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From the Subject of Evil to the Evil Subject: 'Cultural Difference' in Postapartheid
South African Crime Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This article takes up the question of “crime writing” and rejoins the debate around whether such literature stands in for the “political novel” in postapartheid South Africa. What social function might crime writing be serving? Research by political economists and cultural anthropologists suggests that acts of writing in “social detection” mode (rather than “crime writing”) serve as an allegory for occulted sociopolitical conditions. Cultural difference is seen, once again, to play a pivotal role in the legitimation of power, and writers in the detection mode are correspondingly seen to be probing the possibility of a resurgence of “bad” difference. This notion, it is argued, is a key differentiator in an otherwise murky scene in which the borderline between licit and illicit, and right and wrong, has become obscure. While many South African writers are brought into the discussion, including but not restricted to crime authors, a key novel by leading crime writer Deon Meyer is read as a case study to illustrate the more general points made in the article.

KEYWORDS:

South African literature; postapartheid writing; transitional literature; post-transitional literature; crime writing; thrillers; postcolonial; cultural difference; postcolony.

From the Subject of Evil to the Evil Subject: 'Cultural Difference' in Postapartheid South African Crime Fiction

Introduction

One of the more energetic debates about postapartheid South African literature revolves around the question why “genre fiction,” and more particularly crime fiction, so heavily dominates the book market. This debate has mostly been conducted anecdotally or superficially, in reviews and comments on literary websites, despite scattered articles and one or two special issues on the topic.¹ Particularly contested has been my own suggestion that crime thrillers may have come to stand in for what used to be seen as “political” or engaged fiction, in response to which some academics have argued that the generic or formulaic nature of detective novels prevents them from securing substantial purchase on sociopolitical issues.² A common strand has been the contention that it is far-fetched to think genre fiction can be seen to engage in political themes with as much import as

¹ For special-issue treatment, see *Current Writing* 25 (2) 2013, which is devoted to crime fiction in South Africa, with articles by Sam Naidu; Elizabeth le Roux; Anneke Rautenbach; Priscilla Boshoff; Sabine Binder; Claudia Drawe; Elizabeth Fletcher; Jessica Murray; and Margie Orford. Another South African journal, *scrutiny2*, published a special issue on the same topic in 2014, with pieces by Colette Guldemann; Sam Naidu; Caitlin Martin and Sally-Ann Murray; Elizabeth le Roux and Samantha Buitendach; Antoinette Pretorius; and Jonathan Amid and Leon de Kock. Other articles include Titlestad and Polatinsky, “Turning to Crime”; Anderson, “Watching the Detectives”; and Warnes, “Writing Crime.” For a book-length study on the larger Southern African zone, see Primorac, *Whodunnit in Southern Africa*. For an idea of the kind of content on website debates, see <http://slipnet.co.za/view/reviews/crime-fiction-the-%E2%80%98new-political-novel%E2%80%99/>

² See, for example, the SLiPnet citation in Footnote 1, directly above, in which a range of academics weigh in on the matter in the comments section following my review essay of Roger Smith’s crime thriller *Dust Devils*. I first raised the issue of crime novels and sociopolitical content in 2010 in the South African *Sunday Independent* newspaper in a review of Mike Nicol’s novel, *Killer Country* (“Hits Keep Coming,” http://www.leondekock.co.za/wp-content/uploads/mike_nicol.pdf), followed it up in 2011 in the Johannesburg-based *Mail & Guardian* weekly in a review of Nicol’s *Black Heart* (“High Noon in the Badlands,” <http://mg.co.za/article/2011-05-06-high-noon-in-the-badlands/>), and again in 2013 in the *Cape Times*, in a review of Nicol’s *Of Cops and Robbers*, in the *Cape Times* (“Hardboiled Noir,” <http://www.leondekock.co.za/wp-content/uploads/Cape-Times-Books-page2-30-August-20131-copy.pdf>). The *Sunday Independent* used my comments on crime fiction as possibly the “new political novel” as the basis for a series of opinions by, among others, Imraan Coovadia, Mbongeni Buthelezi, and Kelwyn Sole (<http://sundayindybooks.blogspot.com/search?q=novel+debate>).

Gordimer, Serote, Langa, Mda and others have done in the past. The majority of such commentary, as suggested above, has taken on the form of contrasting stabs of opinion in the comment boxes of digital literary media, and as such does not penetrate much beyond provisional position-taking.

An exception to this trend is Michael Titlestad and Ashlee Polatinsky's essay, "'Turning to Crime': Mike Nicol's *The Ibis Tapestry* and *Payback*," in which the authors argue that Nicol's own turn from serious fiction (as exemplified by his 1998 novel *The Ibis Tapestry*) to the popular form of crime fiction (as in his 2008 novel *Payback*), represents an unfortunate withdrawal from more serious literary writing in which matters are fittingly in a state of unresolved tension. Instead of keeping faith with the open-form novel, Nicol gives way to the temptation of neat but ultimately superficial gestures of closure. Although Titlestad and Polatinsky do not say so explicitly, there is a palpable sense in their argument of disappointment that an outstanding South African author, in the older, more serious vein of South African writing, should sell out to the enticements of a popular market of fiction in which relatively cheap "answers" are neatly laid out via generic form. The pre-2000 literature's intense grappling with the challenges of cultural difference appears to have given way to "thriller" computations of the social totality in which difference, now gleefully colored into the supposedly blank spaces of the postapartheid dispensation, adds up to premature closure, as if the new democracy is little more than a motley gangland version of the "rainbow nation." Reading Titlestad and Polatinsky, one finds it difficult not to agree that, if it is indeed true that crime fiction does little more than dish out over-eager visions of closure, such totalisation would be premature, to say the least. The sense of disinvestment that is implied in Titlestad and Polatinsky's argument, a divestiture of multilayered texture and imponderable complexity in fiction for the sake of flimsy surface resolution and easy entertainment, is helped along by some of Nicol's own statements. These utterances (in my opinion, as disingenuous as Athol Fugard's protestations that his writing is "not political") make the case that he has abandoned serious fiction to write what he calls "commercial [genre] fiction" because he supposedly enjoys it more, and it sells

better.³ So, in a sense, Titlestad and Polatinsky's article reads, to take my extrapolation further, as a parable for a literature that has lost the plot, and consequently its sense of direction. This, indeed, is a common theme in discussions of postapartheid writing (cf. MacKenzie and Frenkel).⁴ Being so lost, one might argue, the newer literature now grabs onto the easy solution of genre fiction, with a mere patina of political content in its preoccupation with social violence, or "crime." In the subtext of Titlestad and Polatinsky's argument, proper, one is invited to read the story of a once-great literature, with redoubtable names like Gordimer, Leroux, Mphahlele, Brink, Matshoba, Coetzee, Hope, Ndebele, Vladisavic, Mda, Serote, Breytenbach, Langa, Van Niekerk, Van Heerden, et al, now dumbing down quite alarmingly. The post-transitional writers are seen as copping out of the real deal, which is complexity and openness, for the sake of quick-sell, flimflam entertainment. These supposedly cheap tricks, in addition, feed off a still-volatile society in a manner that some may regard as being on the brink of unethical.

