

# No Lay of the Land

*Writing in South Africa  
after apartheid*

**Leon de Kock**

**What does it mean to be a “postapartheid” writer? The customary** sense of South African writing, especially in the United States, tends to concentrate on classic examples of resistance to racial injustice, with names like Alan Paton, Es’kia Mphahlele, Athol Fugard, Nadine Gordimer, André Brink, Lewis Nkosi, Antjie Krog, and J.M. Coetzee coming most readily to mind. In the years since South Africa’s “silent” revolution in 1994, however, the lines have become harder to see as a political and moral battleground that was once infamously familiar refracted into a scene of seemingly lesser micro-struggles under the still-grand, emblematic banner of “liberation.” However, Nelson Mandela’s “bloodless” revolution, in the view of most independent experts today, was far more a symbolic victory than a material one, with black elites reaping huge financial benefits at the cost of the vast majority of ordinary (and mostly black) South Africans. The average black citizen of the nominally free South Africa, today, 21 years after the end of apartheid, remains pitifully poor despite the many constitutional gains of democracy, with real unemployment rates estimated at over 35 percent (youth unemployment is reliably estimated at more than 50 percent). This is especially evident under the crony regime of the all-but-disgraced current president, Jacob Zuma, who has spent a large part of his late political career evading trial for corruption, and whose government is seen as nothing if not pragmatic in its elite-enrichment strategies under the cover of the African National Congress’s powerfully symbolic liberation currency.

For citizens, intellectuals, writers and observers alike, it has been a somewhat rough ride. It’s as if the country lost its heroic master-narrative of resistance as freedom was gained, but, at the same time, somehow not properly achieved. In a real sense, this twist in the tale—and the issue of why, where, and how it came about—is in fact the real question, the *actual* story, for postapart-

heid writers. However, like the student protests in the country in the second half of 2015 against rising university fees—a remarkable upsurge of what noted commentator Achille Mbembe calls the “politics of impatience”—it is a tale, or a set of tales, that don’t quite make headlines with quite the same force as apartheid and the liberation struggle once did.

This loss of focus has created an interesting situation in South African writing. The legions of writers that have emerged (and those who have continued to write) after South Africa’s Mandela “miracle” of 1994 have proved to be difficult to sum up under any easy-to-hand categorization. The early years of the new democracy witnessed heady optimism of a kind that is well summed up in novelist André Brink’s rousing call, made on the brink of political liberation in 1993, for “a reimagination of history.” The recently deceased Brink, a veteran of resistance against apartheid, urged creative artists “to grapple, exuberantly and adventurously, with the limits of the possible.” In saying this, Brink was echoing a similar appeal by author and scholar Njabulo Ndebele, who famously urged writers to “rediscover the ordinary” and to break from the overly stark depictions of “struggle” literature.

Sadly, however, such early-transition buoyancy did not last very long. Following the honeymoon years of 1994–1998, during which the universally beloved Nelson Mandela served as president, troubling currents began to emerge, such as a widely perceived return to exclusionary racial discourse in the governance of Mandela’s successor, Thabo Mbeki, not to mention Mbeki’s disastrous AIDS-denialism, said to have caused the deaths of at least 350,000 people. This coincided with growing public perceptions of an overall failure to deliver on the election promise of “a better life for all,” as the new government showed it was simply unable to make good on its once-socialist charter. This was after the Mandela administration, widely thought to have been run by Mbeki behind the scenes, bought into hard-nosed macroeconomic policies, in sync with the neoliberal zeitgeist across the developed and developing worlds. It has to be added

that the government had no real choice in the matter: globalized “markets”—or the “world economy”—would brook no alternative, and South Africa desperately needed “economic growth” for the sake of jobs, or so the story went. On the ground, however, the mainly black poor remained trapped in the shacks and shackles of poverty.

