strange, South Africa via acts of journalistic detection for the (then) *Maverick* magazine and ultimately for his own book.

These quests of detection, or inbound travel (both geographical and personal-ideological), in sharp contradistinction to the “pack for Perth” response to estrangement, are important not just in Bloom’s case but in a more general sense for postapartheid writing. In *Ways of*

Staying, Bloom extends rather than contracts his intersubjective range of communication. He meets, talks to, and takes notes on the comments of people who are most “other” to the white South African subject position, in particular black South Africans who are transients in Johannesburg and who live in derelict buildings in the old central business district, now a filthy urban slum. Bloom also makes contact with African migrants holding out in various scabby parts of the “golden city” who are at the mercy of both xenophobia and a remorseless economy. (*Ways of Staying* was written amid the xenophobic attacks that hit the country in 2008, and it reports on the aftermath of these killings.) In this way, Bloom seeks a wider base for his reassessment of what it means to live in the country in which his own growing up coincided with the Rainbow Nation’s coming of age but which now seems to be undoing itself in violent spasms. Bloom’s readers journey with him into the once again “unknown” hinterland and the text thus replays a centuries-old motif in South African literature. Now, however, the quest is to find “ways of staying” rather than ways of leaving, in contrast to early explorers and settlers Bartholomew Diaz and Jan van Riebeeck, who left; the nineteenth-century explorers, who also came and went; poets Thomas Pringle and Roy Campbell, who returned to Europe; and Christopher Hope, Breyten Breytenbach, and Coetzee, who eventually headed for the distant hills, too. Is there a way in, rather than out? What will it take?

Bloom, in postapartheid 2007–08, occupies the very far side of the imperial-colonial-neocolonial quest in southern Africa. This mission—for land and money, but also, just as critically, for knowledge—has come full circle, from the “heroic” journeyings of missionary-imperial field scientists such as David Livingstone and Robert Moffat;¹⁰ it now finds compulsive reiteration in Bloom’s expedition to confirm, yet again, but with a greater intersubjective reach, that the habitat is a good one, or at least livable. In an ironic sense, this historical circularity underlines Coetzee’s bottom line that whites are in the country on the “shakiest of pretexts.” Whether you agree with Coetzee’s stance or not, white writers reaffirm such shakiness in each new chronicle of dislocation and their accounts of restless wandering to secure a firm purchase on the

land, whether such footholds are real or discursive. This is a moment in postapartheid writing that marks a disjunctive continuity with pre-transitional writing: it is a literature of compulsive (re)iteration and near-blind narrative cycling, a literature seemingly always, and yet again, at the frontier of unknowing, on the brink, all the way from Sol T. Plaatje's *Mbudi* and Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* (with their sense of imminent conflict across frontiers), through the "Jim-comes-to-Joburg" novels such as Peter Abrahams' *Mine Boy* and Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, to Gordimer's *A World of Strangers* and Coetzee's *Dusklands*. In a sense, these are all narratives about people who are deaf to each other but cross-traversing the same country.¹¹ What is profoundly different, though, as suggested above, is that the white writer in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries seeks a range of reciprocity seldom sought, or found, before. This is an attempt to find the rapport denied in Coetzee's *Foe*, Gordimer's *July's People*, Eben Venter's *Trencherman*, Etienne van Heerden's *30 Nights in Amsterdam*, and Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*.

Despite compulsive cycling, however, the postapartheid narrative does show one or two important breakthroughs. Much like Livingstone's grand imperial survey, *Travels and Researches in South Africa* (1858), Olive Schreiner's somewhat distant view of black subjects on the "African farm" in *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), or Herman Charles Bosman's ironically refracted stories about "kaffirs" (see, for example, his 1930 piece "Makapan's Caves"), Bloom's narrative juxtaposes the mid-2000s experience of the mostly-black poor with life on the wealthier (and mostly white) side of the economic fence. What is markedly different, however, is that Bloom displays a more immediately urgent need to find some way beyond the impasse of violent division. He seeks a commonality in the contingency of *all* postapartheid lives for the purposes of day-to-day continuation, and, to some extent, finds it. *Ways of Staying* narrates (in reporter's notebook, fact-based mode, rather than in self-consciously imaginative flights of fancy or failure) gruesome attacks by blacks against whites, murders and rapes whose seemingly gratuitous cruelty beg the question of whether this is the final revenge for a history of rampantly violent white dominion. As Bloom asks after listening to a radio news bulletin in his car while traveling across the country, "[i]s

