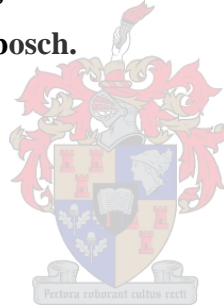


An Examination of Prison, Criminality and Power in Selected Contemporary Kenyan and South African Narratives.

Isaac Ndlovu

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Promotor: Dr Daniel Roux

Co-Promotor: Prof. Meg Samuelson

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any other university for a degree.

Signature.....Date

Abstract

This thesis undertakes a comparative examination of South African and Kenyan auto/biographical narratives of crime and imprisonment. Although some attention is paid to narratives of political imprisonment, the study focuses primarily on autobiographical accounts by criminals, confessional narratives, popular fiction about crime and prison experience, and journalistic accounts of prison life. There is very little critical work at this moment that refers to these forms of prison writing in South Africa and Kenya. Popular prison narratives and to a certain extent the autobiographical in general are characterised by an under-theorised dialecticism. As academic concepts, both the popular and the autobiographical form are characterised by an unstable duality. While the popular has been theorised as being both a field of resistance to power and of consent to its demands, the autobiographical occupies a similar precariously divided position, in this case between fact and fiction, a place where the ‘I’ that narrates is simultaneously the subject and object of the narrative. In examining an eclectic body of texts that share the prison as common denominator, my study problematises the tension between self and world, popular and canonical, political and criminal, factual and fictional. In both settings, South Africa and Kenya, the prison as a material and discursive space does not only mirror society but effects shifts and changes in society, and becomes a space of dynamic adaptation and also a locus that disturbs certain hegemonic relations. The way in which the experience of prison opens up to a fundamentally unsettling ambiguity resonates with the ambivalence that characterises both autobiography as genre and the popular as a theoretical concept. My thesis argues that during the entire historical period covered by the narratives that I examine there is a certain excess that attends on the social production of criminality and the practice of imprisonment, both as material realities and as discursive concepts, which allows them to have a haunting effect both on individuals’ notions of ‘the self’ and the constitution of national identities and nationhoods. I argue that the distinction between the colonial and the postcolonial prison is hazy. Therefore a comparative study of Kenyan and South African prison literature helps us understand how modern prisons and notions of criminality in contemporary Africa are intertwined with the broad European colonial project, reflecting larger issues of state power and control over the populace. In relation to South Africa, my study begins with Ruth First’s *117 Days* (1963), and makes a selection of other prisons narratives throughout the apartheid era up to the post-apartheid period which was ushered in by Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994). Moving beyond Mandela, I examine other forms of South African crime

and prison narratives which have emerged since the publication of Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's *A Human Being Died that Night* (2003) and Jonny Steinberg's *The Number* (2004). In Kenya, I begin with Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Detained* (1981). I then focus on popular narratives of crime and imprisonment which began with the publication of John Kiriamiti's *My Life in Crime* (1984) up to the first decade of the 21st century, marked yet again by the publication of Kiriamiti's *My Life in Prison* (2004). Besides Kiriamiti's two narratives, the other Kenyan texts which I examine are John Kiggia Kimani's *Life and Times of a Bank Robber* (1988) and *Prison is not a Holiday Camp* (1994), Benjamin Garth Bundeh's *Birds of Kamiti* (1991), and Charles Githae's, *Comrade Inmate* (1994).

Opsomming

My proefskrif onderneem 'n vergelykende studie van Suid-Afrikaanse en Keniaanse auto/biografiese narratiewe van misdaad en gevangeneskap. Hoewel aandag tot 'n mate geskenk word aan verhale van politieke gevangeneskap, is die primêre fokus van die studie eerder op autobiografiese narratiewe deur misdadigers, konfessionele narratiewe, populêre fiksie met betrekking tot misdaad en gevangenis-ondervindinge, sowel as joernalistieke verslae oor gevangenes se lewens agter tralies. Min kritiese werk is tot dusver in verband met hierdie vorme van gevangenis-narratiewe in Suid-Afrika en Kenia gedoen. Populêre prisoniers-narratiewe, en tot 'n mate autobiografieë oor die algemeen, word deur 'n ondergeoordeerde dialektisisme gekenmerk. As akademiese konsepte word beide die populêre en die autobiografiese vorme deur 'n onstabiele dualisme gekenmerk. Terwyl die populêre tipe geteoretiseer word as sowel 'n vorm van weerstand teen mag as van toegee daaraan, word aan die autobiografiese tipe 'n soortgelyke onstabiele, verdeelde rol toegeskryf – in hierdie geval, tussen feitlikheid en fiksie, 'n plek waar die “ek” wat vertel terselfdertyd die subjek en objek van die verhaal is. Deur middel van 'n eklektiese versameling van tekste wat die gevangenis as verwysingspunt deel, problematiseer my verhandeling die spanning tussen self en wêreld, die populêre en die gekanoniseerde, die politieke en die kriminele, die feitelike en die fiktiewe. In beide kontekste, Suid-Afrika en Kenia, weerspieël die gevangenis as diskursiewe spasie nie alleenlik die gemeenskapsomgewing nie, maar veroorsaak dit ook veranderings en verskuiwings in die gemeenskap – sodoende word die gevangenis self 'n ruimte van dinamiese verandering en 'n plek wat sekere hegemonesse verhoudings versteur. Die manier waarop die ondervinding van gevangeneskap lei tot 'n fundamentele versteurende dubbelsinningheid resoneer met die dubbelsinnigheid wat beide die autobiografiese as genre en die populêre as teoretiese konsep karakteriseer. My tesis voer aan dat, gedurende die ganse historiese tydperk wat gedek word deur die narratiewe wat ek hier betrag, daar 'n sekere *oormaat* is wat die sosiale produksie van misdaad en die toepassing van gevangeneskap begelei, beide as stoflike werklikhede en as diskursiewe konsepte, wat hulle toelaat om 'n kwellende effek uit te oefen beide of individuele mense se sin van 'self' en die samestelling van nasionale identiteite en nasionaliteite. Ek voer aan dat die onderskeid tussen die koloniale en die postkoloniale gevangenis onduidelik is, en dat 'n vergelykende studie van Keniaanse en Suid-Afrikaanse gevangenes-narratiewe ons dus help om te verstaan hoe moderne tronke en idees oor misdaad in Afrika deureengevleg is met die breë Europese koloniale projek, en groter kwessies van staatsmag en beheer oor die bevolking weerspieël. In Suid Afrika begin my studie met Ruth First se *117 Days* (1963), en maak dan 'n seleksie van ander gevangenes-narratiewe van die apartheid-era tot en met die post-apartheid oomblik wat deur Mandela se *Long Walk to Freedom* ingelui word. Ek vestig dan my aandag op ander vorme van Suid-Afrikaanse misdaad- en gevangenes-narratiewe wat sedert die publikasie van Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela se *A Human Being Died that Night* (2003) en Jonny Steinberg se *The Number* (2004) verskyn het. In Kenia begin ek met Ngugi wa Thiongo se *Detained* (1981), en kyk dan ten slotte na populêre narratiewe van misdaad en gevangeneskap wat hulle aanvang vind met die publikasie van John Kiriamiti se *My Life in Crime* (1984) tot en met die eerste dekade van

die 21ste eeu, nogmaals gemerk deur die publikasie van Kiriamiti se *My Life in Prison* (2004).

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Today the destiny or fate of the prisoner weighs heavily on us. The prisoner’s fate is always bound up with those of us who are not yet captured, regardless of whether this relation is acknowledged” (Avery F. Gordon 2008: 652).

This thesis offers a comparative reading of Kenyan and South African auto/biographical prison narratives. It examines the depiction of the production of colonial and post-colonial/apartheid and post-apartheid senses of citizenship and subjectivity in South African and Kenyan narratives of crime and imprisonment. The rationale for this choice is that the prison structures of both countries developed out of the British colonial model and also a large body of African prison literature has come from the two countries. South Africa and Kenya share a similar colonial history in the sense that both were colonised by Britain at different times. The Cape Colony was occupied by Britain as early as 1795, and officially made a British colony in 1806. The prison system inherited by apartheid was essentially a British one. Kenya, on the other hand, was effectively occupied by Britain in 1895. Among other things, my thesis investigates how this colonial heritage plays out in different social and literary contexts. I examine prison texts from both sites in order to explore the similarities and differences between the ways in which the British colonial prison model has been experienced and recorded in these two postcolonies. In other words, in addition to its interest in popular prison literature, the thesis interrogates how a similar prison structure impacts on the literary form and the representation of self in two different contexts. In this sense, it explores questions around the link between material institutions (such as the prison) and the production and performance of cultural forms (such as autobiography and popular fiction).

The prison was an important tool in colonial governmentality and was driven by the need for new senses of time, space and subjectivity in the service of a broad agenda of domination. In the book *A History of Prison and Confinement in Africa* (2003), Florence Bernault argues for this inextricable link between the development of prison practices and the European colonial project in Africa. She argues that the prison “did not emerge [only] after European conquest had imposed full control over colonies, but served as a crucial tool to carry on colonial wars against Africans” (3). This suggests that colonial wars were not just won and lost on the battlefield but also in the realms of the ideological, the cultural and the spatial. This idea is also suggested by Yvonne Vera (1995), who says that, in colonial Southern Rhodesia, space was actively produced and that the prison, in particular, mastered space in order to articulate a colonial itinerary (35-36). Clearly, then, the prison and its regimes played an important role not just as place of physical confinement, but also in the constitution of the subjectivities of

colonial subjects. The prison was a potently crucial and versatile colonial instrument of subjugation in that it simultaneously served as a place of physical incarceration and also as a space for the production of specific colonial worldviews.

My thesis examines the literary representation, conceptualisation and utilization of colonial power systems, notions of criminality and the prison at different historical moments in South Africa and Kenya. British and European imperialism in general was given impetus by Enlightenment ideas, which tended to crystallize human identity over time and often viewed humanity as progressing relentlessly to some ultimate religious and scientific truth. While these notions do allude to change, change is seen as predestined toward some final and preordained revelation. In the light of the above, I investigate how the prison as a coercive instrument and ideological state apparatus informs the formation of subjectivities not only of the prisoners, but also of the warders, prison officials and even of the larger society beyond the prison walls. To put it differently, although prison reflects certain subjectivities, one of the central focuses of my thesis is the exploration of the role of the prison in the production of subjective experience and the literary form.

In exploring the prison's impact on the literary form, I examine the so-called canonical prison narratives alongside more recent popular narratives with the objective of tracing continuities or discontinuities in the ideological and material penology that has characterized these two former British colonies. For similar reasons, I accord equal literary value to both fictional and non-fictional auto/biographical accounts and narratives. This is inspired by H. Aram Visser's argument that "every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices [and that] literary and non-literary 'texts' circulate inseparably" (1989: xi). Similarly, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said develops this idea by pointing out that all types of narratives have to be interpreted and understood within their historical and cultural milieu (1993). What Quayson (2007: 647) calls "representational regimes" is a major concern of my thesis, since my focus is on the role of the prison in the production of notions of the self and the literary. I discuss material conditions insofar as these intersect with the experience of prison that explores ideas of introspection, contrition, reform and conversion; in other words, my focus is on the way the prison may cause the person to internalise its penal modes of control, which are, in turn, entangled with the broader project of colonialism and its aftermath in the postcolony.

My discussion opens with Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* and Ngugi's *Detained*. I argue that in keeping with Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the "chronotope", these narratives mold

together space and time to produce linear narratives when describing circular and disjunctive time. These two autobiographical texts comprise an established canon of African prison writing, and any analysis of the contemporary role of the prison in African life and letters is in a sense compelled to begin here. In this chapter, I argue that Mandela's and Ngugi's narratives allow us to think about the reciprocal interaction of prison and community. These texts, and others that I examine in the later chapters of my thesis, allow us to examine how the prison as an exceptional technology for forging of subjectivity within its walls always influences and mirrors the larger processes for subject-formation in other social institutions. I approach *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela's celebrated prison narrative, from two perspectives. Firstly, I emphasise the allegoric, the symbolic, and the metaphoric; in other words the literary aspects of this narrative which, in my opinion, have not been afforded adequate critical attention. This allows me to argue that the prison provides Mandela with the impetus for imagining an ideal political community beyond apartheid, and to observe that Mandela symbolically dies in prison, to be born in his new post-prison self. In this chapter, I also point out that it is specifically because Mandela pursues a vision of an all inclusive society to replace apartheid that he fails to pay attention to post-apartheid political uses of the prison.

Secondly, I take advantage of *Long Walk to Freedom's* stature in the prison literary canon as an entry point into the lesser known prison and crime narratives that form the principal part of my study. In my examination of *Long Walk to Freedom*, I apply and extend Frederic Jameson's (1986) notion that all third-world narratives are allegories of the nation, Roger Rosenblatt's (in Stone 1982: 260) reading of autobiography as an extended suicide note and Giorgio Agamben's (1998) idea that the concentration camp, rather than the space of confinement such as prison, is the absolute space of exception. I examine how Mandela's narrative is influenced by and influences the prison space and the larger social space outside the prison. I explore how meaning in this and other prison narratives is connected to and informed by (and at times informs) place, space,¹ time and various cultures; that is, the literary, material and ideological conditions that influenced the writing of these prison narratives. I use the term "ideological" in the Althusserian sense where this term is viewed as a representational structure that allows us to conceive or imagine our lived relationship to transpersonal realities such the social structure or the collective logic of history (Jameson: 30).

¹ I am using the word place to refer to a "neutral" geographical location. By space I am alluding more to the constructed nature of every place and to how it is always experienced in discursive terms.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1981) is an exemplary text of the so-called literature of engagement. While Mandela's project of reconciliation in *Long Walk to Freedom* makes him silent about the antecedents of the state over which he presides, Ngugi's engagement with the prison is informed by his realization that the post-colonial state wants to feign amnesia about the prison's colonial roots. Ngugi claims that the post-colonial Kenyan prison is an unmitigated extension of the colonial prison. He therefore commands African writers to "be with the people in burying the imperialist idol and his band of white and black angels, forever" (Ngugi 1997: 77). Ngugi argues that in post-colonial Kenya, as in colonial times, the prison is not just a repressive state apparatus but also operates at the cultural level as an ideological instrument for inculcating a culture of fear that ensures Western nations continued access to Kenyan resources with the help of corrupt ruling elites. Using Bakhtinian terminology, I argue that among a few other momentous occasions, the year Ngugi spends in a post-colonial Kenyan prison is *the* turning point in his literary career.² Thereafter, he abandons the heteroglossia, dialogism and polyphony of his earlier novels, and adopts the monologism, strident and declamatory tone of his later works exemplified in *Detained*. Admittedly, Ngugi's angry tone enables him to achieve a number of things which Mandela's sanguine and inclusive attitude cannot articulate. Unfortunately, unlike in postcolonial studies where the aim is to dismantle the imperial idea of linear time or the figure of linear development (McClintock 2007: 629), Ngugi fails to use the concept of the prison to transcend the Marxist conceptualisation of history as culminating in the grand victory of the oppressed classes.

In Chapter Three, I extend the theorisation of the prison space to talk specifically about solitary confinement. Engaging with Ruth First's *117 Days*, Emma Mashinini's *Strikes have Followed Me*, and Breyten Breytenbach's *True Confessions*, I contend that solitary confinement allows us to see the conditions and limits of the autobiographical selves presupposed in the act of writing an autobiography. While Breytenbach's immersion in the

² When I use "post-colonial" with a hyphen, I am using this term largely as a neutral time-marker of the period after independence from Western territorial colonialism. But when I use it without a hyphen, as in "postcolonial", I do so with the additional sense of the postcolonial condition theorised in postcolonial studies. However, in both senses, I am employing it advisedly and guardedly since some critics have rightly pointed out to the homogenising way in which this term has often been used. For example, Anne McClintock (2007: 631) says it is "prematurely celebratory". Claiming that the term is unsatisfactory, Gayatri Spivak (1990: 166) writes: "We live in a post-colonial neo-colonial world". Aijaz Ahmad also argues that "in periodising our history in the triadic terms of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial, the conceptual apparatus of 'postcolonial criticism' privileges as primary the role of colonialism as the principle of structuration in that history" (1995: 6). Anthony Appiah thinks that "postcoloniality is the condition of ... a *comprador* intelligentsia: a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of the world capitalism at the periphery" (1991: 348).

intellectual and artistic milieu of existentialism and poststructuralism leads him to a broad rejection of stable identities, for First it is solitary confinement that debunks the notion of a bounded self that can be coherently narrated. Mashinini's narrative lacks the theoretical pretensions of Breytenbach and First. Interestingly, right from the time she is imprisoned and placed in solitary confinement, she views the self as "situated, embodied, gendered, sexualized and racialised" (Colin Davies 2004:169). Although an issue beyond the scope of my current project, Mashinini's narrative suggests that there are other understandings of autobiographical selves that are not necessarily founded on notions of Enlightenment. This leads me to the conclusion that the bounded self that is presupposed in the Enlightenment inspired autobiographical act, although not totally fictitious, is largely a creation of the narratives themselves, and that outside narrative it exists as an entity that recedes further and further away from all that is knowable.

Chapter Four examines Steinberg's *The Number*, and asserts that, in his biographical narrative of Magadien Wentzel, Steinberg, with varying levels of success, attempts to offer an examination of the prison that seeks to break down the compartmentalisation and polarities associated with the study of the African prison. I argue that Steinberg is preoccupied with the "encounter with the singular, the specific, and the individual" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000: 6), as these intersect and are informed by collective, national and global identities that are equally in a state of flux. In his brilliant study of the South African Number prison gangs, Steinberg suggests that these gangs do not just use the legal system to achieve what they term social justice within the prisons, but they possess and constitute the legal apparatuses in a menacingly ambivalent way. This takes us back to Bernault's (2003) observation that, since its inception as a tool to win colonial wars in Africa, the prison has reflected the power-effects of a system of which it is a product but it has also haunted the system, insidiously coming back and permeating it as its repressed. In a way, this chapter is the centre-piece of my thesis, because it is here that I bring together most of my major arguments.

In Chapter Five, I explore Kenyan popular narratives of crime and imprisonment which emerged in the wake of Ngugi's *Detained*.³ An examination of these narratives helps us

³ I am using the term popular narratives/culture guardedly since there are numerous debates about using it either as a descriptive category or just as a theoretical figuration. For example, Juan Flores (2005) points out that there is a generalised scepticism as to the persistence and theoretical utility of popular culture in its traditional sense because of the ideological manipulation of the concept of 'the people' in the hands of populism in its various twentieth-century guises. He writes: "The recurrent appeal to 'the people' in opportunistic political mobilizations of left, right, centre, whether in the name of democracy, national liberation, the free world, or labor, has so perverted that slogan as to empty it of all meaning, contestatory or otherwise" (73). Pierre Bourdieu (1983) notes that the term "popular" is always ambiguous because it comes to us inscribed with the history of political and cultural struggles. Karin Barber claims that the term "popular" is a "site of contested evaluations" (Barber 1997:

appreciate Karin Barber's (1987) perceptive and persuasive argument about how history is made. She writes: "History ... was also made by the collective or aggregate struggles, actions, and reactions of the obscure majority of African people. Their experiences are history in their own right as well as making official history of the leaders intelligible" (8). Despite the proliferation of the popular "my life in crime" stories in Kenya, especially after the publication of Kiriamiti's *My Life in Crime* in 1984, there has been no rigorous scholarly effort that pays specific attention to the prison in order to develop a coherent theory of this historical and cultural phenomenon.⁴ A distinctive aspect of these narratives is not just their focus on crime and prison, but equally the manner in which the writers (re)inscribe the city from which they have been removed onto the minute and dreary spaces of the prison. These narratives exude and celebrate the individualistic ethos of urban society, and their autobiographical nature embraces the controversial confessional mode that characterizes most prison narratives.⁵ In these narratives, the city and prison exist in a symbiotic dialecticism that leads to the production and consumption of these popular narratives. Discussing African popular literature in general, Jane Bryce-Okunlola (1997) writes: "African popular writing provides a space for the rewriting of power relations, for transformation, above all, for *pleasure* in a harsh world where pleasure is not just an escape but a challenge" (187). In these narratives, the prison, just like the city, is depicted as a space of transformation, a harsh and

3). In light of the above, my use of the term popular culture is therefore more in line with the writings of de Certeau (1984), Bourdieu (1983, 1993) and Barber, who have used this term to refer to a complex signifying practice.

⁴ Jacqueline Bardolph's (1984) "The Literature of Kenya" is one of the few pioneering studies that try to understand the growth of Kenyan fiction from 1964 up to 1984. Interestingly, Bardolph says that Kenyan popular literature began in earnest with the publication of *Son of Woman* (1971) by Charles Mangua. In *Urban Legends, Colonial Myths: Popular Culture and Literature in East Africa* (2007), James Ogude and Joyce Nyairo include a number of articles that focus on popular culture and literature in general from East Africa. In this volume, Tom Odhiambo's article examines some of the crime narratives that I discuss here. Odhiambo argues that the popular narratives that he analyses "are both symptoms and consequences of a dysfunctional system of wealth and economic resource distribution" (243). Tom Odhiambo (2004) in his PhD thesis also problematises the concept popular literature in his examination of David Gian Maillu, one of the leading popular writers in Kenya. In an ambitious study which tries to capture all the Kenyan novels since Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964), in *Urban Obsessions Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel*, J. Roger Kurtz has written a useful book for all those interested in the development of the novel genre in post-colonial Kenya. However, Kurtz's study, because of its extensive scope, obscures the subtle genre distinctions in what he calls the "Kenyan novel". For example, the clearly autobiographical crime and prison narratives that I examine in this chapter are also problematically included under the list of novels. On Kenyan prison writing specifically, F. Maina Mutonya (2001) has written a Masters thesis on the works of Kenyan novelist Wahome Mutahi. Mutonya emphasises the satirical and fictionalized nature of Mutahi's representation of the prison in his two novels *Three days on the Cross* (1991) and *The Jail Bugs* (1993).

⁵ Quoting Hubert Damisch (2001), Mbembe and Nuttall argue that the city has historically been one of the most privileged sites of the emergence of the question of the subject and its articulation to reason and sensation. They then go on to point out that "as we now know, the subject itself is always *en fuite* (leaking, fleeing) – a fiction of ourselves and a fabulation of our world. So is the city" (Public Culture 16 (3): 353-354). Among other things, Chapter Five extends the exploration of this matrix of the auto/biographical subject, the city and the prison, which I begin in chapter one with political narratives.

challenging universe where, in a magnified way, power relations are contested and rewritten all the time. These narratives provide pleasure to the reader by depicting a world where lawlessness is both tantalisingly staged and completely contained.