Titlestad and Polatinsky's argument is sound, and well executed, although possibly fallible to the critique executed by Cambridge-based South Africanist scholar Chris Warnes,⁵ who detects a "popular" and "highbrow" binary in their reasoning. Without going into the merits of an argument that compels one to choose between "high" and "low" forms, I would like to suggest that there may be a different way of looking at Nicol's work, and that of other crime writers. This article, then, asks a different question of crime fiction, one which might be introduced as follows: What if one were to read the large (although by no means universal) shift from, let's say, social-realist "complexity" to crime-detective "genre," as something else entirely? This would involve reading such writing as indicative of a bigger movement, a seismic shift in the social body itself. What if the efflorescence in South African "crime writing," in all its forms,⁶ rather than muffling variegation or selling

³ See SLiPnet review cited above on Nicol's reported statements about his own crime writing.

⁴ Mackenzie, Craig, and Ronit Frenkel, "Conceptualizing Post-Transitional Literature".

⁵ Warnes, Chris, "Writing Crime," 983.

⁶ For example, police procedural, noir, fallible detective, nonfiction "inside-stories" about the resurgent social monster called "crime," social biographies of known public thugs, and still more.

out on intricate “entanglement,”⁷ is in fact prizing open some much larger goings on in a manifestly transformed social condition? This is a condition, moreover, that is no longer just national, just “South African,” but transnational in its dimensions, and global in its derivations.

The reformulated question, then, might be put as follows: Why this obsession, in the new millennium, with law and (dis)order, and more particularly with the spectacle of “crime,” as presented in mediated forms such as fiction and nonfiction writing? Articulated in this way, the question leads us away from the ultimately futile war of opinion about whether or not crime fiction is sufficiently “literary,” or adequately complex as an object of formal literary architecture. Instead, it concentrates our attention on the question *what is this fiction about*, and *what is it doing out there*, regardless of the finer points of literary merit. This, indeed, is the issue to which Warnes also directs scholars of South African writing, suggesting that writers such as Meyer and Orford “keep faith with some of the core features of ‘serious’ South African literature: its capacity to document social reality, to expose injustice, and to conscientise readers into different modes of thought and action.”⁸ To this I would add that the “core” question for a scholar of literature is also the following: Why the relatively sudden, and major, shift in circulation and reception from liberal-humanist and late-modern forms of fiction to genre-based novels? To what larger complex of socio-historical conditionality might this be attributable as a more general syndrome? This is by no means an uninteresting question, and one that Warnes perhaps does not probe extensively enough, resting his case on the argument that “the postapartheid crime thriller should be read as negotiating – in the ambivalent sense of the word – the threat and uncertainty that many feel to be part of South African life, creating fantasies of control, restoration and maintenance, and reflecting on the circumstances that gave rise to this unease.”⁹ Agreed, but what greater complex of circumstance, both cultural and historical,

⁷ See Nuttall, *Entanglement*.

⁸ Warnes, “Writing Crime,” 983.

⁹ Warnes, “Writing Crime,” 991.

long- and short-term, underlie the “threat and uncertainty” that Warnes identifies?

Cultural Difference in a Postapartheid Frame

The argument, I believe, needs to commence with a view of the changing role of cultural difference before and after the political transition of the 1990s. For several decades now postcolonial theory in its various forms has encouraged an emphasis on cultural difference as a modifier of political subjectivity and identitarian position-taking. More general studies of cultural difference in its many dimensions, such as those by Robert Young, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha,¹⁰ to name only the most obvious, in addition to South African-specific examples (Comaroff, Attwell, Brown, Wylie, Hofmeyr, De Kock, among others),¹¹ have tended to place the spotlight on the many ways in which cultural difference has been misrecognized, in the colonies and the Orient, within reductive epistemic frames of reference. The centuries-long discourse around the “wild man,”¹² primitivism, exoticism and other categorical impositions, including the fixations of social-Darwinist thought and biological racism,¹³ found a trenchant rebuttal in postcolonial theory and revisionist cultural history, most emphatically perhaps in *Orientalism*, and stretching beyond literary and cultural criticism to empirically-founded historical works of epistemic redress such as Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe*. Just about every one of J.M. Coetzee’s South African novels implicitly deals with the politics of cultural difference in one way or another. Ditto Nadine Gordimer and the legions of lower-ranked South African novelists working in the pre-2000 period. I think it is fair to say that a common strain in such work has been the sense that cultural difference has been mismanaged in both colonial and neocolonial contexts, not to mention

¹⁰ Young, *Colonial Desire; White Mythologies*; Said, *Orientalism*; Spivak, *In Other Worlds*; and Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

¹¹ Comaroff, Jean and John. *Of Revelation and Revolution*; Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity*; Brown, *Voicing the Text*; Wylie, *Savage Delight*, Hofmeyr, “*We Spend Our Years*”; De Kock, *Civilising Barbarians*.

¹² See Dietrich, *Of Salvation and Civilisation*.

¹³ Dubow, *Scientific Racism*.

neoliberal conditions, and that vigilance about more equitable recognition of all forms of difference – in sexuality, race, ethnicity, language, culture and the episteme – remains an important ethical task. It is also fair to suggest that South Africa’s “negotiated revolution,” culminating in a transition to majority rule and broad-based democracy in 1994, set in place (at least in the formal superstructure of the law and the Constitution) a remediation of the evils of earlier negations of difference. By 1994, racial discrimination and the mismanagement of difference (a kind of distorted or “bad” difference, such as apartheid’s “separate but equal” alibi for white rule) came to be seen by all except the lunatic-fringe far right as a universal evil, as the very subject of evil. By this time, apartheid, solidly based on the segregationist foundation laid by more than three centuries of colonialism, had been declared a crime against humanity; now, after the advent of full democracy, even the insiders of apartheid, the mollycoddled whites, were persuaded to accept that “rainbowism” – a symbolic figuration of “good” or equitable cultural difference peculiar to South Africa’s late revolution – was a virtuous political and social state of being. For a short while during President Nelson Mandela’s five years of honeymoon rule, “rainbowism” was enthusiastically embraced, not least by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Mandela himself, who will be remembered, among other things, for having tea, in the white “homeland” of Orania, with Betsy Verwoerd, widow of apartheid’s architect, Dr Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd.

