

# “There is the Black Man’s Story and the White Man’s Story”: Narratives of Self and the Valence of “Stories” in Postapartheid Culture

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## Summary

Taking into its purview the marked tendency in postapartheid culture to emphasise self-narrativisation, this article examines “self-voicing” in conceptual terms, citing and discussing scholars who have commented on similar trends. The article then considers a more specific case in which narratives of the self loom large, namely Jonny Steinberg’s non-fiction work, *The Number*. In this book, Steinberg not only interweaves several instances of self-storying, but he also shows that narrative relays – in which the self becomes an entity that is susceptible to *shaping* – are themselves caught up in the politics of everyday life, and of cultural contestation more generally, rendering them contingent. The article concludes with a brief consideration of Achille Mbembe’s 2015 Facebook intervention in which he warns, in the wake of the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, against the meta-text of an all-consuming preoccupation with the bogey of whiteness.

## Opsomming

Met inagneming dat daar in die post-apartheidkultuur ’n duidelike geneigdheid tot self-narrativering bestaan, poog hierdie artikel om die “self-stem” binne konseptuele terme te ondersoek met die fokus op aanhalings en diskussies van kundiges wat reeds soortgelyke tendense verken het. Die artikel beskou ’n spesifieke geval van nader, naamlik die niefiksieteks van Jonny Steinberg, “*The number*”, waarin die narratief van die “self” sterk na vore kom. In hierdie boek vervleg Steinberg verskeie gebeure van self-verhaling, maar hy toon ook aan dat narratiewe vertellings – waarin die self ’n entiteit word wat ontvanklik is vir *vorming* – so vasgevang is in die alledaagse politieke lewe, asook in meer algemene kulturele beswaarmaking, dat hierdie vertellings ondergeskik daaraan word. Die artikel sluit af met ’n kort beskouing van Achille Mbembe se 2015 Facebook intervensie, waarin hy waarsku – binne die volgstroom van die “*Rhodes Must Fall*” veldtog – teen die metateks van ’n allesverterende behepthed met die skrikbeeld van witheid.

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This article takes a view of the intricacies involved in what is often viewed as a key element of postapartheid artistic endeavour: the imperative to reclaim (injured, damaged or expropriated) selfhood through story, that is, via the (re)mediating registers of culture in general, and of literary (oral and print) culture in particular. The tendency towards reclamation of self through narrativization (or “self-storying”) is a powerful urge in postapartheid culture, whether or not one believes that stories – or discourse more generally – are a sufficient form of “recompense” for the *longue durée* of social injustice. However, as this article seeks to suggest, “self-voicing” on its own is only the beginning of the story, so to speak. The more complex part of the self-voicing relay occurs when such narratives enter into what I like to think of as the politics of stories and account-giving, a process by which the valence of narratives of the (communal) self are affirmed but remain under negotiation. By this I mean that stories of self-validation – especially when such gambits at affirmation are socially oriented – enter into circulation as a form of cultural capital, and as such cannot but become subject to contention, negotiation, and contingency.

## 1 Narratives of Regeneration

Njabulo Ndebele, in a seminal essay entitled “Truth, Memory, and Narrative”, collected in Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael’s edited volume, *Senses of Culture* (2000), underlines the *regenerative* power of narrative, and the link between testimony, memory, and narrative. “Time has given the recall of memory the power of reflection associated with narrative” (2000: 20), Ndebele argues. This reflective capacity, “experienced as a shared social consciousness”, will hopefully be the “lasting legacy of the stories of the TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission]” (20). It is a legacy that will “give legitimacy and authority to previously silenced voices” (20), an “additional confirmation of the movement of our society from repression to expression” (20). Whereas the state attempted, in the apartheid era, “to compel the oppressed to deny the testimony of their own experience, today that experience is one of the essential conditions for the emergence of a new national consciousness”, Ndebele writes, adding that “[t]hese stories may very well be some of the first steps in the rewriting of South African history on the basis of validated mass experience” (20).

Ndebele here captures one of the core impulses of transitional and post-transitional narrative in general: the restoration of “legitimacy and authority” to previously silenced voices, and the emergence of a “new national consciousness”. In concluding his essay, he argues that a “major spin-off” resulting from the “stories of the TRC” is the “restoration of narrative” (28). He sees this as a rare opportunity to take narrative beyond testimony, towards imaginatively creating what he calls “new thoughts and new

worlds” (28). Writing in 2000, then, Ndebele sets a challenging agenda for postapartheid culture as a whole. The criterion, as he sees it, is that the narratives resulting from “a search for meanings” (20) in the wake of apartheid “may have less and less to do with the facts themselves and with their recall than with the revelation of meaning through the *imaginative combination of those facts*” (21, emphasis added); for, at that point, Ndebele writes, “facts will be the building blocks of metaphor” (21).

It is striking that Ndebele’s sense of imagination traverses an arc that cuts through any strong division between fiction and nonfiction, testimony and invention, fact and fable. Rather, he sees the condensation of postapartheid’s many sources of (formerly muted) self-expression and storytelling into metaphor, into an imaginative amalgam, as the more important task, whether the writing at hand is autobiography or poetry, bearing witness or fictionalizing it; the more pressing need is the metaphoric (figurative, imaginative) reconstruction of experience via memory that has regenerative moral import. This will prove a testing but accurate criterion over the years following 2000, in which many works will indeed engage in a “search for meanings” (20).

Indeed, it is undoubtedly true to say that the capacity for newfound self-affirmation, found in the self-recuperation of formerly repressed, and often still-marginalised, voices, positions and identities, has been one of the more emphatic, and unambiguously affirmative, yields of postapartheid expression. Much critical scholarship has sought to validate a culture of undistorted expression in response to centuries of patriarchy and racism. A good example of such work is Meg Samuelson’s *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women? Stories of the South African Transition* (2007). Commenting on this study, scholar Andrew van der Vlies (2008: 954) argues that “Samuelson’s project ... is informed by a desire to ‘restore’ to these historical women [Krotoa-Eva, Nongqawuse, and Sarah Bartmann] some of their strangeness and challenging heterogeneity, that which does not necessarily serve the purposes of normative, naturalising national discourses”. Similarly, Pumla Dineo Gqola’s *What is Slavery to Me* (2010) seeks to problematise appropriations of slave heritage to reconfigure group identities, just as Gabeba Baderoon’s *Regarding Muslims* (2014) tracks the various tropings, some problematic, in South African cultural expression, of Muslim identity. It is clear from these examples that reclamation or recuperation of formerly repressed identities and subject positions, coincident with the transition and its afterlife, also involves the politics of cross-appropriation and the dangers of being subsumed into larger, newly repressive, or normalising, narratives. In an important sense, the post-transitional literary-cultural sphere is replete with contending scripts, a place of keen vigilance about who speaks for, and about, whom, and under what authority.