The last chapter examines prison texts that have been emerging since the demise of apartheid in South Africa. Some scholars have observed that the post-apartheid prison is a depoliticised space. In a way, these narratives reflect and participate in this “depoliticisation”. However, David Schalkwyk (2000) suggests that there is a haunting pervasiveness of the prison and its regimes that has spilled over into the post-apartheid era. He writes:

It is one of the sad truths of both the ‘new’ and ‘old’ South Africa that prisons form a major part of what we call the ‘culture’ of the country ... Apart from the empirical issue of continued overcrowding, violence, and deprivation, the theoretical issue of the prison and its relation to the broader concept of culture and community remains as pressing as ever. (279)

In line with this thinking, I point out that although there have been unavoidable discursive shifts in the representation of the prison since 1994, the narratives I examine in this chapter are characterised by the paradox that while the prisoner/criminal is posited as “responsible for all the harm committed by that individual” (Dilts 92), the individual is simultaneously represented as a victim of his or her socio-political environment. To use Foucault’s terminology, in these narratives we witness interdiscursive dependencies or clashes as the nation reels under numerous material and discursive transitional forces. What seems to be emerging in post-apartheid narratives is a prison, to quote Loïc Wacquant, that is increasingly being used as “a device for (re)generating, marking, and enforcing symbolic [and physical] boundaries” (2009: 196) between the majority underclass and the privileged minority.

Chapter 2: “Canonical” Prison Literature: Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* and Ngugi’s *Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary*

Introduction

This chapter examines two auto/biographical prison narratives: Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* and Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary*. Although I classify it as a prison narrative in this thesis, Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* is in fact an autobiography, albeit largely ghost-written, of Mandela’s life from the time of his birth in 1918 up to his inauguration as the first democratically-elected president of South Africa in 1994. The Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o is one of the most celebrated but also most controversial living writers hailing from the African continent. His prison narrative, *Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary* (1981), shows that he belongs to a school of thought that Achille Mbembe (2002) calls “Afro-radicalism”, which “claims to have founded a so-called revolutionary politics, which seeks to break away from imperialism and dependence” (629). *Detained*, a narrative characterised by a pulsating moral urgency, is supposed to be a diary of the year Ngugi spent in Remand Prison at Kamiti, Nairobi, in 1978. However, rather than presenting everyday entries of the time spent in prison as the title of the book suggests, Ngugi explores, among other things, the role of colonial violence and the imposition of colonial culture during the late nineteenth century European invasion and conquest of Africa, and how Kenyans’ resistance reached its zenith in the Mau Mau war that led to independence in 1963. His primary concern is trying to understand why the Kenyan post-colonial regime has failed to transcend and transform colonial culture and how and why it resorted to the use of repressive apparatuses associated with colonialism, such as the prison.

On the one hand, these narratives have found a place in what in Foucauldian terms may be called the “power and knowledge-effects of scientific discourse(s)” (Foucault 2004: 6) because of the way the neat label ‘political prison literature’ implicates them in a particular ‘field of study’. Despite the fact that Ngugi has not attained the deified status of Mandela, he has enjoyed a fair amount of literary acclaim all over the world. On the other hand, because these two particular narratives are about prison, written by former prisoners, they do in fact constitute what Foucault calls “subjugated knowledges”. An attentive re/reading of them shows “blocks of historical knowledges” about how the prison functions both as a material place of incarceration and as an ideological space where human power relations are reconfigured to produce peculiar forms of culture and certain power effects which are masked

in the functional and systematic ensembles of the dominant literary criticism.⁶ These two texts represent an established canon that one needs to examine because they laid the foundation for a certain literary and political disposition towards the prison in African letters. The more “popular” confessional literature of criminal transgression, privation and redemption that surfaced in the last three decades has to be understood as something that emerged alongside, but also in conversation with, these political works.

I also explore these narratives through M. M Bakhtin’s notion of the “chronotope”, which he defines as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (1981: 85). In his “Chronotopes of the Self in the Writing of Women Political Prisoners in South Africa”, Schalkwyk expands on this definition by arguing that chronotopes are “the distinctive molding together of space and time into representational form and substance” and argues that they “are informed by historical and ideological pressures” (2001: 1, 2). My main interest is in the historical and ideological literary-connected temporalities and spatialities of these narratives; thus, I am not necessarily approaching them as archives of gross human rights abuse advocating social and political justice. *Long Walk to Freedom* and *Detained* produce, draw and weave together chronotopes in a way that is particular to their political context and the elevated status of their protagonists as well as the material reality of their various penal regimes. To a certain extent, these narratives are grappling with how to meet the requirements of a linear narrative when describing circular or disjunctive time. Both Mandela and Ngugi make use of chronotopes, but they (re)invent them according to their different circumstances.

Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* can rightly be called an “autobiography of incarceration” (Schalkwyk 1994: 24). In a description which aptly captures what Mandela seems to be doing in his narrative, Schalkwyk writes:

To write from “inside” is not simply to reflect the four walls of universal confinement, nor even to reflect on what is beyond those four walls, but also to refract the complex of social and historical relations that constitute the self both within and outside its conditions of incarceration. (24)

⁶Foucault uses the term subjugated knowledges to refer to at least two things. First, it refers to “historical contents that have been buried or masked in functional coherences of formal systematizations”. In this first sense, it also refers to “blocks of historical knowledges that [are] present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which [are] masked, and the critique [is] able to reveal their existence by using ... the tools of scholarship”. In its second sense he uses it to refer to “a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity” (In *Society Must be Defended* 2003:7).

This complex nature of what can be called prison narratives, a complexity that Schalkwyk highlights in the quotation above, partly accounts for the popularity of Mandela's autobiography. The autobiography has had a tremendous impact on South African social and literary landscapes. The central role that the prison played in shaping Mandela's subjectivity is reflected in the narrative and largely contributes to its appeal across disciplines and to people of different cultural backgrounds. The narrative offers a rare moment that enables the reader to peer into the reciprocal interaction of prison and community, and the ways in which, in South Africa, the prison and its regimes structured and constituted, and in many ways continue to structure and constitute, individual subjectivities and the national narrative itself. Specifically, *Long Walk to Freedom* helps us think through the relationship between prison, the autobiographical and issues of subjectivity.

In *Long Walk to Freedom* the prison plays precisely such a central role, and in fact, becomes an unconscious motif for Mandela, which in turn serves to organise the narrative structure of the text. Its auto/biographical nature, including those sections that do not directly deal with the narrator's prison experiences, is in fact informed by the space of the prison and by different notions of criminality that were espoused by both the colonial and apartheid states. Mandela's autobiography indicates that rather than being just time spent in a space of physical incarceration, his prison years become a literary device which he uses to organise his pre-prison and post-prison experiences. In analysing *Long Walk to Freedom*, I draw attention to contexts and aims of Mandela by constantly emphasising his use of the prison as a central trope of his narrative. The colonial and apartheid notions of crime and criminality, prison and imprisonment are the axes upon which Mandela's autobiography hinges and revolves. To some extent the prison is the place and space that mediates between the Mandela of pre-1962 and the Mandela of post-1990. Hinting at this central role that the prison has played in his construction of the self, Mandela says: "[P]rison gave me the opportunity to think through many issues. I also had time to debate issues with my comrades." (in Schadeberg 1994: 83). Those sections that do not directly deal with the prison and imprisonment are therefore organised through Mandela's prison experience. Although *Long Walk to Freedom* was published in 1994, Mandela himself says: "I began writing it clandestinely in 1974 during my imprisonment on Robben Island" (vii). The original manuscript, in other words, was written and finished in prison. Although successfully smuggled out of prison, it was not published. Upon his release from prison in 1990, Mandela added to and improved on it. However, *Long Walk to Freedom* is not just a prison memoir. The prison is an important trope that Mandela invokes to develop other concerns that relate to reconciliation, nation building, and duties of

national citizens towards the state and towards each other and ideas of universal human rights. Read this way, Mandela's text is less of a historical account than a well-thought blueprint for the post-apartheid state. The narrative celebrates the inauguration of a post-apartheid state and seeks to provide it with a guiding vision.

Detained presents some dilemmas about the uses of prison in post-colonial/post-apartheid settings which are not anticipated in *Long Walk to Freedom*. While Mandela is extending forgiveness and a hand of reconciliation to his former apartheid captors, Ngugi's *Detained* and all his post-1977 books are characterised by a distinctly angry and bitter voice. Ngugi explains the Kenyan prison and African history through the paradigm of Western European capitalism, which, from the late fifteenth century, and with varying intensities, expanded into most parts of the world. After the decolonisation of Africa, Ngugi does not see this global capitalism relenting: rather, it intensifies as capitalist industrialised nations not only search for markets, but also set up factories in the former colonies so as to take advantage of non-unionised cheap sources of labour. In this neo-colonial scenario, the prison, depoliticised or not, continues to play an important role in the perpetuation of economic exploitation and unequal power relations within national and global contexts. Mandela does not meditate on the post-apartheid political uses of the prison and its entanglements with the exploitative capitalism of the neo-colonial environment.

In *Detained*, the reader comes to the disturbing realisation that instead of being a culmination of the Kenyan history of resistance against foreign invasions, "the moment of decolonization both internalized and exemplified the multiple legacies of colonial governance" (Rao and Pierce 2006:18). In this prison narrative, Ngugi can be said to be exploring what Graham Pechey (1994) calls the post-colonial paradox, "that it takes anticolonial struggles to produce neocolonial conditions" (153). However, Ngugi's argument in *Detained* seems to be premised on his optimistic view that the pathological condition of post-colonial Kenya can and will be overcome through a concerted Marxist struggle, which will result in the victory of the peasants and workers and the establishment of a truly socialist government. Interestingly, in *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela's attitude towards communism ranges from ambiguous approval to outright rejection. On the other hand, Ngugi sees his prison narrative as participating in a cultural struggle for the decolonisation of the Kenyan minds, which will lead to the Kenya that the masses had hoped for in 1963 at the attainment of territorial independence from British colonial rule.

A brief examination of Ngugi's writing shows that his militancy, although intensified by his imprisonment, evolved over a period of time. The ending of *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) is a case in point. Mumbi, one of the main characters, closes the narrative with words that exemplify Bakhtin's (1981) notion of 'dialogism' as a potentially liberatory form of speech because of its heteroglossic and polyphonic nature. Mumbi says:

People try to rub things out, but they cannot. Things are not so easy. What has passed between us is too much to be passed over in a sentence. We need to talk, to open our hearts to one another, examine them, and then together plan our future we want. (213)

Ten years later, Ngugi's openness to the fluidity of culture and the indeterminacy of the future, which is expressed through a style that is typically dialogic and polysemic, has been seriously compromised. In *Petals of Blood* (1977), towards the end of the novel, Ngugi's narrator declares:

Tomorrow it would be the workers and the peasants leading the struggle and seizing power to overturn the system and all its prying bloodthirsty gods and gnomonic angels, bringing to an end the reign of the few over the many and the era of blood drinking and feasting on human flesh. (344)

The author's tone has become more strident and declamatory here. Both the angry tone and the problematic syntax of this passage indicate that the dialogism of *A Grain of Wheat* has become a disillusioned monologism masquerading as the inevitable march of history towards a socialist egalitarian society. Things have become too easy and solutions too obvious. The reader is now confronted with what Bakhtin (1981) calls essential monologism, which although not necessarily representing the "limited official discourse", represents a limited form of Marxism discourse because the narrative voice is "talking down to the people or speaking for them – however much it may strive to be 'one' of them" (Crehan 1995: 114). During his imprisonment, Ngugi writes on toilet paper his first Gikuyu novel, *Caitani Mũtharaba-inĩ*, subsequently translated into English as *Devil on the Cross*, as a symbolic rejection of the corrosive neo-colonial cultural forces that he claims are illustrated by his unfair arrest and imprisonment.⁷ Relating a satiric version of Jesus' parable, he writes:

⁷ Ngugi writes on toilet paper for the practical reason that it is the only writing material that is available to him during his imprisonment. However, the metaphoric significance of this act is powerful. In a way, by writing on toilet paper Ngugi is rejecting the Kenyan comprador bourgeoisie and their Western sponsors as only fit for wiping bums and for flushing down the toilet drain.

For the Kingdom of Earthly Wiles can be likened unto a ruler who foresaw that the day would come when he would be thrown out of a certain country by the masses and guerrilla freedom fighters ... And it came to pass that as the ruler was about to return to his home abroad, he again called his servants and gave them keys to the land, telling them: 'The patriotic guerrillas will now be deceived because you are all black, as they are ...'. (*Devil on the Cross* 83)

By the time Ngugi is released from detention, without being charged, he has become openly confrontational and no longer wants any dialogue with the Kenyan comprador bourgeoisie and their Western sponsors. He is on a warpath because he has no uncertainties about the reasons for his incarceration, the task of a post-colonial African writer and the purpose and function of his writing. He writes:

I am where I am (in prison) because I have written about and I have believed in a Kenya for Kenyans, because I have attempted to hold up a mirror through which Kenyans can look at themselves in their past, their present and perhaps their future ... I am where I am because I was involved in the writing of a play in the Gĩkũyũ language, *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, a play that looks at the Kenyan history of struggle against imperialism with pride, delineating the traitorous role of those who sold out; a play which correctly reflects the true social conditions in Kenya today, especially in its comparative depiction of the styles of life of the 'privileged' thieving minority and the labouring majority". (*Detained* 188)

It is this uncompromising attitude in speaking what he considers to be the truth that may have contributed to his arrest in the first place. For Ngugi, the Kenyan post-colonial rulers imprisoned him because they were traitorous thieves, and feared him because he was in the process of exposing them by empowering the people through his Gikuyu play. Ngugi's social realist stance about the role of the writer, his linear perception of history and his diagnostic and prescriptive approach to the problems that plague post-colonial Kenya, summarise not only his views in *Detained* but his entire post-1977 fictional and non-fictional oeuvre.⁸

⁸ Following his release from prison, besides *Detained*, Ngugi also published three non-fictional books. These are: *Writers in Politics: A Re-Engagement with Issues of Literature and Society* (1981), *Moving the Centre The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993) and *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986). As for novels which have been translated into English, there are *Matigari* (1987), and the monumental 2006 satiric novel *Wizard of the Crow*.

While there seem to be unanimity that most post-colonial African states are characterised by a pervasive and apparently intractable crisis, not all writers are as hasty in apportioning blame for this sad condition.⁹ For example, Basil Davidson says that the legacy of colonialism for newly independent African states “was not a prosperous colonial business [as suggested by Ngugi’s parables in *Devil on the Cross*], but in many ways, a profound colonial crisis” (1982: 182). More recently, Makau Mutua (2008) has observed: “At independence, many outgoing colonial powers left the machinery of colonial state intact, even though the new African elite was supposed to rule through the imposed constitution” (46). Discussing the imprisoning and almost inescapable nature of colonial legacies, Fassil Demissie (2007) observes:

Throughout Africa, the physical imprints of colonialism are evident in the form of military garrisons, churches, hospitals, trading centres, prisons, schools, agricultural and mining barracks as well as urban centres. (3)

According to these views, after independence African leaders did not inherit jewels from their erstwhile colonial masters which they then systematically smashed. Rather, they took over the captaincy of doomed ships whose captains had abandoned them because they had hit the proverbial iceberg, and which were quickly filling with water.¹⁰

Bill Ashcroft (1997), a postcolonialist theorist, does not share this pessimistic view of the damage caused by colonial rule upon African societies. Focusing on culture rather than the physical violence on colonial bodies, he argues that during and after colonisation African societies often developed in ways that revealed a remarkable capacity for change and adaptation. He writes:

A common view of colonization, which represents it as unmitigated cultural disaster, disregards the often quite extraordinary ways in which colonized societies engaged and utilized imperial culture for their own purposes. (2)

⁹ For example Comaroff and Comaroff observe: “Lawlessness and criminal violence have become integral to the depictions of postcolonial societies, adding a brutal edge to older stereotypes of underdevelopment, abjection, and sectarian strife” (*Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, 2006:6). See also Bade Onimode’s (1988) *A Political Economy of the African Crisis* for a more nuanced discussion of the causes and possible solutions to the so-called “African crisis”.

¹⁰ In his book *Architects of Poverty*, Moeletsi Mbeki (2009:16) argues that “the states African political elites inherited from colonialists were flawed to start with, imposed as they were by force and by foreigners”. However, by acknowledging the fact that African nationalist governments inherited almost intractable problems imposed by colonial structures, Mbeki does not down-play their contribution to the current state of underdevelopment and other problems in Africa. He goes on to address both the culpability of African “political elites” and a myriad of other historical factors that have had an influence to what he calls African “poverty”.

In *Detained*, Ngugi depicts Africa's encounter with Europe as an unceasing heroic struggle for freedom and self-determination. He argues that "the modern [African] world is a product of both European imperialism and the resistance waged against it by the Africans" (Ngugi 2003: 53). He blames Eurocentric historiography for casting Africa's encounter with Europe as a complete disaster, and claims that African ruling elites, and not colonial rule per se, are largely responsible for the pathological condition of post-colonial African states.

Ngugi sees the prison as participating in both the cultural and physical violence of Europe's encounter with Africa and constantly refers to three defining moments that have a bearing on the state of affairs in Africa today: the trans-Atlantic slave trade; the colonial conquest of the continent by European powers in the last quarter of the nineteenth century; and, the post-colonial take-over of political leadership by corrupt and self-serving African elites. In so doing, Ngugi seems to share Mutua's view that "Africa cannot be understood unless resort is had to its tormented history" (33). Ngugi emphasises that in its origin the prison was an abiding aspect of colonial culture and that the post-colonial prison is a reflection of a colonial mentality and the rapacious nature of the ruling African elites. This is a view shared by Crawford Young (1995), who singles out colonialism as having the most powerful effect on the present condition and future of Africa. He notes that the "colonial legacy cast its shadow over the emergent African state system to a degree unique among the major world regions" (19). However, Peter Childs and Patrick Williams (1997) sound a warning: "The important role of intellectuals as participants in, and theorizers of, anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles risks giving intellectuals in general an unearned, or at least unexamined, heroic status in certain quarters" (14). My examination of Ngugi's *Detained* will explore these diverse views in an attempt to understand Ngugi's account of his imprisonment, together with the way he tries to negotiate the ambiguities of his own position in the power systems of the colonial, post-colonial and Western worlds that he has inhabited.

1. Prison Autobiography as Suicide Note in *Long Walk to Freedom*

Rosenblatt's notion of viewing every autobiography as a suicide note is useful in examining Mandela's autobiography.¹¹ Rosenblatt points out that the life recorded in an autobiography is complete to a specific point, and is therefore as good as dead. According to Rosenblatt, the autobiographer is simultaneously engaged in a three pronged process of shaping, understanding and ending life (178). In order to fully apply Rosenblatt's theorisation, we have

¹¹ I must, however, hasten to mention that Rosenblatt's formulation has the singular weakness of failing to distinguish between various types of suicides and suicide notes. For the purposes of my argument, I use Rosenblatt's formulation as if there is just one kind of suicide and suicide note.

to try and understand what a suicide note is, particularly that of a physically and mentally sound person, and what it hopes to achieve. In my view, a suicide note serves an ambivalent purpose. Among other things, it both announces a cessation of hostilities and serves as a declaration of war. In other words, a suicide note acknowledges defeat on one level, but at the same time transfers the battle to another realm. This is why a suicide note is both a settlement and at the same time an *unsettling* document. In this light, a suicide note simultaneously bares and conceals, solves everything while at the same time solving nothing. It is at once an expression of hope and an expression of futility – *futility* in that it announces the unnecessary and untimely loss of a life; and *hope* in that its executor believes that humanity still has a conscience that can be pricked to some kind of revelatory shock by the needless waste of life. So the suicide victim, in some way, believes in a benign future if not for himself or herself, at least for the survivors. Eagleton (2003) points out that death teaches the living that life is ultimately unmasterable and therefore shows the bogusness of trying to master the lives of others (186). Following Eagleton’s formulation, suicide can therefore be viewed as a benevolent act of self-sacrifice that holds valuable lessons for the living while at the same time remaining an unforgivable self-centred and selfish act. Eagleton further argues: “Tragedy is about wresting victory from failure” (186). In a similar vein, one can say that suicide is about the symbolic wringing of life out of death. One can therefore say that the body of the suicide victim, just like the suicide note, is inscribed with meaning, or at least the desire to mean something.

Mandela’s prison autobiographical account parallels Rosenblatt’s formulation in a number of ways. First, an autobiography gives the impression of being a personal affair as much as a suicide note masquerades as a personal account of the suicide victim. However, upon careful analysis, a suicide note reveals itself to be a deeply communal activity. The suicide note writer’s actions do not only come out of his or her psychology, but also from his or her relationship/s with other people. Additionally, the suicide note writer hopes that there will be an audience or readership for his/her missive. The above observations agree with the sociologists Edwin S. Shneidman’s comments about suicide. He argues: “While the act may be regarded as a purely voluntary one, ... suicide as a whole conforms to certain general laws, and is influenced by conditions other than mere individual circumstances or surroundings” (1976: 1). One of the fathers of sociology, Emile Durkheim, also famously demonstrated in his seminal work, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, that suicide is a social act that requires

explanation from social facts (1965: 309-310).¹² In this way, Mandela's autobiography resembles a suicide note. The very word "autobiography" suggests a deeply personal account of an individual's life. However, upon closer analysis Mandela's autobiography emerges as a communal document in more than one way. Firstly, Mandela obviously writes his 1974 life story in response not only to what he has done with his life, but especially to what others have done with it. By 1974, he had already spent more than ten years in prison. Clearly then, Mandela writes his life story mainly in response to his prolonged imprisonment and the debilitating experience of prison, but additionally also in response to the repressive and oppressive apartheid regime responsible for his incarceration. Secondly, other people are directly involved in the writing or shaping of *Long Walk to Freedom*. The 1974 manuscript that Mandela refines after his release from prison in 1990 was not even Mandela's brainchild. He writes: "One day, Kathy, Walter and I were talking in the courtyard when they suggested that I ought to write my memoirs" (463). While Mandela's autobiography differs from a suicide note in that it is apparently a suggestion from his colleagues that sets him on the path of writing his life story, it is also true that this is a life story directly resulting and responding to the criminalisation of his activities and his subsequent imprisonment by the South African apartheid regime since his first entry into active politics in the early 1950s, as much as the suicide note is an explanatory statement detailing the physical and psychological pressures exacted on the individual that lead him or her to the act of suicide. Both Mandela and his friends view his imprisonment as martyrdom that will spur on, rather than dampen, the struggle against apartheid. A number of writers emphasise Mandela's surfacing out of the long prison years as a new person, and this suggests that the old Mandela symbolically dies in prison.¹³

¹² Durkheim persuasively argued that all the three major types of suicide; *egoistic suicide*, *altruistic suicide* and *anomic suicide*, which he enumerated, were a result of some kind of social disequilibrium (see Anthony Giddens's *Durkheim*, 1978: 42, also Robert Bierstedt's *Emile Durkheim*, 1966: 135-191). Of course Durkheim has been criticized, and rightly so, for excesses in argument in his effort to establish the scientific status of a sociological explanation of suicide. (see Kenneth Thompson's *Emile Durkheim*, 1982: 110-111).