The cultural-difference rainbow, in its honeymoon phase, was not to last, as everyone now knows. Any number of accounts, both scholarly and imaginative, will show that, starting around the ANC’s second term of government in 1999 and the ascension to the presidency of the distant, less conciliatory Thabo Mbeki, a pervasive current of disillusionment set in. This occurred amid widespread perceptions of 1) the consolidation of a neoliberal form of “class apartheid” in what political economist Patrick Bond calls a “choiceless democracy”¹⁴ and 2) an emerging political discourse which was newly race-accentuated to a degree that dedicated non-racialists both inside and outside the ANC found uncomfortable. One

¹⁴ Bond, Patrick, “Mandela Years.”

example of the new focus on race – particularly the valorization of “pure” blackness above other ethnic colorations – was the controversy over the Mbeki-supported “Native Club,”¹⁵ which was part of a bigger pattern that Finlay describes as typifying the Mbeki presidency of 1999-2008: “[A] polarity in public exchanges dealing with race that, for many, felt quite different from the spirit of the preceding period, where notions of non-racialism and inclusivity were the guiding ideology of state decision and the *zeitgeist* of public discussion.”¹⁶ To the ire of many longstanding non-racialists, the ominously named Native Club, closely affiliated with President Mbeki’s office, was open to black intellectuals only. Such exclusionary discourse and practice was widely perceived during Mbeki’s reign to signal the emergence of an unwelcome, ugly racial essentialism, re-enshrined from above in the South African body public. This was seen as abrogating the traditions of non-racialism for which the ANC fought, themselves regarded as immemorial values (non-racialism was enshrined as a key principle in the ANC’s 1955 Freedom Charter). It was felt that here, once again, a single race among many was being valorized as primary, as a more privileged category; cultural difference was yet again in danger of being mismanaged to the benefit of one strain or accent above others. The specter of a resuscitated variant of “bad difference,” an exclusionary delineation of preferment, and the hardening of such an ugly scab on the body of the “new” South Africa, galled many South African libertarians. Not least among such perceived defacements of the rainbow ideal of freedom and equality amid diversity were the neoliberal economic policies which, combined with publicly proved state corruption, were creating receptive conditions for what Bond has more recently has called the “crony-capitalist, corruption-riddled, brutally-secritised, eco-destructive and anti-egalitarian regime [South Africa] suffer[s] now.”¹⁷

Bond’s far-left version of events is, of course, is one strand in a widely told story about what went “wrong” in South Africa’s transition to democracy. However, the fact that public discourse found strong traction in the 2000s on the basis of a

¹⁵ See Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Tracking the Historical Roots*; Finlay, “Staging Performance.”

¹⁶ Finlay, “Staging Performance,” 36.

¹⁷ Bond, “Mandela Years.”

widely held feeling that democracy was “failing,” and that it was on the brink (see, for example, Xolela Mangcu’s *To the Brink*), can be illustrated by a major University of the Witwatersrand conference in January 2008 called “Paradoxes of the Postcolonial Public Sphere: Democracy at the Crossroads.” At this gathering, political analysts Ivor Chipkin and Mangcu, among others, sounded warnings about a disturbingly race-inflected narrative of “national identity” that seemed to be increasingly normative, and exclusionary on a racial basis, in the ranks of the governing party. In his book, Mangcu critiques what he describes as the “racial nationalism” of the Mbeki government, calling for a renewed acceptance of “irreducible plurality” and a return to the traditions of non-racialism.¹⁸ More broadly speaking, such Mbeki-era “racial nativism”¹⁹ hit home with an especially sick thud for South African cultural and political analysts. Like Homi Bhabha and his fellow postcolonial thinkers in the volume *Nation and Narration*, many observers had come to regard restrictive identikit for essentialized versions of “national identity” as counter to progress made in critical theory since the 1968 revolution. The assumption could now no longer be held that the “new” South Africa was on board in the larger, progressive project of deterritorializing hegemonic and/or foundational fixations of subjectivity and identity, a global hobgoblin. This is not to mention the bad taste such a return to ethnic fixations left in the mouth of those who had read Fanon and saw in the ugly re-birth of racial contractions of power and privilege the specter of corrupt ruling elites who were wont to lose the plot of their own revolution.

It is not my purpose here to test and probe such positions or their antecedent historical conditions per se, but to note the resurgence of public-sphere alarm about new orthodoxies of national identity, and new forms of “bad” difference. Such excrescences were perceived to be in stark contradiction to the promise of the negotiated South African revolution, with its popularly celebrated “rainbowism,” regardless of frequent mockery among the intelligentsia of “rainbow” delusions. At

¹⁸ Mangcu, *To the Brink*, 119.

¹⁹ Mangcu, *To the Brink*, 37.

the time of writing, another five years after the demise of Mbeki, in the era of Zuma and “Nkandlagate,”²⁰ it is common cause among intellectuals, journalists and analysts of almost every persuasion in South Africa (apart from government spokespeople) that the democratic ideal in South Africa has been compromised by agents of self-enrichment and public-sphere corruption. This condition has culminated in what is perceived as a system of patrimonialism with Jacob Zuma at its narrow apex. “Bad” difference would appear once again to be ruling the roost, at least to some extent.

To illustrate the point, consider the words of renowned scholar and noted Johannesburg resident Achille Mbembe in a 2013 commentary in the *South African Mail & Guardian*, which includes the following ominous description of the state of the country:

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.²¹

For Mbembe, South Africa in 2013 is not immune from what he calls a “mixture of clientelism, nepotism and prebendalism” common in African postcolonies, and he warns that an “armed society” such as South Africa is “hardly a democracy;” it is, he writes, “mostly an assemblage of atomised individuals isolated before power, separated from each other by fear, prejudice, mistrust and suspicion, and prone to mobilise under the banner of either a mob, a clique or a militia rather than an idea and, even less so, a disciplined organization.”²²

‘Bad’ Difference – a New ‘Axis of Evil’?

Again, my purpose here is not to develop, contradict or validate arguments for and

²⁰ On Nkandlagate, see for example David Smith, “Jacob Zuma Accused of Corruption,” *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/29/jacob-zuma-accused-corruption-south-africa>.

²¹ Mbembe, “Our Lust for Lost Segregation.”

²² Ibid.

against such readings of the country's political management, suggestive as they are of a revolution that has lost its moorings. It is, rather, to ask a question that follows from such perceptions and readings. The question relates to the writing of the transition period and beyond, in which, as I have already noted, the turn towards "crime" stories is accompanied by an accelerated sense of alarm about "crime" and disorder in the public body itself. The new wave of fiction, I argue in this article, works on the hunch that a freshly perverse form of officially legitimated "bad" cultural difference has become an alibi for civil mismanagement, perhaps even for what Mbembe, above, calls the "instrumentalisation of disorder". "Bad" difference is coming to be perceived as a new "axis of evil" around which social detection persistently finds itself orbiting. I propose that the work of social detection, as generically spun into detective stories by a new generation of writers, has become a matter of exposing such "bad" difference and its legitimating rationalizations, its postures and alibis, marking it out as "off" (as in "good" meat that has "gone off"), and identifying it as the shadow-side of virtuous or acceptable versions of legitimate cultural difference. Such socially "conscientising" writing, in Warnes's words,²³ seeks to show more precisely how "bad" difference goes about its disingenuous work. If the "transition" itself is difficult to "see," and hard to believe, since so little appears to have changed on the ground, in hard economic terms, especially for the poor,²⁴ then such detection and exposure is – almost naturally – the work of the writer. In such an understanding of the writer's role, s/he seeks to show what's actually going on, or at least to suggest a theory, a revised version of the lost social plot, in which a calculated guess is made. The task for the writer (and the critic), then, is to make the transition – or the fiction of the transition – visible and tractable by plotting its characters, their sphere of operation, their motives and *modus operandi*, and ultimately, their deeds and the social meaning thereof. Political operatives who were "good" in the past, under conditions of disenfranchisement, now often become "bad" bearers of power. At least, this would often appear to be

²³ Warnes, "Writing Crime," 983.