If there is a golden, affirmative thread in postapartheid writing, then, one might find it in the diversiform narrative reclamations of identity, and the

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excavation of buried or repressed selves, showing an unfolding (self-) expression rather than repression (to use Ndebele’s terms, above). Such speaking out satisfies, in spirit at least, Ndebele’s vision of narrative as giving “legitimacy and authority to previously silenced voices”, confirming the “rewriting of South African history on the basis of validated mass experience” (Ndebele 2000: 20). Further, as Ndebele notes, it is the revelation of meaning through the “imaginative combination of ... facts” (21) so that “facts will be the building blocks of metaphor” (21) that is important. This proleptic description of the ongoing scene of writing in postapartheid time and space accounts to a great extent for the prevalence of memoir-type or confessional/autobiographical writing by a wide range of South African subjects, all the way from the township streets, from whence many spoken-word poets emerge; to the prisons; to the universities, where academic critics and scholars at large are more likely nowadays to write their own variants of memoiristic witnessing or reflection than pen “appreciations” of “great writers”, as earlier generations were inclined to do. Notable recent examples of this (often meritorious) trend include Leslie Swartz’s *Able-Bodied* (2010), Jacob Dlamini’s *Native Nostalgia* (2009), Mamphela Ramphela’s *A Life* (1995), and the accounts in *At Risk* (2007) and *Load Shedding* (2009), edited by Liz McGregor and Sarah Nuttall, by writers such as Michael Titlestad, Rita Barnard, Nuttall, Deborah Posel, Achille Mbembe, Liz McGregor, and Imraan Coovadia, among others. Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael argue, in their edited collection *Senses of Culture* (2000), that the “flourishing of the autobiographical voice has emerged alongside the powerful informing context of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but it is also a symptom of the decompression, relaxation, and cacophony of the post-apartheid moment in general” (298). They contend that the “autobiographical act” is in fact “more than a literary convention”, it “has become a cultural activity”. In a multiplicity of forms, including “memoir, reminiscence, confession, testament, case history and personal journalism”, such “biographical acts or cultural occasions” see narrators take up “models of identity that have become widely available”; these cultural occasions have “pervaded the culture of the 1990s and have spread into the new century” (298). Nuttall and Michael continue:

Particularly since the political transition of 1994, personal disclosure has become a part of a revisionary impulse, part of the pluralizing project of democracy itself. The individual, in this context, emerges as a key, newly legitimized concept. South Africa becomes a “recited” community ... [t]alking about their own lives, confessing, and constructing personal narratives – on the body, on the air, in music, in print – South Africans translate their selves, and their communities, into story.

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These points are well made. However, it is not just that, in the wake of the TRC, everyone has a story to tell, and should tell it, reclaiming selfhood, dignity, and difference, or providing still more diverse and variable perspectives on past and present. It is also that the post-transitional zone lines became blurred by different reckonings of value and multiple invocations of legitimacy. It is a space, in addition, that came to be searchingly contested between individuals and groups via the valence of storytelling. In that sense, the post-liberation era has seen an acceleration in the *politics* of stories and account-giving, where the most telling stories more often than not have a strong relation to the perceived real, including the datum of people's lived experience. This current of connection to the detail of the actual is not quite the "stenographic bent" that Louise Bethlehem (2001: 365) once identified in pre-1994 literature, with its "rhetoric of urgency". It shows, rather, what I would call a "contentious bent", an insistence on both the "real story" and the right way of looking at it. It is an argument in which people insist on their own versions of themselves, as the examples of Samuelson, Gqola and Baderoon above suggest. Stories of emergence and survival, a thriving line of writing and oral rendition, as Jonny Steinberg's *The Number* (2004) so amply illustrates, encode affirmative identity stakes in highly particularised ways, contributing to self- and group-validation as perhaps the single biggest symbolic reward of democracy. These particularised and contentious gambits, however, implicitly trouble the idea of a universal measure of reclaimed identity, and they reopen "grounds of contest"<sup>1</sup> in ways that render precarious any cosy metanarratives or settled identity politics on the basis of victimhood in the world of postapartheid, and indeed of post-postapartheid, an era that I would suggest begins after 2010, after even the Soccer World Cup fails to transform the "rainbow nation" in the way a hungry, still largely dispossessed populace would have wanted.

## 2 Nongoloza and *The Number*

At the base of the case study presented below – the life-story of Magadien Wentzel, prisoner and narrative interlocutor in Jonny Steinberg's nonfiction work *The Number* – lies a deeper tale: that of Mzuzephi "Nongoloza" Mathebula, a bandit figure memorably chronicled in Charles van Onselen's concise study, *The Small Matter of a Horse: The Life of "Nongoloza" Mathebula, 1867-1948* (1984). It is now common cause, thanks to Van Onselen's chronicle, that the man who came to be known as "Nongoloza" was a true-life outlaw figure who, at the turn of the twentieth century, saw

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1. I am cross-referencing, here, Malvern van Wyk Smith's concise history of South African literature before the transition, *Grounds of Contest* (1990).

the benefits of banditry above the pennies to be had for racialised labour in and around South Africa’s fabled city of gold. Van Onselen details the history of lumpenprole black bandits under Nongoloza who called themselves the “Ninevites” and formed a paramilitary hierarchy based on ranks and structures borrowed from colonial English judiciary and Boer military establishments. These Ninevites, also known as the “Regiment of the Hills” (Van Onselen 1984: 13), hid out in old mine shafts and caves to the south of Johannesburg, from whence they conducted their operations to separate the wealthy from their goods and cash. In Van Onselen’s recounting, the Ninevites established a politically oppositional outlaw subculture that later, as its progenitors and their early soldiers were imprisoned or killed, took root in South Africa’s prisons in the form of a mythos, a founding story for the rise of the infamous “Number” gangs. These prison bands (whose three factions are called 26s, 27s and 28s), have been a pervasive presence in South Africa’s jails over the past hundred years, developing a shadow rank hierarchy, an order that came to rule the prisons by night and to this day holds a tense line of truce with the jail authorities by day.