¹³ For example Lodge (2006) argues that Mandela's "moral standing as a leader was enormously enhanced by imprisonment" (ix). Du Preez Bezdrop (2006) on the other hand portrays Mandela as Christ-like figure and the prison years are conceived as a symbolic grave from which Mandela was resurrected having attained enormous real power and some form of iconic immortality. Similarly, using panegyric terms, Brown and Hort (2006) see the long prison years as playing a crucial formative role in Mandela's character. They write: "Nelson Mandela became a great leader because he was in prison for 27 years ... For Nelson Mandela, prison was the forge that strengthened his iron will" (66). Mandela's long prison years parallel the Christian ritual of baptism. The complete immersion in water is thought of as symbolic death. The apostle Paul writes: "Therefore we were buried with him through our baptism into his death, in order that, just as Christ was raised up from the dead through the glory of the Father, we also should likewise walk in a newness of life" (Romans 6 vs 4, *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, 1984).

This reading of both the suicide note and Mandela's narrative closely resembles what Jameson calls the unconscious of narratives, whereby we analyse and explore "the multiple paths that lead to the unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts" (1981: 20). Although Jameson's idea of a 'political unconscious' is a complex and slippery literary paradigm, it is nonetheless very illuminating in my examination of Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*. Interestingly, the prison itself has metaphorically been referred to as a space of death by a number of writers (Gready 2003: 153; Gordon 2006: 655). Therefore, one may argue that by writing his 1974 unpublished prison narrative, Mandela was wresting life out of the symbolic space of death and was calling not only for reconciliation but also for some form of reparation. A suicide note similarly anticipates and escapes death, its existence is testimony of its writer's desire to transcend death; it is evidence of a yearning which was physically unrealisable for its writer; a yearning that the writer hopes his or her death will somehow realise.

Avery Gordon (2008), who views the writings of prisoners as a curse directed at the world outside the prison, writes: "The prisoner's curse ... replies to the social death sentence in multiple voices. It asserts the life world and the life force, the anticipatory afterlife, of the ones whose existence has been denied, abandoned, forgotten" (655). This becomes clear when one considers the reason Walter Sisulu gives to encourage Mandela to write his story of imprisonment. Mandela writes: "Walter said that such a story, if told fairly and truly, would serve to remind people of what we had fought and were still fighting for. He added that it could become a source of inspiration for young freedom fighters" (463).¹⁴ So, as much as the suicide note writer does not hope to benefit directly from the victory that his or her note may wrest out of death, Mandela and his colleagues are by and large thinking about posterity when they embark on the project of writing the story of Mandela's life.

Clearly then, Rosenblatt's formulation that an autobiography is like a suicide note in that it seeks to shape, to understand, to end life and anticipates a new birth has many parallels with Mandela's prison narrative. In a number of ways, Mandela's autobiography seeks not only to give shape to his life and build a new nation; it is also a creative process which results in the solid and complete life portrayed in *Long Walk to Freedom*. In the 1990s upon his release from prison, Mandela is at a vantage point in his life where he starts to see patterns and order replacing his fluid and tumultuous life of the past 70 years. The disjointed aspects of his life

¹⁴ The audience of Mandela's narrative is eclectic and shifting. In the above example it is the freedom fighters, and at other times it is the entire nation, and at other times it is the anticipated new generation of the post-apartheid period.

are brought together into a related whole. This reading is implied by the ending of *Long Walk to Freedom*. Mandela writes:

I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended. (617)

Despite the disclaimer in this quotation which suggests that freedom has not yet been attained, both this quotation and the title of the narrative intimate some kind of arrival at some destination.¹⁵ The title is, after all, *Long Walk to Freedom* and not *Unending Walk to Freedom*. The last sentence of the above quotation also suggests that the destination of freedom has been reached; the narrator says, “for with freedom come responsibilities”, suggesting that whatever walking will be done henceforth will be a different kind of walking that largely involves the safeguarding of the already-attained freedom. The above quotation, and to a certain extent the title of Mandela’s narrative, are of course deeply Marxist sentiments which foretell ultimate victory, despite also implying a never-ending struggle. The sentiments come very close to what I said Mbembe calls Afro-radicalism above. Mandela’s above words unequivocally resemble Marx’s famous words in “The Communist Manifesto”:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles ... oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, *carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes.* (Marx and Engels 1961: 52-53; italics mine)

To its credit, as much as the conclusion of *Long Walk to Freedom* registers a measure of triumph over tyranny and oppression, it also implicitly indicates that new tyrannies are already festering under the songs of victory, and therefore calls for a life long struggle and alertness. From its time of publication *Long Walk to Freedom* attained an independent

¹⁵ One of these destinations seems to be the house that Mandela builds in Qunu his home village in the Eastern Cape. This house is based on the floor plan of his house in the Victor Verster prison. This seems to bear out the point that I made earlier on that Mandela’s autobiography remains contained by the logic of the prison; that life after prison keeps reproducing its logic, even its architecture.

existence of its own, but also marks an end or death of one Mandela and the resurrection of another.

2. Narratives and Subjectivity in *Long Walk to Freedom*

The study of Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* can be further enhanced by a detailed application of Jameson's (1986) assertion that all third-world texts should be read as national allegories. Despite the embedded essentialism and totalizing scope of Jameson's assertions, his approach to literary analysis is very helpful.¹⁶ Approaching *Long Walk to Freedom* at an allegorical level, for example, allows not only for a rereading of this narrative, but also its symbolic rewriting. Reading this narrative as an allegory opens it up to "multiple meanings, to successive rewritings and overwritings which are generated at so many levels and so many supplementary interpretations" (Jameson: 29). Referring to personal and often intimate writing such as auto/biographies, Jameson argues: "[T]he story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" (69). In the following paragraphs I would like to explore *Long Walk to Freedom* using the Jamesonian formulation by first quoting Mandela's words that appear right at the beginning of this narrative. Mandela says:

I was born in 1918 at Mvezo, a tiny village on the banks of the Mbashe River in the district of Umtata, the capital of Transkei. The year of my birth marked the end of a great war; the outbreak of influenza epidemic that killed millions throughout the world; and the visit of a delegation of the African National Congress to the Versailles peace conference to voice the grievances of the African people of South Africa. Mvezo, however, was a place apart, a tiny precinct removed from the world of great events, where life was lived much as it had been for hundreds of years. (Mandela 1994: 2)

It is interesting to note that Mvezo is described in island-and prison-like terms. The narrator says it was "a place apart" and twice uses the adjective "tiny" to describe the village of his

¹⁶ Jameson is not unaware of the pitfalls of his project. In *The Political Unconscious Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981: 31-32) he argues: "As a matter of practical criticism, it must be clear to anyone who has experimented with various approaches to a given text that the mind is not content until it puts some order in these findings and invents a hierarchical relationship among its various interpretations. I suspect, indeed, that there are only a finite number of interpretive possibilities in any given textual situation, and that the program to which the various contemporary ideologies of pluralism are most passionately attached is a largely negative one: namely to forestall that systematic articulation and totalisation of interpretive results which can only lead to embarrassing questions about the relationship between them and in particular the place of history and the ultimate ground of narrative and textual production."

birth.¹⁷ First, it is referred to as “a tiny village on the banks of the Mbashe River”, and then second, as “a tiny precinct removed from the world of great events”. According to the narrator, due to their geographical location which mimicked confinement and the resultant lack of access to world news, the people of Mvezo lived in apartheid-like intellectual and mental darkness.¹⁸ Due to their literal and metaphoric confinement, not only were they unaffected and unaware of the first world war, the Spanish influenza and the colonial oppression that led to the formation of the ANC, and the dispatch of a delegation to Versailles in 1918, but they were also blissfully ignorant that a ‘messiah’, in the form of Mandela, was being born right in their midst. The birth of Mandela in the tiny village of Mvezo was forever going to remove it from the invisible ignominy and place it alongside Versailles and Bethlehem; places where world’s great events have taken place. There is an implied superiority that the narrator attaches to the knowledge of Europe and its disastrous and inhuman history of wars, epidemics and colonial oppression.¹⁹ The narrator is ambivalent about his Mvezo heritage. While putting it on the world map through his narrative, he implicitly despises it for its failure to make him part of the world of great events, and the world’s great events are always and inevitably connected with Europe, and most often with Europe’s unequal relationship with Africa. The narrator sees no contradictions in the ANC delegation’s going to the oppressors of black people at Versailles to seek salvation from them when the Europeans had plunged themselves into one of the bloodiest war ever recorded in human history.

Throughout his narrative Mandela shows this unquestioning trust in the goodness of the oppressor and the oppressor’s capacity to transcend his or her wickedness and coming to a realisation of the humanity of his or her oppressed victim. For example, Mandela is deeply touched by the farewell words of Badenhorst, “one of the most callous and barbaric commanding officer [they] had had on Robben Island” (448). On the eve of his departure,

¹⁷ Later on, Mandela characterises the prison as a microcosm of society as a whole; and in this respect Mvezo will seem the exact opposite. However, it must be noted that when Mandela refers to the entire South African society as a prison he is thinking about the restrictions of colonial and apartheid regimes placed against Africans. In comparing the village of Mvezo to a prison I am largely referring to its isolation and separation from the day today social activities that make it exist as a geographical island in the minds of many citizens.

¹⁸ One of the objectives of both colonialism and apartheid was to encourage the so-called separate existence and development of different cultures. But by distributing resources in a skewed manner in favour of the minority white groups, the actual aim of apartheid was to keep people of other races unaware of the world developments which would create a desire in them to fight for freedom.

¹⁹ Mandela himself is aware of his Anglophilia. He writes: “I confess to being something of an Anglophile. When I thought of Western democracy and freedom, I thought of the British parliamentary system. In so many ways, the very model of the gentleman for me was an Englishman ... While I abhorred British imperialism, I never rejected the trappings of British style and manners” (*Long Walk to Freedom*: 291).

Badenhorst simply says to Mandela, “I just wish you people good luck” (448). These sentimental words of a departing man whose conscience is guilt-ridden as a result of all the abuses he has inflicted on his black prisoners, set Mandela along the path of one of his most sanguine contemplative homilies about humanity’s capacity for goodness. Mandela writes:

It was a useful reminder that all men, even the most seemingly cold-blooded, have a core of decency, and that if their hearts are touched, they are capable of changing. Ultimately, Badenhorst was not evil; his humanity had been foisted upon him by an inhuman system. He behaved like a brute because he was rewarded for brutish behaviour. (448)

Roux (2007: 129) attributes Mandela’s penchant to idealise human relations to at least two factors. For most of his imprisonment Mandela was relatively insulated from the often vicious politics of the general section of the prison. Secondly, Mandela finishes his prison autobiographical account as a president-elect of a democratic South Africa. As a result of this, argues Roux, “both the narrator and the addressee become *universalized*; the voice that addresses the reader arises for no particular reason from some indefinable, interior space, and it addresses a vague, inclusive readership” (107). The above quotation, where the narrator deliberately places his time of birth alongside world-changing events, may hint at this attempt at universalising his experiences, and also at the optimistic post-1990 years during which Mandela’s prison narrative was completed, and it may be evidence of Mandela’s awareness of his political power and mythical status as a symbol of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Mandela writes his narrative with an ambivalent stance to his deification. Referring to the ‘Free Mandela Campaign’ of the 1980s Johannesburg and London, Mandela recounts:

The ANC had decided to personalize the quest for our release by centring the campaign on a single figure. There is no doubt that the millions of people who subsequently became supporters of this campaign had no idea of precisely who Nelson Mandela was. (493)

Among other things, this quotation reveals Mandela as being very conscious of the power of myth and suggests that he is in fact engaged in mythmaking through his own prison narrative. This posits his narrative as a site of both power and a centre of resistance, a way of carrying forward the struggle against oppression through other means. In writing his autobiography, Mandela and his friends who encourage him to write it are not unaware of the power that the Mandela image already possesses at this point in time. We have seen that one of the reasons

why the 1974 unpublished manuscript was written was in order to inspire young freedom fighters with courage and enthusiasm. Mandela and his friends are aware that his narrative has the potential to serve as a blueprint for the next generation of freedom fighters.

Due to the power of the mythical halo that Mandela already possesses at this time, partly as a result of a number of historical coincidences, it may be argued that through writing his autobiography he is already engaged in lawmaking. Walter Benjamin's observation that there is an intimate and often reciprocal relationship between law, power and mythmaking makes sense when one considers the above. He argues: "Lawmaking is power making, and, to that extent, an immediate manifestation of violence [and] power [is also] the principle of all mythical lawmaking" (1978: 295). Mandela's autobiography can be read as a means through which he exposes how a racist state, once having acquired some measure of power, goes on to consolidate that power through numerous laws which are meant to further entrench the privileges of the white minority. Mandela's narrative also aptly shows that the laws and the legalities of apartheid South Africa were embedded in violence since they aimed at dispossessing black people and other non-white races of their freedoms and means of livelihood. His autobiography also becomes "law" in that it animates the entire logic of the post-apartheid state.

The irony of course is that by attaining a certain measure of power, as a result of his ability to wrest power from the oppressor through writing his life story, Mandela is not only lawmaking, but he is also on the verge of manifesting violence. The fact that Mandela and the ANC are walking on the precipice of violence is evident in a number of ways. Firstly, Mandela and his colleagues are serving prison life sentences mainly for forming Umkhonto we Sizwe, a machine of terror and violence. Secondly, when in prison Mandela's narrative shows the difficulties that the ANC encounters when it has to deal with dissenting voices even before it ascends to state authority. This is not only seen in the ANC's bitter rivalry with other anti-apartheid organisations, especially the PAC at Robben Island, but it is also dramatised by the numerous clashes between political prisoners and common law prisoners. For example, on one occasion when common law criminals started to taunt and mock political prisoners through songs, purportedly at the instigation of white warders, Mandela tells us how they responded: "Although the more hotheaded among us wanted to confront them, we decided to fight fire with fire" (393). So from then on they spent days on end fighting their battle through songs²⁰. Mandela later plays down the obvious potential for violence against

²⁰ In *My Fight Against Apartheid* (1987) Michael Dingake actually talks about the way prisoners at the Fort in Johannesburg used to sing loudly to drown out the screams of cellmates who were being abused. This is an

those who do not subscribe to the ANC when he writes: “I saw the gang members not as rivals but as raw material to be converted” (394). Mandela’s use of imagery is curious. His tone is disparagingly condescending and there is an implicit dehumanisation of those who do not see the goodness of the ANC way. They are not humans who can, in their difference from and disagreement with the ANC, contribute positively to the fight against the racist apartheid state until they are converted to ANC. Despite Mandela’s post-1990 enthusiasm about converting his rivals, his narrative fails to provide a solution regarding those who obstinately refuse conversion. Later, after his release from prison, this was to become a serious problem which almost derailed all plans for black majority rule. Mandela himself reports that the period between 1990 and 1994 became one of the most violent episodes in the South African history as rival black political organisations jostled for sovereign authority.

It is interesting to note that by a curious coincidence, while people outside prison were busy creating a demi-god of Mandela by their personalised campaign to free political prisoners, in prison a similar process was also taking place. Probably this is one of the instances where we witness the prison possessing and constituting the state and vice versa (Rodríguez, 2006: 43).²¹ Mandela himself tells us of how the prison authorities had been increasingly making him the unelected representative of the Robben Island prisoners. For example, when General Steyn visited the island in the 1970s, it was Mandela who was called to the office as a representative of all prisoners. Apparently, his friends also acknowledged his uniqueness and leadership qualities, for as we have seen Mandela began to write his autobiographical account in 1974 after being encouraged by his colleagues, who believed that his life story would serve the interest of the struggle. Earlier, I referred to Lodge who points out that Mandela’s iconic and celebrity status is not solely attributable to his long imprisonment. Lodge argues: “In the South Africa of the early apartheid era, Mandela was one of the first media politicians, ‘showboy’ as one of his contemporaries nicknamed him, embodying glamour and a style that projected *visually* a brave new Africa world of modernity and freedom” (ix).²² This shows

interesting counterpoint to Mandela’s benign notion of the harmony of song displacing the disharmony and chaos of a physical argument.

²¹ Mandela explicitly shows the intimate relation of the prison and the state, and of state and prison when he paraphrases Dostoevsky: “No one truly knows the nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones” (1994: 187). Hugh Lewin, another political prisoner who spent seven years in apartheid prisons argues that Pretoria Central Prison was “a mirror of the outside South African society: a rotten regime, devoid of moral justification, maintaining control through deceit and double-dealing, and, in the process, befouling everyone” (*Bandiet* 1974: 176-7).

²² Mandela himself enables us to trace his rise to fame. As early as 1962 it appears as if Mandela had attained an iconic figure that angered his political competitors. For example, Stephen Tefu, a prominent communist trade unionist and PAC member who was imprisoned together with Mandela in 1962, was so annoyed by the attention

that Mandela's ascendancy to fame cannot be fully understood without considering a complex interplay of forces such as Mandela's own personality and personal heritage, the political and social environment of Johannesburg in the 1950s and the overall world situation, the general prison system and conditions in apartheid South Africa, and the specific and peculiar conditions of Robben Island in the 1960s and 1970s, and along with other factors.

Mandela's first encounter with Robben Island also reveals this crucial importance of myth or storytelling in the construction of meaning, which is inextricably entangled with space in power contestations. He writes:

The island. There was only one. Robben Island ... It was still light when we were led on deck and saw the island for the first time. Green and beautiful, it looked at first more like a resort than a prison. *'Esiquithini.'* 'At the island' ... Robben Island was well known among the Xhosa after Makanna ... the six-foot-six-inch commander of the Xhosa army in the Fourth Xhosa War, was banished by the British after leading ten thousand warriors against Grahamstown in 1819". (327)

We can detect at least four narratives that are woven together in the above words. First we have the experiencing voice of the novice Mandela telling us about his initial reaction when he first saw Robben Island from the shores of Cape Town. Then this voice is overlaid by the numerous voices of the Xhosa people expressing their mythical perceptions and sentiments about the Island. We have Mandela's narrating voice, which has gone through the harsh realities of the Island after spending eighteen years incarcerated there. Lastly, we have Mandela's narrative voice which is attempting to merge its story with those of the legendary anti-colonial fighters such as Makanna and Autshumao.

The description of Robben Island reminds the reader of Mandela's depiction of Mvezo in the opening pages of his narrative. It is therefore very tempting to consider parallels and points of divergence in the portrayal of these two places. It is ironic that although being inland, Mvezo, even after being popularised by Mandela's narrative, is still less known than Robben Island. With regards to Robben Island, the narrator says that if you say "the Island", everyone knows which island you are referring to. He tells us that he himself had heard of Robben Island as a

that Mandela was getting from the warders and declared in disgust: "Mandela is a little boy who is afraid of the white man. I don't know who he is. One morning, I woke up and found every newspaper saying, "Mandela, Mandela, Mandela"" and I said to myself, "Who is this Mandela?" I will tell you who he is. He is a chap built up by you people for some reason that I don't understand. That is who Mandela is!" When one remembers that Mandela unilaterally entered into negotiations with the apartheid leaders in the 1980s, Tefu's sentiments start to take a new meaning which Mandela may not have intended when he wrote the above words.

child. So then, among the Xhosa people at least, the mythical stature of Robben Island preceded but was also surely enhanced by Mandela's incarceration there. Before Mandela's incarceration, Robben Island attained its legendary status from two related incidents having to do with two heroes of anti-colonial struggle. The first was Nxele or Makanna who led a ten thousand men strong Xhosa army against the British imperialists in Grahamstown in 1819 (as Mandela points out in the above passage). He was captured and incarcerated at Robben Island and drowned while trying to escape by boat. The other story is older than that of Nxele. It concerns the heroic exploits of Autshumao, the Khoi Khoi warrior who was banished to Robben Island in 1658 by Jan van Riebeeck and became the only known person to have successfully escaped from the island by rowing to the mainland in a small boat. Interestingly, though, Robben Island attains its mythical status as a result of a relationship, albeit a confrontational one, between Africans and European imperialists.²³ Nxele, Autshumoa and Mandela partly derive their legendary status as a result of stories which largely and without their active participation in the process are circulated by the imperialists themselves. Of course the imperialists circulate these stories for their own purposes, but once in circulation, stories are appropriated by the colonised and used ambivalently both as reminders of the oppressor's power and ruthlessness but also as propaganda for fostering a desire to break free from the oppressor's chains. Mandela's prison narrative, which as we have seen has been appropriated and re-appropriated by different interest groups, also serves a similarly ambivalent purpose. However, this appropriation of stories is never a once-off event; it is a contested and contestable process usually without a definite victor.

A further juxtaposition of Mandela's memories and description of Robben Island when he saw it for the first time, with those of his birth place of Mvezo which opens his autobiography is very revealing. It is significant that like Mvezo, Robben Island is spatially and geographically a land apart and is depicted as an inconsequential piece of land where the world's great events cannot take place. The narrator refers to it as a "narrow, windswept outcrop of rock". Interestingly, some writers have noted the ambiguity with which islands are often viewed in the West. For example, Elizabeth McMahon (2005) says that within the Western colonialist tropism island territories are ambiguously seen as condensed sites of

²³ From 1652 onwards, Robben Island attained a mythical status due to the number of African leaders who were banished there for resisting colonial invasion. Starting from 1855 with the imprisonment of the Xhosa Chief Siyolo, by 1874 more than six prominent Xhosa chiefs had been incarcerated in the Island for resisting British colonial rule. (See Jürgen Schadeberg's *Voices from Robben Island*, 1994: 8; see also Smith Charlene in *Robben Island* 1997: 15). Smith further catalogues other instances of human rights abuse that were connected to the Island way before 1855. As a result of this she concludes: "The Island thus became entrenched as a symbol of the denial of human and political rights" (11-12).

acquisition, containment and control²⁴. She further argues that the island is a paradoxical and contested space, one that represents a condensation of the tension between land and water, centre and margin, and, relative to a national perspective, between reflective insularity and an externalising globalisation (20). In Mandela's above words all these contradictory perceptions and meanings of Robben Island can be discerned. For example, when in 1982 Mandela suddenly found himself in Pollsmoor, he was not pleased by his new surroundings and found himself nostalgic about the island. He writes: "We were now in a world of concrete. I missed the natural splendour of Robben Island" (502). Mandela's words remind the reader of Colonel Aucamp's curious announcement on the midnight of 12 June 1964 after Mandela had been sentenced to life imprisonment by Judge De Wet. Aucamp told Mandela that he was being transferred from Pretoria Local Prison to Robben Island. Without any trace of sarcasm in his voice he approached Mandela's cell and inquired: "Mandela, are you awake? You are lucky man. We are taking you to a place where you will have your freedom. You will be able to move around; you'll see the ocean and the sky, not just grey walls" (367). Similarly, one writer talks of the biblical beauty of Mvezo, which, however, is just skin deep (Mandela Foundation 2005: 38). To both Colonel Aucamp and Mandela, Robben Island, and by extension Mvezo, are incongruous and contested spaces where the individual is simultaneously insulated and exposed, not only to the brutal forces of nature but also to the oppressive political system that is responsible for his castaway condition in the first place. That the mythical status of Robben Island as a site of political struggle is not merely a post-apartheid construction is evident from Walter Sisulu's words: "[W]e were very conscious of the legacy of Robben Island and the political leaders who had been imprisoned there ... Makana, Maqoma, Harry the Strandloper. We were inspired by these great leaders" (in Schadeberg 1994: 27). Although the idealisation of Robben Island as a kind of struggle paradise is obviously a post-apartheid trope, it is clear that the tenaciously ambivalent signification of this island goes all the way back to a past that probably lies beyond a full scholarly archival retrieval.