²⁴ See Bond, *Elite Transition*; Allen, *Transformation in South Africa*.

the real, hidden meaning of the transition as construed by crime writers.²⁵ Power is seen as an ineluctably a motor of corruption, and ultimately the turning point in any scenario of “good” and “bad” difference. The implicit question is: Does the country, inexplicably beset with renewed violence and perverse social manifestations of disorder, still know itself – that is, if it ever did? The answer, it seems, is dubious, to say the least.²⁶

The distinction between faux-difference and the real deal might be seen in the following terms: political and cultural difference as validated by the Constitution suggests a relation of symmetry in which the parts are relatively equal within the whole, or at least equal in relation to the diktat of the Constitution. “Bad” or corrupt difference, on the other hand, uses the legitimizing politics of cultural difference as an alibi for asymmetrical gain, or gain at the expense of others in the vaunted constitutional democracy. This is perceived as undermining the relation of relative equality that validates difference in the idealized, constitutional sense in the first place. “Bad” difference in this sense is a form of enunciatory and material hypocrisy, the use of the power afforded by constitutional equality to leverage unequal preferment while speaking the hallowed ethos of egalitarianism. Performative or enunciatory rather than integral or conscientious cultural difference becomes a means of social legitimation, under whose implicit banner the perceived shuffling and snuffling at the trough is seen to occur. Materialist critics would see this as a form of class betrayal, as Bond does in his description of the postapartheid order as “class apartheid,”²⁷ a system in which those speaking for the poor continue to do so while gaining asymmetrical capital leverage based on an “empowerment-for-all” ticket. This is precisely what the new generation of Black Consciousness proponents such as Andile Mngxitsisana do in fact say (at the time of writing, Mngxitsisana had

²⁵ See, for example, Nicol’s “Revenge Trilogy” – *Payback* (2008), *Killer Country* (2010), and *Black Heart* (2011) – in which this trend is particularly marked, along with Roger Smith’s *Mixed Blood* (2009) and *Wake up Dead* (2010).

²⁶ Celebrated South African nonfiction author Jonny Steinberg in 2013 commented at a seminar following his award of a Windham Campbell Prize at Yale University that South Africa is a country where “writing is a question of coordination between deaf people” (personal seminar notes).

²⁷ Bond, “Mandela Years.”

joined his leader Julius Malema in Parliament on behalf of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) political party). For the crime writers, the existence of corrupted or “bad” difference is detected in a range of public and private spaces, from the government itself (more specifically, its corrupt and hungry officials and their cronies, as in Nicol’s works), among the criminals, which often includes the (degenerate, sold-out) members of the South African Police Services (as in Smith’s *Mixed Blood*); or in civil society itself, in which “bad” alliances between distinct subsets of the heterodox civil cosmopolis in cahoots with state functionaries create diseased distortions of “civil” practice (as in Margie Orford’s *Gallows Hill* and Andrew Brown’s *Refuge*). For writers in the postapartheid period, the older and perhaps easier-to-define moral economy of anti-apartheid or struggle literature has disappeared for good. Now, they feel compelled to work out a new way of seeing things. In this newer social and moral economy, the boundaries of right and wrong, of good and bad, have shifted decisively, and need to be pinpointed afresh. Disorder and criminal violence have become epidemic and must be addressed. Of course, this is never going to be an easy task. The postapartheid fictional terrain, I will argue, dramatizes a reconfigured contest over law and order in which the borderlines of legitimate and illegitimate, now far less clear or identifiable, are under erasure. “Crime” is so rife that neither the state nor any particular civil grouping, it would appear, has a monopoly over either violence or legitimacy. Moral ambiguity – the loss of stable political and ethical compass points – proves to be a ubiquitous new terrain in which “difference” plays out in these fictions, often revealing, in addition to misgovernment and criminal citizenship, a gory inversion of the rule of law.

Postcolonial Law and (Dis)order

Harvard-based South African cultural anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff home in on precisely such ethical muddiness, such profound moral ambiguity and seeming lawlessness, within contexts of validated political difference, in two separate essays in their edited volume, *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony* (2006). Rita Barnard, too, in her essay “Tsotsis: On Law, the Outlaw, and the Postcolonial State” (2008), in

which she discusses the Comaroffs work in this regard, draws attention to the manner in which the postapartheid state has brought with it “new patterns of inclusion and exclusion, new meanings of citizenship, and new dimensions of sovereignty and power.”²⁸ One aspect of this newer set-up, according to Barnard, is that “minimal government, under pressure from a frightened citizenry (redefined as consumers and victims), can readily turn into its authoritarian opposite.”²⁹ For the Comaroffs, the former colonial state evinces a particular preoccupation with the law, amounting at times to a fetishization of legality. The preoccupation with law and legality, write the Comaroffs, runs deeper than “purely a concern with crime.”³⁰ This is an important point to make, since “crime” in South African discourse is a problematic signifier, capturing very incompletely the more generalized scene of social instability. It has to do, the Comaroffs argue, “with the very constitution of the postcolonial polity,” since the “modernist nation-state appears to be undergoing an epochal move away from the ideal of an imagined community founded on the fiction, often violently sustained, of cultural homogeneity, toward a nervous, xenophobically tainted sense of heterogeneity and heterodoxy.”³¹ The rise of neoliberalism, the authors continue, “has heightened all this, with its impact on population movements, on the migration of work and workers, on the dispersion of cultural practices, on the return of the colonial oppressed to haunt the cosmopolis that once ruled them and wrote their histories.” Such effects “are felt especially in former colonies, which were erected from the first on difference.”³²

Now, difference comes back to haunt the former colonies: “[P]ostcolonials are citizens for whom polymorphous, labile identities coexist in uneasy ensembles of political subjectivity;” such citizens tend not to attach their sense of destiny to the nation, but rather to “an ethnic, cultural, language, religious, or some other group,” despite the fact that subjects such as these do not necessarily reject their national

²⁸ Barnard, “Tsotsis,” 561-562. See also Johnny Steinberg, “Crime”.

²⁹ Ibid., 565.

³⁰ Comaroff, *Law and Disorder*, 32.

³¹ Ibid., 32.

³² Ibid., 33

identity.³³ What are often labeled as communal loyalties (vide Pagad in the Western Cape, for example, or migrants from other parts of Africa who have been the subject of xenophobic attacks in Johannesburg and elsewhere), “are frequently blamed for the kinds of violence, nepotism, and corruption said to saturate these societies, as if cultures of heterodoxy bear within them the seeds of criminality, difference, disorder.”³⁴

It is worth cycling back a little to give a more complete account of how the Comaroffs get to the rather startling point that it is within cultures of heterodoxy that criminality and disorder are seen as correlates of difference. How has it come about that the role of cultural difference, such a critical factor in the history of many postcolonies, could have shifted so drastically, and so alarmingly, from a virtue to something resembling a matrix for criminality?