In Van Onselen’s narrative, the remarkable events in the life of Nongoloza, or “King of the Ninevites”, are laid bare. This larger-than-life figure (reputed by many to be invulnerable to bullets) emerges as a mythological personage who not only established a massive movement of “social banditry” (1984: 16), but also eventually initiated what has since become a gang culture in South Africa’s prisons based on densely sedimented oral lore. During Nongoloza’s own lifetime (1867-1948), the influence of this “proto-nationalist” (1984: 51) spread far and wide, embracing “prison, compound and township alike” (35). Nongoloza’s mythical afterlife, in its generative role as the engine of Magadien Wentzel’s personal life-story as a prison-gang member – and that of thousands of inmates like him – continues to play a determinative role in prison gang culture across South Africa, reaching well into the post-postapartheid present. Not only is Nongoloza’s story of social banditry folded into the life story of Steinberg’s interlocutor, Wentzel, but it serves as the basis of identity-forming convictions and a quasi-military secular mythology (with mythical overtones) in South African prisons that to a large extent governs both behaviour and self-expression, with life-and-death consequences for those who fail to observe the story’s demands upon individual prison inmates.

From the narrative matrix of the Nongoloza tale, and its many further layers and dimensions, the “Number” gangs developed their own story of origins, which is a big part of Steinberg’s topic in his eponymous book. It goes without saying that the various stories surrounding Nongoloza, and the oral compendium of tales about the origination of Numbers lore that he initiated, remain subject to ongoing interpretation and disputation within South Africa’s prisons, as Steinberg’s study amply demonstrates. Steinberg

is nothing if not an aggregator of stories, high and low, historical, mythical, apocryphal, oral, you name it. Even the tellers of stories become, as it were, characters in their own right in Steinberg's trademark play of tales and their telling, which he takes into view with forensically analytical precision, showing how stories themselves enter into the politics of everyday life. It was thus inevitable that Steinberg would bring Van Onselen's (academic) account of the Nongoloza story into confrontation with the (less academic but more demotic) understanding of it held by his seasoned gang-leader interlocutor in *The Number*. Despite Van Onselen's impeccable scholarly credentials, Magadien Wentzel is not impressed by this venerated historian's reading of the Nongoloza story, which also happens to be Wentzel's own myth of origins, orally transmitted within a tight prison community and underscoring his role as a "big shot" in the Numbers' hierarchy. In the event, Steinberg tells Magadien that, as a matter of historical record, Nongoloza actually recounted the main events of his life to a white warder in 1912, that this autobiographical narrative was transcribed and lodged in an official prisons report, and that it then served as one of Van Onselen's primary sources in his book. Despite the fact that this is academically provable, Magadien is less than impressed, and he prefers to be his own historian, with his own sources of authority:

There is the black man's story and the white man's story. Go to any prison in this country, you will hear the black man's story – exactly the same in every prison. You go there with Van Onselen's story, they will kill you. Serious. How can you say Nongoloza spoke to a white man?

(Steinberg 2004: 236)

Steinberg tries to explain how Van Onselen came into properly legitimate scholarly possession of the (academically cross-checked) story he tells, but Wentzel interrupts him:

Van Onselen is fucking with something very fucking important. You look at Shaka's history, you look at Piet Retief, at Jan van Riebeeck. This is history people believe. It is like a power. People are prepared to die for their stories.

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This exchange undoubtedly provides an unexpected turn in what one is accustomed to understanding as the politics of knowledge production in academia. In this instance, intellectual jousting in the cloistered halls of the university is rendered relative by contention over stories in another hothouse of competing narratives, another enclosure in which understanding is forged via the giving and taking of accounts: the South African prison, with its marked cultures of institutionalised violence. Van Onselen himself, widely known for his crusty, gloves-off style of argument in public academic forums (in his years at the University of the Witwatersrand, especially),

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would be at something of a disadvantage in this debate with Wentzel, who is (or was, before his professed turn away from crime) capable of giving the term “visceral engagement” a wholly new twist. The point is, though, that Van Onselen himself is unlikely ever to have a debate with Wentzel, given the geographical, class and vocational distance between these two men. Yet the democratic space of postapartheid writing, via story-aggregator extraordinaire Steinberg, opens up a dialogic zone in which such unlikely bedfellows are allowed to share the privilege of public dialogue, even if it is reconstructed after the event. This is what one might call a Bakhtinian moment, a dialogic zone never available in quite the same measure before 1994. Steinberg, and other nonfiction writers like him, stitch together stories from irreconcilably polarised realms because real communication, and real listening, remains an urgent need despite – or because of – the gains of postapartheid. Steinberg has in fact said publicly that writing in and about South Africa “is a question of coordination between deaf people”.<sup>2</sup> Steinberg’s *raison d’être* as a writer seems to be to act as a collector of otherwise disparate accounts, and to sift through them with an unsparingly sharp eye, while also embedding himself empathetically inside his interlocutor’s felt and cognitively perceived world. Anyone who has read Steinberg, whether it is *The Number* (2004), *Three Letter Plague* (2009), *A Man of Good Hope* (2014), or any of his other books, is likely to agree that this writer’s ability both to listen to, and elicit from, his subjects what one might call “heartfelt” stories, is quite extraordinary. These interlocutors open up to Steinberg, entering into a bond in which the right, or best possible, telling of the story becomes an objective of the utmost importance because, always, the stories matter deeply; on these accounts depends someone’s entire sense of him or herself, at least in their own understanding. The story must not merely be told; one must get the story right, and tell the right story, so to speak.