When the depiction of Mvezo and that of Robben Island are put side by side, as I have tried to do above, the reader is struck by the centrality and importance of these two "insignificant" places in Mandela's most critical and formative years. From 1918, the year of his birth to the beginning of 1937, Mandela was in and about the vicinity of Mvezo, a place where life was

²⁴ The complete containment and isolation suffered by the unwilling inhabitants of Robben Island is captured in the words of Ethelreda Lewis in her book *The Harp*: "For there is no prison safer than the island. And all, all are caged that live there. All see the broad heavens striped with bars. All are held in unseen chains to the body, the mind, the soul" (in Schadeberg 1994: 12).

lived much as it had for hundreds of years. From 1964 to about 1982, again a total of 18 years, Mandela was at the “the island”, a place where “watches and timepieces of any kind were barred [and where] each week resemble[ed] the one before” (375). Mandela’s free years before going to prison were spent either in traditional and conservative places, such as at the palace at Mqhekezweni, where “the two principles that governed [Mandela’s life] were chieftaincy and the Church” (18), or in highly hierarchical and militarized institutions of learning, such as in Clarkebury Institute, Heldtown or the University College of Fort Hare, or training as a lawyer in a frigid and rigid British colonial-style environment. Interestingly, during most of his early years in Johannesburg, he was taught contemplative thoughtfulness by poverty and hunger and was also training for the formal and highly conservative court career as a law advocate. The above observations suggest that critics such as Boehmer (2008), Brown and Hort (2006), and a number of others, while correct in seeing the prison years as being decisive in the transformation of Mandela from an impulsive politician and militant activist into a calculative and meditative statesman, fail to recognise the resemblance of apartheid prison environment to most of the places where Mandela spent his formative years.

Tom Lodge (2006) offers a much more attentive reading of Mandela’s life story. He argues: “Generally in Mandela’s career there are no sudden turning points; rather key decisions develop out of lengthy incremental processes of thought, and are often influenced by Mandela’s recollection of precedent” (viii). Reflecting on his political career, Mandela himself writes:

I cannot pinpoint a moment I became politicized, when I knew that I would spend my life in the liberation struggle ... I had no epiphany, no singular revelation, no moment of truth, but a steady accumulation of a thousand slights, a thousand indignities and a thousand unremembered moments produced in me anger, a rebelliousness, a desire to fight the system that imprisoned my people. (89)

The above words depict a Mandela with an evolutionist rather than revolutionary political approach. However, Lodge’s argument about the continuities in Mandela’s political career becomes even much more telling when we recognise the correspondence of pre-colonial and colonial mythical modes of appropriating power through the spatial act of reclusion or of isolating certain individuals for a certain period of time. One of the aims of the prison is to remove individuals with socially undesirable behavioural traits from mainstream society and to place them in a place of isolation. In apartheid prisons, however, prisoners often found

themselves suffering from double isolation. On a number of occasions Mandela found himself in solitary confinement for transgressing certain prison regulations. Mandela and many other prisoners found this to be the most formidable of all prison punishments. However, in a later chapter, I examine how the 27s and the 28s, some of the so-called ‘Number Gangs’ in South African prisons, often sought the isolation cell by stabbing a warder because it served as a place of initiation where the ‘manhood’ of a potential gang member could be severely tested. So a place that symbolises pain and degradation in the eyes of prison authorities and many other prisoners is transformed into a ritualised space that one ought to pass through if one is to enjoy certain privileges in prison as a ‘man’. The circumcision initiation ritual that Mandela describes in detail also helps us to understand some of the ambivalent mythical conceptions of the prison and the isolation cell that were held by both the oppressed Africans and by their white oppressors in colonial and apartheid South Africa. In *Long Walk to Freedom*, places of reclusion, in this case the circumcision site and the prison, are simultaneously viewed as places of punishment and penitence and as factories for the manufacture of ‘real men’ and heroes.

The isolated location of the circumcision site that Mandela describes in relation to the inhabited villages is instructive in this regard. He writes:

Early in the new year, we journeyed to two grass huts in a secluded valley on the banks of Mbashe River, known as Tyhalarha, the traditional place of circumcision for Thembu kings. The huts were seclusion lodges, where we were to live isolated from society. It was sacred time; I felt happy and fulfilled taking part in my people’s customs and ready to make the transition from boyhood to manhood (24).

The secluded circumcision site is a place full of figurative significance, not only for the young initiates but for Xhosa people as a nation. As a result of the myth that surrounds this site and the circumcision ritual itself, the place is transformed from one where intense pain is inflicted on the young initiates’ penises to one that fills them with happiness since the occasion marks conversion into manhood. Mandela’s narrative shows that manhood is such a desirable thing among his people because it symbolically constitutes the individual as a subject. This is seen from Mandela’s comment below: “The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and were equal in their value as citizens. (Women, I am afraid, were deemed second-class citizens)” (20). I discuss this point in more detail in my later chapter when I examine Steinberg’s explanation of the ways in which humanity is equated to

manhood within the prison gang community. Mandela consistently shows that place and space are always tied to a certain kind of emblematic transition and transformation, such as moving from boyhood to manhood. For example, we see this when he gets his own house with Evelyn, his first wife: “Early in 1946, Evelyn and I moved to a ... house of our own in Orlando West ... I was mightily proud ... A man is not a man until he has a house of his own” (98). Mandela’s narrative suggests that place and space are not just neutral geographical locations, but they are narrations which always come laden with multiple connotations which have real consequences on how the individual or a group of people live their lives and how they experience their reality.

We observe a similar pattern of ritualised behaviour when, in 1956, despite the encroaching darkness and his pessimism about apartheid government’s policies, Mandela returns to Transkei to purchase a plot of land in Umtata near his rural home. Defending his incomprehensible decision Mandela writes: “I have always thought a man should own a house near a place he was born, where he might find restfulness that eludes him elsewhere” (178)²⁵. What Mandela does reminds us of the deeply symbolic act that was performed by the prophet Jeremiah when Jerusalem was under Babylonian siege and was on the verge of destruction. Jeremiah bought a field from Hanamel his paternal uncle. Explaining his actions, which apparently went against common sense, the prophet says: “[T]he God of Israel, has said, ‘Houses and fields and vineyards will yet be bought in this land [after the exilic period]’” (Jeremiah 32 vs 8–15). So whether Mandela realised it or not, his buying land in Umtata when the thick clouds of apartheid were gathering on the horizon was a figurative affirmation of the certainty of the demise of the apartheid state. Although it was to be two long months after his release from prison before Mandela would have the opportunity to travel to Qunu, it is interesting that his strongest desire had been to go there straight away after stepping out of prison. His wish to build a house in his rural home territory was eventually fulfilled in 1993. The irony of course is that the house he built resembled the one he had occupied at Victor Verster Prison from 9 December 1988 up to the time of his release on the 11th of February 1990. This dramatises the power of place and space over the individual’s consciousness. Clearly, the self, is among other things, constituted by the organisation and arrangement of the individual’s locale.

²⁵ This seems to be a very pastoral ideal rooted in a long tradition of Xhosa pastoralism. Ironically, this pastoralism would be intelligible to the colonial pastoralist imagination as well, making this one of those rare moments of agreement between traditions – an agreement that resulted in constant warfare for land.

So far it must be clear that I am arguing for a collapsing of the roughly three life phases of Mandela that are related in *Long Walk to Freedom*, such that, instead of there being sharp divisions, we have a life that is seamlessly interwoven. The matrix and point of interface for Mandela's narrative is of course the space of the prison and the prison-like spaces that constitute an important part of his formative years. Through the two quotations about Mvezo and Robben Island, I have shown that it is in the construction of a narrative, in trying to make sense of what has happened to the individual that blocks of temporalities are created around place and space. These chronotopes are intrinsic to narratives: they are the building blocks of narratives; without them there cannot be any narrative.

Lodge notes that “[f]or Mandela, politics has always been primarily about enacting stories, about making narratives” (ix). Although the prison years are clearly crucial in consolidating his childhood experiences, it is significant that Mandela claims that he did not learn about the rudiments of democracy in prison, but at the palace in Mqhekezweni as a young boy. The young Mandela was quite enthralled by the tolerant and democratic manner in which the regent exercised his power. Describing one of the sessions where the regent met his subjects to discuss issues of state, Mandela says: “Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form ... People spoke without interruption and the meetings lasted for many hours” (20). This romanticisation seems to be a veiled lesson in democracy for the citizens of the newly liberated Republic. However, Mandela suggests that this democracy imbibed at a tender age guided his dealings with his fellow political prisoners at Robben Island. For example, he explains that he often disagreed on a number of issues with his colleagues but once a decision had been democratically arrived at, he supported it more than its advocates (409). Although Mandela seems to entirely ascribe this discipline to his teenage years that he spent observing deliberations at the regent's palace in Mqhekezweni, it is clear that his childhood memories are now coloured by his prison experience and a desire to consolidate the then-emerging democratic political dispensation. Still enamoured by past African methods of conflict resolution, Mandela also attributes his spirit of accommodation towards malicious gang members, competitive PAC members, and abusive and cruel warders to his early years when he observed the running of government by the regent, a milieu he escaped from for its parochialism the moment he could. However, it is largely the space of the prison, mediated through the narrative, which enables Mandela to create these continuities in his political career. Nevertheless, it is important to note that stories and the theatrical seem always to have captured Mandela's imagination. For example, he talks of occasions when chiefs and headmen who would have come to the palace would, after their serious

deliberations, have time to tell stories. It is the manner in which they told their stories that captivated and fired the young Mandela's imagination. He writes: "Their speech was formal and lofty, their manner slow and unhurried, and the traditional clicks of our language were long and dramatic" (21). In the light of the above, it would be a futile exercise to try to determine which formative space was the most important in creating the meditative and calculating politician that Mandela turned out to be. What seems crucial in the constitution of the self for Mandela, as Lodge points out, is that space and events seem largely accessible to him through stories or narratives.

3. Scaffolds of (I)legalities

Mandela's depiction of Robben Island allows us to utilise and interrogate Agamben's notion of the camp as the absolute space of exception. Agamben praises Foucault's perceptive study on biopolitics, by which Foucault meant the growing inclusion of people's natural lives in the mechanisms and calculations of power in 18th century Europe. He also applauds Foucault in his examination of the process of subjectivisation or how, beginning in the 18th century in Europe, the individual objectified himself or herself, making himself or herself simultaneously subject and at the same time an appendage of external power control. However, he criticises Foucault for failing to apply his study to the only phenomenon that Agamben considers to be the exemplary place of modern biopolitics: the phenomenon of the camp, that characterised the politics of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century Europe. Referring especially to Nazi concentration camps, Agamben argues:

What happened in the camps exceeds the juridical concept of crime that the specific juridico-political structure in which those events took place is often simply omitted from consideration. The camp is merely the place in which the most absolute *conditio inhumana* that ever existed on earth was realized.

(166)

Agamben goes on to argue that the concentration camp, and not simply the space of confinement such as the prison, is the absolute space of exception. Although there were no camps directly comparable to the Nazi concentration camps or the Soviet gulags in South Africa, some writers have nonetheless classified apartheid South Africa alongside the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century Europe.²⁶ Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* sheds

²⁶ Interestingly, in South Africa of the late years of apartheid (1980-1990), there were death squads that operated secret internment camps. A division started to develop between "normal" prisons and these secret locations of torture and destitution, where the rule of law simply ceased applying altogether. For example Pumla Gobodo-Mdikizela describes the Vlakplaas, a farm outside Pretoria where Eugene de Kock presided over a secret

interesting insights on Agamben's claim that the camp, and not the prison, is the place of absolute *conditio inhumana*.

The South African prisons of the 1920s and 1930s, as portrayed in Bosman's *Cold Stone Jug*, and of the 1950s and early 1960s, as portrayed by Mandela in *Long Walk to Freedom*, are racist places characterised by physical degradation and psychological trauma. For example, in *Cold Stone Jug* Bosman relates the physical pain of the stone yard gang and the near starvation prison diet which threatened the physical health of all inmates. He also relates the psychological distress that almost drives him mad, and actually leads to the madness of quite a number of other prisoners. He talks of a place that dehumanises the individual so much that he loses his power of speech and is reduced to the howls of a trapped or dying dog. It can, however, be argued that, despite all its deprivations, Bosman's Swartklei Great prison is still a space of privileged white man, who can still be rehabilitated and be reintegrated into mainstream society. Certain laws and regulations that respect the value of human life still apply in Bosman's Swartklei Great Prison, and what happens within its walls although inhuman, is nevertheless, at least for white prisoners, still within the juridical concept of crime that the specific juridico-political structure of apartheid South Africa could comprehend.

However, an examination of Montagu Slater's *The Trial of Jomo Kenyatta* (1959) shows that in colonial Kenya something that nears an absolute state of exception started to obtain. Earlier in this chapter, I mention that Mbembe defines politics as a project of autonomy and the achieving of agreement among a collectivity through communication and recognition. Based on this normative theory of democracy, both the British colonial invasion of Kenya and the Mau Mau activities are located outside juridico-political structure; they lie in some zone of indistinction where the British juridical notions of justice undergo a radical redefinition. In *The Trial of Jomo Kenyatta*, Slater points out that the British colonial government did not even pretend that it was implementing the same legal standards in the colonies as in Britain. In order to fight their rebellious subjects, the British instituted something not entirely dissimilar to Nazi concentration camps in Kenya, in which by 1954 over 100 000 Kenyans were incarcerated under the suspicion of being Mau Mau or supporters of Mau Mau. Incidentally, it is not the great totalitarian states that instituted the use of concentration camps (as it is usually assumed), but they were introduced by the very torch bearers of

apartheid hit squad. Although apartheid authorities obviously knew about the existence of the Vlakplaas, its activities were not governed by any known legislation (*Human Being Died* 2003: 104-108).

enlightenment, the British, during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902.²⁷ It is interesting to note that on both occasions, in South Africa (1899 – 1902) and in Kenya (1952 - 1956), when Britain’s colonial project was threatened she resorted to the creation of concentration camps. In view of Agamben’s claims about the camp as a space where an absolute state of exception obtains, this often glossed over historical fact takes a new dimension when we realise that both South Africa and Kenya inherited British juridico-political structures. This makes it clear that the British colonial project, which was linked to notions of humanist enlightenment, was in fact entangled with the emergence of the concentration camp in Africa. Agamben’s assertion that “[t]he camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule” (168) is evident in the two above occasions when the British colonial project was put under siege. What is more disturbing, however, about Agamben’s argument is that he says the camp is not a historical fact, but a “hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space in which we are still living” (166). If this is true, it becomes imperative to determine whether the prison narratives under review bear out Agamben’s observations.

The question that I seek to answer now is this: can these observations about the camp be brought to bear on our understanding of Mandela’s portrayal of the prison in *Long Walk to Freedom*? On this issue, the narrative can be read at a number of levels. The first analysis of the depiction of the prison reveals an apartheid state which treated its citizens, especially black ones, with increasing inhuman cruelty, while nonetheless still operating within some form of juridico-political framework in dealing with the law’s transgressors. In their study of postcolonies, Comaroff and Comaroff (2006) argue that these polities are engaged in the fetishisation of law. They point out that postcolonies are by no means lawless, but instead “their politics and popular cultures, even their outlaw cultures, are infused with the spirit of the law” (19). Mandela’s narrative as a whole suggests that insofar as the fetishism of the law is concerned, postcolonies mimic both the colonial and apartheid state. The apartheid state that Mandela depicts is by no means lawless: instead it is a state that suspends legalities when

²⁷ A recent historical work makes the following observation about the British use of concentration camps during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902: “The conditions in these camps were appalling, Epidemic diseases, malnutrition, insufficient medical care and dreadful sanitary arrangements resulted in high death rate. In the white camps, the death toll rose to 26 370 of the approximately 100 000 inmates. In the Black camps the official British figure was just over 14 000, but recent research proves that a figure in excess of 20 000 deaths among the 120 000 inmates of these camps is acceptable”. “The Centenary of the Anglo-Boer War, 1899 – 1902”, www.Icon.co.za/2009/02/11. In these camps, in Foucault’s words “[d]eath was now something permanent, something that slips into life, perpetually gnaws at it, diminishes it and weakens it” (*Society*: 244). The colonial authorities had both the means to make life, through providing services that would ensure the health and safety of their subjects, and also the mechanism to let die through deliberate physical neglect, starvation, lack of medication and at times through painful bodily torture which resulted in slow death.

this suits its objectives,²⁸ or deploys them to authorise predation and criminalise opposition (Comaroff and Comaroff: 11). One interesting feature of Mandela's narrative is its attempt to show the clear distinction that regulated the behaviour of state authorities in their dealings with two categories of prisoners which increasingly became the hallmark of apartheid South Africa: the common-law criminals on one hand, and political prisoners on the other. For example, in his initial arrest and subsequent imprisonment Mandela suggests that a semblance of shared rule of law was still in existence. He writes:

I was handcuffed and taken to Pretoria in an old van in the company of another prisoner ... The choice of companion was curious: his name was Nkadimeng and he was a member of one of Soweto's fiercest gangs. Normally, officials would not permit a political prisoner to share the same vehicle with a common-law criminal, but I suspect they were hoping I would be intimidated by Nkadimeng, who I assumed was a police informer ... I was put in a single cell with this fellow. I demanded and eventually received separate space so that I could prepare my case. (307)

The above extract suggests that up to about this time, political prisoners were treated differently from common-law criminals, and hence indicates that the apartheid prisons still maintained a mock adherence to a juridico-framework. If Mandela's claim is true that the apartheid authorities were working hand in hand with dangerous gang members like Nkadimeng, this may suggest that law and lawlessness were conditions of each other's possibility not only in the postcolonial polities that Comaroff and Comaroff examine, but also in apartheid South Africa. Interestingly, Mandela says that even at Robben Island prison authorities worked in cohorts with gang members in an attempt to break the will and the solidarity of political prisoners. Mandela writes:

To counterbalance the effect of these new political allies, authorities also put a handful of common-law prisoners in our section ... These men ... were members of the island's notorious criminal gangs, either the Big Fives or the Twenty-Eights, which terrorized other prisoners ... Their role was to act as *agents provocateurs*, and they would attempt to push us around, take our food and inhibit any political discussions we tried to have. (393)

²⁸ Mandela's predicament with the law is exacerbated by the fact that as a lawyer, he can never entirely lose faith in the power of the law: this is almost the guiding contradiction of his narrative. Nor can Mandela afford to denigrate the law in the difficult moment of transition during which *Long Walk to Freedom* was published.

At one point, prison warders even instructed these prisoners to sing a song with the lyrics which said, “What did you want in Rivonia? Did you think that you would become the government?” (393). This song was a taunt directed against all political prisoners but especially the Rivonia trialists who were interned on the Island at the time. All these instances where authority seems to ally itself with the criminal element suggest that “politics and crime, legitimate and illegitimate agency, endlessly redefine each other” (Comaroff and Comaroff: 11). In fact, Mandela indicates that at one time, especially before the enactment of the Ninety-Day Detention Law, which specially targeted political dissent, going to prison was viewed as an act of heroism since it was seen as a form of resistance against apartheid. One had to commit a crime in order to be jailed, and this was not just a way of resisting authority: it also enabled one to gain some form of legitimacy and authority in the eyes of fellow freedom fighters, rather in the way circumcision rituals which I discuss above enabled Mandela and his peers to become ‘men’. In this way, the resistance of freedom fighters became dependent on state authority. This debilitating binarism can also be seen from the fact that during apartheid, a court appearance was often the only place where political activists could air their views freely. For example, during both his first trial and his subsequently sentencing to five years for inciting people to strike and for leaving the country without a passport, and also during the Rivonia trial in which he was sentenced to life imprisonment, Mandela was allowed to spell out his political beliefs. Among other things, Mandela addressed the court with the following words:

I am prepared to pay the penalty even though I know how bitter and desperate is the situation of an African in the prisons of this country ... More powerful than my fear of the dreadful conditions to which I might be subjected in prison is my hatred for the dreadful conditions to which my people are subjected outside prison throughout the country I have no doubt that posterity will pronounce that I was innocent and that the criminals that should have been brought before this court are the members of the government. (319)

In the above quotation, Mandela is appealing to more than the legal or what is defined as lawful by the state. Rather, he is evoking the political issues behind his arrest and imprisonment and is appealing to what he believes are universal human ethical standards. To the apartheid state of Mandela’s narrative one can apply Roger Berkowitz’s (2005) observations about the modern world. He argues: “Lawfulness has replaced justice as the measure of ethical action in the world” (ii). Interestingly, writing about the use of law in

ancient Greece, Hannah Arendt (1998) evokes the architectural and theatrical and applies it to the juridical, and argues that the *polis* was never founded on the ethical and the just, rather on the lawful and the unlawful. She writes:

Before men began to act, a definite space had to be secured and a structure built where all subsequent actions could take place, the space being the public realm of the *polis* and its structure the law. (194–195)

In Mandela's trial, as we also noted in Kenyatta's, the courtroom, both in the apartheid and colonial systems, were not only places where law was enforced, but became microcosms of the state, where law became the structure which enabled people to resist the senseless and brutal actions of the oppressor. Unfortunately, this theatricalisation of justice in these two spaces of oppression must be equated to the performance of a tragedy rather than a comedy as it inevitably led to tragic consequences. Nevertheless, in the South African situation, it is clear that at this point in time, although political activists did not expect justice from the apartheid judicial system, they could still assume certain judicial formalities, and they often manipulated these for their own political ends, as is evident in Mandela's speech above. Here, as in Kenyatta's trial, although the acting within the court space plays out like a show for all parties involved, the space is clearly used to achieve different goals by the oppressor, on one hand, and by the oppressed, on the other. For the oppressor, the courtroom becomes a stage for the ritualised performance of justice for the benefit and satisfaction of a certain assumed audience, and for the assuagement of the conscience of the oppressor; for the oppressed, it becomes the only space where the political battle can be fought, or, to revert to Arendt's language of theatre, where political battles can be acted out with minimum bodily pain and injury.