the focus on [the murders of David Rattray, Brett Goldin, and Richard Bloom] symbolic of a national undercurrent, their front-page status a function of resurgent white fears? Or might we be affirming by our fascination that such murders are inevitable, a necessary tax on history?" (20). Bloom also reports probing on black experience in postapartheid South Africa, showing how urban subjects live on the knife-point of survival and giving the term "bare life" immediate specificity. His extensive recounting of the story of Tony and Claudia Muderhwa, a migrant couple from the Democratic Republic of Congo, along with similar accounts, probes the more objective conditions of "plot loss" and high-wire contingency in the country at large. All kinds of South Africans are eating dirt in the "new" South Africa, Bloom's book effectively says, although only some have the luxury of "leaving," especially for "better" places. The irony is not lost on Bloom that while some of his own cousins have emigrated to Australia, the stretched migrants seeking shelter in Jozi (Johannesburg) want nothing so badly as to *not* be thrown out of the country. In the end, Bloom's white protagonist—a narrative presentation of himself—decides to hang in there, so to speak, and stay.

If South African literature seems always to ride a horizon of unknowing, irresistibly reworking a foundational trope in which the frontier returns, then the ruptures in such a continuity might be found in the manner in which points of connection and disconnection are refigured in the moment of writing. The frontier as a figure, discursively overlaying any number of physical and imagined sites, is nothing if not a mirage, a phantasmal site of projected integration, repulsion, partial success, measures of failure, and possible catastrophe. It is that ever-looming horizon, the imagined limit, where the game might change forever if one is not careful, and where decisive encounters are thought always to be on the brink. It is, in addition, a figuration of the stakes involved in personal, familial, and national life that may or may not involve transnational considerations. In practical terms, it becomes a matter of *figuring out* what the proportions of safety and danger, rule and misrule, and freedom or its opposite really are or might be. It helps to answer, always provisionally, the question: Will I have a fair chance when I leave private space and merge with the "country," the nationally imagined or named

domain, whether in its regional or urban manifestations? As a result, detection is an important act for the work of civic imagining¹² basic to ordinary life in postapartheid South Africa; it is the figuring out, for citizens, of their contested birthplace, and for migrants, of their destination country, but for all it is an act of urgent and perpetual reimagining, because this place—both actual and spectral, mediated and experienced, perceived or imagined and felt—must be faced again on each new day. We are here. We are staying. We want to be here. And we want to know the deep truth about the country, now, again. How can subjects—both citizens and “aliens” wanting to become nationals—find out, for real? The frontier—the place where one finds out what the limit condition is or might be—is therefore in a state of permanent revision or *refiguration* (some might say reterritorialization). If this is always the case, then so it is with special urgency under “transitional” conditions.¹³ The transitional frontier, one might speculate, is always in motion, moment by moment, in the instant of projection meeting experience. Human subjects, in their guise as citizens or “aliens” in a bounded terrain, want to be prepared, especially when anxiety is running high about conditions on the ground and the chances of survival. In particular, citizens in unstable postcolonial polities where law and disorder feed off of each other (Comaroff and Comaroff, *Law and Disorder* 5, 18, 20) tend to be hungry for data and news of developments in the “contact zone,” and they will eagerly consume both factually presented and imaginatively reworked data—from the lurid headlines of the *Daily Sun* to the fact-based fictions of crime writers. In short, the market for proxy detection is a big one, or at least big enough to meet the writer’s desire to go out there on behalf of those who are perhaps more cautious and find out what the hell is “really” going on.

It is as simple as that: find out what is going on out there. This is the business of a very large chunk of current South African writing which very often deals with the predicament of wayward or mashed-up temporalities in which tropes from the long time of before intrude jaggedly into the supposedly transformed present, which is always on the brink or “yet to begin.”¹⁴ This is a moving present, then, a moving frontier of time that refuses to yield to a promised future of secular redemption