In addition, elite-enrichment scandals became a hallmark of the new dispensation. After Mandela stepped down in 1998, wave upon wave of government scandals began cresting, starting with an enormous arms deal running into hundreds of millions of dollars in which heavy bribes and injudicious spending were the order of the day. The scandal-besieged Mbeki government was followed by a dispiriting consolidation of patrimonialism and crony-governance under current president Jacob Zuma, whose “Nkandlagate” blemish is only one such “bad spot” in a morass of governmental malpractice on every level, as frenetically reported every day in the country’s nongovernmental media. “Nkandlagate” has seen hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars spent on Zuma’s private homestead in rural KwaZulu Natal. The other large area in which the country seems to have lost the plot has been an epidemic of crime so marked that leading nonfiction writer Jonny Steinberg was moved to write about a “phenomenology of crime” taking hold inside the country.

In the face of such demoralizing trends, writers increasingly found it hard to follow Brink’s prompt to “reimagine history” in any upbeat manner. To do as Brink suggested, namely to “grapple exuberantly and adventurously with the limits of the possible” began to seem less urgent as a newer and more pressing imperative emerged: to account for the somewhat anticlimactic, and socially destructive, *failure* of the once-rejoiced democratic miracle. It has been a severe disillusionment, a bad hangover, for citizens, writers and libertarians alike, and it still comes as something of a shock to read the following summation of affairs by Mbembe, written in 2013 for the Johannesburg *Mail & Guardian*: “South Africa has entered a new period of its history: a post-Machiavellian moment when private accumulation no longer happens through outright dispossession

but through the capture and appropriation of public resources, the modulation of brutality and the instrumentalisation of disorder.”

Even if this analysis is only half true—and it is the kind of thing all manner of observers have been saying for quite a while now, from all quarters in the “rainbow nation”—the shock of it remains disorienting. How did it happen that a revolution once described as a “miracle,” with such unusually excellent prospects, could so decisively have gone off the rails? And why did the so-called “new” South Africa so quickly yield to the grubby politics of exclusionary self-enrichment? The force of disillusionment in the South African case derives from the high degree of hope invested in a country that had, by 1994, become a global allegory for the politics of race. If South Africa could pull through, then it would set a testing example for the rest of the world, not least the United States. But writers in both South Africa and the United States now face the relative loss of such optimism, with events in the troubled zone of “race relations” still looking as grim as ever, especially after the Freddie Gray event in Baltimore, along with similar instances of racial malpractice by police in places like Ferguson, Missouri, and Manhattan, New York, where former tennis professional James Blake was unceremoniously brought to the ground by a policeman in full view of the public after being taken for a common criminal. The Baltimore, Ferguson and Manhattan debacles are isolated examples mirroring the much worse event of the Marikana killings in 2012 in the North West Province of South Africa, where the supposedly reformed national police force, acting on orders from the highest political levels, shot dead 34 protesting platinum miners, dirt-poor underground laborers who were seeking an improvement in wages as low as \$400 a month. Many of the murdered, it now turns out in the wake of an official hearing, and from investigative journalism by the likes of Pulitzer-prize-winning photojournalist Greg Marinovich, were executed at close range while quite possibly begging for their lives.

In the event, postapartheid South African writers have increasingly turned to a mode of writing that I describe, in my forthcoming

book *Losing the Plot: Crime, Reality, and Fiction in Postapartheid Writing* (Witwatersrand University Press), as “social detection.” These acts of investigative writing are quests to work out what’s actually going on, and how it is that things have turned out so badly, in an “out there” that has become occulted by competing frames of legitimation, warring perceptions, and the lack of anything like the moral and ethical common ground available to observers in the time of apartheid. Writers and scholars, as much as trade unionists and workers, had made sacrifices, staying in the country to fight the “good fight,” and now suddenly it was as if the whole thing had been a bad joke all along. Some writers turned within, as many poets did, taking the lease of “freedom” to write about love and sex and the textures of “ordinary” life, while others began to chronicle the dirt and grit of urban existence in the “global south,” charting African destinies more widely now that the much-imagined “Azania” had in fact come about (except it was still called “South Africa”) and was no better or worse than the rest of Africa or the world. Transnationally minded academics began seeking even broader connections between “global south” and India, South America and the antipodes, while nonfiction authors like Steinberg began looking for stories of displacement and reconnection both inside and outside the once “beloved country,” from Liberia to New York to Somalia and back to Johannesburg and Cape Town. A new wave of crime writers and speculative fiction innovators such as Mike Nicol, Deon Meyer, Roger Smith, and Lauren Beukes sought answers for dystopian outcomes in a newly entangled global scene in which destinies were strung across cities everywhere in the “connected” world. The post-millennium hangover was certainly not confined to any one place, and the “exceptionalism” (famously “outed” by scholar Mahmood Mamdani) that apartheid had once conferred on South Africa was now really gone for good.