Interestingly, Comaroff and Comaroff (2006), referring particularly to postcolonies, suggest that the law or the legal is often used to sanctify and sustain criminally brutal modes of domination, "some of them highly rationalized, highly technicized, [and] highly sanitized" (2). They go on to argue: "The modernist nation-state ... has always been erected on the scaffolding of legalities" (22). This is evident in all the cases when Mandela is confronted by the apartheid juridical state machinery. For example, during his 1962 trial, despite the fact that within the strictly legal there was no way he could have proved himself innocent, the state went on to call more than a hundred witnesses. Mandela himself tells us: "It (the charge) was indisputable – and in fact I did not dispute – that I was technically guilty on both charges [of illegally leaving the country and inciting African workers to strike]" (313). Since

Mandela's technical guilt was not being disputed, it becomes clear that in spending stupendous resources in this case, the state was not out to deliver justice, but to prove to onlookers that the state was built on a scaffold of legalities, as Comaroff and Comaroff have argued.²⁹

In a similar way, Slater shows how both the prosecution and the magistrate in Kenyatta's trial were preoccupied with the legal and not necessarily the political context and moral issues in their unswerving conviction that Kenyatta and his colleagues were guilty.³⁰ However, what is most striking in the two instances is that both the accuser, in this case the state, and the accused are aware that they are engaged in some kind of play-acting ritual which is never meant to satisfy what can be termed the ethical and the just. Admittedly, the accused or the dominated are often thrown into this play-acting against their will. But as we have already seen, at times it is the oppressed that actually triggers this performance. For example, during the 1952 Defiance Campaigns, political activists deliberately dared arrest and imprisonment. This action was aimed at using the court as an arena for political battle since most avenues of political expression could lead to extreme bodily harm or even to loss of life. Secondly, the action was based on the assumption that despite the bitter and desperate situation of an African in the apartheid prisons, some kind humane respect for human life still governed the behaviour of prison officials and the government still operated within some kind of juridico-political structure which restrained its law-enforcing agents from a flagrant abuse of prisoners. Seeking out imprisonment was therefore a safe way of continuing the struggle against the oppression of apartheid state, and a confirmation that South African jails at this time were not spaces where an absolute state of exception obtained.

In Mandela's account, the prison is narrativised as a space that cultivates the stoic endurance of pain, and therefore becomes a place that is charged and invested with symbolic significances which are able to infuse an aura of visibility and invincibility upon its former occupants. We also saw earlier in this discussion how Mandela links circumcision and the

²⁹ More recently, Robert Mugabe, the president of Zimbabwe, has utilised this global obsession with legalities to remain in power despite the astounding pressure that has been coming from both within and without Zimbabwean borders. He has managed this feat by keeping on invoking the law, rewriting the law, working just barely inside its parameters. This tactic has disarmed most of his international detractors.

³⁰ In the case of apartheid government, it never really acknowledged that "political prisoners" existed as a separate category. Political prisoners were just people who had broken the law, criminals like everybody else. Interestingly, what preceded the new political dispensation in 1994 was the decriminalisation of individuals like Mandela and black political organisations. While this process was publicised in the media, Mahmood Mamdani argues that the same process of decriminalisation of the apartheid state was taking place behind the scenes. (Mamdani "From Human Rights to Human Wrongs: An Alternative to Nuremberg as a Paradigm". Public Lecture University of Western Cape, 24 May 2010).

possession of a personal piece of land or house to the symbolic attainment of manhood. Mandela suggests that in the case of the prison, the oppressed are able to subvert what the state designed it for. Commenting on the 1952 Defiance Campaign, Mandela writes:

The ANC emerged as a truly mass-based organization with an impressive corps that had braved the police, the courts and the jails. The stigma usually associated with imprisonment had been removed. This was a significant achievement, for fear of prison is a tremendous hindrance to a liberation struggle. From the Defiance Campaign onward, going to prison became a badge of honour among Africans. (129)

Clearly then, the Defiance Campaign was not a mere physically confrontation with the apartheid state, it largely aimed at demystifying the power structures of apartheid. It was meant to subvert what Mandela tells us the prison is designed to achieve: “Prison not only robs you of your freedom, it attempts to take away your identity. Everyone wears a uniform, eats the same food, [and] follows the same schedule. It is by definition a purely authoritarian state that tolerates no independence or individuality” (321).

Mandela’s narrative also suggests that a prisoner is not unlike a political activist who is forced to go underground by authorities. Describing the period when he was forced to operate underground, Mandela observes: “The key to being underground is to be invisible. Just as there is a way to walk into a room in order to make yourself stand out, there is way of walking and behaving that makes you inconspicuous” (225). Mandela seems to imply that what the authorities fail to achieve through imprisonment becomes a self-imposed state when one operates underground. Viewed in this light, it is operating underground, and not the prison, which forces one into some kind of state of exception. The state agents can eliminate the activist without fear of any judicial inquisition since the activist is officially missing anyway.

The irony of course is that Mandela’s narrative as a whole suggests that being underground in fact leads to intensified visibility. For example, during the period that he spent underground between 1961 and his subsequent arrest in 1962, he enjoyed amazing and unsolicited publicity which clearly contributed to the iconic status which Mandela would later enjoy during his Robben Island days and after his release from Victor Verster prison in 1990. For example, in June, before his arrest on the 5th of August 1962, while Mandela was still as far away from South Africa as Addis Abba, Ethiopia, newspaper headlines sensationally declared, ‘RETURN OF THE BLACK PIMPERNEL’. Black Pimpernel is the name that journalists had given Mandela during the period he spent underground as a wanted political activist. Mandela

subsequently acquired something of the status of a deity, partly due to his long imprisonment. Interestingly, during the Defiance Campaign, people capitalised on the social meanings attached to imprisonment to achieve a certain measure of resistance and some level of agency. I have already noted the paradox that is embedded in political prisoners' use of their new status acquired from prison to mobilise and rally people against the oppressive establishment; their resistance becomes inseparable from the power regimes of the state.

However, with the enactment of the Ninety-Day Law and the brutality which it unleashed especially on black political prisoners, we witness a shift starting to take place as the officials begin to deliberately disregard their own conventions as a way of breaking the political will of dissidents. We start to witness South African jails becoming indistinguishable from camps, places where Agamben says a state of exception begins to become the rule. Mandela's narrative only hints at this brutality in passing, but other writers such as Ruth First foreground it strongly. Later, in Steinberg's *The Number*, albeit in a different setting, we will see the same process taking place, when the confrontational power of the Number gangs is gradually eroded by the coming in of democracy as prison authorities incrementally shift the unspoken conventions upon which the Number gangs previously derived their stability and authority.

Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* can be read as a celebration of a life-long resistance against the apartheid regime. The twenty-seven years that Mandela spends in prison are narrated as participating in this resistance. The narrative considers that ugly chapter of South African history closed; and with it the end of arbitrary arrests and imprisonments of political opponents. Although written some fifteen years after Ngugi's *Detained*, *Long Walk to Freedom* refuses to engage with the idea of prison beyond apartheid. It is as if the prison is buried with the end of apartheid. Ngugi's *Detained* shows that the prison would continue to be used as an instrument for political battles by black governments that take over the reins from white racist regimes. In subsequent chapters, I will seek to show that the depoliticisation of the prison in post-apartheid South Africa does not mean that it is no longer central to the individual notions of the self and in national discourses that try to define what the new post-apartheid state means. For now, let us consider how *Detained*, although published a decade and half before *Long Walk to Freedom*, sounds an alarm to Mandela's post-apartheid sanguinity.

4. Post-colonial Prison and Colonial Violence

One of Ngugi's aims in *Detained* seems to be the excavation of the archive of colonial violence against the colonial subjects as a means of understanding his own imprisonment by a

post-colonial regime. Ngugi makes this one of his urgent tasks because, as Makau Mutua (2008) observes, “there seems to be a rush of amnesia, a deliberate forgetfulness that wants to wish away this barbaric history” (33). Murunga and Nasong’o (2007) also help us understand why the Kenyan post-colonial regime would feign forgetfulness of the violent colonial history when they observe: “Law enforcement agencies were created to enforce colonial rule over the natives and this role was inherited and perfected by the postcolonial state in fighting opposition” (13). In *Detained*, Ngugi reminds his readers of the brutalities of colonial rule so that they can see parallels with the postcolonial state’s violent excesses. He exposes colonialism’s savagery which was justified through the depiction of natives as savages who could only be subjected to humane European ways through the use of brutal force. On the question of colonial violence, Anupama Rao and Steven Pierce (2006) make a similar point by indicating that colonies were regarded as exceptional spaces where metropolitan norms of justice and civility could be disregarded (2). They argue: “Colonial subjects were ruled through violence; violated bodies were by definition colonial” (21). Like Ngugi, other writers have argued that postcolonial violence mirrors that of the colony. For example, summarizing Walter Benjamin’s thesis, Comaroff and Comaroff (2006) propose that in the postcolony “violence and the law, the lethal and the legal, are constitutive of one another” (vii). Throughout *Detained*, Ngugi shows that this postcolonial violence has its roots in colonial rule. He argues that violence was not a temporary tool of subjugation, but rather, brutality was the very essence of colonial settler culture, and fear was its defining norm.

Since colonialism was essentially violent, Ngugi reckons that all the cultural productions of this system should be interpreted through the same paradigm of brutality. He writes:

For the settlers in Kenya were really parasites in paradise ... No art, no literature, no culture, just the making of a little dominion marred only by niggers too many to exterminate. (*Detained* 29-30)

For Ngugi, therefore, it is not so much colonial violence as the colonialists’ lack of culture itself which was destructive to African social structure. It was this vast “emptiness”, the inability to “produce a culture”, which resulted in the colonialists’ resort to violence and coercion, exemplified by the prison, as the principal means of rule. Ngugi says that it is this legacy of cultural emptiness which the departing Europeans bequeathed to the African “comprador bourgeoisie” that needs urgent attention. He observes that, since colonialism did not only use physical violence but also engaged in a systematic attempt to impose a culture of emptiness masquerading as the rule of law upon the Kenyan social sphere, true emancipation

for Kenyans from the neo-colonial mentality lies in the revival of the Kikuyu cultural heritage, such as the use of Gikuyu and other indigenous languages in the arts and as language of instruction in academic institutions. Ngugi believes that this is one of the major ways of achieving an economically independent and culturally decolonised Kenya. His arrest and imprisonment by the postcolonial regime of Jomo Kenyatta, when he was engaged in what he perceived to be a Kikuyu cultural renaissance through the successful staging of Gikuyu performances of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* among the peasants of Kamĩĩĩĩthũ, convinced him of the power of his people's culture in the fight against the forces of neo-colonialism.

To prove his point that the repressive and violent postcolonial Kenya is a mirror image of the colonial regime, Ngugi gives numerous examples of atrocities that were committed by high ranking colonial officials against native Kenyans. One of the examples that he gives is a dispatch by an early colonial governor, Sir A. R. Hardinge. The governor wrote:

Force and the prestige which rests on a belief in force, are the only way you can do anything with those people, but once beaten and disarmed they will serve you. Temporizing is no good ... These people must learn submission by bullets – it's the only school; after that you may begin more modern and humane methods of education, and if you don't do it this year you will have to next, so why not get it over? ... In Africa to have peace you must first teach obedience, and the only tutor who impresses the lesson properly is the sword (*Detained* 37-9).

Through this quotation Ngugi implies that colonial imprisonment was the violent means through which the native was taught obedience. The governor's words also reveal not only the patronising generalisations that facilitated colonial invasion and its attendant violence, but also the kind of power systems that characterised the colonial encounter. This shows how colonial rule was facilitated by an othering discourse that was ambivalently pre-enlightenment in nature and yet rooted in enlightenment thought. Edward Said (1993) helps us understand the colonial governor's almost unforgivable condescending arrogance when he argues: "Throughout the exchange between Europeans and their 'other' that began systemically half a millennium ago, the idea that has scarcely varied is that there is an 'us' and a 'them', each quite settled, clear, unassailably self-evident" (xxviii). It is also interesting to note that the governor believes that the colonised had to be subjected through two forms of power: first, the bullet which leads to disarmament and forced submission; and then the use of more enlightened and humane methods of education. On this matter Rao and Pierce observe:

The exigencies of governing the colonized ultimately produced uncomfortable similarities between the so-called barbarism of the native practices and the acts of terror and violence used to contain them. (2)

So it would seem that the Foucauldian formulation of the spectacle yielding way to disciplines does not necessarily fit the colonial situation. Foucault says that the Europe of Antiquity was a civilization of spectacle, and defines spectacle as “render[ing] accessible to a multitude of men the inspection of small objects” (*Discipline* 216). Foucault points out that these spectacles were meant to unite people temporarily through the spectre of violence. He writes: “In these rituals in which blood flowed, society found new vigour and formed for a moment a single great body” (216). For the colonial governor, the bullet represents an all-out war against the entire recalcitrant native population and not just the rendering of few objects to a multitude. The colonised population becomes fearful and submissive upon the realisation that the coloniser has both the will and the means to exterminate them. Superficial peace and unity are achieved through the fear of being annihilated. By extension, then, Ngugi seems to imply that, in the postcolony, the colonial bullet has been superseded by the prison as a symbol of all repressive state apparatuses and has become “the only school” for those who oppose the neocolonial state. The bullet and prison are violent means through which precarious peace and unity are achieved and maintained both in the colony and the postcolony.

Interestingly, Foucault claims that in Europe, from the eighteenth century onwards, the spectacular exercise of power with its attendant violence was gradually replaced by the “disciplinary modality of power” (*Discipline* 216). Foucault also refers to these dispersed modes of power which insidiously but systematically monitors its subjects through a complex connections of disciplines, as a *capillary* form of power. For Foucault, this transformation in the functions and uses of power did not lead to a lessening of the grip of power over the individual but rather its intensification. He argues that the development of a disciplinary society “assures an infinitesimal distribution of the power relations” (216). However, despite the development of the disciplinary modality of power, Foucault points out that the exercise of power remained Janus-faced. He writes:

At one extreme, the discipline blocked, the enclosed institution, established on the edges of society, turned inwards towards negative functions: arresting evil, breaking communications, suspending time. At the other extreme, with panopticism, is the discipline-mechanism: a functional mechanism that must

improve the exercise of power by making it lighter, more rapid, more effective, a design of subtle coercion for a society to come. (*Discipline* 209)

In *Detained*, Ngugi shows that the new form of societal power relations which Foucault calls a capillary form of power was not exported into the colony because the natives were regarded as savages who only understood the language of violence. He sets out to prove that the colonial rulers did not apply the European ideas of reform in the colony because Africans remained irredeemably other even after gaining what the colonial governor calls more “modern” and “humane” methods of education in the excerpt quoted earlier. Africans represented an extreme form of the other, such that the sword and the bullet did not just precede the use of disciplines but remained a permanent feature of colonial rule. Ngugi observes:

[T]he colonial system *did* produce a culture. But it was a culture of legalized brutality, a ruling-class culture of fear, the culture of an oppressing minority desperately trying to impose total silence on a restive oppressed majority.
(34)

The colonial prison clearly participated in this attempt at imposing total silence on a restive oppressed majority. In the quotation above, Ngugi claims that the violent imposition of colonial rule was a negation of the humanity which the colonisers claimed they possessed and assumed the natives lacked. Ngugi reports how Meinertzhagen, a British colonial army Colonel, celebrates his brutality in his book *Kenya Diaries*. Colonel Meinertzhagen reports the capture and killing by the Kenyan warriors of one British colonial officer. Afterwards, Colonel Meinertzhagen and his men surrounded the nearby village “and ordered the massacre of every soul – a cold-blooded vengeance against defiant husbands and sons” (*Detained* 35). In his *Kenya Diaries* Meinertzhagen triumphantly and remorselessly wrote: “Every soul was either shot or bayoneted ... we burned all huts and razed the banana plantations to the ground ... Then I went home and wept for a brother officer killed”. These cowardly acts, and shameless brutality against unarmed women and children, Ngugi sarcastically observes, are regarded as “deeds of British colonial heroism” (*Detained* 34), and they are facilitated by what Said calls the unassailably self-evident ‘us’ and a ‘them’ mentality which permeates Europe’s relationship with the rest of the world.

Ngugi also demonstrates that in the majority of cases the British colonial commanders did not even make an attempt to hide their conceited arrogance and utter contempt for Africans under the rhetoric of bringing enlightened civilization to Africa. For example, one British military

commander, exasperated by the fierce resistance of the Kenyan Nandi guerrilla army against British invasion, wrote:

I have used every effort to conciliate the tribes and have exercised the greatest forbearance in dealing with them, and at their own request have even gone as far as to make blood brotherhood with many of them; but the ignorance of the people is so extreme that it is impossible to convey to such savages that the occupation of their country is not harmful to them.
(*Detained* 41)

Ngugi argues that those controlling the colonial repressive state apparatuses such as the prison had a brazen and unquestioning sense of superiority over their colonial subjects. Logically, imprisonment was seen as a legitimate cure for the ignorance of savages. Ngugi forcefully asserts that the postcolonial Kenyan regime is a colonial mutant. Ngugi's aim in *Detained* is to show that the Kenyan people never accepted British colonial rule lying down, and therefore should not accept postcolonial abuse without resistance. He interprets his own imprisonment and prison writings as participating in this resistance.

In 1902 Kenyans may have lost the battle, but the war continued unabated through other means over the years leading to the Mau Mau war of liberation. Due to the fierce resistance that the colonisers had faced during the initial invasion of Kenya, Ngugi says that Colonel Meinertzhagen predicted that the British would not be able to occupy the country for more than fifty years. After the initial violence of colonial invasion in Kenya, Ngugi shows that the coloniser continued to build upon this culture of legalised brutality against the colonised subject through the use of a biased penal system. Ngugi gives numerous examples of natives who suffered appalling injustices at the hands of respected white settlers after being accused of frivolous and ridiculous crimes. Ngugi notes:

In March 1907, Colonel Grogan and four associates flogged 'rickshaw boys' outside Nairobi court-house. The 'boys' were later taken to hospital with lacerated backs and faces. Their crime? They had the intention of alarming two white ladies by raising the rickshaw shafts an inch too high! (*Detained* 32)

Another example: "In 1960, Peter Harold Poole shot and killed Kamane Musunge for throwing stones at Poole's dogs in self-defense" (33). And "[i]n 1918 ... two British peers flogged a Kenyan to death and later burnt his body. His crime? He was suspected of having an

intention to steal property ... The governor later appointed one of them to be a member of a district committee to dispense justice among the ‘natives’” (33). Through these and other examples, Ngugi proves that the post-colonial Kenyan violence and arbitrary imprisonment of suspected political opponents is a continuation of the British colonial culture. This colonial culture was so violent that it was even condemned by some British citizens. Ngugi notes that both within Kenya and in Britain, there were always dissenting European voices against the brutality and self-congratulatory British imperialism. For example, one Eileen Fletcher, a Quaker social worker, who, after serving for a time as a rehabilitation officer in the Mau Mau detention camps, resigned in protest and flew back to England. This is what she wrote in *The Tribune* of 25 May 1956:

I have just come back from Kenya where I was sent by the British government. I have seen Emergency justice in operation ... In a women’s prison ... I saw twenty-one people – including 11 and 12 years old – who were all condemned to this inhumane punishment, for supposed ‘Mau Mau offences’. All of them, believe it or not, have been convicted by British magistrates. (*Detained* 38)

Similarly, Barbara Castle, a Labour M.P., referred in *The Tribune* of 25 September 1955 to Kenya as a police state where the rule of law had broken down, where the murder and torture of Africans by Europeans went unpunished and where authorities pledged to enforcing justice regularly connived at its violation. In view of this indictment of colonial brutality by fellow British, Ngugi arrives at this sobering conclusion:

Barbara Castle was, of course, wrong about what she termed the breakdown of the rule of law. This *was* the rule of law, the colonial rule of law, and it had been in operation, with differing degrees of intensity, since 1895 ... Thus all these eruptions of brutality between the introduction of colonial culture in 1895 and its flowering with blood in the 1950s were not aberrations of an otherwise humane Christian culture. No. They were its very essence, its law, its logic, and the Kenyan settler with his *sjambok*, his dog, his horse, his rickshaw, his sword, his bullet, was the true embodiment of British imperialism. (*Detained* 39-40)

As a result of the gory crimes committed by the settlers and tolerated and condoned by British colonial rulers, Ngugi comes to the conclusion that colonial justice was that of sword, bullet and *sjambok*. It is in this light that he views the postcolony as a transformed colony disguised

by the black faces that now occupy political positions. He shows that it is the colonial justice system which Kenyatta and his colleagues have not only inherited but admired and administered after the departure of the coloniser at independence from 1963 onwards. Ngugi strives to show that what Comaroff and Comaroff (2006:6) call the postcolonial condition of endemic “criminality with violence” was incepted at the colonial invasion of Africa and blossomed during the entire period of colonial rule.

Like Florence Bernault (2003), whom I refer to in an earlier chapter of this thesis, Ngugi locates the birth of the prison in Africa at the very beginning of the violent invasion of the continent because he views all colonial institutions as violent. The prison is an exemplary institution in this regard. He writes:

Detention without trial is part of that colonial culture of fear. It was introduced to Kenya by this racist settler minority, by Jesus-is-thy-Saviour missionaries, and their administrators ... Detention was an instrument for colonial domination. In its origins and purpose, it is clearly a colonial affair.

(44)

For Ngugi, the fact that the post-colonial Kenyan government continues to use the prison to persecute its critics is evidence that neo-colonial conditions prevail in Kenya. He locates his own post-colonial arrest as providing an unbroken link between the early detentions of militant leaders of the patriotic armed resistance to British invasion at the turn of the twentieth century.

5. Prison Narratives and the Excavation of Emancipatory Historiography

Ngugi’s extensive quotations from colonial historiography should be viewed as a writer’s attempt to lay bare the forms of power and knowledge which the African comprador bourgeoisie and their former colonial masters would want to remain hidden and forgotten. The many citations of colonial historiography that Ngugi exposes and then challenges in *Detained* can be seen as performing a corrective function to the biased version of history of Kenya, which he argues is perpetuated by the postcolonial administration. For Ngugi, it is this distorted history that prevents Kenyans from engaging in a protracted struggle that will lead to cultural emancipation and ultimately to a truly patriotic exercise of power by the ruling class, and to an equitable redistribution of the material resources of the country.

Ngugi insists that the coming of independence has not brought any change to postcolonial Kenya, as illustrated by the fact that both the colonial and postcolonial regimes use repressive

state apparatuses such as the prison to gag dissenting voices. Ngugi's *Detained* seeks to show that the criminalisation of a clearly political function of colonial prison regimes is maintained by Kenyatta's post-colonial regime, and this is what he refers to as a colonial affair. The banter that characterises the exchange between Ngugi and one of his jailers who reprimands him for breaching the regulation of switching off all lights at midnight is illustrative of Ngugi's understanding of these disturbing continuities in the postcolonial modality of power. The dialogue goes like this:

“Professor ... why are you not in bed? What are you doing?”