The first step is to sketch the context in which such a keen preoccupation with the law, legality and its abrogation in the postcolony might be found, since one of its most recent examples is surely postapartheid South Africa. Drawing on a wide range of case studies and ethnographic scholarship, the Comaroffs find that “law and disorder” are constitutive of a social base in which legality and criminality depend on and feed off each other in an enhanced, or accentuated, manner. The Comaroffs note that “vastly lucrative returns ... inhere in actively sustaining zones of ambiguity between the presence and absence of the law;” in this way, value is amassed “by exploiting the new aporias of jurisdiction opened up by neoliberal conditions.”³⁵

Central to the Comaroffs’ discussion about the consequences of neoliberal political rationality in the postcolony is not only what one might call on-the-ground conditions of “lawlessness” behind value-amassing grabs, but also the widespread media *representation* of such conditions as “bad.” These media versions of what might be styled as a kind of grab-what-you-can-while-you-can approach to the “free

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Comaroff, *Law and Disorder*, 5.

market” take their lead from an older, more equitable liberal rationality. Egalitarian political theory in South Africa, I would add, embedded in an idealistic (and classic liberal-democratic) Constitution, exists in a state of fundamental disjuncture with socioeconomic practice, as observed and reported upon frenetically in the real world of everyday media. The conjunction of “neo” and “liberal” creates a paradoxical nexus in which it is possible both to be willy-nilly part of such an order and to work against its grain, whether corruptly (as in police commissioners who take bribes but profess to uphold the law) or from a position of genuine entrapment as a subject in such an order of things. The crime writer often takes up the position, on behalf of an entrapped citizenry, of the galled civil subject observing dirty doings in a newly created “democratic” order that seems to belie in its (reported) behavior every tenet of its underlying (liberal-democratic) ethos. Further, in the more reflexive writers’ work, there is an awareness that the citizen so entrapped in observing widespread neoliberal quashing of classic liberalism is also willy-nilly part of the same system. This kind of tension between an idealized notion of (fair) legality that is consistently invoked as a leitmotif, and its persistent cancelling by (unfair) practice parading as differential empowerment, is typical of the postcolonial law/disorder condition described by the Comaroffs.

Ironically, in such conditions law is fetishized, “even as, in most postcolonies, higher and higher walls are built to protect the propertied from lawlessness, even as the language of legality insinuates itself deeper and deeper into the realm of the illicit.”³⁶ Law and lawlessness, assert the Comaroffs, “are conditions of each other’s possibility.”³⁷ And so, too, are these two leitmotifs of the postcolony inextricably bound in fictive imaginaries: “Mass mediation,” write the Comaroffs, quoting Rosalind Morris, “gives law and disorder a ‘communicative force’ that permits it to ‘traverse the social field’.”³⁸ These arguments appear to support Margie Orford’s

³⁶ Ibid., 22.

³⁷ Ibid., 21.

³⁸ Ibid.

public views³⁹ that crime fiction allows ordinary citizens imaginatively to traverse zones of law and its scrubbing out which are not generally seen except by policemen and journalists; the “crime” story is thus a “communicative force” in which bolted-in, apprehensive citizens of the neoliberal postcolony can “get out” and “see” what might actually be going on in the dark of night, and in the clear light of day, too, in the frequently bewildering, unreadable postapartheid topography.

Morris comments on the pervasive phenomenon of mediated “crime” in South Africa: “Transmitted along a myriad vectors, in televisual serials, newspaper columns, radio broadcasts, and music lyrics, crime is the phantom that haunts the new nation’s imaginary.”⁴⁰ Crime is both an event in the real world and a mediated condition feeding other fears and insecurities: “Macabre tales of heavily armed robbers and single-minded carjackers, of remorseless murderers, and – most remarked of all – pedophilic rapists feed a national press that is insatiable for news of personalized catastrophe with which to signify or prophesy political failure.”⁴¹ Similarly, historian Gary Kynoch⁴² argues for a deep preoccupation among whites in South Africa in the postapartheid period with narratives of lawlessness amid mounting political suspense.

‘Crime’ as an Allegory for the Sociopolitical

Understanding, interpreting, describing and responding to “crime” in the “new” South Africa therefore appears to be an everyday allegory for the sociopolitical terrain in a broad sense, speaking urgently to anxieties about very real conditions of social disorder.⁴³ “[T]he causes of crime’s transformation are ... usually construed in

³⁹ See Orford’s comment in De Kock, Leon. “Roger Smith and the ‘Genre Snob’ Debate.” SLiPnet, <http://slipnet.co.za/view/reviews/crime-fiction-the-%E2%80%98new-political-novel%E2%80%99/>

⁴⁰ Morris, “The Mute and the Unspeakable”, 61.

⁴¹ Ibid., 61.

⁴² Kynoch, “Fear and Alienation”.

⁴³ On forms of “allegory” in this sense, see also Rita Barnard’s insightful discussion of the film version of Fugard’s *Tsotsi*.

political terms,” argues Morris; “[c]rime marks the boundary of the polis as much as any other wilderness,” she adds.⁴⁴ Within such a sociopolitical milieu, regardless of finer points of form, genre or the writer’s intention, writers ineluctably go to the heart of the political with every new narrative in which detection is imagined as a set of explorations across the social terrain, and the cause of a crime is sought within a chain of events in the kind of polity described above.

Of course, many shades of the palette will be evident as writers seek to depict an emerging order through the lens of what a community deems to be “criminal,” in line with classical sociologist Emile Durkheim’s credo that society learns to know itself by coming to understand the nature its own criminal shadow. For Durkheim, crime – and more to the point, how people respond to its occurrence – provides a basis for the emergence of a normative consensus. “Crime brings together upright consciences and concentrates them,” Durkheim wrote in the late 19th century,⁴⁵ and this continues to hold true. The problem for South African writers on the cusp of the 20th century, however, has often been the very equivocality – and contestation – of the line between legality and criminality, both in the civil and in the public, or governmental, sphere. The condition of “plot loss” for such writers is acute: not only has the sociopolitical dispensation at “home” changed fundamentally, making what in the very recent past was illegal and wrong suddenly legal and right, and vice-versa; world politics, too, have undergone a disorienting transformation. In the 1990s, leading into the new millennium and beyond, these two formerly far more discrete zones (“home” and “outside” world) began to play into each other such that new levels of uncertainty would bedevil the projected relief at achieving a democratic consensus in the South African body politic at large. In the wake of globalization and its dramatic 1990s upsurge, the rules had been rewritten across the transformed face of the world, especially for nations that for so long had defined themselves in relation to the antagonisms of the Cold War.

⁴⁴ Morris, “The Mute and the Unspeakable,” 61.

⁴⁵ Durkheim, *The Division of Labor*, 103.