from the bad old days of frontier conflict. And while the impulse to detect might be straightforward enough, the complexities of detection are not. How does one “write” the country, now, again, write it up, so to speak, now that both everything and nothing has changed and we are back at “START”? Or so it seems. The two most basic options for a writer, of course, are fiction or nonfiction, although both these categories, in current literary production inside the country, bleed into each other in ways that should make one wary of the distinction, especially in the case of works of sociopolitical detection. Fiction writers may (and often do) use factual, researched data to make educated guesses, rendered in imaginative form,¹⁵ while nonfiction writers tend to use much the same kind of data to set up narrative simulacra of the supposed real,¹⁶ but such simulacra are naturally still reimagined, at least since we started reading Hayden White on narrative constructions of “fact.”¹⁷ Of course, different writers will be either more or less licentious with the combinations of invention and imagination, more or less liable to surrender to the seduction of formal closure demanded by genre when the facts may resist such closure. But in all of these cases there is a certain catharsis, a kind of relief derived from knowing, at last, what is going on (or thinking that one knows), or the purgation of pity and fear involved in “watching” the most feared events happen to others in a book, whether or not the happening is exaggerated or “played up.” In fact, one may want a bit of playing up in fiction, just for the hell of it, for the release, and writers like Mike Nicol, Sarah Lotz, Angela Makholwa, Deon Meyer, Margie Orford, and Roger Smith happily oblige.

Further, there is an edge to the nonfiction accounts, and to many of the factually loaded fictional accounts, too, a sharp seeking for clues and traces deriving from what, in a different context, Carlo Ginzburg calls the “conjectural paradigm” (105) of detection based on a more general “evidential paradigm” (96). Ginzburg traces the evidential paradigm and its clue-based conjectures to its sources in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes and late nineteenth-century art criticism (98). This is an inductive approach; it works from small particulars and stories and avoids looking to the bigger picture before it can construe the shape of things from micro-details, traces, and imprints. Moreover, it maintains

a hard-nosed skepticism about alibis and tall stories (metanarratives, “baas”- or master-narratives, and “kak-praat” or shit-talking). It meets such large alibis with a “god is in the details” counterpunch.¹⁸

Such a return-shot is evident in the work of Steinberg, a younger-generation postapartheid writer who made it his task to discover what was “really” going on with the ugly business of farm murders and came up with the uncommonly powerful literary debut that is *Midlands* (2002). *Midlands* deserves attention because it sets the tone of much postapartheid detection in nonfiction mode, establishing the basis for an inductive, evidential, and conjecturally stringent quality of voice. This occurs amid a palpable sense of unease about a country’s “never [quite] having begun,” properly speaking, in spite of the postapartheid script of revolutionary progress. *Midlands* enjoyed a successful reception—it snatched up the Alan Paton Award, an event that almost instantly turned Steinberg into a key postapartheid writer—and Steinberg has strengthened his reputation with each of his successive books. Despite its factual bias, *Midlands* is styled as novelistic, conversational nonfiction in a register that is both sharply analytical and considerate of its reader’s peculiarly postapartheid disposition. That is to say, it settles on a quality of interlocution that is impatient with the obfuscation of fact by embellishment and evidence by fancy. It is a voice and an interlocution that is as persistent as a jackhammer in its determination to discover the ever more complex actual and historical conditions behind a single South African farm murder and, inductively, the possible conditions behind murder as a social language in the “new” South Africa. *Midlands* is also a travelogue and describes repeated forays into the “heart of the country”—the lush and tropical KwaZulu-Natal interior, seat of ancient rivalry between white and black—in order to prise open camouflaged conditions. This is a mission to acquire knowledge that, a book like *Midlands* implies, cannot practicably be done in fiction. The details to be sought out are beyond imagining: the point is to scratch below the surface of “stories” because there are too many stories already. As Hedley Twidle reports in his article “‘In a Country Where You Couldn’t Make This Shit Up’? Literary Nonfiction in South Africa” (2010), when Malan, Altbeker, and Steinberg sat on a panel at a South

African book fair in 2010 they found themselves in agreement that “a plethora of emergent non-fiction narratives in South Africa . . . seemed to provide the most compelling and challenging medium for the serious writer at present” (6). Twidle also notes that van Niekerk and Antjie Krog made similar statements, with van Niekerk commenting that “fiction has become redundant in this country” (5) and Krog flatly stating that “at this stage imagination for me is overrated” (5). The more urgent tasks for these authors, then, are to gather evidence of below-the-radar conditions, secure “on the ground” intelligence, and note the details in shorthand and/or tape recorder records; the imperative is to report back on conditions that appear to confound outcomes envisaged in the postapartheid metanarrative. Bloom and Steinberg do this with a high degree of self-reflexivity about avoiding bias in their recasting of stories told to them in good faith by informants. This is taxing fieldwork that includes sifting, writing, and reckoning with one’s own relation to the intelligence gathered. There is not time enough for make-believe. It is the age of what David Shields calls “reality hunger,” and there is a keen appetite for demythologising data relayed with the kind of skeptical discrimination that is germane to a journalistic rather than an imaginative register.