Clearly, then, this is very serious business involving the most intimate textures, or layers, of people’s lives, their self-making and identity construction, their aversions and resentments, and their most prized memories. There is little place in such a highly sensitive process for “fiction”, or for fictionalising life stories, and yet there is much fictionality in these accounts; here, one might talk about the fictions that underlie, in some cases make up, much of what is taken to be the real. This kind of “fictional” content almost always enters into Steinberg’s stories at a secondary level, as he disentangles truth from half-truth, perspective from fact. Despite such blending of nonfiction and fiction, however, the emphasis remains squarely on the primacy of an impeccable standard of accuracy, and of reported actuality. Steinberg

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2. This is a comment made by Steinberg at Yale University in 2013 during a seminar following the award to him of a Windham Campbell prize (personal notes).



frequently refers to himself as a “journalist”, despite the fact that his books are a hybrid of advanced investigative journalism and scholarly research, achieving a quality of social history that is, in South Africanist studies, second to none, except perhaps for Jacob Dlamini on the one hand, and Van Onselen on the other, to whom Steinberg owes, and acknowledges in *The Number*, a great debt. In this regard, Steinberg, like Dlamini, is unique to postapartheid writing, and his mission as a discoverer of deep stories, excavated with due regard for both their surface feel (their *affect*, an increasingly important factor) and their below-the-radar complexity, gives his work an edge over writing that is merely imagined or made up.

It is as if the analytical edge of nonfiction, in its commitment to establishing an unambiguously accurate baseline account – and its dedication to getting the story right – are necessary precisely because the “right story” can only be achieved, or nearly achieved, in a continuous weighing up of the value of the stories people tell themselves, which are likely to have varying degrees of usefulness. That is to say, Steinberg deploys a forensic mode of nonfictional investigation, akin to journalism in the best sense of that term, to discriminate between values and orders of information folded into stories. Steinberg is alert to the fact, always, that human subjects use stories strategically and pragmatically, so one cannot always take them at face value. As suggested above, much of the information gleaned in the course of a Steinberg-type book, although based on fact, often verges on a kind of fictionality in its self-serving arrangement of elements. For example, Steinberg (2004) writes, at one stage, that

[Wentzel’s] identification with Sidney Poitier in *To Sir with Love* is almost certainly a retrospective memory. It is the product of a conciliation he has made with the world during the last three years. It is also the symptom of a peace he has made with himself.

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Explaining this, the author suggests that

[watching *To Sir with Love*] wasn’t his first experience of black and white. Away from the screen, in his real life, he was watching his mother give her maternal love to two white children. And the feelings this spectacle invoked had made him a virulent racist. He hated the Sampsons in particular, the entire white population in general. Even the “pseudo-whites”, the coloured middle class, with their domestic workers and their family cars, he hated with a vengeance

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On the basis of this evaluation of what Steinberg has deduced about Wentzel’s sense of things, over the longer term and in view of the stories he typically tells himself, the author is able to identify his subject’s current

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storyline as a “retrospective memory”, a reconstruction (or fiction, of a sort) in the present of a memory that, Steinberg concludes, must have had a different charge in the past: “Back in the mid-seventies, he must have watched *To Sir with Love* with ambivalence at best: a toxic mix of longing and envy” (138).

Such sifting, calibrating and recalibrating, and then the re-crafting of a reflexive cover narrative, in the face of an enormity of oral and researched data, represents the real work of Steinberg’s brand of nonfiction. This is no less the case in Dlamini’s work, especially in *Askari* (2014). In *The Number*, as elsewhere in Steinberg’s corpus, the importance of such work is evident in the consequences that pertain to narratives of self-understanding, or self-delusion. The very destiny of Steinberg’s interlocutors is intricately bound with their stories of origination and validation. This can be seen on both an individual and a collective level. Socially, the prisons became a site in which the political narrative of transition after 1994 gained an intensified focus. The early years of Mandela’s presidency saw riotous conditions inside goals like Pollsmoor in the Cape after the authorities failed to meet unrealistic expectations of mass amnesty and “freedom” on an exaggerated scale (Steinberg 2004: 271-276). However, white bosses in the command structure gave way to people of colour fairly quickly, and the new prison directors had their own ideas about running institutions of incarceration. One new manager in particular, Johnny Jansen, decided to turn the prison ship around, from an authoritarian, violent and mistrustful institution to a place where the governors and inmates might forge a common language. As a man of colour himself, Jansen had experienced the humiliation of racial discrimination at the hands of his former white bosses, “[s]o he believed that he knew why the men in his charge had murdered and raped; their psyches had been mangled by the collective humiliation of apartheid” (319). “I don’t think the solution to crime is so complicated”, Jansen says to Steinberg in the course of *The Number*. “Human beings are supposed to be simple. They didn’t become what they are by choice, but by their circumstances. If you expose them to different ways of doing things, it is like giving a child a new toy” (319). Steinberg continues:

It was all charmingly romantic. Human beings are naturally good: apartheid had deformed their souls. Jansen himself had almost succumbed to the cancer of racial humiliation; he had wanted to kill. But he was better now, a fully-fledged human being, and he was going to shepherd his flock back to goodness: one victim of apartheid taking the rest by the hand.

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Romantic it may well have been, but at this point, Jansen as a senior prison boss is doing something quite astonishing for any jail, let alone a prison built on the foundations of apartheid – he is structuring a management revolution in a language of redemption. It is surely not accidental that healing discourse

of this kind was also being used, at the same time, by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was in fact sitting in the period that Jansen launched his initiative (1997 going into 1998). The redemptive version of the transition story so key to postapartheid mythography, then, is played out inside Pollsmoor, one of South Africa's biggest prisons. And, given the confined space of goal, its urgent pressures, and the play of freedom and its opposite that is central to its very nature, Pollsmoor witnesses a dramatic, larger-than-life version of the promise, and outcome, of the transition narrative. Is it fiction or reality? Can it be made to work? What is more, Steinberg's interlocutor, Wentzel, comes to internalise this redemptive promise (for reasons that are skillfully narrated in *The Number*), and so his story – and *The Number* – gain an enhanced significance as postapartheid documents, giving witness alongside the TRC to momentous currents of change, and the power of narrative to reconstitute selfhood.