Leading crime novelist of the South African transition Deon Meyer takes precisely the disambiguation of this complex condition as his implicit task, his subtext, in the “crime” novel *Heart of the Hunter*. Meyer’s hero in this tale, the muscled modern warrior Thobela (“Tiny”) Mpayipheli, allegorically embodies the intricate complexity of the postapartheid dispensation in several ways. Not only was Mpayipheli schooled in Cold War conditions as an MK soldier trained in Eastern Europe under Communist conditions; not only was he “forgotten” by the now-ruling ANC upon his return from exile (as many have been); he was also “shopped” as a crack assassin to the eastern Europeans in return for much-needed political capital. Then, to make matters worse, this Xhosa “hunter-warrior” – associated explicitly in the text with a line of immemorial pre-colonial champions including Phalo, Maqoma and Ngqika – is abandoned by the Eastern Europeans after the fall of the Berlin Wall. They had been using him as an unusually sharp Cold War assassin, one who kills his final victim with a stabbing spear. Importantly, Meyer’s multilayered “plot” in this novel is built precisely upon the ruins of earlier sociohistorical plots: 1) The ANC’s alliance with the USSR and the Communist world, which imploded on the eve of liberation in South Africa, just when it was due to bear ultimate fruit; 2) The promised economic “new deal” in South Africa, in consequence upon socialism’s projected moral victory on the world stage; this is a deal that dramatically failed to come about; Mpayipheli, committed foot-soldier of the revolution, comes home to nothing, neither glory nor money; 3) The setting up of a socialist democracy inside a (pre-globalization) nation-state secured by the liberation forces – yet another conspicuous failure of intention. All of these building blocks for what was long projected as a “good” and ideologically virtuous new South Africa had been precipitously swept away. The nation-state’s ability to act like a relatively independent Westphalian entity, as much in this novel as in *realpolitik* in the 1990s and early 2000s, was now being undermined to a critical extent by the late-capitalist world order and its border-busting money and technological flows, spreading its tentacles even as far as Moscow and the formerly “Red” China. (Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki’s accession to the controversial “market-friendly” policy for economic growth and employment, “GEAR”, in this period, is therefore also not surprising.) As

Allen concludes after a searching political-economic enquiry,⁴⁶ the South African postapartheid state found itself trapped between a rock and a very hard place as global economic pressures increasingly set the agenda for any single state – and more especially countries in the developing or “emerging” world – seeking to secure economic growth and rising employment for its citizens.

In Search of the ‘Virtuous’ Postapartheid Citizen

Meanwhile, inside the “fragile, infant democracy”⁴⁷ that *Heart of the Hunter* maps in the course of its plot, matters are correspondingly complicated. Gone is the old struggle order of good revolutionaries pitted against bad white politicians, or commendable Communists out-thinking exploitative Western capitalists. Now, in many instances, the government is at war with itself as certain alliance partners push to the left of an unstable center and others, formerly rock-solid alliance partners, to the right; at the same time, separately constituted intelligence agencies (combining the knowledge regimes of the former liberation armies with those of the former SA Defence Force and SA Police) find themselves bitterly crossing swords with each other. The collateral damage quotient that results from such intergovernmental feuds includes “good” people like the struggle hero Mpayipheli himself and Miriam, his newfound beloved. Of course, one need only mention the name Vusi Pikoli and similar examples to find real-world cases of such collateral damage. The “good,” as in “good people,” and how to define this in the “new South Africa,” ideologically speaking, was fast becoming an aporetic category. And it is this black hole, this blind spot about what exactly constitutes a “good citizen,” or a “reasonable man” in legal parlance, to which both crime writers, nonfiction authors and political analysts have repeatedly turned.⁴⁸

Imaginative writers such as Meyer, Margie Orford, Kgebetli Moele, Nadine Gordimer, Zakes Mda, J.M. Coetzee, Damon Galgut, Fred Khumalo, Andrew Brown,

⁴⁶ Allen, *Transformation in South Africa*, 181-192.

⁴⁷ Meyer, *Heart of the Hunter*, 234.

⁴⁸ See Bloom, *Ways of Staying*; Altbeker, *Fruit of a Poisoned Tree*; Chipkin, *Do South Africans Exist?*

Marlene van Niekerk, Siphiso Mzobe, Lisa Fugard, Imraan Coovadia, Sarah Penny, Diale Tlholwe, Sonja Loots, Thando Mgqolozana, Henrietta Rose-Innes, Niq Mhlongo, Etienne van Heerden, Rachel Zadok, Mandla Langa, Ingrid Winterbach, Eben Venter, Michiel Heyns, Angelina Makholwa, Heinrich Troost, and still others (too numerous to mention) at work in this period seemed especially keen to probe the problem of the “virtuous” individual – and the limits or pressures brought to bear in defining such virtue – as a litmus test for the health of the social body at large. Where does one draw the line between legitimate cultural difference – a polymorphous good – and less ennobling strains of difference? In a fragile ensemble of citizens trying to make a new democratic consensus, “bad difference” arguably introduces a strain of polymorphous perversity, to misuse Freud’s famous term. Coetzee probed the limit-conditions of democratic consensus in the character of David Lurie, and Gordimer in her examination of the trigger-finger character in *The House Gun*, Duncan Lingard, to mention the two most obvious examples. Damon Galgut, in *The Good Doctor*, gives us two doctors trying to do the “right thing” in a rural hospital, against the political odds, and asks us to weight them up.⁴⁹ The other authors mentioned above can be shown to be doing a similar exercise via different means in each case.

How to define a “good” person in the “new South Africa” is also what’s urgently at issue in Meyer’s novel. By creating a single primary focus of public attention – a riveting road chase – Meyer succeeds in concentrating the attention of three interlocking sets of reading publics (his South African readers, his sizeable international audience, and the imagined general-public consumers of media embedded in novel’s plot) upon a critical question: is Tiny Mpayipheli a bad guy or a good guy, a hero or a villain? Is he virtuous or meretricious within the redefined terms of moral good under the new dispensation? How far do we allow for “difference” in the newly tolerant constitutional democracy? A “good citizen” is a category, as Chipkin⁵⁰ demonstrates, that is under erasure in Meyer’s “infant democracy,” and therefore the subject of feverishly differential redefinition. It is a

⁴⁹ See Titlestad, “Allegories of White Masculinity.”

⁵⁰ Chipkin, *Do South Africans Exist?*, 100.

question on which the fate of the country hangs, because if South Africa gets this definition wrong, or badly skewed towards renewed injustice and “bad difference,” that is, discrimination writ large, then the “baby” dispensation might just emerge from the transition as a beastly adult. The stakes, therefore, are very high. The political importance of this moral fixing of a “good citizen” cannot be overestimated. Such “fixing” – in the senses of both stabilizing as well as correcting – implies a corrective and discursive re-territorializing of the new country, achieving a next-to-impossible consensual underpinning.