‘I am writing to Jomo Kenyatta in his capacity as an ex-detainee’.

‘His case was different,’ the warder argues back.

‘How?’

‘His was a colonial affair’.

‘And this a neo-colonial affair? What’s the difference?’

‘A colonial affair ... now we are independent ... that’s the difference ...’ he says (4).

Ngugi narrates his imprisonment by these numerous detours into the colonial origins, and uses of prison and imprisonment, in order to show that both the Kenyan colonial and postcolonial prison regimes were and are used in managing restive populations that are dissatisfied by the oppressive and exploitative manner in which power is exercised. He debunks the concept of an independent Kenya by showing that it is an empty signifier.

Ngugi implies that the use of the prison by the British invaders is an indication that Kenyans did not welcome them with open arms as their long awaited saviours from the African forces of darkness, as subsequent European historiography would have Africans believe. The colony was founded on the blood of valiant Kenyans who were brutalised by the bullet and the prison of the coloniser into an uneasy submission. To substantiate his case Ngugi gives a long list of Kenyan warriors who valiantly fought the British invaders and were subsequently captured and killed in colonial detention camps and prisons. The first of these men was Waiyaki, who was imprisoned in the Fort Smith from 14 August 1892 and was subsequently shot and buried alive for his heroic defiance of colonial invasion. Then there was Nguugu wa Gakere, who was arrested and imprisoned in 1902 for leading his men against Nyeri Fort. He died in

detention in 1907, still defiant of colonial rule. This list includes women. Me Kitilili led the Giriama people to resist and fight British colonial rule up to her arrest and imprisonment in 1914. Ngugi points out that his own arrest without charge was possible because “by 1966 all the repressive colonial laws were back on the books [coated in] sweet semantics” (*Detained* 51). According to Ngugi, Kenyatta, who had previously fought against and as a result had been detained by the colonial regime, offers a bad example of individuals who were not only broken by prison, but were co-opted into the colonial system: a system which Kenyatta then perpetuated in independent Kenya under the guise of black rule.

Summarising the ideology (or lack of it) that drives the Kenyan postcolonial regime Ngugi writes:

Ideally, the authorities would like to put the whole community of struggling millions behind barbed-wire, as the British colonial authorities had once tried to do with the Kenyan people. But this would mean incarcerating labour, the true source of national wealth: what then would be left to loot? So then the authorities do the simpler thing: pick one or two individuals from among the people and then loudly claim that all sins lie at the feet of these few ‘power hungry’ ‘misguided’ and ‘ambitious’ agitators. (13)

Ngugi suggests that his imprisonment is a display, a means by which the ruling regime pummels the agitated masses into submission. Ngugi casts his arrests as a pre-emptive strike, an invisible spectacle, a Foucauldian rendering accessible to a multitude of men the inspection of small objects. Although not publicly displayed, Ngugi’s imprisonment quickly became national and international news. Just as the bullet and imprisonment were to serve as violent and bloody instruments of submission for the colonial governor, secretly murdering political opponents and throwing some into prison becomes an important feature of the Kenyan postcolonial regime even after Kenyatta’s death in 1978. Mutua observes: “[T]he state under Moi widely used extrajudicial killings, including the so-called ethnic clashes of the 1990s, to silence dissent” (286).

In the same quotation above, Ngugi suggests that the colony became an experimental space where the colonisers tried forms of coercion that had never been practiced in Europe. This is seen in Ngugi’s reference to the concentration camps in which the British colonial authorities confined entire villages in an attempt to curb the Mau Mau war of liberation in the 1950s.³¹

³¹ At the onset of the Emergency, Kenya had 58 prisons and detention camps with a population of 9000 prisoners. By 1959 there were 176 prisons and detention camps with a population of 99 000 detainees. Leonard

During the Mau Mau emergency, we see a manifestation of power which is neither spectacle nor panoptic. The Mau Mau phenomenon enables us to make sense of Bernault's observation that the prison was used as an early instrument of colonial conquest and in the subjugation of Africans (2003:3). Ngugi suggests that both before and during the Mau Mau Emergency, Kenyans experienced the prison not "as the auxiliary of justice in pursuit of criminals [but] as an instrument for political supervision of plots, opposition movements or revolts" (*Discipline* 215). However, the irony of the situation is that the colonial authorities never admitted to this political function of the prison, and they even denied that the Mau Mau phenomenon was a manifestation of any genuine political aspirations. Instead they chose to view Mau Mau members as misguided criminals who needed psychological rehabilitation. This is seen from the fact that the Mau Mau detention camps remained under the supervision of the Kenyan Prisons Service well up to 1959 when they were eventually transferred to the Ministry of African Affairs (Kercher 1981: 27).

Despite the subtle changes in the postcolony and its penal regime, Ngugi insists that it remains an unmitigated perpetuation of colonial rule. While the British colonial authorities had attempted a mass imprisonment of all black Kenyans in the 1950s, Ngugi depicts his own imprisonment as an inverted spectacle of power. He writes:

[D]etention without trial is not only a punitive act of physical and mental torture of a few patriotic individuals, but it is also a calculated act of psychological terror against the struggling millions. It is a terrorist programme for the psychological siege of the whole nation. (*Detained* 14)

Interestingly, Jeannine DeLombard (1995) calls Ngugi's imprisonment and that of other prominent figures in postcolonial Kenya "a spectacle of invisibility" (51). Probably, this is best illustrated by the fact that the police chose to arrest Ngugi at midnight on 30-31 December 1977 "with an incredible show of armed might" (*Detained* 15). He spent one night in the police cell and then the next day at noon was transferred to Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. What happened when the car transporting Ngugi arrived at the gates of the prison exemplifies what is referred to as the spectacle of invisibility by DeLombard. Ngugi writes:

The whole area around Kamiti was immediately put under curfew – and this in the noon of day. I saw innocent men, women and children dive for cover

C. Kercher says the Mau Mau Emergency (1952-1959) was "a unique and aberrant experience in the history of the Kenyan experience" (*The Kenyan Penal System: Past Present and Prospect* (1981:23). While Kercher suggests that the Mau Mau Emergency was an anomalous mutation of the British colonial prison regimes, Ngugi, on the other hand, thinks that it was a logical climax of a colonial system steeped in violence.

pursued by baton waving warders and within seconds there was not a single civilian standing or walking in the vicinity of Kamiti Prison (*Detained* 18).

This suggests that Ngugi's arrest was simultaneously a spectacle and also an attempt at concealing it from the public. This vacillation between the visible and the invisible was characteristic of colonial rule as well. The fact that the officers who come to arrest an unarmed academic do so with an incredible show of force, suggests a spectacularisation of power. However, the fact that they do so at night and the subsequent unnecessary display of power by the warders who declare a *de facto* state of emergency outside the gates of the prison, all point towards a regime which is trying to prevent its criminal acts from being publicised. Evidence indicates that early in his rule, Kenyatta combined lethal brutality and imprisonment as important tools of entrenching his corrupt rule. His opponents, depending on how dangerous they were regarded to be, were either imprisoned without being charged or were assassinated. For example, Pio Gama Pinto was assassinated in 1965, Tom Mboya the trade unionists and the likely successor of Kenyatta was killed in 1969, as well as J.M. Kiriuki in 1975. Under President Arap Moi, Robert Ouko, the urban foreign minister was killed (Mutua 2008: 286). It is ironic that Kenyatta perpetuates the brutality and injustices of colonial rule that he had been a victim of. Addressing the court which was about to sentence him and five of his colleagues on trumped up charges of being leaders of the Mau Mau, Jomo Kenyatta expressed his feelings of helpless submission, rejection and resistance of the entire colonial legal apparatus when he said: "I am asking for no mercy at all on behalf of my colleagues. We are asking that may justice be done and that the injustices that exist may be righted" (Slater 241). With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that as Kenyatta was verbally rejecting colonial justice or the so called rule of law he was at the same time internalising its logic.

Ngugi is at pains to show that postcolonial Kenyan regimes' attempts of imposing total silence on a restive oppressed majority through imprisonment and brutality will not succeed, since the culture of Kenya from the time of the imposition of colonial rule is not one of passivity but of struggle which culminated in the Mau Mau war of liberation. He does not assume that agency and/or resistance is some "natural" human capacity that will inevitably emerge under oppressive conditions – instead, he locates resistance as part of a *historical* legacy in Kenya. After the Mau Mau war, Ngugi believes that the most potent tool for fighting neo-colonial forces are cultural productions in Kenyan languages such as the play *I will Marry When I Want*. Ngugi believes that this culture of defiance already exists among the peasants as demonstrated in their 1977 stage performances of his socialist play in Gikuyu.

Ngugi views his books as cultural interventions meant to fight a post-colonial disciplinary modality of power, where power relations are now distributed in an infinitesimal and subtle way through the selective use of the prison, nepotism, tribalism and appeals to false sentiments of patriotism.

6. Fault-lines in Ngugi's Vision

However, Ngugi's stance in *Detained* is problematic for a number of reasons. While he is at pains to show that the Kenyan postcolonial regime is caught up in a colonial binary thinking; he believes that the peasant and himself can or have transcended this binary condition. We also saw how Mandela, although tolerant of other views, believes that given time everybody will eventually see the correctness of the ANC ideology. Both Ngugi and Mandela are advancing essentialist views. As I indicated in the introduction of this chapter, Ngugi's belief in the resilience and transformative capacity of the colonised people's culture of resistance is shared by Ashcroft (1997). Putting forward a highly contested postcolonial theory Ashcroft says that colonial rule was not simply an unmitigated cultural disaster: rather, the colonized societies engaged and utilised imperial culture for their own purposes (2). However, for Ngugi as we have seen, the struggle against colonialism did not just remain at a cultural plane but involved what became a trademark physical confrontation which ultimately drove the coloniser out of Kenya in the early 1960s. Ngugi's *Detained* is an attempt to show the masses that Kenya has an unbroken history of struggle which started as early as 1895 during the British colonial invasion of Kenya, and continued well into the first two decades of the twentieth century, when the natives were eventually brutalised into submission by the superior fire power of the coloniser. Ngugi argues that this struggle flowered with the heroic exploits of Mau Mau fighters in the 1950s. In *Detained*, Ngugi appeals to the Kenyans that this record of valiant struggle against oppression should not have stopped after the attainment of political independence in 1963.

In *Detained*, Ngugi problematically assumes the role of a self-appointed representative of peasants, and the rest of the underclass. This position is complicated by factors which include his social position as a Western-educated university professor, and the fact that after his release from prison, Ngugi went into exile, first to Britain, and then to the United States of America where he still resides. Ngugi seems oblivious of the contradictions that his situation invokes. This can be attributed to the immense influence that Frantz Fanon's and Amilcar Cabral's works have had on him. Fanon writes: "While politicians situate their action in actual present day events, man of culture take their stand in the field of history" (*The*

Wretched of the Earth, 1967: 168). Cabral writes: “For with a strong indigenous cultural life, foreign domination cannot be sure of its perpetuation” (*Return to the Source: Selected Speeches*, 1973: 62). While Fanon overestimates the cathartic value of anti-colonial violence for the colonized subject, Ngugi, like Cabral, over-estimates the revolutionary capacity of anti-neo-colonial cultural strategies in eliminating postcolonial economic, social and political inequalities. Since he views himself as a soldier conducting a cultural warfare, he reckons that his geographical location is of no consequence. This contrasts markedly with nationalists such as Mandela who refused to go into exile, choosing to stay in the thick of events where the battle was actually being fought.

Peter Childs and Patrick Williams (1997) indicate that the position of an intellectual is one of power which the intellectual needs to be aware of. They argue:

In terms of post-colonial knowledge production and the refusal of tyranny of the expert, implications would include the need to be critically aware of the power invested in particular locations from which one speaks and writes.
(23)

The above suggests that Ngugi’s imprisonment was a profoundly traumatic experience and it also became a moment of loss of anchoring for him, particularly since there are clear indications that it intensified his anger and disillusionment with the Kenyan post-colonial government, which in turn led to the impairment of critical reflexivity and literary creativity on Ngugi’s part. Although Ngugi may not regard himself as a postcolonial theorist, Anthony Appiah’s (1991) description of what he terms the postcolonial theorist embraces some of the contradictions that Ngugi as a person and his work inhabit. Appiah writes:

In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them both through the West they present to Africa and through an Africa they have invented for the world, for each other, and for the world.
(348)

The anti-imperialist militancy of Ngugi notwithstanding, the fact remains that his considerable Western education and training has alienated him from some of the Kenyan realities that he still so authoritatively writes about. The canonisation of Ngugi’s writing in many institutions of learning in Africa and in many parts of the world, and Ngugi’s own self-perception as a dissident and subversive writer, puts him in a paradoxical position.³² Edward

³² In *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993), Ngugi argues that early African post-

Said (1993) makes a perceptive observation about the difficulty of occupying one impermeable cultural position. He writes: “Partly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic” (xxix). This suggests that in one way or another, Ngugi’s radical voice may have been long co-opted into the disciplinary modality of power without Ngugi even being aware of it.

In the light of the above, one of the greatest ironies of Ngugi’s *Detained* may be that it reveals that he is implicated in the disciplinary functions of power that he criticises so much. In *Detained*, Ngugi suffers the ambiguity of embracing what Spivak has famously called the position of the “subaltern” and entirely rejecting the benefits that flow from being what Anthony Appiah calls the “comprador intelligentsia”. The three sections of the first chapter of *Detained* are an attempt to resolve this uncomfortable position. The first section of this chapter indicates that Ngugi is largely representative of the somewhat more privileged experience of political prisoners. He writes: “12 December 1978: I am in cell 16 in the detention block enclosing eighteen other political prisoners” (3). Further down he calls the cells occupied by political prisoners “Kenyatta’s tiger cages” or the “block of ‘tiger cages’” (3). That Ngugi chooses to call political prisoners tigers is curious but unsurprising. He is of course using this phrase in a sarcastic manner to imply that political prisoners are like ravenous tigers in the eyes of Kenyatta. However, Ngugi’s tone makes it clear that he accords political prisoners a superior status. They are not the biblical sheep that can be led, unresisting into a pen. Rather, they are dangerous tigers, who through their pen and language can lead to the collapse of the neo-colonial regime of Kenyatta. So they have to be kept caged. Throughout his narrative, Ngugi gives the impression that “[i]t is the active few who, through their original ideas, leadership and guidance, transform the masses into creative agents, rather than the masses who, through their independent actions, transform the few into leaders” (Crehan 106). The peasants he claims literally took charge of the *Ngahika Ndeenda* failed to initiate new projects after his arrest and his subsequent imprisonment. His attempts therefore to try to put himself at the level of the peasants is as unconvincing as trying to equate a tiger to a sheep.

Ngugi also presents his one-year stay in prison as a moment of profound revelation. For example, Ngugi wrote his pre-prison fiction in English. By contrast, all his post-imprisonment

colonial literature is “a series of imaginative footnotes to Frantz Fanon” (66). Notably, Fanon’s work is characterised by its militancy against colonialism and all traces of imperialism, and Robert C. Young describes Fanon as the “father of anti-colonial theory” (1995: 161). Ngugi includes his own works alongside that of Fanon and sees it as participating in the struggle against neo-colonialism and imperialism.

novels are first written in Kikuyu, and then personally translated by the author into English. He attributes his transformed view of languages to an unsolicited lecture that he received from a Muugikuyu prison warder. The warder said:

The trouble with you educated people is that you despise your languages. You don't like talking to ordinary people. But what use is your education if it cannot be shared with your people? ... You people, even if you follow Europeans to the grave, they will never never let you really know their languages ... Europeans will never let you into the secrets held by their languages. (*Detained* 129)

Ngugi interprets the warder's words as an exposé of the betrayal of the people by the African western educated intellectuals who use European languages in their works of literature. The warder's words highlight an essentialist perspective which views language as an irreducible carrier of a people's culture. Curiously, the *warder* – who has power in the prison – becomes the voice of the ordinary African people. So it suddenly dawns upon Ngugi that to privilege the English language in the production of Kikuyu cultural experiences is to place Kikuyu culture and its historical experiences in an inferior position in comparison to English culture. However, Ngugi is only using this encounter with the warder, whether real or imagined, as a stylistic tool to explain his own rejection of the English language as means of expressing the Kenyan people's experiences and worldview. This is made clear by the fact that it was his pre-prison experiment with the Gikuyu play that sought to displace the hegemonic position of the English in the arts, and the fact that he took it to the exploited peasants, which led to his imprisonment in the first place. This suggests that his understanding of the subtle manner in which the colonial culture had entrenched itself, not only through brutal violence but also using cultural institutions, was more of a gradual process, rather than the sudden moment of enlightenment implied in the above quotation.

Ngugi constantly tries to attribute his journey of retracing his cultural roots back to the ordinary people as in the example of the warder's words above. Jennine DeLombard (1995) writes:

As an imprisoned African former colonial subject who repeatedly has presented himself as an ally – if no longer a member – of the peasantry and the working classes, Ngugi is representative of a number of groups who have been marginalized in both political and literary terms. (52)

An example of this is when he attributes the final script and performance of *I will Marry When I Want*, which he co-authored with Ngũgĩ Wa Mirii largely to the peasants of Kamĩĩĩthũ. He writes:

[T]he whole project became a collective community effort with peasants and workers seizing more and more initiative in revising and adding to the script, in directing dance movements on the stage, and in the general organization. (77)

A page before this statement, Ngũgĩ tries to convince the reader that all his Western education had been of little consequence in comparison with the six months he spent with peasants preparing for the performance of the play. He says:

The six months between June and November 1977 were the most exciting in my life and the true beginning of my education. I learnt my language anew. I discovered the creative nature and power of collective work. (76)

A little later, he somewhat patronisingly comments:

For myself, I learnt a lot. I had been delegated to the role of messenger and porter, running errands here and there. But I also had time to observe things. I saw how the people had appropriated the text ... so that the play that was finally put on to a fee-paying audience on Sunday, 2 October 1977, was a far cry from the tentative awkward efforts originally put together by Ngũgĩ and myself. (78)

Ngũgĩ is trying very hard to prove that he has “shifted the centre of vision because ... [he is no longer] bound by the European Centre” (Ngũgĩ 2003: 53). For Ngũgĩ, true knowledge comes from the peasants and not from Western institutions of higher learning. But despite his assertions that he represents the peasants’ views, what Ngũgĩ succeeds in offering is often a constricted and over-determined socialist ideology and worldview. Some may also find offense in Ngũgĩ’s naïve condescending attitude, arising from having been alienated from the people in the first place, which now enables him to find fascination and fulfillment from the peasants’ awkward attempt at scripting and directing a play. In the above quotation, Ngũgĩ is speaking as an observer of peasants and not as being one of their kind. He is also obviously writing with a Western audience in mind.

Throughout *Detained*, Ngugi pits himself against Kenyatta. Unlike Kenyatta, who was broken down by the colonial prison to become a member of the comprador bourgeoisie, Ngugi clearly points out that he himself managed to resist Kenyatta's attempts to break him. But it can be argued that just like Kenyatta, who was a member of the Western-educated intelligentsia, and initially posed as someone who represented the aspirations of the people only to turn around after attaining political power, Ngugi's militancy is sustained by the fact that he is sidelined from political power. Ngugi tries by all means to show that unlike Kenyatta he truly represents the aspirations of the subaltern. Curiously, though, in order to illustrate that ordinary Kenyans realised the continuity of the repressive colonial ideology in independent Kenya, Ngugi includes photographs of Kenyan demonstrators who reside in London brandishing posters. One of them reads: "Waingereza walifunga Kimathi ... Mzee anafunga Ngugi" (The white man imprisoned Kimathi ... Kenyatta imprisons Ngugi). It is a painful irony that it is not the peasants of Kamĩĩĩĩũ where Ngugi says *I Will Marry When I Want* was scripted and first staged, but the educated elite residing in the metropolis of the former coloniser who have the courage to protest Ngugi's arrest. The anti-apartheid movement that Mandela says ended up being personalised as the Free Mandela Campaign was also spearheaded in the West. In Ngugi's case this captures the contradictions that he has to negotiate in his quest to be both an equal and also a voice of the voiceless Kenyan masses.

One of the questions that seems to preoccupy Ngugi in *Detained* is how KANU (Kenya African National Union), a party that had shown amazing anti-colonial zeal, quickly imploded into an oppressive machinery serving the interests of the ruling elite and those of foreign powers. He observes: "[T]he KANU of 1961, as an instrument of Kenyan nationalism was totally opposed to the sixty years of colonial culture of repressive violence and mass terror" (*Detained* 50). Ngugi is of the opinion that when KANU took over power on 12 December 1963 it had a clean record. However, what baffles Ngugi is that "by 1966 all repressive laws were back on the books" (51). His answer to his own question: "What happened between 1961 and 1966 to make KANU reintroduce all these undemocratic, unjust and arbitrary practices?" (51), is populist and informed by his unique Marxist understanding of history as having reached its consummation during the Mau Mau war of liberation. Since the masses had fought so valiantly to overthrow forces of colonial oppression, Ngugi puts the blame squarely on the "comprador bourgeoisie which had been growing in the womb of the colonial regime [and] desired to protect and enhance its cosy alliance with foreign economic interests" (53). According to Ngugi, this is the group of people who raised "Colonial Lazarus" from the dead. This view is also shared by Art Hansen (1993), who says that the ruling African elite

should be blamed for failing to transform the postcolonial state so that it would not forever depend on the norms of the colonial state apparatus.

Other writers, however, have argued that Ngugi's Colonial Lazarus may not have died in the first place. For example, Ralph Benjamin Neuberger (1986) writes:

KANU accepted the "Majimbo Constitution" because that was the condition for independence. It very soon eroded and abolished the federal system, and imposed a unitary regime strongly dominated by the Kikuyu bureaucracy.
(175)

This is an important observation because it suggests at least two things. While Ngugi paints a romanticised picture of the British who were vanquished and driven out of Kenya by the patriotic Mau Mau guerrilla forces, Neuberger implies that although the British may have been forced to the negotiating table by Mau Mau activities, Kenyan independence was by no means an unconditional surrender of the routed colonialists. Historical developments also indicate that despite Ngugi's efforts to show that the interests of the African ruling elite always converge with those of their former colonial masters, this may not always be the case. In the Kenyan situation, British attempts to weaken KANU by imposing a federal constitution indicate that they viewed KANU as a threat to British settlers' commercial interests. As it turned out, KANU shrewdly played along with the British game as a means of attaining the control of the repressive state machinery. Once that had been achieved, within three years, they imposed a unitary regime which the British had opposed in the first place. While Ngugi's claim that the comprador bourgeoisies' "political inspiration and guidance comes from outside the country" (*Detained* 56) may be partly correct, historical evidence paints a much more complex picture. The interests of the African ruling elites and those of their former colonial masters can be perceived as running parallel, like the lines of rail tracks; co-operating whenever there are points of interchange to avoid fatal head on collisions or when there is need for a U-turn, but never really converging or significantly diverging.