South African writers found themselves folded into the more general rot of a neoliberal world order of hyper-capitalism, but were also finding an almighty stink at home, where the urge towards un-

seemly consumption had taken root precisely in the place where political virtue had once seemed to reside—not only in the cadres of the African National Congress, now running the show, but everywhere else, too. The scramble for position, wealth, goods and privilege was the new contagion, and suddenly writers had more crime plots and reality mash-ups than they knew what to do with.

Apart from the more obvious examples of crime writers such as Meyer and Nicol, and the many works of “true crime” nonfiction, there is the exhilarating work of Ivan Vladisavic, recording the jarring surfaces of Johannesburg in *A Portrait with Keys* (nonfiction) and *The Exploded View* (fiction); Lauren Beukes, locating media-era criminality in altered states of identity among newly cornered (and conditioned) individuals in Cape Town (*Moxyland*), Johannesburg (*Zoo City*), Chicago (*The Shining Girls*), and Detroit (*Broken Monsters*); Henrietta Rose-Innes, taking the pulse of ideas, ecological conditions and postapartheid subjects in distressed times (*Nineveh*; *The Green Lion*); the late K. Sello Duiker, filling in the intimate details of a pathological public sphere (*Thirteen Cents* and *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*); the late Phaswane Mpe doing much the same (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*); not to mention Kgebetle Moele (*Room 207*), Marlene van Niekerk (*Triomf*; *Agaat*), Ingrid Winterbach (*The Road of Excess*; *It Might Get Loud*), Zoë Wicomb (*David’s Story*; *Playing in the Light*; *October*) Etienne van Heerden (*30 Nights in Amsterdam*; *In Love’s Place*), and still many others. Many of them find in the country’s cities the residues of a criminal past fuelling the bonfires of entirely new vanities, grotesquely enlarged by the release of uncontainable energies. The forces of want and need, entitlement and redress, left to their own devices, have telling effects: a world of disorder, a merry mess in which he who best instrumentalizes the discord wins.

It’s no surprise, then, that the new wave of literature after the end of apartheid often leans toward *social detection*, a kind of forensic probing of the social machine to establish just how and why the promise of the Mandela miracle went off the rails. Many writers have

resorted to genre writing—crime fiction in particular— the signature cases being Beukes, Mike Nicol and Deon Meyer. In the 1980s and 1990s, Nicol wrote postmodern novels (*This Day and Age*; *Horseman*; *The Ibis Tapestry*) but he now turns out thrillers that depict South Africa, not unconvincingly, as a motley noir gangland, each individual out for him- or herself (especially in his “Payback Trilogy”). More professedly “serious” writers tend to work from the basis that little can be taken for granted, and any conclusions reached must be based on ascertainable clues within a wide-ranging investigation. Perhaps the best proponent of this “conjectural paradigm” (following Carlo Ginzburg) is Jonny Steinberg, who in 2013 received a Windham Campbell prize at Yale for his scintillating nonfiction oeuvre, including works such as *Midlands*, *The Number*, *Sizwe’s Test*, *Little Liberia*, and his recent tour de force, *A Man of Good Hope*. These books are all written in a narrative voice that is exactly analytical—skeptical of the many “stories” that South Africans tell themselves—and yet searchingly compassionate. Steinberg, in a talk at Yale, described the process of writing about his home country as an act of “coordination between deaf people,” and his narratives probe how it is that the beloved country remains marked by rebarbative South Africans re-engaging in conflict along various racial and ethnic frontiers.