In the course of Jansen's ambitious programme, he recruits the Centre for Conflict Resolution (CCR) to come to Pollsmoor. Jansen wants the CCR to conduct conflict resolution workshops for warders and inmates. "These were heady days at Pollsmoor", Steinberg comments. "Its young coloured managers wanted to reinvent the prison; they were searching hungrily for ideas" (323). The CCR people succeeded in changing the prison "profoundly", Steinberg writes, "at least for a while" (323). During their first 18 months at Pollsmoor, the CCR consultants got a workshop going with warders "in an endeavour to unstitch the coarse and violent practices apartheid had bequeathed to the prison" (323). The 18 inmates in the workshop consisted mostly of Number gang leaders and members of the inmate committee. The workshop was based on psychological research around "human dynamics". The CCR agents set up a second course called "creative and constructive approaches to conflict", and another on trauma debriefing, conducted by clinical psychologist Stephen van Houten (326). "It was the first time ever for some prisoners", Van Houten reported, "that they were able to verbalise their traumatic childhoods and/or their crimes". Steinberg sees in this a transformative moment:

That, indeed, is much of what the workshops were about for Magadien. At the age of 39 he learned a foreign language, a language of self. It opened the door to an entirely new universe. The idea that one can make of one's life a project, an internal and inward-gazing project, that one can retrieve the most intimate of one's memories, work on them, shape them into a single narrative of meaning – this was radically foreign, and a revelation.

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Steinberg's "narrative of meaning" chimes with Ndebele's comments at this time about the profound importance of a "restoration of narrative" (Ndebele 2000: 28) in service of "a new national consciousness" (20). In addition, the correspondences between what Steinberg calls this "foreign" notion of

trauma debriefing and self-shaping in Pollsmoor, on the one hand, and very similar processes going on in the TRC, on the other, cannot go unremarked. It would be no exaggeration to say that during the optimistic, early phase of transition, public discourse about the project of democracy seized the language of healing and reparation, of making good, all of it involving what one might call projects of reoriented selfhood. For Justice Minister Dullah Omar, the commission was “a necessary exercise to enable South Africans to come to terms with their past on a morally accepted basis and to advance the cause of reconciliation” (South African History Online).<sup>3</sup> For Omar, healing the “wounds of the past” (a common phrase in public discourse at the time) and avoiding further conflict meant, as Omar himself put it, building “a human rights culture”, for which “disclosure of the truth and its acknowledgement are essential”. Omar boldly declared that “truth” was the fulcrum of the public healing process: “The fundamental issue for all South Africans is therefore to come to terms with our past on the only moral basis possible, namely that the truth be told, and that the truth be acknowledged”.<sup>4</sup> This publicly enshrined, redemptive understanding of “truth” was no philosophical game, no academic play with words. It struck home forcefully as the TRC hearings and their media reverberations populated the public imaginary. This was the secular redemption of postapartheid at work, and it witnessed the remarkable event of Krog’s boundary-breaking *Country of My Skull* (2009). Krog’s amalgam of reporting and lyrical writing, drawing on testimony and, to a lesser extent, memoir – some of it fabricated for effect – established “creative nonfiction” as an ascendant form of literary intermediation in postapartheid writing. “Truth” – the real thing, wheat that had been sifted and gleaned from the chaff of lies and “fictions” – became a discursive imperative in both the more general public sphere and in the delimited literary realm. It ushered in a widespread public emphasis on embracing a wholly unadulterated brand of scrupulous, ethical communication, at last, after decades of official lying and private withholding. Such invaluable utterance of bare truth, such painful unearthing of repressed psychic material, is clearly of a different category to the notion of the “real” that, when placed in routine opposition to fiction, literary scholars rightly dismiss as simplistic or banal, citing the interpenetration of fictional and real elements in both fiction and nonfiction. Certainly, even TRC testimony is likely to contain storytelling elements that are constructed after the fact, ingredients that might be seen as “fictive”, but the categorical insistence on the primacy of a discourse of truth and truth-telling – in contradistinction to

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3. See South African History Online, “His Role in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission”.

4. Quoted in “Truth in Translation – The ‘Truth’ Behind the Play”, <[http://www.truthintranslation.org/educational\\_materials.pdf](http://www.truthintranslation.org/educational_materials.pdf)> 06/09/2015.

lying and repressing, withholding and twisting – should be seen for what it was in the late 1990s, going into the 2000s, in post-transitional time and space: an urgently revelatory, cleansing process.<sup>5</sup> At least that was the aim, if not always the result. Fiction, until the mid-1990s the pre-eminent form for intermediating higher “truth” in South African culture, now had to take a back seat, finding its place in the internal registers of a discourse of “healing”, a revelatory brand of truth containing the much-needed “real” content of what happened, and what was still going on, out there.<sup>6</sup> This was a discourse that borrowed from the conventions of storytelling, but which saw its main business as excavating repressed registers of selfhood and community.

Postapartheid, then, becomes a voluminous, many-tiered space of stories, a house with many rooms, one might say. At the TRC, the stories came in the form of testimony and witnessing, often in broken registers of language that seemed inadequate to the task of expressing the trauma at hand. In the process, what Krog would later come to call the country’s new common

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5. The TRC’s notion of truth was, of course, never uncomplicated, as Shane Graham points out in *South African Literature After the Truth Commission* (2009), with various understandings of truth being acknowledged in the TRC’s final report: forensic or factual truth; personal and narrative truth; social truth; and healing and restorative truth. There is, as Graham suggests, an inevitable tension between factual truth and psychological or personal truth (29), and competing truth functions created difficult paradoxes and ambiguities, rendering the notion of a “recovery” or “excavation” of truth severely problematic.
  6. Pre-1990s literature in South Africa was also thickly populated with nonfiction, and a similar sense existed about the need to set down the actual, often spectacular, bizarre, or unbelievable facts about what was going on at ground level, so to speak. Ndebele, in “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings from South Africa”, quotes T.T. Moyana as saying that “[a]n additional difficulty for the creative artist in South Africa, especially the black writer, is that life itself is too fantastic to be outstripped by the creative imagination” (42). Many other writers have made similar statements about the “unreality” of the “real” in apartheid South Africa, and the corpus of memoir and autobiography runs deep in the years before the transition was even dreamed about, from Sol T. Plaatjie to Es’kia Mphahlele to Emma Mashinini to Ellen Kuzwayo (see, for example, Judith Lütge Coullie, *The Closest of Strangers*; Laurreta Ngcobo, *Prodigal Daughters*). However, the post-transitional scene sees a new, urgent emphasis on a different kind of detection of the real: no longer what was “wrong” in and with apartheid, but how the postapartheid project itself is working out, and whether it is in fact what it implicitly claims to be. A great deal is at stake in this question, in fact, the success of the entire project of the “quiet revolution”. For a comprehensive survey of autobiographical works in the post-transitional period (that is, from about 2000 to 2010), see Annie Gagiano (2009).

language of “bad English” came into prominence.<sup>7</sup> In the prisons, the “foreign language” that Steinberg talks about, what he calls “a language of self”, opening the door to “an entirely new universe” in which “one can retrieve the most intimate of one’s memories, work on them, shape them into a single narrative of meaning”, coincided also with the adoption of English: “It was foreign”, Steinberg continues, “not only in the sense that the language of self is largely a bourgeois language, a million miles from the way a man of the ghettos thinks about himself. It was quite literally spoken in a different language: the workshops were largely conducted in English.” So, Wentzel, a mother-tongue Afrikaans-speaker, comes to use English as “a significant part of his internal dialogue; many of his most intimate thoughts he could only think in English” (Steinberg 2004: 326).