The twenty-first century travelogue, unlike those of the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries, then, cannot afford the assumption of prior knowledge. Such assumptions, spread across races, ethnicities, classes, and genders, are what brought the country to the brink of violent revolution in the first place. Bloom and Steinberg re-trope the journey of discovery in hard-nosed detection mode for the sake of a necessary exercise in social forensics, for which there is a reinvigorated appetite in the reading market.¹⁹ Steinberg has, since the publication of *Midlands*, become one of this form’s best and most favorite practitioners, winning Yale University’s Windham Campbell Prize in 2013. *Midlands*, moreover, is an excellent place to look for suggestions about what postapartheid South African writers in the evidential nonfiction mode are up to and what it is that they are finding out on their knowledge-gathering journeys of detection. The quest now is as much inward as outward, and it reluctantly suspends the teleological mythography of “rainbow-

ism” as it seeks to understand reversion rather than rupture—reversion to frontier set-ups in which frequent acts of murder communicate an anxiety about failed “new” beginnings, “re-starts,” and a disorienting loss of plot. It is a journey that no longer takes geography (place) as a *terra incognita* upon which to impose the beneficence of “field science” (as Livingstone did, for example) according to Linnaean scientific or established ethnographic schemata. Instead, it switches from an authoritatively-deductive to a nervily-inductive mode, seeking out details first and making more general conclusions with appropriate caution.

Nevertheless, it does not take very much reading of *Midlands*—a few paragraphs into the book’s Prelude on the peculiar phenomenon of farm murders, in fact—before one bumps unceremoniously into the oldest trope in the South African book, the frontier: “[Peter] Mitchell was killed, not just figuratively, but quite literally, on the southern midlands’ racial frontier, the dust road on which he died a boundary between the white-owned commercial farmlands to the west and the derelict common land of a dying black peasantry to the east” (Steinberg, *Midlands* viii-ix). Mitchell’s murderers, who had shot the twenty-eight-year-old scion of a settler family on his father Arthur’s farm in the southern midlands of Natal, did so “in order to push the boundary back,” writes Steinberg (ix). This was a campaign the killers’ “forebears had begun in the closing years of the nineteenth century, and which their great-grandchildren believed it their destiny, as the generation to witness apartheid’s demise, to finish” (ix). Steinberg describes how he quickly saw that his initial intention to write a book about multiple farm murders would not be possible. He would either have to write the story of this one murder fully or leave it completely alone, so complicated did its details and implications appear:

I initially thought I was to write about an event from the recent past, but it soon became clear to me that much of the story lay in the immediate future, and I would do well to hang around and record it. This was a silent frontier battle, the combatants groping hungrily for the whispers and lies that drifted in from the other side. It was clear from the start that Peter Mitchell

would not be the only one to die on that border, that I had arrived at the beginning of a deadly endgame. And I knew that the story of his and subsequent deaths would illuminate a great deal about the early days of post-apartheid South Africa. (ix)

A jolt such as this—when the nonfiction account that promises to yield insight about what newness lies beyond the threshold of the transition, seems instead to take its reader back/forward into the future anterior—is a surprisingly persistent feature of “post”-apartheid writing of all stripes. It is a future-anterior or a “will have been” feeling that pops up all over the place. So what, if anything, is different, or new, in a book such as *Midlands*?

What is different in both *Midlands* and *Ways of Staying* is the occasion for writing and the manner of approaching a very old topic. A new occasion calls for a revised register, something Steinberg puts together quite meticulously. The occasion for writing, at the most basic level, is the advent of postapartheid, along with a ferocious curiosity about the very question, and real nature, of the “transition.” What does it mean? Is it real? Has it led to anything beyond the “threshold” implicit in the very term “transition,” the idea of a “limit” and a “beyond,” or are these notions themselves a collective fiction? The more immediate pretext for writing is the reported surge in what have become known as “farm murders.” These murders look, on the surface, like a form of retribution for the ills of apartheid, persistently involving what appears to be arbitrary cruelty. Steinberg writes:

[T]he motive for the vast majority of attacks appears to be robbery; the perpetrators flee the scene of the crime with guns, cars and money. And yet, so many attacks are accompanied by seemingly gratuitous violence, the violence itself performed with such ceremony and drama, that the infliction of painful death appears to be the primary motive. “Farm murders,” as South Africans have come to call them, occupy a strange and ambiguous space; they tamper with the boundary between acquisitive crime and racial hatred. . . . Now [soon after Mandela’s inauguration], the dispatches from farming districts appeared

to be telling us something all too real. Perhaps the goodwill of the Mandela period was illusory? Perhaps there were a host of unsettled scores we had brushed under the carpet? Maybe, for once, the countryside was way ahead of us, bringing a grim portent of life after the honeymoon. (vii)

Steinberg wants to know what is behind the phenomenon of farm murders, a matter widely reported to be a luridly perverse “new South Africa” spectacle, something that appears to run against the grain of the idea of the transitional and the much-trumpeted “transformation” of South African society. As a writer, Steinberg finds himself dissatisfied with the sketchiness of what he is able to write or find out in his circumscribed role as a crime reporter for the Johannesburg newspaper *Business Day*. He secures funding and a desk at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in Johannesburg, leaves his job at *Business Day*, and begins a series of forays into the “country,” both in the sense of the rural hinterland beyond the city and in the broader sense of the entirety of the political and geographical polity as an entity, a collective thing.

Steinberg’s long and exhaustive investigation concentrates one’s attention on his voice as narrator. Over the course of *Midlands’* compelling, exhausting, and unforgiving narration, Steinberg’s stabbing, analytic, skeptical voice sets a very distinct tone. There is an unaccustomed impatience in this voice: it does not indulge its immediate interlocutors—the people Steinberg interviews, especially the white farmers in the Midlands region—and yet is considerate of its reader, whom it addresses directly in the second person as “you” (“you will remember”; “I will tell you this story a little later”). It is also self-reflexive in its acts of putting the bits and pieces of the narrative together and sharing with the reader the difficulties of where and how to slot in various segments of the overall reality puzzle. Steinberg effectively narrates his acts of hard detection both in a new kind of mood and on behalf of a new kind of reader. This is a “new South Africa” reader who is well informed about politics and economic history, tired of spent alibis from the past, hungry for “clean” information, and impatient for a real change in the country’s dealings. It is a reader that belongs to a generation of (in this case

white) urban South Africans who came of age politically in the explosive 1980s, joining the United Democratic Front (UDF), the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), or the trade unions to fight apartheid from whichever vantage worked best. It is a respectful voice, to be sure, but it is never prepared to swallow whole the self-justificatory mythmaking it is regularly served in response to its cross-questioning, or the half-answers and the evasions its probing often elicits. It is a voice that refuses to indulge in paternalistic or “bleeding heart” liberalism and it does not feel overly beholden to self-serving political rationalisations, whether from the white or the black side of the political fence.

The white or the black side? The political fence? Surely these terms are or should be redundant in the postapartheid age. The fact that this is *not* the case, as Steinberg shows over the course of his many vividly described but mostly dispiriting encounters, is partly why the detector-narrator’s voice is so brusque as it probes its interlocutors. The narrative voice needs this “hot knife” quality, because suddenly, for both the isi-Zulu-speaking black citizens and the white South Africans in Steinberg’s story, the stakes are very high. It is as though postapartheid has not changed the game, as it was supposed to, but merely accelerated the moves, shifted the positions on the board, altered the roles of players, and upped the reward money while failing to pay out equal start-up amounts. Suddenly it is all or nothing, and now that the political game has been decided the new finishing line is the power conferred by wealth or, often, mere survival. Participants who used to be pliable suddenly play dirty; players often change sides without declaring their motives; the rulebook has been rewritten in the language of fairness but the enforcement of these rules is all but impossible; indeed, enforcement becomes openly partisan along racial lines while private reckoning seeks to “balance” the scales of competing interests, confirming the hypothesis that law and disorder in the postcolony are parasitically co-dependent; and evasion and half-truths are used on both sides of a reconfigured “racial frontier” to gain the edge.