In keeping with the imperative to account for the fate of the wayward postapartheid experiment, currently trending authors such as Steinberg, Imraan Coovadia, Jacob Dlamini and Mark Gevisser, whom I discuss below, all find reason to be suspicious of any master-metric in the acts of detection they perform, finding in the imprints of an erratic and errant world telling complicities, complications, paradoxes and unexpected ruptures. Postapartheid writers, then, must be alert to a finer grain of complexity than ever before. They must look outwards, at the actual conditions in a world that requires less “discursive” meta-footwork à la J.M. Coetzee, and more written-up evidence about what the hell’s going on out there.



**Ascertaining the lay of the land, in its finest grain, is exactly** what Jonny Steinberg is up to in his first big nonfiction book, *Midlands*, a work that heralded a younger-generation postapartheid brand of writer who would make it his task to discover what was “really” occurring in several areas of the country’s supposedly new life. In *Midlands*, Steinberg’s subject is the ugly “epidemic” of farm murders, with their immoderately sadistic, “revenge”-style slaughters of farmers, both Afrikaners (“boers”) and English-speaking descendants of colonial settlers. These white farmers remain on the land, and they continue to lord it over their black serfs. Economic dependency among the rural peasant class, *Midlands* shows, is as robust as ever. *Midlands* probes the consequences of this amid accelerated postapartheid expectations. It is a book that deserves attention because, in nonfiction mode, it sets the tone of much social detection, establishing the basis for an inductive, evidential, and conjecturally stringent quality of voice. This occurs amid a palpable sense of unease, in spite of the postapartheid script of revolutionary progress. *Midlands* enjoyed a successful reception—it snatched up South Africa’s premier Alan Paton award, an event that almost instantly turned Steinberg into a key postapartheid writer, setting up a career that culminated in the prestigious Yale prize. Despite the evidential bias of *Midlands*, Steinberg’s narrative is styled in novelistic, conversational nonfiction, using a register that is both sharply probing and considerate of its reader’s hunger for clarity as it investigates the conditions behind a single South African farm murder.

Steinberg reluctantly suspends the mythography of “rainbowism” as he seeks to understand reversion rather than breakthrough—reversion to conditions in which frequent acts of killing on isolated farms communicate an anxiety about failed “new” beginnings, a disorienting loss of plot. In the event, it does not take very much reading of *Midlands* before one bumps into the oldest South African trope, 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.” Mitchell’s murderers, who had shot the twenty-eight-year-old scion of a settler family on his father Arthur’s farm, did so “in order to push the boundary back,” writes Steinberg. 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.” 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.

Here a 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 what art historian Hal Foster calls a “future anterior”—to the brink again. A jolt such as this is a surprisingly persistent feature of postapartheid writing of all kinds. It is a future-anterior disorientation that pops up all over the place. So what, if anything, is different, or new, in a book such as *Midlands*?

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 fero-

cious 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 widely reported surge in farmer slayings that look, on the surface, like a form of retribution for the ills of apartheid, often involving 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.

Steinberg wants to know what is behind these murders, a matter that was becoming a luridly perverse “new South Africa” spectacle.

For the isiZulu-speaking black citizens and the white South Africans in the Midlands area of KwaZulu Natal, the story’s locale, 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.

Can such a condition truly be called a “transition” to democracy? Political power has changed hands, but economic might on the whole has emphatically not, apart from conspicuous black-elite enrichment. White people in the Midlands area 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. These are people who on the whole remain indigent, 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 *a lot 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 diktat of fair play. This “equal chances” regime has turned out to be well-nigh unenforceable, a fact that is clear to everyone—hence the accelerated desperation on all sides.

As *Midlands* shows, the murder and robbery unit in the area under the spotlight in Steinberg’s book is both under-resourced and

demoralized. White detectives, such as *Midlands's* Louis Wessels, belong 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.” To add to the misery, democratic South Africa “was a rough country to police.” 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.” 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.” Steinberg shows how, in the rivalry following the Mitchell murder, the black parties up against their white accusers regard the (largely white) local murder and robbery squad as being on the “white side,” while whites see the (entirely black) local police station as being on the “black side.” 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.”