Robert H. Jackson (1992) suggests that right from its inception the postcolonial state has never enjoyed legitimacy and loyalty neither from its officials nor from its citizens, and as a result, its survival has largely been ensured by external factors and interests (1). According to this view, Ngugi's portrayal of Kenyans as a homogeneous rainbow nation torn to pieces by the greed of the ruling elite that co-operates with foreign multinationals has to be supplemented by a much more careful study of the African situation. For example, Ngugi accepts the principle of Kenyan nationalism and the notion of the state without interrogating

their imperial origin. Interestingly, Mutua tries to get to the root of the problem when he argues:

The invention of the African state by colonialism, and the subsequent misapplication of the right to self-determination, stand at the root of the crisis of the postcolonial state. (2008: 8)

Mutua further points out that the arbitrary nature in which modern African states were created by European imperialism (for example Kenya has over forty possible nationalities) made most of these states ticking time bombs. T. O. Elias also locates the origin of modern African problems at the Berlin Conference of 1884-5, which randomly apportioned the continent to competing European powers. He argues: “This event was the genesis of many present-day conflicts and virtually insoluble problems in the African Continent” (1988:37). While Ngugi foregrounds the destructive nature of colonial rule in Africa, his bitter experience of imprisonment at the hands of the Kenyatta regime seems to prevent him from acknowledging the basic fact highlighted by Rao and Pierce that “while decolonization does not mark an ultimate break in technologies of governance based on alterity, it does indicate an important moment in which such strategies began to move beyond the purview of the state” (18). All this, although not absolving the comprador bourgeoisie of the crimes that Ngugi accuses them of, nor the developed capitalist nations for complicity in keeping Africa poor, suggests that African problems and solutions thereof may lie deeper than Ngugi is willing to allow in his angry prison narrative.

While an imaginative, ideologically independent and truly patriotic leadership is indispensable in the creation of economically and political viable African states, it seems as if there are other important variables that Ngugi glosses over due to his intention of settling scores with the post-colonial Kenyan regime which humiliated him through a painful one-year imprisonment. As suggested by Neuberger, the British, due to their vested economic interests and military supremacy, never contemplated ever granting full economic independence to the Kenyan black majority. According to Mutua, the “transition from colonialism to independence – if it can be called that – lasted a split of a second” (38). In the light of this comment, it would seem as if Ngugi underestimates the British political intrigue, power, and influence over Kenyan economic destiny during the process of transition and after the attainment of independence. This also suggests that African independence from colonial rule may have been one of the greatest political hoaxes of the twentieth century right from the start. As I have already argued earlier, Ngugi also fails to acknowledge that what he calls

Kenya was in fact “an imposed falsehood” (Mutua 37) since it is an amalgamation of heterogeneous tribes created by the British through deceit, fraud, intimidation and outright violence. Instead of glorifying the diverse nature of the tribes that constitute modern Kenya, these should be viewed as a real threat to national unity, and should be taken as a serious stumbling block in the efforts of overcoming Africa’s many challenges.

Curiously, Ngugi depicts the unity of the Kenyan people in their fight against foreign invaders in exuberant poetic terms. He writes:

[Kenyan history] is the history of Kenyan people ceaselessly struggling against Arab feudalists and slave dealers; against Portuguese marauders who opened up Africa to her four-hundred years of devastating encounter with European domination, and later against British predators trying to embrace Kenya with claws and fangs of blood; yes, a history of Kenyan people waging a protracted guerrilla war against a British imperialist power that used to boast of its invincibility to man or God, a revolutionary culture of courage and patriotic heroism ... A fight-back, creative culture, unleashing tremendous energies among the Kenyan people. (*Detained* 64)

As propaganda for spurring Kenyan people on in their fight against neo-colonial forces, this may be permissible. However, as a historical record, it is not very helpful because it is a blatantly romanticised version of history. The Kenyan people are described as “ceaselessly struggling” to fend off enemies of every sort. The British are called “predators ... with claws and fangs of blood” preying on innocent Kenyans who have “a revolutionary culture of courage and patriotic heroism”. This description negates the participation of Kenyans, no matter how negligible, in the oppression and exploitation of fellow Kenyans during these heroic battles against foreign invasions.³³ This is something that Ngugi is aware of, as his 1967 novel *A Grain of Wheat* shows. Ngugi also problematically depicts Kenyans as a homogeneous group united against invaders. Mutua acknowledges that during moments of crises, such as the fight against colonialism such moments of unity could have existed, but they never ran deep enough to sustain the decolonised state. He writes:

³³ Moeletsi Mbeki captures these historical entanglements and the complicity of both ordinary and elite Africans to their own oppression and the continent's underdevelopment by relating his experiences when he visited the Slave House on Gorée Island, off the coast of Dakar, Senegal. The curator showed Mbeki a musket that was sold to Africans during the slave trade. Explaining the apparent contradiction, the curator points out that Africans “needed the guns to protect themselves against the communities they raided for people to sell” (*Architects of Poverty: Why African Capitalism Needs Changing*, 2009:x)

Although the struggle against colonial rule within the borders of the colonial state created unity among different nations within it, such unity was shallow and insufficient to form a cohesive national identity ... beyond race and oppression African nations within the colonial territory did not have much else in common. (38)

This suggests that instead of idealising the African multifarious entities which are called 'nations' today, and which were essentially constituted through European colonial violence, Africans should probably rethink the very notion of the nation and the concept of nationalism, and seriously acknowledge the central role that tribalism (both as a colonial construct and pre-colonial reality) has played in Africa's seemingly intractable problems.

Still pursuing an idealised vision, Ngugi suggests that the common fate of political prisoners at Kamiti forged an unbreakable bond of unity among them. He writes:

[W]e all shared a common feeling: something beautiful, something like the promise of a new dawn had been betrayed, and our presence and situation at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison was a logical outcome of that historical betrayal. (*Detained*: 63)

If we consider Matua's comments, the unity and amicable relations that Ngugi says existed amongst political prisoners during his stay at Kamiti may be viewed as people temporarily united by tribulation. Significantly, Ngugi's vision of a people who share an intense feeling of oneness is only limited to fellow political prisoners. His vision is not broad enough to encompass the entire prison population. The collective pronouns "we" and "our" in the above quotation clearly refers to political prisoners who were Ngugi's only companions during his stay at Kamiti. Since in *Detained* Ngugi largely represents the experiences of political prisoners in the jails of postcolonial Kenya, it is important to ask how representative he is of other subaltern voices, such as those of common criminals, the peasants and the urban underclass. In his book *The Number* (2004), Steinberg has shown that the political democratic transition in South Africa has not managed to alter the criminal landscape of the country significantly. As a result of narrow policies that only focused on overthrowing the apartheid political system, there has been a burgeoning of crime, which has come to threaten the very survival of the post-apartheid state. This suggests that African political programmes have to anticipate other challenges that stand in the way of creating socially, economically and politically inclusive and viable states.

The problems presented by Ngugi's posing as a spokesperson for the feelings and views of other prisoners notwithstanding, the above quoted passage leaves the reader in no doubt that Ngugi assumes that this shared feeling of betrayal that he talks about also embraces the society outside prison. Ngugi goes on to assume that this feeling is deep enough in post-colonial Kenya to lead to a national unity and patriotism that would extricate the nation from its politics of patronage and oppression. However, the events after the successful 2002 democratic removal of KANU from power by the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) for the first time since independence in 1963 indicate that tribalism still poses a serious challenge to Kenyan national development. Before it even started to govern, this unlikely coalition of numerous factions and leaders with competing interests and ambitions was fractured along two major tribal lines. There was the Kikuyu group of Kibaki, and the Luo party of Odinga. This duo was to lead to the disputed 2007 elections which turned bloody as people started to kill each other along tribal lines (Mutuo 2009: 182, 287). On 24 January 2008 Ann Talbot of the World Socialist Web Site reported:

At least 700 people have died in the three weeks of violence that have followed the disputed election that returned President Mwai Kibaki to power in Kenya. It is estimated that a quarter of a million people have been displaced from their homes. The deaths are a result of intertribal violence and the police opening fire with live rounds on unarmed demonstrators (1).

In 1981 Ngugi had made the following prediction:

One day these wishes (of freedom riding to liberty) will be transformed by the organized power and the united will of millions from the realm of morality into people's chariots of actual freedom from naked exploitation and ruthless oppression. (12)

Thirty years on after Ngugi's singing of the Kenyan people's deep feelings for national unity after their initial betrayal by the comprador bourgeoisie in his prison narrative, the bloody violence of late 2007 and early 2008 suggests that African problems need to be approached with caution and a soberness of mind.

In the end, Ngugi tries to offer an inclusive solution to the Kenyan crisis of governance. He admonishes:

Until democratic Kenyans, workers, peasants, students, progressive intellectuals and others, unite on the most minimum basis of a patriotic

opposition to the imperialist foreign domination of our economy, politics and culture, things will get worse not better, no matter who sits on the throne of power. (*Detained xv*)³⁴

This inclusivity remains at an abstract and problematic level. It remains unclear who these democratic Kenyans are almost thirty years since Ngugi penned the above words. He seems to use the term democratic with the bold conviction that it has one definition, when in practice it is not so. The term democratic or democracy has suffered a lot of abuse throughout the world, and in Africa in particular from the late 1950s onwards. For example, Shadrack Wanjala Nasong'o and Godwin R Murunga (2007) note:

[T]he honorific nature of the concept of democracy is such that all manner of political systems claim to be democracies. Even countries that have never held an election in decades, such as the former Zaire, are conveniently called 'democratic republics'. Others without a competitive party system, such as Uganda (1986-2006), call themselves 'non-party democracies'. (4)

What complicates the situation is that most of these "democracies" enjoy the political and economic patronage of most successful Western democracies. So, while Ngugi may be right in blaming Kenya's crisis on neo-colonialism and the predatory nature of the ruling elite, a theory that takes into consideration the changing dynamics of the internal structures of African societies, the impact of global forces on them, and the ways in which oppositionary politics and subversive discourse are always de-legitimated or co-opted into dominant discourses, is likely to lead to a more comprehensive explanation of Africa's problems.

Probably to his credit, Ngugi refuses to engage with issues of confession and self-interiority that the prison aims to engender in its victims. He writes:

A writer needs people around him ... In this literary target I was lucky to have for teachers, detainees and warders, who were very co-operative and generous in sharing their different mines of information and experience (8-9).

Although he emerges visibly more bitter and angry after his one-year stint in detention, he consistently places the prison at the collective, material and historical forces that led to its

³⁴ Karl Marx acknowledged the powerlessness and vulnerability of peasants and argued that they did not constitute a class. Marx declared: "They (peasants) cannot represent themselves, they must be represented". In Karl Marx. 1970: 170-171. "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte". *Selected Works in One Volume*.

birth in Africa, and never at the individual confessional level. He argues that the imprisonment of an activist “is not only a punitive act of physical and mental torture of a few patriotic individuals, but it is also a calculated act of psychological terror against the struggling millions” (14). He further calls it “a terrorist programme for the psychological siege of the whole nation” (14).

Conclusion

It is difficult to dislodge both Ngugi and Mandela from the domain of the “political” because they relentlessly refuse to engage the personal effect of the prison. For example Mandela dedicates only one paragraph to his solitary confinement experience and chooses not to dwell much on other prison privations. His autobiography is a public rather than a private affair. Yet the prison has, throughout its history, especially in the 19th century focused on the person, the individual. The refusal to engage the personal is of course itself a political act, it is a refusal to participate in the confessional, personal (and apparently ‘rehabilitative’) form of address that the prison sometimes demands. At the same time, there are dangers that attend on this erasure of the self, not least because it means that the insidious effect of the prison in recasting, aligning, speaking to, subjecting the individual is *repressed*. As we have seen, both Ngugi and Mandela make broad assumptions about the autobiographical subject and its ability to offer a coherent national narrative and the narrative of an identifiable and definable self. That this notion of the self is more complex than Ngugi and Mandela are willing to acknowledge is demonstrated in the prison autobiographical narratives of a number of South Africans. The next chapter examines First’s *117 Days*, Mashinini’s *Strikes have Followed Me*, and Breytenbach’s *True Confessions* in an attempt to understand some of the conditions that give birth to notions of a coherent bounded self and some of the limits that reveal this idea as slippery and complex.

Chapter 3: Prison and Solitary Confinement: Conditions and Limits of the Autobiographical Self in First's *117 Days*, Mashinini's *Strikes have Followed Me*, and Breytenbach's *True Confessions*.

Introduction

“Everything he has made pretty in its time. Even time indefinite he has put in their heart, that mankind may never find out the work that God has made from start to the finish” (Ecclesiastes 3 vs 11).

The title of this chapter takes its inspiration from Georges Gusdorf's seminal article entitled “Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie” originally published in 1956 and translated into English by James Olney in 1980 as “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography”. Gusdorf's article is an attack on René Descartes' famous dictum: “Cogito ergo sum” (I think therefore I am), and it also extends the Hegelian-Marxist view which claims that the self is only a product of the individual's interaction with society. Gusdorf's observations about autobiography are simple yet revolutionary in the understanding of the notion of the self. If Paul John Eakin's (1985) argument that “the writing and reading of autobiography presuppose the idea of the self” (198-9) is correct, then Gusdorf's following words go a long way in helping us locate the origins of the idea of the autonomous self. He writes:

[T]he genre of autobiography seems limited in time and space: it has not always existed everywhere ... it would seem that autobiography is not to be found outside our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures; but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was not their own.³⁵ (29)

When Gusdorf further points out that the “conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life [which autobiography assumes] is the late product of a specific civilization” he

³⁵ There is controversy as to what can be considered the first autobiography in the Western tradition. Gusdorf (1980:28-9) suggests that St. Augustine's (c. 398-400) *Confessions* marks the beginning of the autobiographical genre, while Huntington Williams (1983:3) and W.J.T. Mitchell (1990:648) see Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1770) as the pivotal starting point of the autobiographical genre. However, the rudimental elements of the notion of a coherent bounded self suggested in Descartes' words is clearly much more established than some critics claim. However, what is at stake in Gusdorf's argument is the Western idea of a *subject* which comes to *stand for*, or perhaps even *replace*, earlier or other notions of the unity of individual identity. While Gusdorf usefully points out the socially constructed nature of the Western notion of a coherent bounded self, the idea of autonomous self is clearly not *new*, but it is also not *stable*: it has experienced all sorts of vicissitudes through the centuries.

suggests that the notion of an autonomous, coherent bounded self is but an idea. Using and extending Gusdorf's insights on autobiography and its interpellation of an autonomous self, the lives and autobiographical narratives of Ruth First, Emma Mashinini and Breyten Breytenbach allow us to explore and interrogate popular conceptions of confinement, self-interiority and the related issues of subjectivity in the South African context.³⁶ While Mandela and Ngugi essentially bypass the confessional mode, the writers in this chapter tend to evoke it. In this sense, for them, "the political" becomes more intricately bound up with the shifting and indeterminate terrain of subjective interiority, and therefore more difficult to objectify, to apprehend, to demarcate. If we are to talk about the literary history of prison writing in South Africa and Kenya, we have to acknowledge these different modes, two distinct trajectories that lead to the present moment, and that the present moment draws on as it recasts, rethinks, re-engineers the experience of prison.

Building on Gusdorf's proposition, this chapter is framed by two main arguments both drawn from Eakin (1985). The central argument in Eakin's book is that "autobiographical truth is not fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and ... that the self that is the center of autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure" (3). I will argue that Ruth First's *117 Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation under the South African Ninety-Day Detention Law* (1965), Emma Mashinini's *Strikes have Followed Me All My Life: A South African Autobiography* (1989) and Breyten Breytenbach's *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1984) help us to appreciate that outside the narrative, the self of an autobiographical narrative is in fact in a state of mobile equilibrium and the process of telling the narrative helps the individual to half *discover* and half *create* the self. An examination of the autobiographical narratives of First, Mashinini and Breytenbach suggests that the bounded self that is presupposed in the autobiographical act, although not totally fictitious, is largely a creation of the narratives themselves, and that outside narratives it exists as an entity that recedes further and further away from all that is knowable. The fact that notions of the selves of all these writers almost totally collapse when the authors are placed in solitary confinement seems to support Gusdorf's observation that the bounded self presupposed in autobiographies is a purposeful culturally specific construct. The

³⁶ While my chapter specifically focuses on the relationship between solitary confinement and the autobiographical, a detailed study of such factors as historical sensibilities, race, education, language, culture and many others, in the depiction of prison experiences by South African women prisoners can be found in David Schalkwyk's "Chronotopes of the Self in the Writing of Women Political Prisoners in South Africa" (In *Apartheid Narratives* 2001: 1, 2).

experience of solitary confinement in prison, in other words, provides useful ground for us to think about what an autonomous “self” is, exactly, and where its boundaries are located.

While Gusdorf insists that the autobiographical genre expresses an 18th century European historical consciousness, it is interesting that J.U. Jacobs sees an emblematic relationship between imprisonment and the process of writing an autobiographical narrative. He argues:

The stripping of the prisoner, both literally and mentally by a series of interrogators provides the metaphor for the compulsive baring of the self that is autobiography, conscious self-disclosure through narration (1992: 124).

One could take it even further than Jacobs and claim that the stripping of the prisoner is *not* just a metaphor. The “modernist” prison is itself an 18th-century invention. Its idea of solitary confinement is firmly based on 18th century ideas about the value of solitary reflection and contrition. The Enlightenment prison is, in fact, the *deliberate* architectural expression of a cultural idea – the prison reflects the idea, but it also imposes it on people, it is one of those mechanisms that transform ideological abstractions to real experience. The caveat when we deal with African prisons is that they are not exactly Enlightenment prisons. They borrow some of the procedures, but not exactly the underlying ideas.

In the above quotation, Jacobs couples prison regimes with the autobiographical act and assumes that both processes are painful and involuntary. While the prison, in the words of Breytenbach, is a place of “repression and of baseness where the lowest instincts prevail ... a world of humiliation and whore’s values” (346), Jacobs problematically assumes that all autobiographical acts participate in this same logic. Admittedly, there is something both compulsively heroic and humbling about the act of writing the self. Viewed in this light, the way Jacobs makes a metaphoric linkage between the way the prisoner writes about and is written by the prison regimes, and the way he or she writes and is also written by the autobiographical narrative, is thought-provoking. As a result of this connection that he makes between prisoner and the autobiographical act, Jacobs concludes that “the prison memoir is best approached within the general category of autobiography, and more specifically as a confessional narrative” (125).³⁷ Jacobs’ critical distinction encounters serious problems when

³⁷ Peter Brooks warns that the phrase confessional narrative is not unambiguous. He says that a distinction should be made between various kinds of confessional narratives (In *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt and Literature*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. p. 3). For example, confessions can be made under relatively free conditions in the presence of a priest or a psychoanalyst, or one can be forced to confess through torture or other coercive means by one’s interrogators as was the case for First, Mashinini, Breytenbach and

applied to the strong tradition of human rights autobiographies, or autobiographies of personal suffering and triumph such as those of Mandela and Ngugi which I examine in the preceding chapter. Moreover, an examination of First's *117 Days*, Mashinini's *Strikes have Followed Me* and Breytenbach's *True Confessions* allows us to interrogate some of the assumptions related to what Jacobs calls the "conscious self-disclosure through narration" associated with "the general category of autobiography". These autobiographies are unique in that they are largely about, and emanate from, one specific chronotope; a period of solitary confinement in the police cells and prisons of apartheid South Africa.³⁸ In this light, it is the interface of painful solitary confinement and the self-reflexive interiority that isolation is supposed to foster that seems to lie at the heart of what First, Mashinini and Breytenbach are grappling with in their narratives.

The centrality of Ruth First's prison autobiographical account in South African prison literature is captured in Jacobs's observation that First is one of the pioneers of the tradition of the prison memoir (1992: 115). First was detained under the 90-Day Law on 9 August 1963 and was kept in solitary confinement for 117 days. She spent 89 days in the cells of Marshall Square police station and 28 in Pretoria Central Prison. First was a member of the South African Communist Party and had been implicated in the Rivonia incident, which saw Mandela and others being arrested. Although escaping arrest at Rivonia, she was arrested and detained without charge just three weeks later. Like First, Mashinini was kept in isolation confinement first at Pretoria Central Prison, and later at Jeppe Police cells for half a year. Although not directly involved in politics, she was at the time of her arrest the outspoken Secretary General of the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union of South Africa (CAWUSA). Breytenbach, a founding member of an obscure organization called Okhela which sympathized with black resistance movements, was a white anti-apartheid political activist like First. He was arrested and sentenced to nine years in prison in November 1975 when he entered South Africa from France to try and recruit members for his organization. Out of the seven and half years that he spent behind bars, almost two were spent in solitary confinement in Pretoria Central Prison. After their release from detention, First, Mashinini and Breytenbach wrote autobiographical accounts of their confinement experience. First's

other detainees during the apartheid era. Breytenbach is especially interesting because he insists on confusing the "literary" confession with the coerced police confession (in the process, perhaps, revealing a hidden dimension of coercion beneath the "literary" confession).

³⁸ I am using this Bakhtinian notion of chronotope as it is employed by David Schalkwyk in his "Chronotopes of the Self in the Writing of Women Political Prisoners in South Africa"? He defines chronotope as "the distinctive molding together of space and time into representational form and substance" and argues that "chronotopes are informed by historical and ideological pressures" (In *Apartheid Narratives* 2001: 1, 2).

117 Days, Mashinini's *Strikes have Followed Me* and Breytenbach's *True Confessions* have large sections which reflect on the psychologically debilitating effect of imprisonment in general, and of solitary confinement in particular. This confessional aspect of these narratives is what distinguishes them from Ngugi's *Detained* and Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*.

Debunking the Notion of Bounded Coherent Self

The solitary confinement of First, Mashinini and Breytenbach helps us to see that the individual autonomy that is valorised in certain autobiographical narratives is not as autonomous as we may have believed. This discovery helps us think through Gusdorf's assertion that the notion of a coherent autonomous self is largely a social construct popularized in the West in the eighteenth century. This also suggests that there is something destabilizing about the space of solitary confinement, enabling it to function as an experimental space in which notions of an integrated subject are put to the test and found wanting. While imprisonment in general exposes individual autonomy as illusory, First, Mashinini and Breytenbach's narratives specifically show that it is the space of solitary confinement that allows for the deconstruction of notions of an autonomous self.³⁹ In addition, it appears that solitary confinement allows these writers, and by extension the reader, to reconstruct and reconstitute the notion of the self on entirely new grounds. These texts help us to see that the self is not autonomous and transcendent, and that it is not constituted through a lonely process of introspection, but rather at the intersection of the material world, individual mental capacity which is dependent on the healthy functioning of biological bodily processes, and an indefinable spiritual entity. These narratives help us see that these three units do not and cannot operate independent of each other without the danger of the dissolution of consciousness. These narratives facilitate the discovery of some of the conditions that permit, but also limit, individuals from attaining and narrating the imaginary autonomous self.