It is therefore no surprise that Meyer orchestrates sustained attention on precisely the difficulties of moral and ethical compass-setting. He achieves a high degree of narrative concentration for his intersecting reading publics by launching his protagonist Mpayipheli on a movie-style motorcycle chase from Cape Town to northern Botswana. By using a such plot-heavy thriller model, Meyer succeeds in doing what many indubitably estimable, older-style political writers often cannot do in discursively heavy modes: revivify the *drama* – the big-screen sense of plot, the wide range of characters – in the story of postapartheid political change.

A Frankenstein or a Robin Hood?

In consequence, some more detailed plot recapitulation at this juncture, it is hoped, will not be amiss. Mpayipheli, figured perhaps a little romantically as being in touch with “the voices of his ancestors – Phalo and Rharhabe, Nqika and Maqoma, the great Xhosa chiefs, his bloodline, source, and refuge”⁵¹ – reluctantly agrees to help a former struggle comrade, Johnny Kleintjes, who is being held hostage by unknown parties in Lusaka following an intelligence sting. Mpayipheli must take a hard drive supposedly containing sensitive information to Kleintjes’s obscure transnational kidnapers in the Zambian capital so that he can secure his compatriot’s freedom. Mpayipheli is reluctant to do this – he has bought a plot of land in his ancestral Xhosaland (Eastern Cape), whence he wants to return with his beloved Miriam and

⁵¹ Meyer, *Heart of the Hunter*, 3.

her son. He feels compelled to nurture and re-educate the boy as a man of the people. Like the Al Pacino character Carlito Brigante in the movie *Carlito's Way* (1993), Mpayipheli badly wants to close down the bad parts of his history, to live pure and straight, but the past hauls him in for one (seemingly) last settling of scores. He “owes” Kleintjes an unspecified “struggle” debt, and Mpayipheli is nothing if not a man of his word, a “stand-up guy” in American gang-movie parlance. He books a flight from Cape Town to Lusaka, thinking he will sort the business out quickly. Unknown to him, though, various, warring SA intelligence agencies are trailing him – they also don’t quite know what’s going on, and they want the intelligence on the hard drive Mpayipheli is carrying so they can find out. When agents try to apprehend him at Cape Town International airport, he shows his extraordinary physical prowess by staging an unlikely escape, exiting the airport and eventually “borrowing” a BMW 1200 GS motorcycle from his place of work, a Motorrad dealership in the Cape Town city bowl.

Mpayipheli, accustomed to riding a 200cc Honda Benly, finds himself compelled to adapt to the brutish power of the massive BMW, almost wiping himself out as he makes his way onto the N1, the road that leads north to both Botswana and Zimbabwe, and beyond that, his intended destination of Lusaka. He knows that the combined forces of the SA Police Services, the SA National Defence Force, various arms of the postapartheid intelligence services, along with an elite reaction unit, will soon be hunting him down. They do this with helicopters, satellite surveillance, roadblocks, and an arsenal of arms fit to kill a battalion of soldiers, let alone a solo fugitive on a motorbike. When *Cape Times* reporter Allison Healy gets wind of the story, the stage is set for a media spectacle that (for the purposes of this novel) concentrates the attention of significant portions of the new nation on a dramatic chase, and what it represents.

In line with the idea that reporters and detectives traverse social shadow-zones on behalf of the citizenry, and bring back dispatches on what’s actually going on out there, Healy’s reporting, along with other media missives in the novel, pitted against statements by the state, signal a fierce public-sphere contestation over how best to understand and interpret the events “on the ground” regarding Mpayipheli.

The big question is how to “read” him – is he a Frankenstein of the struggle, as the government media communiqués suggest, or a Robin Hood, as many civil subjects begin to think during the course of the story? Before long, reporter Healy is not only updating her “story” on a daily basis in the *Cape Times* as she forges deeper and further in her work of social detection, she is also being interviewed on national TV. The Mpayipheli affair becomes a media fanfare, and a test case, to boot: who is more truthful, and more “good,” in this sapling democracy – the government’s agents or the individual that these agents are hunting down? The resolution of this question carries an enormous burden of meaning for the health and longevity of the democracy: if Mpayipheli does turn out to be a Robin Hood, then why is the State so intent on crushing him, and others like him? Can the new government be trusted? If Mpayipheli is essentially an upstanding citizen, then what is being hidden from sight and why? What is on the hard drive he is carrying on his person? And how important are the consequences of such hiding?

These questions were especially important in the early transition period (roughly the first ten years), when South Africa still loomed large in the global imaginary as a singular case of constitutional, democratic success among developing nations, a “miracle,” indeed. As the German scholar Jorn Rüsen loudly expostulated at a Wits University colloquium in 1998 called “Living Difference,” “[i]t is imperative for us that you [the democratic transition] succeed!”⁵² He was reminding skeptical South African delegates how much was at stake, not only for South Africa, but also for the very possibility of constitutional democracy in the postcolonies of the world. Among the colloquium discussants at that event was Nancy Fraser, for whom Habermas’s theory of public-sphere deliberation, framed as it is within Westphalian-state or “national” contexts, as well as Benedict Anderson’s notion of *nationally* constituted “imagined communities,” no longer easily obtained in the globalizing, post- and transnational sphere.⁵³ South Africa, one might argue, was in this period caught amidships, between the stern of national identity (still a major

⁵² See De Kock, “South Africa in the Global Imaginary”, 289.

⁵³ Fraser, “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere”, 11-13.

point of reference for South Africans of all persuasions) and the bow of globalization, the point at which the SA ship was encountering the swells of oceanic global interconnection.

On the one hand, the very existence of media contestation across various public outlets, and between civil and state subjects (as depicted in *Heart of the Hunter*, and as did indeed exist in reality), might have suggested to Meyer's readers that a nationally bounded democratic public sphere is – or was then – on a sound footing; the novel is set in the early 2000s, several years before the infamous Protection of State Information Bill, or "Secrecy Bill." Such healthy public-sphere contestation might suggest that Fraser's sense of a sequestered national public sphere is premature in the case of South Africa. Meyer is one of the few crime writers who, at least in his earlier novels, of which *Heart of the Hunter* is a good example, evinces optimism about the new democracy and its prospects for robust health. (He is correspondingly severe on the old white renegades who continue come out of the woodwork in corrupt new-era knavery.) At the same time, however, the undercurrent forces in Meyer's story, the very factors precipitating "plot loss" among the state's functionaries – namely the CIA and transnational Muslim agents at work in the novel's "sting", alongside an intelligence scam *inside* the South African security establishment – are mostly beyond the nation-state's control and awareness. This suggests that Fraser's theory of nation-states losing the luxury of an efficacious, bounded public sphere might be half-right after all. In Meyer's novel, as in many demonstrable real-world incidents in postapartheid South Africa, the state is itself too often in the dark about what exactly is going on for comfort; this is especially so in strategic instances, both with regard to external undercurrents and internally, where its own operatives are often provably at war with each other, as each week's stories in the news media tend to suggest. The state, like its citizens, seems to have lost the plot, and to save face it has to present a unified front. In the name of "national security," in this novel, it has no choice but to back the most politic option in the short term: hunt down Mpayipheli so that it can eliminate the risk that the intelligence he is carrying will compromise its security, not to mention its increasingly sensitive dignity. In order to do this, however, it must fight a war of

public opinion, and in the process betray Mpayipheli, one of its former MK soldier-heroes, painting him as a psychopathic, out-of-control renegade.