Such resurgent barricading is not confined to the matter of policing. Reflecting on the discourse of Colin Waugh, a local farmer, the author notes that “[Waugh] had blurred the distinction between racial difference and a military frontier.” 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.” Here one sees how the hallowed discourse of diversity at the heart of the constitutional democracy—of pluralism or rainbowism in its idealized 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 and misperception, all age-old South African frontier characteristics, are here re-cast, resituated within the game according to the rulebook of constitutional democracy. But politics, according to Elias Sithole, a black stalwart of the struggle with whom

Steinberg comes into contact during his search for clues, is corrupt to the core:

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.

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. In Sithole's view, "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. [ . . . ] 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.

In response, Steinberg asks: "You kill his son?" Sithole replies: "Yes. It has come to that."

Here, then, is a deadly counterpoint to any sense of a relatively seamless "transition" from apartheid to postapartheid. For the people in the Sarahdale/Izita region, such as Sithole and Mitchell, the frontier under postapartheid has reached a state characterized by Steinberg as "an endgame [ . . . ] one that was bound to end with

the spilling of more blood on the border between Izita and the Sarahdale farms.” It is a curious return to the frontier, “post-apartheid South Africa’s racial frontier,” as Steinberg himself puts it, 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.

**Yale Ph.D. graduate and former New Haven resident Imraan**

Coovadia, now acknowledged as one of South Africa’s leading fiction writers, deals smartly with the demands of social detection in his most recent novel, *Tales of the Metric System* (2014). This work is notable because it creates a plotted whole that is an ensemble of historical periods both before and after apartheid, beginning with the introduction of the metric system in South Africa in the early 1970s—a decidedly republican rejection of British pounds and ounces—and closing with the opening game of the 2010 soccer World Cup in the showy Soccer City stadium in Soweto, the famous black residential area outside Johannesburg. In so doing, Coovadia yields to the predominance of the actual in postapartheid writing, allowing relatively settled historical markers to dictate plot, which he then creatively re-arranges. In the process, Coovadia also introduces the theme of quantification, valuation and weighting as a way of accounting for the present as well as the past. In particular, *Tales of the Metric System* implicitly asks: how does one take the measure of the past, and how does one gauge the present, given that metrics themselves can be made to be interchangeable, reversible, adaptive and pragmatic, not to mention strategic in a self-interested way. In this manner, Coovadia troubles the idea of a relatively seamless transition from apartheid to freedom, insisting instead on a longer view.

And the long view, as in Jacob Dlamini’s outstanding nonfiction books *Native Nostalgia* and *Askari*, makes a mess of trajectories and verities. Just as Dlamini disarranged many prevailing assumptions in *Native Nostalgia* by presenting, in memoiristic form, a version of “township” (in US parlance, “ghetto”) life that was worthy of “nostal-

gia”—rather than the usual depiction of dehumanization—so Coovadia also puts to the test the more commonplace, even if politically correct, measure of things. Both these writers contribute to what New York University critic Mark Sanders, writing about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the mid- to late 1990s, calls the “ambiguities of witnessing.” Detection may be the dominant impulse, but it was always going to be less than straightforward.

Coovadia, following in Dlamini’s steps, goes back to the townships, but in imagined stories founded upon the very real data of widely witnessed and reported conditions. Coovadia seeks a link that endures across time and space, from apartheid to postapartheid, and finds a common mettle, an (in)constant value, in the country’s near-universal disposition towards theft. It is an inspired, if discouraging, narrative move because it allows Coovadia to structure his historical cameos around a negative “universal” that, in one sense, suggests the existence of a decidedly pathological public sphere both before and after the “transition,” but, in other senses, troubles the *measure* of such behavior. This is because “theft” can be both noble and ignoble, big and small, of great or little consequence; so much depends on who is “stealing” from whom, and how. Coovadia (who likes citing Charles Dickens in his spirited public talks) introduces, for example, a distastefully Scrooge-like black man under apartheid who steals compulsively from powerless people and hordes his ill-gotten gains, in the process collaborating with the hated apartheid system. And yet accounting for this man’s deeds turns out to be an intricate business.