Exactly the same thing was happening in the public sphere at large, and it is exemplified in the way in which a formerly Afrikaans poet was transformed by public pressure into an English writer of creative nonfiction. Using “field” theory drawn from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Anthea Garman (2009) has written suggestively about how overlapping public fields such as the media field, the literary field, and the political field orchestrated pressure on Krog to produce *Country of My Skull* (1998). First, in her capacity as a radio reporter on the TRC hearings, she was invited to write long pieces for the *Mail & Guardian* by that weekly’s then editor, Anton Harber. These harrowing, incandescent pieces made a strong political impact, and, as a result she was asked by Random House boss Stephen Johnson to supplement them with more such writing for a book. She eventually agreed, and the resultant book, *Country of My Skull*, rivals Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) as a far-reaching event for South African literature in the global imaginary. Just as Paton’s book stood as a masterpiece that captured the pain of racial conflict for all the world to see and feel, so *Country of My Skull* spoke to the world at large of the new drama in postapartheid South Africa – its reckoning with Truth writ large. Like *Cry, the Beloved Country*, *Country of My Skull* got significant international uptake, both of them eventuating in Hollywood movies. Both, in a sense, inaugurated a certain tradition of writing: Paton set the tone for the liberal novel (and realistic fiction in general) as a leading form in which to intermediate apartheid conditions, while Krog’s work stood as a major example of how nonfiction (following in the footsteps of many notable predecessors, including Es’kia Mphahlele, Ellen Kuzwayo, Emma Mashinini, Nelson Mandela, and Rian Malan) might mediate postapartheid conditions via a life-writing blend of the real that is narratively refashioned, cast in lyrical tones and making free use of fictive devices. Such writing (and public discourse more generally) conjoined the perceived need to unearth truth, on the one hand, and to reconstruct a viable language of self

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7. See Leon de Kock, “Ethics Knot Leaves Poetry at Sea” (2013).

for all South Africans who were trying to “get over” apartheid on the other, by no means a simple task.

The ascendant “language of the self” under the spotlight here, conducted mostly in English, amounted to what Steinberg calls the working and shaping of memories into a “narrative of meaning” in the wake of democracy. This is a strikingly similar description to Ndebele’s “restoration of narrative”, which for Ndebele is a re-enactment of stories designed to buttress “a new national consciousness” (Ndebele 2000: 20, 28; see also above). This specifically *narrative* capacity was perceived as a revelatory – and revolutionary – opening, a rupture of great import in the world of postapartheid. Despite the “language of self” being bourgeois, “a million miles from the way a man of the ghettos thinks about himself” (Steinberg 2004: 326), it took hold in public discourse, and it stuck. This was the case not only in Steinberg’s own remarkable series of memory-shaping true stories – books that came to be seen as among those at the cutting edge of postapartheid writing, and winning a slew of prizes – but also in a run of “truth” books in postapartheid literature’s often cited “diversity” of forms.<sup>8</sup>

The “language of self” that Steinberg captured in prison discourse, in addition, was also key to the rise of identity politics in public contestations in postapartheid life, as witnessed in the heated exchanges about Pippa Skotnes’s *Miscast* exhibition, to be followed later by equally bruising arguments over Brett Murray’s painting, “The Spear”.<sup>9</sup> In academic

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8. Such works include memoirs (for example, Breyten Breytenbach’s *Dog Heart*, Mark Gevisser’s *Lost and Found in Johannesburg*, McIntosh Polela’s *My Father, My Monster*, Albie Sachs’s *The Soft Vengeance of the Freedom Fighter*, Gillian Slovo’s *Every Secret Thing*); true crime stories (Antony Albeker’s *Fruit of a Poisoned Tree*, Mandy Wiener’s *Killing Kebble*); fictionalised memoir (Diane Awerbuck’s *Gardening at Night*, Dominique Botha’s *False River*, Nadia Davids’s *An Imperfect Blessing*, Finuala Dowling’s *Homemaking for the Down-at-Heart*); political exposes/thrillers (Andrew Feinstein’s *After the Party*, Peter Harris’s *In a Different Time*); extended political story-essays based on individual experience (Jacob Dlamini’s *Native Nostalgia*, Anton Harber’s *Diepsloot*); biographies (Stephen Clingman’s *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary*, J.C. Kanne-meyer’s *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*, Shaun Viljoen’s *Richard Rive: A Partial Biography*); crime fiction infused with the data of real incidents (Erica Emdon’s *Jelly Dog Days*, Jacques Pauw’s *Little Ice Cream Boy*); historical sagas narrativised for popular reading (the later works of Charles van Onselen and the prolific historical nonfiction of Karel Schoeman, to name only two examples). See also Gagiano (2009).

9. “The Spear” was a painting exhibited at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg in 2012 that depicted the country’s president, Jacob Zuma, in a “heroic, revolutionary pose, with his penis hanging out”, as *Time* magazine put it in a report on 23 May 2012 (see Perry). The painting sparked a major public row,