Can such a condition truly be called a “transition” to democracy? Perhaps, in a postcolonial style, but only insofar as it plays out on the old terrain of the frontier. Political power has changed hands, but eco-

conomic might on the whole has emphatically not, apart from conspicuous black-elite enrichment. White people in the Midlands area in which the book takes place remain sturdily wealthy; they continue to own the land and its riches. Black people are either unemployed (the great majority), wage earners on white farms (a fortunate few), or small-time entrepreneurs with political connections (a tiny handful, making up a ragged local elite). The condition of postapartheid, in Steinberg's analysis, is felt not in the euphoria and material advancement of enfranchisement but in the urgency of frustration about delayed economic liberty for the majority of the population, about still "never [quite] having begun." These are people who on the whole remain dirt-poor, despite having an ANC president and a bill of rights. So, on the black side of this pumped-up, higher-stakes racial frontier, indignation and hostility are running hotter than ever before in the country's history—leading in this case to the killing at the center of the story—while on the white side there is a level of fear and insecurity about the rule of law that supersedes earlier versions of "black peril." All parties appear to feel much worse than they did before. They are jointly and severally rattled, but with a new sense of entitlement, each in their own way seeking to rely on the provisions of an immaculately promulgated but waywardly and inefficiently enforced regime of "fair play." This regime is well-nigh unenforceable, a fact that is clear to everyone—hence the accelerated desperation on all sides.

Perhaps this is why the farm murders Steinberg sets out to investigate have a "bite to their horror that is absent from the horror of most murders" (5). "[W]hite farmers," Steinberg avers, "were not killed under apartheid. Not like this, at any rate. They were killed by jealous spouses, by disturbed neighbours and by crazed children. But never like this" (5). Under apartheid, he writes, people on farms had to lock their doors when they went away on holiday: "But murder? Never. No black man entered the vast commercial farmlands to kill a member of a powerful white family. And on the handful of occasions when a crazy black man did kill a white, the police would comb the countryside with their fists and their electric shocks and they would get a confession" (6).

Such policing is no longer the norm. In fact, the opposite is true. As *Midlands* shows, the murder and robbery unit in the area under the

spotlight in Steinberg's book is both under-resourced and demoralised. White detectives, such as *Midlands'* Louis Wessels, belonged to squads that were "shattered by the demise of apartheid" because "[t]he cause that animated the unit's work—already somewhat misty—was defeated, and vanished from the face of the earth" (81). To add to the misery, democratic South Africa "was a rough country to police" (81). There were many towns assigned to individuals such as Wessels where a detective who goes to interview a suspect "is not sure whether he will come out alive" (81). And why bother to investigate? Steinberg writes: "So much mortal danger, so much fear—in the service of a political order from which men like Wessels are so thoroughly estranged" (81). Steinberg's analysis of the state of policing in democratic South Africa (73–90) makes for depressing reading. It is a centralised "monster of an institution" (78), the second largest in the world, and it is "chaotic and ungovernable" (78). Just as police units in KwaZulu-Natal under apartheid were often less than savory, with white policemen openly furthering the agendas of the Mangosuthu Buthelezi's apartheid-linked Inkatha Freedom Party, so is contemporary policing mired in local politics. Steinberg shows how, in the rivalry following the Mitchell murder, the black parties charged by the white accusers regard the (largely white) local murder and robbery squad as being on the "white side" ("I know these policemen are yours," says a member of the Cube family), while whites see the (entirely black) local police station as being on the "black side" (87). In Steinberg's narrative, the Mitchell family comes to view the new constitutional dispensation, with its openness to claims and counter-claims on every level, including that of local policing, as "an edifice behind which the criminals, the savages and the killers of this country took refuge" (88).

Such resurgent barricading is not confined to the matter of policing. Reflecting on the discourse of Colin Waugh, one of Steinberg's key interlocutors, the author notes that "[Waugh] had blurred the distinction between racial difference and a military frontier" (16–17). But that is not all. "Later," Steinberg writes, "when I tried to enter Izita in my white skin, I discovered that [Waugh's] 'opposition' had done the same" (17). Here, then, is another instance of what I have elsewhere called "bad"

difference,²⁰ only now it is the inverse of perverse, monologic “cultural difference” within apartheid’s separate-but-equal governing mythology, or within the ranks of a neoliberal governing elite; here one sees how the hallowed discourse of heterogeneity at the heart of the constitutional democracy—of pluralism or “rainbowism” in its idealised sense—is mangled in the hands of not only those who conceive of and administer the law but also those who are subject to it. Side-taking, antagonism, misperception, and misrecognition of difference, all age-old South African frontier characteristics, are here re-cast, resituated within the game according to the rulebook of constitutional democracy. What have really changed are the odds and the relative weighting of factors such as law-making and enforcement. Politics, for Elias Sithole, a black stalwart of the struggle with whom Steinberg comes into contact during his search for clues, are corrupt to the core. Sithole sets out his view of things:

And so what is the ANC now, that noble organisation in the name of which people died horrible deaths? The ANC in Izita is run by a bunch of small-time, crooked businessmen who couldn’t give a damn about their constituencies. They want to make money, and to keep making it they need power, and that is why they get involved in politics. Politics has become the playground of the corrupt. It is no more than that. He shook his head in disgust. (qtd. in Steinberg 121)

Sithole believes that young people have been afflicted by a new scourge. “Something terrible” has happened to the traditionally revered revolutionary sub-group called “the youth.” They continue to think of themselves as soldiers, he says, “but there is no war to fight” and “[s]oldiers without a war are bandits” (122). He defines a bandit as “somebody who has retained the revolutionary’s disrespect for the law” but has no ennobling ultimate goal (122); the bandit “just sweeps, just smashes” (122) without putting anything in its place. The bandit, Sithole says with palpable distaste, “calls himself an entrepreneur” (122). One might add that in so doing, such “entrepreneurs” instrumentalise disorder, confirming Mbembe’s interpretation of conditions in postapartheid South Africa as atomised, instrumentalised chaos (Mbembe). For the people on the

ground in the Sarahdale/Izita region, the frontier under postapartheid has reached a state characterised by Steinberg as “endgame”: “The truth is that things had spiralled out of control. Mitchell and his enemies were caught up in an endgame, one neither had bargained for, one that was bound to end with the spilling of more blood on the border between Izita and the Sarahdale farms” (75). Later in the narrative, Steinberg sees a stark underlying logic behind the myriad complexities in the events he finds himself investigating:

I realised then that what was going on between Mitchell and his tenants was quite simple, really. They had tried to push him off his farm and rob him of his vocation, and now the idea of farming that land the way he had done before his son died contained the most meaning he was ever going to squeeze out of his life. I also realised that his tenants would never leave him in peace. Whenever he dipped a cow, mended a fence or planted a seed, he would be getting his revenge. They would haunt him in the taking of his every pleasure. (184)

The narrative quest to find out what is actually going on beyond the transition, or where the “transit” in “transition” has actually taken the constitutional democracy, increasingly results in the discovery of little more than a familiar, but now incredulous, taste of bile. Paraphrased, this is a realisation that might be voiced as an exasperated question: Have we still not even *begun* to get beyond ourselves? In Sithole’s view, the combination of hope and disappointment is palpable:

In the 1980s there was hope. Change was around the corner. The ugly things would soon be leaving. Then democracy came. Mandela’s government. Then another election. Mbeki’s government. And the white farmers still run the countryside. Things are getting worse, in fact. The farmers are building these game reserves and taking over miles of land they have never used before. They don’t trust the police any longer so they create their own private police forces. These men in their uniforms stand on the hilltops watching your every move with their bin-

oculars and their night-vision glasses, defending the law of their land.

There is nowhere to escape to. You can't go to the cities because there is no work there. You will starve to death. You are a prisoner in the white man's countryside, and now there is no prospect of anything different. It is you against him for the rest of time. So when he marches onto your land and tells you he is going to interview your future son-in-law and decide whether he can live in your house, you take matters into your own hands, because nobody else is going to. (qtd. in Steinberg 245–46)

In response, Steinberg asks: “You kill his son?” Sithole replies: “Yes. It has come to that” (246).

Here, then, is a deadly counterpoint to any sense of a relatively seamless “transition” from pre-postapartheid to post-postapartheid. For Sithole, it is what Steinberg calls “endgame.” It is a curious return to the frontier, “post-apartheid South Africa’s racial frontier” as Steinberg puts it (x), repeating the phrase “racial frontier” another five times in his book as if to say: keep remembering that we are still in this game, not beyond it, and that it is now endgame time. However, Steinberg thereby ironically reaffirms another immemorial trope in the country’s literature, and especially its white literature—apocalypse or end times²¹—and suggests yet another act of cycling in the literature at large. It is therefore clear that any suggestion that South African literature is largely “post” transition, “post-transitional,” or “post-postapartheid” should be regarded with some caution. If we are to believe Steinberg’s and Bloom’s inductively based reports, postapartheid’s material conditions contradict the (healthy) promise of such forward-looking temporalities and question the scripts of (even faltering) progress in time-and-place conditions and (even relative) containment of the past. Instead, and again, we have the specter of never (quite) having properly begun.

Notes

- 1 I have made similar arguments myself in “Judging ‘New’ South African Fiction in the Transnational Moment,” “Does South African Literature Still Exist?” and “A History of Restlessness: And Now for the Rest.”