Shabangu is a spit-and-shine amalgam of shame, kleptomania, repressed homosexuality, pride and cowardice, among other disparate qualities. His idiosyncratic figuration speaks to a range of complicities that play havoc with any easy summations of the state of South Africa, before and after apartheid. The structure of Coovadia’s book, conjoining 10 different days, spread across four decades, with the transition precisely in the middle, also confounds the forward-march, “shoulder to the wheel of history” illusions that turned 1994



into the supposed start of an unsustainable myth of progress. And yet Coovadia avoids simply resorting to such a narrative's opposite, a dour tale of descent, or a dystopia without remit. This can be seen in the way he handles the theft leitmotif, presenting stealing as a behavior that cuts across every stratum, period, class and political inclination, suggesting a "history" that is thoroughly steeped in dodgy connivance.

The township on the eastern side of Johannesburg in which Shabangu lives goes by the name of Tembisa. Here, Shabangu "was hoarding the remainder of his days. But to what purpose? He had forgotten how to measure his own life." Shabangu's reckoning occurs after he witnesses a "necklacing" in 1990—a mob-led burning to death of an individual suspected of being a spy, or a thief, by means of a gasoline-drenched tire set alight after being positioned around the victim's neck. In the novel, Shabelo, the young boy thus ritually murdered, turns out to be innocent. He serves as a ritual sacrifice for the sins of people like Shabangu, who is indeed a spy-collaborator and a rampant thief, routinely betraying the trust set in him as a local locksmith by pilfering as he changes his clients' locks. Ironically, the woman who sets the martyr Shabelo on fire—like the chanting crowd egging her on, going on nothing but hearsay and suspicion—sweetly ministers to the distressed Shabangu in her father's house only minutes after this shattering event. This petit-bourgeois woman, called Esther, tries out her nurse-training routines on Shabangu following his fainting spell at the scene of the necklacing. Both Shabangu and Esther have gravely miscalculated the odds in their complicity in the theft of an innocent young man's life, but they cannot see this with any clarity in the heady turbulence of the moment, despite Shabangu suffering a terrible sense of dread about his own complicities. The world that Coovadia captures, in narrative retrospect, is full of such irregular measures and mixed odds, along with characters that present thoroughly paradoxical measures of virtue and vice. In this way, Coovadia effectively strips not only the present, but also the past, of any semblance of straightforward

measurement.

Towards the end of *Metric System*, Coovadia manages to import, via the unbalancing effects of the unrelenting trickery that is theft, a whimsical sense of somewhat slant love into his youngest generation of characters. It is 11 June, 2010, a day that for South Africans (and Africans at large) brought the bursting-with-pride opening game of the 2010 World Cup, when South Africa faced Mexico in Soccer City, Soweto. A Cape Town city-slicker called Sherman, who operates a racket in which people's cellphones are stolen on the streets of Cape Town and then sold back to them, is drawn into a relationship with Shanti, one of his casual, everyday victims. Shanti happens to be the niece of Uncle Ashok, a *roman à clef* version of convicted postapartheid crook Schabir Shaik, who is believed to have brokered shady deals for current president Jacob Zuma; Shanti is therefore indirectly complicit in the culture of theft, too. This unlikely union between young South African millennials, one black and one Indian, seems to flower despite, and in the midst of, the country's merry materialism, its inclination towards appropriation and shady dealings. It is as if Coovadia is suggesting that the younger generations no longer share the burden of the terrible measure of things past, the reckonings with high ideals that have suffered such ignominious defeat. Such a change of attitude accounts to some extent for the juxtaposition at the end of *Metric System* of the youngest and the oldest of the generations featured in the story, the latter failing to achieve an exalted vision of an "ideal world," and the young characters managing to rescue some sense of makeshift love—or, at the very least, joy—despite the country's many, earlier defeats in "measuring up."