discourse, too, the politics of identity found strong expression in partisan critical readings of writers like Zoë Wicomb, Gabeba Baderoon, and Yvette Christiansë, among others, whose work has been read as affirming the agency of subject positions marginalised in the past on gender and race grounds. In a broader sense, especially in the wake of the TRC, life-writing as a genre became a means to self-discovery and creative expression, as lecturers who ran creative writing programmes in the post-2000 years will readily affirm. “Everyone has a story to tell” was a common refrain supported by the culture of bearing witness, the opening up of self and past encouraged by TRC discourse. Fiction hardly seemed necessary. In fact, it verged on the meretricious. There were too many stories waiting to be told, already, and a strong conviction that such stories needed to be given truthful utterance, “voiced” in an affirmative wave of speaking out and talking back to decades of power abuse, and of silencing; all this for the sake of healing a traumatic and troubled past, of restoring agency to formerly disadvantaged people, as South Africans are wont to put it. Who would wish to argue with such virtuous uses of culture, such powerful embedding of restitution in the aesthetic protocols of a scarred country? One only had to attend a poetry reading at Wits University, the University of Cape Town, or listen to the InZync poets of the Stellenbosch Literary Project (SLiP) at Kayamandi, Stellenbosch, to hear the voices of self, of affirmative self-making in full flow, talking back sharply, and with verve, against earlier histories of denigration and dehumanisation. The works of leading “spoken word” poets such as Lebo Mashile, Jitsvinger, Koleka Putuma, the Botsotso Jesters, among many, many others, energetically took up the language of self-fashioning and self-celebration, bringing into being a resounding lyricism of personal and cultural assertion. We are here. This is who we are, and this is how we speak. We will not go away. For many people, not forgetting the growing legions of spoken word poets and their fans, this brand of self-assertive speaking out is the core, the real point, of postapartheid life, whether in “bad” English, “Kaaps”, “Boland rap”, or any other “creolization” (see Nuttall & Michael 2000: 6-10). This is what the new culture of letters and performance means. The spoken word performances almost always conjoin individual experience with lyrical, hip-hop and rap avowals of gender politics, and self-discovery amid challenging social conditions. In addition, such performances are central to the making of emergent styles of identity in the unpredictable post-postapartheid urban conurbations of the 21st century. Whether one likes it or not – many don’t, finding the sing-song

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and the filing of court papers for defamation, as well as the vandalization of the painting (see Wikipedia entry on “The Spear”). Artist-curator Pippa Skotnes’s *Miscast* exhibition in the 1990s, in which, as Skotnes described it in a *Poetics Today* article, the process of reclaiming precolonial identities was “further complicated by their depiction in museum exhibits and displays as ‘living fossils’, alienated from history and culture” (Skotnes 2001: 299).



avowals of identity formulaic and repetitive – it is a force to be reckoned with in the actual locales of cultural reception on the postapartheid ground.

For Magadien Wentzel, also known as “JR”, “William Steenkamp”, and “Darryl”, the TRC-style language of self, rooted in reckonings with the real rather than the denials and fabrications of apartheid and its aftermath, gave him something of inestimable value: the ability to consolidate his various, spurious identities. Here was an opportunity to story himself into a new being, for if Mandela’s revolution itself wasn’t able to open the prison gates and deliver a miracle in everyone’s conditions of living, then individual subjects could take hold of their memories and experiences and reshape them into something of worth, a story with dignity and purpose. Wentzel switches from Afrikaans to English for this encounter (“English ... came to constitute a significant part of his internal dialogue; many of his most intimate thoughts he could only think in English” Steinberg 2004: 326), just as Krog does in *Country of My Skull*, and embraces what amounts to the secular redemption narrative of postapartheid: “And so everything about his new experience smacked of revelation, of a radical rupture, just as certain Christians describe the sudden presence of God in one’s life” (Steinberg 2004: 326). In his conversations with Steinberg, the “jargon of psychology” slips into Wentzel’s language, in his use of phrases such as “I need closure” (327). Steinberg realises he is witnessing something remarkable:

Journeying with him back to his past, I felt we were two outsiders looking into the world of a stranger. The tools he used to think about his history were not available to him when he lived it. There is a sense in which he was re-inventing his past when he spoke to me, using his new knowledge to write a history of himself.

(327)

The question, of course, is whether the rewritten history of self can hold in the face of adverse material conditions once Wentzel is released from prison for the last time. In Wentzel’s case, the narrative of mostly secular redemption (he does align himself with religion from time to time) wears thin as actual circumstances make it difficult for him to uphold a good standard of living outside of crime. Wentzel does, however, succeed in resisting the invitations of various former crime partners to take the easy way out. Despite the hard material edge of his new, self-storied identity, he holds onto its narrative power to yield, if not money and means, then at least the riches of what one might call symbolic deliverance. At a Sunday religious service held in Pollsmoor in the early 2000s, Wentzel “got up and denounced the gangs in the name of Jesus”, something “he remembers ... as one of the bravest actions he has ever taken” (327). Johnny Jansen’s prison reforms, even in the skeptical view of Steinberg, prove to be “astoundingly successful” (328), and Wentzel himself becomes, before his release, a “minor celebrity at Pollsmoor”. He would be “wheeled out for all visitors”

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because “Pollsmoor was doing well, beyond the wildest expectations, and the change managers wanted to show off their good work”, inviting all and sundry to the prison to come see for themselves (331). By late 2002, Steinberg writes, Wentzel “was being booked out of Pollsmoor to meet the world” (331). The “relentlessly energetic” Jansen co-founded a modest community-based organisation called Ukukhanya Kwemini Association, or Uka (331). Jansen felt he needed to take the message outside prison, to the communities from which the inmates came. And so, in October 2002, Jansen takes Wentzel with him on a car trip into the Klein Karoo to visit the town of Ladismith. They meet with members of the Uka board of directors, and Magadien addresses a packed Ladismith community hall on the same night. The next day he speaks at the local school’s morning assembly.

The way he tells it, he was the town’s hero for a day. “I spoke straight to their hearts. To the kids I described the horrors of prison. I told them prison does not make you a man, it fucks you up and rapes you and then throws you out. I said that no human being who cares for himself will want to go to prison. To the parents, I said how I had fucked up the task of bringing up my own kids. I said that in some homes, you have three generations sitting around smoking drugs together. I said we had to rebuild some sanity in our communities.”

They all crowded round me after my speech in the town hall. A woman came up to me and hugged me and burst into tears. She explained that her son was in prison.

It was one of the greatest moments of my life. The Uka delegation all had dinner in a restaurant that night. I was served by a waiter for the first time in my life. I ordered chicken livers for starters. It was my first taste of food outside the prison since 1998. I savoured every mouthful. I felt I could learn to eat properly again.

“I looked round the restaurant, and looked at myself eating in the restaurant. I thought to myself: ‘I am somebody now. I am a decent human being, someone a waiter takes an order from.’”

“I laughed at myself. I thought: ‘I have dignity now ....’”