2 This argument, cast in a slightly different way, is also made by Medalie in “Uses of Nostalgia” (35–36). In addition, see Titlestad, writing about Medalie’s collection *His Mistress’s Dog*, on the idea of what he calls, borrowing from one of Medalie’s stories, “mezzanine ontology” in postapartheid writing. Titlestad argues that “post-transitional” is a “compromised” term:

Prior to the liberation of South Africa, writers were haunted by a sense of approaching catastrophe and inspired by the hope for liberation. We lived, the dominant literary ideology asserted, in what Antonio Gramsci called an ‘interregnum’: the old was dying but the new could not be born. What remained for authors in the context of this crisis was to put their shoulders to the wheel of history. In a sense, this logic—of being subsumed by historical process and necessity—continued through the first decade of democracy. For most authors, though, this teleological rumbling forward is no longer an option: many instead reflect lives caught in-between an old order that has—quite rightly, and to the relief of all right-thinking individuals—disappeared and the uncertainties of the future. (119–20)

3 Of interest in this regard is the spate of novels in the postapartheid period that return to telling the country’s history, or major events in this history, in ways that cater to a sense of the future anterior or the “will have been.” I am thinking here, for example, of Winterbach’s *To Hell with Cronje* (2007), Mda’s *Heart of Redness* (2000), Sleight’s *Eilande* (2002), Brownlee’s *Garden of the Plagues* (2005), and Robertson’s *The Spiral House* (2013), among others.

4 See also Silber and Geffen, Leggett, and Burger.

5 See Graham’s *State of Peril*.

6 Kynoch cites van Onselen’s *New Nineveh* (1982), Glaser’s *Bo-Tsotsi* (2000), and Pinnock’s work on street gangs in Cape Town, *The Brotherhoods* (1983), among others.

7 Citing South African Police Services statistics, Steinberg illustrates white “misreading” of crime with the following example: In the remote town of Lusikisiki in the Transkei, where the only white face one is likely to see is that of a doctor from Médecins Sans Frontières, 109 murders were reported in 2003 and 76 in 2004. By contrast, in Parkview, a rich white suburb of Johannesburg, two murders were reported in 2002 and one in 2003. None of these three victims was white (“Crime” 27).

8 According to Altbeker, only Columbia and Swaziland had higher murder rates than South Africa when his article was published circa 2005 (2).

9 See also the edited collection *Should I Stay or Should I Go? To Live in or Leave South Africa*.

10 See my *Civilising Barbarians* 141–87.

11 This description is borrowed from Steinberg, who remarked, during a seminar at Yale University in September 2013 following his receipt of a Windham Camp-

- bell Prize, that South Africa is a country where “writing is a question of coordination between deaf people” (personal seminar notes).
- 12 A related concept is the “civil imaginary” (see *During* as well as my “*Sitting*”).
- 13 Cornwell, in his introduction to the *Columbia Guide to South African Literature in English Since 1945*, cites anthropologist Robert Thornton as suggesting that “South Africa seems likely to remain in permanent transition, just as it once seemed to exist perpetually just ahead of apocalypse” (Thornton qtd. in Cornwell et al 7).
- 14 For more on “plural temporalities” in postcolonial conditions, see pgs. 160–70 of West-Pavlov who cites Dipesh Chakrabarty, Achille Mbembe, and Edouard Glissant.
- 15 Such as, for example, Pauw’s *Little Ice Cream Boy* and Marnewick’s *Shepherds and Butchers*.
- 16 This is precisely what authors such as Bloom, Steinberg, and Altbeker do.
- 17 See White, *Tropics of Discourse*.
- 18 Ginzburg cites art historian Aby Warburg’s famous line, “God is in the detail[s]” (22), generally thought to be the origin of the phrase “the devil is in the detail[s]” (96).
- 19 All the anecdotal evidence—arising from conversations with South African publishers over the past few years—suggests that nonfiction generally outsells fiction and “true crime” does better than crime fiction. This is also reflected in the rising tide of “true crime” in the local South African publishing market in both English and Afrikaans.
- 20 See my “Subject of Evil.”
- 21 The trope of apocalypse can be detected in any number of “classic” South African works of literature, including Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Schoeman’s *Promised Land* (translation of *Na die Geliefde Land*), Gordimer’s *July’s People*, Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K*, and Venter’s *Trencherman*, among others. See also Cornwell’s inclusion of anthropologist Robert Thornton’s statement on the link between transition and apocalypse (7).

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