Following the event in which Shanti buys her own cellphone back from pickpocket Sherman, a stylish and friendly thief if ever there was one, she invites him over to her parents' nouveau-riche residential palace in a wealthy suburb of Cape Town. Unbelievably, and yet perhaps also predictably, once arrived and installed as a guest, Sherman pickpockets her Uncle Logan's phone while enjoying

her family's Cuban-cigar hospitality. One cannot but observe that Sherman is a small-time crook when measured against Uncle Askok, the Schaik character who made a killing in a notorious arms deal, postapartheid's first major corruption scandal. When Shanti hears from her Uncle Logan that his phone has gone missing, she knows what to do. She pulls Sherman aside and takes him up to her room, where the following exchange occurs:

—I meant, did you take my Uncle Logan's telephone?

—Yes, I did, chicken. But only to prove that I had the talent. It's waiting for him downstairs on the kitchen table.

—Am I going to find out that you took anything else?

—Nothing except your heart. Or do I have that already?

Here, theft is converted from the sinister activity that it is in the stories of Mr Shabangu, becoming instead a trial of "talent." Sherman's generation appears to have adopted casual theft as the only way to "get even," and to get on in the world. Such thematic treatment prompts one to ask: isn't this the way it's always been, what bandit capitalism has in fact taught us to do? At one stage, Sherman says to Shanti: "In the end everybody makes money except ordinary people like me and you. We must also have the chance to make money. We also have the right to have our fun." And how else to make money but to do what the country's leaders and leading citizens are perceived to be doing—take it, steal it, finagle it, one way or another.

It is as if Coovadia is here registering that, despite the corrupted general metric of plunder that rules an otherwise disparate citizenry, the younger generations will find less oppressive and more—dare one say it?—*loving*, or at least joyful, ways to engage in taking things from each other. In a society of unequal accumulation in which leaders, not to mention leading citizens, espouse and defend sophisticated forms of thievery, who is to say that people on the street should not find a certain joy in aping such behavior, modifying

it and scaling it down, or up, depending on one's means, talent, and opportunities?

**Yale graduate Mark Gevisser, in *Lost and Found in Johannesburg*,** a nonfiction investigation into the cartography of Johannesburg, finds himself dealing with a rather more sinister form of South African theft: a “home invasion” in which three black men break into the Johannesburg apartment of two female friends, Bea and Katie, whom Gevisser is visiting. The invaders rough Gevisser and the gay couple up with a brand of casual brutality that does not sit well with these good people's liberal-left political progressivism, throwing matters severely out of kilter. In fact, Gevisser's manuscript of *Lost and Found* is lodged in a bag he brought along with him on the visit. He had been editing it, and one of his most discomfiting moments of terror during the break-in and its aftermath is the fear that the hoodlums might take his completed draft away with them. In the event, they don't, but Gevisser nevertheless finds that he has no option but to delay submission to his publishers, because his nonfiction account of growing up in Johannesburg has just been derailed by this unwelcome new event. He might not want to include such a counter-intuitive happening, and its harrowing telling, in his otherwise upbeat summation of postapartheid South Africa's freedom from various repressions, but he must. Events have intervened and now threaten to change the story from cautiously optimistic to downright pathological.

Throughout *Lost and Found*, frontiers and borders are figured as places to explore, and as spaces in which transgression (for example, of sexual norms or political taboos) is regarded as positively liberating. Such crossings are also projected as acts of reconciliation and of potentially loving human encounter. The “home invasion,” however, represents the transgression of limits in an unambiguously ugly and sinister manner. The good intentions of Gevisser's stepping across established lines are sickeningly reversed, with theft and

blind violence seeming to make a mockery of the liberal humanism elsewhere evident in *Lost and Found*. This creates an unwelcome schism, a potential loss of plot.