The question of what exactly constitutes a virtuous South African – and by implication, how to distinguish legitimate articulations of cultural difference from “bad” difference – is therefore a matter of the highest importance, both inside this novel and outside of it, involving a searching exploration of contending values. “Virtue” here would include the sense outlined above by the Comaroffs of a diagnostic preoccupation in postcolonies with the idea of what makes a good or legitimate *legal* subject, a preoccupation which, they add, is “growing in counterpoint to, and deeply entailed in, the rise of the felonious state, private indirect government, and endemic cultures of illegality.”⁵⁴ It is a counterpoint that has “come to feature prominently in popular discourses almost everywhere,”⁵⁵ among which one must count, I would add, crime fiction of the kind I am discussing here. As governance “disperses itself and monopolies over coercion fragment,” the Comaroffs write, “crime and policing provide a rich repertoire of idioms and allegories with which to address, imaginatively, the nature of sovereignty, justice, and social order.”⁵⁶ In the process, the kind of ambiguity about right and wrong, legality and its shadow, noted earlier as typical of life in various postcolonies and developing nations, looms large. As if to demonstrate this very point, Meyer’s character Janina Mentz, head of an elite intelligence unit set up above several existing (and warring) intelligence structures in the postapartheid government, tells her protégé Tiger Mazibuko that “the world ha[s] become an evil place, residents and countries not knowing who [is] friend or foe, wars that [can] no longer be fought with armies but at the front of secret rooms, the mini-activities of abduction and occupation, suicide attacks and pipe bombs.”⁵⁷

‘Intelligence’ in a Reconstituted Public Sphere

⁵⁴ Comaroff, *Law and Disorder*, 20.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Meyer, *Heart of the Hunter*, 104.

Taking this theme a step further, *Heart of the Hunter's* focus on wars of intelligence (both strategic state information/espionage, and "sense-making" in an age of information overload) captures a crisis of old and new methods of warfare. The old methods included MK foot-soldiers such as Mpayipheli conducting guerilla warfare, but such subjects now suddenly find themselves caught up in an Information Age meta-war. In this newer kind of mêlée the old tricks of information and disinformation are elevated into a knowledge economy face-off, a hyper-data war of contending information regimes which claims human lives as incidental sacrifices. By the end of Meyer's novel, one comes to understand that lives can plausibly be lost in a war of attrition around ownership and/or control of information in and of itself, despite the fact that the data at the center of the dust-up might be quite worthless, or even false, as it turns out to be in *Heart of the Hunter*. But just look at what's at stake: the power to define what is "right," and what is legitimate (including what is *legally* right) in the name of the body politic. Therein lies the key to the knowledge/power equation, whether the outcome is Machiavellian or Mandelian. Everything, in a sense, depends on "intelligence," the fight for which in several senses drives Meyer's novel on relentlessly towards its materially bloody conclusion.

In the plot of *Heart of the Hunter*, government agents issue communiqués describing Mpayipheli as a deranged madman, based on the evidence of a high-ranking former MK "hero" who makes this statement to loosen the noose of a sexual harassment rap. Meanwhile, reporter Allison Healy portrays a very different version of Mpayipheli to her readers: he was an old MK hero of great distinction, and he has repeatedly tried to avoid hurting people in the hunt-and-resistance story occurring in the novel. Healy's version of Mpayipheli is also based on the testimony of a former comrade. In addition, the word of more ordinary people, such as Mpayipheli's common-law wife Miriam and a streetwise shoeshine-man who has known him for many years, suggest to Allison and her readers that Mpayipheli is indeed a man of the people rather than the villain the state wishes to make him appear in the eyes of

the masses. “Will the real Thobela Mpayipheli please stand up,”⁵⁸ Healy ruminates, echoing the bigger question underlying the political subtext of the novel. While the makings of political virtue are strongly suggested in the character of Koos Kok, a “Griqua troubadour” who helps Mpayipheli escape the state’s helicopters (Kok is working with musician David Kramer, describing himself as a “*skeefbroer*”), the country at large remains in doubt. Both the motorcycle chase and its reported progress serve to emphasize that the line between law and (dis)order cannot be decisively demarcated. In addition, it reveals a political cartography that is both politically occulted and dangerously labile.

In the end, the novelistic resolution is polyvalent and disorienting. Mpayipheli loses his common-law wife as a result of a blunder by a state security agent, but he recovers the boy, planning to take Pakamile away with him to his ancestral plot of land in Xhosaland. This is his consolation after very nearly dying himself at the hands of his former comrades. However, the state of public opinion about whether Mpayipheli is a noble or a debased citizen remains ambiguous. For Meyer, at this point in his career, and for many writers like him, the “new” South Africa refuses to resolve itself except in perversions of liberality, fairness and safety, especially in violations against the intended inheritors of the revolution.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how cultural difference acts as a locus for a transformed and redefined moral economy in the postapartheid public imaginary, in the media, in scholarship, and in the communicatively powerful form of popular crime fiction. This convergence points to a disparately effected but keen perception of a reconfigured postapartheid “axis of evil,” one which coincides to some extent with a more general postcolonial and global condition in the wake of neoliberal hegemony across the world. Whereas the denigration of cultural difference (in colonial and neocolonial contexts) once mobilized concerted activism for its re-

⁵⁸ Meyer, *Heart of the Hunter*, 192.

validation and the restoration of putatively more symmetrical power relations, a widespread emergence of “bad” difference, instantiated in the phenomenon of the “Felonious State,” has seen a profound lack of clarity on matters of right and wrong, legality and illegality, virtuous citizenry and political (il)legitimacy. Right or wrong uses of violence, too, have become less easy to identify, as fictionally dramatized the case of Thobela Mpayipheli in Meyer’s *Heart of the Hunter* (and its sequel, *Devil’s Peak*). In *Devil’s Peak*, Mpayipheli finds himself resorting to rough justice with his assegai for pedophiles after he realizes that the South African criminal justice system – and therefore the state – is incapable of protecting even children from social degeneration of the most obscene kind. And yet this form of kangaroo-style social justice is shown to be an ultimately unsatisfactory measure, especially when Mpayipheli gets two of the victims wrong and thereby becomes a murderer himself rather than a noble avenger of wrong. Such are the knife-point intricacies of the new order. If neither the state nor any particular civil grouping has a monopoly over legitimate violence, as noted earlier, then conditions are indeed averse and surely in need of intensive detection. The turn to crime fiction in South Africa, I maintain, is therefore far less the escapist, formulaic blind spot that it is often made out to be, but rather a form of social hermeneutics in which detection within an ethically muddled topography identifies, describes and explores the phenomenon of “bad” difference. Alternatively, such detection investigates the *management* of difference in ways that are disingenuous and deceitful, as a point at which the new order either evilly coheres, or falls apart. In the process, the basis of “virtuous” citizenship within the postapartheid context is being extensively rewritten.

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