(332)

This is a major moment on several levels. The restitution of dignity via the power of narrative is a high point for Wentzel personally, and it provides an example of postapartheid discourse delivering the tangible, felt benefit of reclamation. This is a yield that might come in various ways: in the form of self-storying (so richly evident in the passage above); in the repossession of dignity via identity solidarity (for example as a woman aligned with other women fighting abuse by men; a Xhosa poet; a Rastafarian; an urban, hip-hop spoken word artist from the townships; or any of a number of other reclaimed identities); or in any of the other speaking positions that were becoming available, both in the public space of liberated political discourse and in the ordinary means to self-expression opening up on the internet and

in the new media. Anyone could set up a website, start blogging, publish their own writing, post it on Facebook and start aggregating an audience. The currents of public expression that now beckoned to formerly oppressed or silenced people echoed the better examples of TRC-style reckonings with self and other, purging and cleansing the body of the country of its psychic horrors of the past, and reconstituting people as full “citizens” rather than mere “subjects” (cf. Mamdani 1996).

Wentzel holds out, against the odds, in the true story of *The Number* – and it remains important that this is indeed a true story, otherwise why would we believe it, accustomed as we are, in and of South Africa, to centuries of misinformation and manipulation? The narrative of self-recovery does in fact wear thin as Wentzel’s “minor celebrity” status slowly evaporates after his release from jail and his work with Uka runs aground, in the way NGO’s tend to run down. Still, Wentzel clings onto his story as he gets poorer and more desperate, taking begrudging charity from his hard-up in-laws, in whose backyard “Wendy house” he lives in Manenberg, estranged from his legal wife, Faranaaz, and increasingly at odds with her family. He holds out, right to the end, when he phones up Steinberg to declare that he has found the love he has spent his life looking for (416). Whether this love will hold or not is less the issue than the fact that the story of it – a redemptive narrative – is once again nourishing Wentzel’s soul.

Wentzel’s story, then, folded into a larger discourse of truth-reclamation, is individually empowering, speaking to the power of narrative as a vessel for pragmatic, meaningful daily truth about oneself, a story that one can live with. It is also socially forceful, especially when such narrative trending gathers mass and communal weight. Jane Taylor writes of a similar spur in the preface to her and William Kentridge’s key postapartheid play, *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, a stage performance in which embodied versions of truth-telling inhabit puppets in a dance of paradoxical revelation:

What has engaged me as I have followed the Commission, is the way in which individual narratives come to stand for the larger national narrative. The stories of personal grief, loss, triumph and violation now stand as an account of South Africa’s recent past. History and autobiography merge. This marks a significant shift, because in the past decades of popular resistance, personal suffering was eclipsed – subordinated to a larger project of mass liberation. Now, however, we hear in individual testimony the very private patterns of language and thought that structure memory and mourning. *Ubu and the Truth Commission* uses these circumstances as a starting point.

(Taylor 1998: ii)

The merging of “history and autobiography” in the making of what Taylor calls “the larger national narrative”, chiming with the emphases of both Ndebele and Steinberg on this point, speaks directly to the valence of a

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discourse of self as a means to achieve a level of truth that, in the postapartheid context, is potentially redemptive, a means of deliverance from the past. At the same time, however, this is a discourse that remains fluid and open to revision, as the many heated debates currently under way in the South African public sphere – not excluding coruscating exchanges on social media – demonstrate.

### 3 Postscript

As this article was being finalised (September 2015), noted Johannesburg scholar Achille Mbembe weighed in with a remarkable public post on Facebook in which he analyzes what he calls the “new cultural temperament” (in my view decidedly post-postapartheid) that he perceives at large in the public body. This new “force of affect” comes in the wake of “the winds blowing from our campuses [and] can be felt afar, in a different language, in those territories of abandonment where the violence of poverty and demoralization hav[e] become the norm”, and where “many have nothing to lose and are more or less ready to risk a fight” (Mbembe 2015: n.p.). This new narrative, for Mbembe, goes by the name of “decolonization”, which he avers is “in truth a psychic state more than a political project in the strict sense of the term”. Whatever the case, Mbembe continues, “everything seems to indicate that ours is a crucial moment in the redefinition of what counts as ‘political’ in this country”. It is here, I would add, that the immense valence of giving alternative accounts, versions, or “stories” of and about oneself – where one “comes from” in more general, political terms – comes powerfully into the picture. In Mbembe’s words:

Psychic bonds, in particular bonds of pain and suffering, more than lived material contradictions, have become the privileged mode of identification. I am my pain - how many times have I heard this statement in the months since RhodesMustFall emerged? I am my suffering and this lived experience of pain and suffering is so incommensurable that unless you have gone through the same trial, you will never understand – the fusion of self and suffering in this astonishing age of condensation, displacement and substitution.

And yet such a “fusion of self and suffering”, forged in the white-hot, post-postapartheid foundry of self-accounting, must be subjected to continuing acts of renegotiation, further relays of version-making, which is precisely what Mbembe appears to be doing in his Facebook post, a medium which is nothing if not furiously self-revising. Revision and contingency, indeed, lie at the heat of Mbembe’s message, urging his compatriot black South Africans to reconsider some of their imperatives. These urgent interdictions appear to be wholly, and toxically, focused on the all-consuming bogey of

whiteness. Mbembe warns that such locutions may eventually have the force of limiting impositions: “The demythologization of whiteness requires that we develop a more complex understanding of South African versions of whiteness here and now”, Mbembe writes, concluding as follows:

What we need to let go off are those libidinal investments and this is the only way in which we will be able to squarely confront what we call white privilege. We have to find out for ourselves what is the cost of our attachment to whiteness, this mirror object of our fear and our envy, our hate and our attraction, our repulsion and our aspirations. Is it that our fear is that the loss of whiteness as an object of accursed investment will defeat our capacity to nurture any hope about anything? Why are we invested in turning pain and suffering into such erotogenic objects? Could it be that our concentration of our libido on whiteness and pain and suffering is after all so typical of the narcissistic investments so characteristic of this neoliberal age?

Whether or not one agrees with Mbembe, the spirit of his intervention – giving account for oneself as a member of a political community – goes to the heart of my argument in this article. It shows how endlessly invigorating, and necessary for self-constitution, the making and giving of accounts are – and must remain. Such is the valence, and the politics, of endlessly revising the meta-texts that threaten to govern post-postapartheid citizens.

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