How does Gevisser handle this? On the one hand, the author factually—and tautly—recounts the brutality of the event, but, significantly, he is also at pains to “humanize” the attackers. First, then, we read a chilling description of how the insurgents whack Gevisser on the head, sending his glasses flying and leaving the near-sighted writer almost blind, after which they pistol-wallop Katie. They proceed to upend the furniture, including the television, bringing to a premature end the episode of *The Slap* that the three of them had been watching. Not long after upending the TV set, the robbers lead Bea off to the bedroom, hoping to force her to show them where the apartment’s presumed safe is, but instead they succeed only in sexually molesting her. It seems the situation is threatening to become a homicidal rampage, but what Gevisser reads as a change in the robbers’ tempo is brought about by Bea before she gets dragged off:

I followed my breath, in, out, in, out, and heard Bea’s voice, calm and clear: “Excuse me,” she said, as if she was talking to someone at a book-club meeting, “but we’ve just made tea, I think the cup’s still hot, you’ll see, and I was wondering if you’d give me a sip before you gag me, because my throat is feeling very dry.”

Gevisser, “blind and disoriented” from the loss of his glasses after being struck, realizes from the “motion [he] could sense to the extreme left of [his] peripheral vision and the sounds [he] could hear” that the robbers are complying with Bea’s request for a sip of tea. “I understood immediately what Bea had done,” the narrator writes, “and what I needed to do, too”. He continues:

It was as clear as anything I have ever thought, and I will never forget it. We needed to communicate with them. We needed to make them

look after us. We needed to get them to acknowledge that we were human beings and not animals, not disposable, and then they might spare us. And then the revelation: this meant we needed to see them as human beings, and not animals, too, if we were going to survive.

Gevisser is not entirely naïve about the fact that these men are violent criminals with alcohol on their breath, and quite possibly recalcitrant to “reasoning.” The behavior of one of them, “the gangly pop-eyed man who had smacked me,” seemed “high beyond reason,” and “so fraught was the situation [...] that even the most careful, cooperative behavior imaginable might not have saved us.” But this determined optimist persists in his Alan Paton-like “love rather than hate” approach, and in so doing, he resists, both in his behavior on the night and in his subsequent narrative, the possibility of an “atrocities exhibition” (to borrow J.G. Ballard’s phrase) going the way of outright hatred, of torn and broken bodies. This is a significant moment, and it signals a divergence from mainstream true crime narratives in postapartheid writing. Gevisser is straining, both in the course of the actual event and in its mediation, to re-narrate (or re-orient) the happening, turning it away from an atrocities exhibition proper, or “true crime” pure and simple. For “crime,” another term for “theft,” and “theft,” another word for “race relations,” a euphemism for grand larceny on a historical scale, cannot be weighed in South Africa without taking the measure of a delicate series of counterweights.

**Perhaps the fact that, in the works discussed above, nothing** quite adds up in such reckonings, despite a determination to detect conditions, facts, causes and symptoms, is what most aptly distinguishes the postapartheid writer. Steinberg assiduously takes the measure of sociopolitical predicaments bodied forth in real cases involving postapartheid citizens, probing their feelings, contradictions, and behavior in his quests of detection, as if South African

writing is still the “scene of a crime” (as in apartheid), but now requires urgent recalibration. Like many of us writing about and from South Africa today, Steinberg is impatient with grand narratives: they have all proven to be gallingly disappointing, and the biggest dummy we were sold was the narrative of outright political liberation in 1994. Coovadia weighs things up coolly, refusing the clamor of self-assertive identity politics, as Jeanne-Marie Jackson argues in a revealing recent piece in *n+1*. Gevisser resorts to exercises in experiential mapping, redrawing boundaries and human responses to mirage-like vistas via the conceit of urban cartography. My own postapartheid novel, *Bad Sex* (2011), revisits the scene of sexual politics, taking stock of contemporary relations between “liberated” men and women against the backdrop of past abuse (“bad,” or exploitative, sex; racialized patriarchy; interracial sexual misdemeanors) as relayed by the book’s male protagonist, Sammy Baptista, who refuses to swallow whole the notion of realigned regimes of power, whether in the kitchen, the bedroom or the boardroom. It is as of we’re all seeking to detect in the stories of personalized encounter—things we know beyond doubt—the greater causes of our nation’s current waywardness.