What makes a comparative study of the confinement narratives of First, Mashinini and Breytenbach compelling is not so much of their authors' similarities as their differences. All of them were placed in solitary confinement for fighting against the social, economic and political injustices of the apartheid government. Mashinini stands out for being a black female who comes from an impoverished economic background and a disadvantaged intellectual tradition insofar as Western education is concerned. Financial challenges forced her to quit

³⁹ The irony is that the practice of solitary confinement is *based* on a belief in an autonomous self – Bentham's (1843) idea with the panopticon was an attempt to remove "bad influences" so that inmates could draw on their interiority, employ their agency in the service of reform.

school before getting her Junior Certificate. First and Breytenbach share the similarity that they are both white persons in apartheid South Africa who benefited from a reasonably estimable modern Western education and an upbringing which promoted notions of the attainability of an independent and fully conscious individuality. They were also both writers of some note before their incarcerations. But what marks them different is that Breytenbach was a reneging male Afrikaner, while First was a female communist Jew.⁴⁰ This means that despite being white and raised in a South Africa that fostered racial segregation and the superiority of the white races over all others, and the fact that both chose to ally themselves with the oppressed races and to fight for racial and social equality, their worldview was shaped by a number of different forces. Their different experiences of racial segregation were markedly dissimilar. Despite First's, Mashinini's and Breytenbach's disparate cultural, intellectual, political and economic backgrounds, their renditions of their solitary confinement experiences converge on the fact that the notion of an inherent bounded self that awaits narration is exposed as fiction. An examination of all three narratives reveals that subjectivity and the sense of the self are always processes in construction, both within and without an individual's control.

Philippe Lejeune's definition of an autobiography is useful in the examination of these narratives and for developing the arguments that I have raised above. Lejeune defines an autobiography as: "A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality" (1982: 193). Neat definitions have the inherent weakness of falling into the trap of what Zygmunt Bauman (1991) terms "the world of tidy classifications and filing cabinets" (9) in that they disregard the polysemic and polyvalent nature of the constitution of cultural processes such as the selves highlighted by the autobiographical narratives of First, Mashinini and Breytenbach. The restrictive nature of definitions notwithstanding, Lejeune is important as a point of departure for the examination of these prison accounts. At a glance, First's, Mashinini's and Breytenbach's narratives fit perfectly into Lejeune's definition. However, on close examination *117 Days*, *Strikes have Followed Me* and *True Confessions* do not just match Lejeune's definition but also open it up and reveal some of its disturbing assumptions.

⁴⁰ For a gender and racially sensitive analysis of First's *117 Days* see Daniel Roux's "*Presenting the Prison: The South African Prison Autobiography under Apartheid*" in a chapter entitled "Women in Prison" (PhD Thesis), 2007, pp. 152-194, and David Schalkwyk's "Chronotopes of the Self in the Writings of Women Political Prisoners in South Africa" in *Apartheid Narratives* (ed.). Nahem Yousaf, 2001.

Three areas of discussion can be highlighted in Lejeune's definition. These are: the central role memory, language, and an individual with a conscious awareness of his/her life as a narrative construct play in the production of an autobiography. First, let us start with the issue of memory. The centrality of memory to subjectivity is captured in Edward Casey's (1987) observation that human beings are made of their memories and that memory makes human beings (290). James Fentress and Chris Wickham (1992) also concur and add that "a study of the way we remember is a study of the way we are" (7). The reliance of autobiography on memory is probably indisputable. What may be in question is what constitute memory and how it is used in the act of writing an autobiographical narrative. Richard Terdiman (2003) alludes to the futility of any attempts to define such a contested concept as memory. He writes: "Memory is so constitutive, so indispensable to our intellectual and practical activity to begin with that every cognitive or discursive act or fact is already tangled up in mnemonic realm" (186). Suffice to say that I subscribe to Clifford Geertz's (1973) argument that "human thought is basically both social and public" (45). This view is also echoed by Boyarin (1994) who observes that "[m]emory cannot be strictly individual, inasmuch as it is symbolic and hence intersubjective. Nor can it be literally collective, since it is not superorganic but embodied" (26). In light of the above, First's, Mashinini's and Breytenbach's solitary confinement experiences show that memory is indeed contingent on a number of factors in both the present and past, material and immaterial, and social and individual realms. For example, in the opening chapter entitled "The Cell", First signals that as she reflects on the trauma of her solitary confinement her mind is subject to, but also a product of, the limited and desolate space of the police cell that she is subjected to. She writes:

Seen from the door the cell had been catacomb-like, claustrophobic. Concrete-cold ... The window, high in the wall above the head of the bedstead, triple thick – barred, barred again and meshed – with sticky black soot on top of three protective layers, was a closing, not an opening (7).

First's language evokes images of death and entrapment, implying that narrative is impossible in such an environment. The cell resembles a cold, crammed lifeless cemetery where creative thought is rendered infeasible. The triple barred and blackened window is not an opening but has become a metaphor for closure that asphyxiates thought and memory. First's language use in the above passage suggests that the prison *is* already its own metaphor. It is a stylistic version of the claustrophobia of the space. First cannot find a better metaphor for being locked up in a tiny concrete cell since she is already locked up in a tiny concrete cell.

In contrast, Mashinini's notions of the self are ambivalent and more complex than those of First. At times her narrative implies that she imagines herself as having an incorruptible inherent bounded self. She writes: "Everything was taken ... Everything was removed ... I sat in that place with nothing to read. Just with myself. The bare me" (1989: 61). Above, Mashinini uses imagery that is surprisingly close to the thing itself to represent herself as possessing a self that endures even when its covering layers are removed. The physical stripping of her personal belongings is a metaphor for the layers that supposedly cover an essential self that no amount of stripping can compromise. At other times she seems to be aware that the self is provisional and contingent. For example during the initial phase of her detention she suggests that her notions of the self are structured by the knowledge that she is detained under Section 22 of the General Laws Amendment Act which allows her to anticipate release after fourteen days. She is able to count days by the number of suppers she gets and after those fourteen days she declares: "And it was still Emma. I was still sane. I was myself" (62). These words anticipate her almost total collapse after she learns that she has been charged under Section 6 which provided for indefinite detention without trial.

Radstone and Hodgkin (2003) propose an idea related to Gusdorf's about the link between the development of the conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life and the emergence of autobiography when they argue that "[t]he history of memory is indissociably linked ... with the complex story of the emergence on the historical stage of a bounded, coherent self who comes to be understood as the 'container' or possessor of memory" (3). Breytenbach assumes that a coherent self is the product of a memory that forgets many things over time. He does not necessarily view this process of selective remembering as negative, since it allows for human creativity by letting the inessential details fall away. He writes:

Naturally I have forgotten a lot – I wouldn't be human otherwise. That is why I try to structure my mind – the one incident carries the echoes of others – like death. There is no composition like decomposition: not just a rearranging or falling apart, but verily rotting to the bone to bring to light the essential structure. (157)

Breytenbach's prison narrative seems written in a way that largely disputes the notion of a coherent self-contained memory that enables the individual to render a truthful and accurate account of an autobiographical self. For example, addressing the imaginary Mr Investigator of his narrative, Breytenbach writes: "*You* know that we're always inventing our lives. *You* know that what I'm confessing now is also the instantaneous invention of what might have

happened” (17). Breytenbach’s claim is very similar to Olney’s insight that “the autobiographer half discovers, half creates a deeper design and truth than adherence to historical and factual truth could ever claim to” (1980: 11). When Breytenbach says that his narrative is an instantaneous invention he captures a fact also highlighted by Hodgkin and Radstone when they point out that memory is not just the past but is rather about the present and is very much live and active (2003: 1).⁴¹ Eakin (1985) also proposes that the autobiographical act should be understood “as both a re-enactment and an extension of earlier phases of identity formation [and that] these self-defining acts may be re-enacted as the autobiographical narrative is being written” (227).⁴² Breytenbach and his jailers may agree that certain events took place, but their narration of these events will differ. The power of Breytenbach’s above statement lies in his realisation that a coherent self is not fixed for all time, but only exists in a state of mobile equilibrium that depends on factors which are both within and beyond the individual’s control. Solitary confinement violently disrupts this moving balance of the self since it suddenly removes the individual from an environment that enables it and gives it a semblance of stability.

The second aspect of Lejeune’s definition is that an autobiography is created through language as a story. This is seen when he says that an autobiography is produced from memory through a prose narrative. This means that language is intricately linked to the problematics of representation as already suggested by Eakin above. Eakin notes that “[m]uch of the controversy about the ontological status of the self in the autobiography has tended to polarize into a self-before-language or a language-before-self set of propositions” (191). Elizabeth Bruss (1980) also similarly says:

We were apt to take autobiography, for all its local variations of design and reticence, as at least expressive of a common underlying reality – a self existing independently of any particular style of expression and logically prior to all literary genres and even language itself. (298)

⁴¹ Breytenbach was enamoured with structuralist and poststructuralist theory, so the extent to which he is writing from experience and speaking as an academic is difficult to determine.

⁴² About the autobiographical process Eakin further observes: “The autobiographer may even be drawn to suggest that in the completed narrative that such a re-enactment has taken place. Thus the act of composition may be perceived as a mediating term in the autobiographical enterprise, reaching back into the past not merely to recapture but to repeat the psychological rhythm of identity formation, and reaching forward into the future to fix the structure of this identity in a permanent self-made existence as a literary text. This is to understand the writing of autobiography not merely as the passive, transparent record of an already completed self but rather as an integral and often decisive phase in the drama of self-definition” (*Fictions in Autobiography*, p. 226)

Lejeune's definition suggests this polarity by implying the priority of the self-before-language, which if one's memory functions properly can be unproblematically retrieved and expressed in the form of a prose narrative. An examination of the prison narratives of First, Mashinini and Breytenbach suggests that "[p]erhaps subjectivity takes shape by and in its language rather than using language as a 'vehicle' to express its own transcendental being" (Bruss 298). In fact these narratives suggest that instead of operating as separate entities, language and subjectivity may be mutually constitutive.

Furthermore, as we see in Breytenbach's words above, the ability to narrate or to use language implies invention, and inventions serve the present and not the past. But in order for the mind to narrate, it requires certain conditions, as First's and Mashinini's accounts show. Their confinement stories show that the ability to narrate, like subjectivity, is not inborn, nor is it learned once and for all time. This is dramatized by Mashinini's traumatic experience of failing to remember the name of her youngest daughter. First also realises that it is enforced isolation itself that inhibits self-narration. This is seen when she is transferred from Marshall Square police station to Pretoria Central Prison for 28 days. The Marshall Square cell with its catacombic shape and its grey dirty walls curtails First's agency and erodes her subjectivity. Although her new Pretoria environment is much cleaner and her cell more spacious in comparison with the Marshall Square cell, it does not make her more articulate. She writes: "Pretoria shone of bright polished steel and I grew increasingly subdued" (69). In Marshall Square Police cell, it was her memory, which she imagined to be the seat of the self, that was compromised; in Pretoria Central Prison, it is her ability to progressively and coherently articulate the self that she finds slipping away. She tries to conjure up her narrative ability through Bible reading, and when this fails she says:

I devised a plot for a novel. The characters were me and my friends, all cast in heroic mould. We planned and organized in opposition to the Government, called for strikes and acts of civil disobedience, were harassed and chivvied by the police, banned, arrested. Then we were locked in prison cells and here I was again, grappling with life in a cell. (69)

Caged as she is, and "bereft of human contact and exchange", she discovers that her life story can only be narrated in circles. This is also made clear by the use pronouns in the above quotation. The first sentence begins with the singular personal pronoun "I" and attempts to move away from the self by the use of the collective personal pronoun "we" in the third sentence, but it eventually retains to the isolated and confined "I" in the last sentence. No

matter how creative she tries to be, her story ends up in a prison cell. Accidentally, through her solitary confinement, she discovers that without human contact and exchange the self becomes slippery and impossible to pin down. She realizes that beyond the communal the self becomes demented and impossible to narrate.

Mashinini also discovers that it is contact with human beings which lifts her from a state of depression and mental inertia. When she is subsequently allowed visitors she observes: “After visits from my family or friends I felt restored. It gave me more strength than ever before” (86). Like First, she even looks forward to being interrogated. She writes: “And if they didn’t call me for interrogation, I really wanted to remind them, because interrogation was better than to be isolated and all by myself for all those months” (85). But one moving incident of the importance of loving human contact to the emotional and psychological well-being of the individual is illustrated by what Mashinini calls “the kiss of life” which she got from Sisa Njikelana, a fellow detainee and trade unionist, who despite being under police escort showed extreme bravery by walking up to Mashinini, greeted and gave her a warm kiss. Mashinini reports: “I carried the kiss with me for a very long time ... he put life into me” (83). These moments suggest that instead of being eternally bounded and coherent the self exists in a state continuous construction as the individual interacts with fellow humans.

In addition to being Breytenbach’s general academic stance, the cryptic nature of the bulk of *True Confessions* might also be an indication of how solitary confinement becomes a barrier to the individual’s ability to narrate the self coherently. The two years Breytenbach spent in isolation in Pretoria Central Prison are narrated in terms that defy any logic of an autobiographical narrative. This point is raised by Daniel Roux (2007) when he writes:

Of his nine years in prison, he spent two in solitary confinement, and these are also the years that are described in the most fractured, convoluted and self-reflexive prose. The later part of the memoir, which chronicles his life at Pollsmoor Prison, seems more willing to employ the mimetic conventions of realist narration. (214)

The following passage is characteristic of Breytenbach’s narrative style when he tries to represent his arrest, interrogation and the two year stay in isolation:

From room to room. Dying so as to be reborn. To die. To be reborn from room to room. From womb to space. From space to room. From room to coffin. From coffin to destiny of space. From space to nothingness (34).

Whatever Breytenbach is trying to say here about his detention experience, it amounts to a circling negativity. Probably we see here the influence of Zen Buddhism which Coullie et al (2006: 269) say permeates most of Breytenbach's work.⁴³ Room, womb, coffin are all collapsed into a kind of imprisoning space. The life story of the individual is reduced to birth, death and nothingness, processes that tend to elude proper narration.⁴⁴ The indistinct self that is implied in Breytenbach's above words is metaphorically represented in the metal mirror that he has to use when he shaves his beard during the period of his solitary confinement. Commenting on the hazy image of oneself reflected by this mirror he says: "In this surface one could see a vague reflection of yourself" (32). If the mirror as a metaphor for society, it becomes clear that a distinct sense of self is impossible in isolation. Popper (177) writes:

[A] consciousness of the self begins to develop through the medium of other persons: just as we learn to see ourselves in a mirror, so the child becomes conscious of himself by sensing his reflection in the mirror of other people's consciousness of himself. (110)⁴⁵

As Breytenbach comes to realize in his encounter with the metal mirror in solitary confinement, throughout adulthood human interaction continues to act as a mirror that reflects a recognisable outline of the self. Sienaert (2006) points out that "[t]he mirror as a powerful metaphor of identity can be traced throughout [Breytenbach's] art and writing" (270). Breytenbach himself says that the shaping of identity and its resultant self-identification is the product of a given society. He argues:

The sense of I ... is dependent on interaction with some thing or some body "out there". Community is usually the mirror ... We identify/situate ourselves in our interaction with and in relation to cultural constructs such

⁴³ Marilet Sienaert dedicates an entire chapter in her book *The I of the Beholder: Identity Formation in the Art and Writing of Breyten Breytenbach* demonstrating the huge influence of Zen Buddhism in Breytenbach's work. (2001: 15-42).

⁴⁴ Karl R. Popper and John C. Eccles propose that it was the invention of language which enabled humans to discover both the self and death. (*The Self and Its Brain*, 1977: 144). Paul John Eakin, on the other hand alerts us to the complexity of the situation. He argues: "Whether the self, that 'certain intricate watermark,' is literally discovered, made 'visible' in the autobiography, or is only invented by it as a signature, a kind of writing, is beyond our knowing, for knowledge of the self is inseparable from the practice of language" (*Fictions in Autobiography* 1985: 278).

⁴⁵ In fact Jacques Lacan claims that it is at this mirror stage that infants develop the first sense of the self. He writes: "This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage ... would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of the identification with the other, before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as a subject" (*Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 1977: 2). This suggests that discourse or language acts as a mirror for adults in the constitution of the self.

as language, religion, ideology, a shared narrative of history or destiny, adherence or resistance to specific values. (in Coullie et al 2006: 274)

That human interaction acts as a mirror for the individual to construct notions of the self is also suggested by Mashinini. She writes:

And then, one day, the interrogations stopped ... And I missed them ... I didn't think I knew myself any longer. There was no mirror. It's odd what happens when you don't see yourself in a mirror for such a long time. You don't recognise yourself. You think, who am I. (87)

Since both Breytenbach and Mashinini acknowledge that the self is constituted in social interaction, we can conclude that in solitary confinement the self is unhinged in ways that are difficult to enumerate. Breytenbach's own enigmatic prose that deals with his period of solitary confinement is illustrative of how without social interaction a coherent narrated self recedes into incoherence or, according to Breytenbach, into nothingness. But the autobiographical process that Breytenbach engages in can also be viewed as partially reversing this relentless march to nothingness by giving form to a life that may not have had the completeness that an autobiography bestows it.

For Breytenbach, humans' capacity for self-reflection and the need for presenting oneself as a coherent self is the very essence of an autobiographical narrative. The inability to present a single bounded autobiographical self is dramatized by the digressions that occur in the statement that he is forced to write over and over by his interrogators. He writes: "You writing. Hoping that you are still reporting the same story which you have invented and knowing that you are now deviating from it gradually, but not knowing how much" (30).⁴⁶ Earlier, Breytenbach implies that a coherent and autonomous subject is always in a state of construction throughout an individual's life. He asks: "Isn't that the whole process of our being, this looking for a name?" (13). Breytenbach suggests that the stable and coherent narrator of an autobiography is a fiction of the narrative itself. This is what is also meant by Gusdorf when he argues:

⁴⁶ Mashinini is similarly interrogated by being made to write. While she is clearly aware that they are trying to make her contradict herself she does not adopt Breytenbach's post-structuralist attitude towards the autobiographical process. She writes: "They'd make me sit down and write ... they wanted me to say things, but there was nothing I could write that would give anybody away" (75). She also reports that she found this form of interrogation tolerable than the verbal one. "I would sit and write; and write, and this was better for me. Maybe it was a way of being able to think what to say without for once anyone pushing me" (75).

[T]he original sin of autobiography is first one of logical coherence and rationalization. The narrative is conscious, and since the narrator's consciousness directs the narrative, it seems to him incontestable that it has also directed his narrative. (1980: 41)

To counter the imposition of coherence and rationalization that he sees inherent in biographical narratives, and to try and make his story as close as possible to lived experience as it unfolds from day to day, Breytenbach adopts a fractured narrative style which defies a linear understanding of time. This can be seen in the following passage: "It was the second day or perhaps it was the third, no, it was the first day. Then it was the fourth day, I mean it was the second day, it must have been the morning of the second day" (34). And in the following passage: "The questioning continued. At one stage – it must have been the second day – on that morning of the fourth day, no, I remember now, it was the third day, I was taken into a second room, slightly bigger" (35). Breytenbach's narrative technique does not only show the impossibility of accuracy when events are recalled from memory, but also demonstrates that "autobiography is condemned to substitute endlessly the completely formed for that which is in the process of being formed" (Gusdorf 41). However, I have argued that Breytenbach's disjointed narrative style also suggests that the experience of interrogation and imprisonment were so traumatic that they elude any coherent recollection and narrativization.

In Breytenbach's understanding, the confined spaces of the prison cell and prison confinement in general are violently anti-narrative places. He writes: "Whatever the detainee does or doesn't do whilst in prison is done under pressure" (28). For Breytenbach, the prison experience in general precludes rationality and coherence. This then implies that the completely formed narratives of former prisoners such as the ones that I examine in this thesis are mere substitutions of processes that were still unformed at the time the narrator was experiencing them. Hodgkin and Radstone (2003) suggest that the whole debate about narratives, be they historical, autobiographical or literary, comes down to the problematics of memory. They write:

To privilege memory as a tool of truth, through which the statements of authority may be subverted or contradicted, we must assume a direct correspondence between the experience and how it is remembered [but this is not the case since] the past is constituted in narrative, always representation, always construction. (2)

Breytenbach's narrative seems to confirm this view. In the "Notes" section of his text, he says: "My account of what happened is neither objective nor complete ... We are all subject to the fantasies of our world" (338).

Significantly, Breytenbach argues that the self is progressively moving into nothingness, with or without social interaction. In a 2001 interview with Sienaert, he says: "Self is ever-expanding emptiness ... the *awareness* of the changing, making, and unmaking of "self" is a dilation of emptiness. One is always becoming nothing ... one is always becoming death" (109). Mashinini characterises the interrogations by the security branch officers as a search for nothingness. She is frightened by the absurdity and the futility of the interrogations. She says that her interrogators sat "there in a room learning nothing, doing nothing, always questioning and never understanding what they were being told" (74). Their search for what they call the truth can be equated to the search of a bounded coherent autobiographical self that presumably resides in each individual. Mashinini's narrative suggests that both processes are exercises in futility. She writes: "Always they wanted the truth, when I had no more truth to tell. I don't think they ever understood that in fact there was nothing to give away. But they always tried to find it, this nothing" (74). If even in social interactions the destination of the self is always a vast emptiness as suggested by Breytenbach, solitary confinement merely acts as a catalyst of an inevitable process. But if we acknowledge that the self is formed in many forms of interaction, Breytenbach's pessimistic view of the self is also partly a result of his negative life experiences, especially his imprisonment and his two year-solitary confinement.

The third aspect of Lejeune's definition of an autobiography assumes that an autobiographical narrative cannot be possible without a self that has a conscious awareness of its life as a narrative. The narratives that I examine in this chapter seem to simultaneously confirm and problematize Lejeune's assertion. When First is initially thrown into solitary confinement she assumes that it would offer a space for thinking "without diversion" (7). But no sooner is she left entirely alone in this confined space than she realise that something which seems as individualistic and personal as thinking is also, in fact, a socially and materially generated processes. She writes: "Yet, not an hour after I was lodged in the cell, I found myself forced to do what storybook prisoners do: pace the length and breadth of the cell" (8). Ironically, even this act of pacing the length and breadth of the cell does not completely emanate from an imagined self which excludes social encounters. In the absence of any meaningful social activity she says:

I played child-like games in my head: going through the letters of the alphabet for names of writers, composers, scientists, countries, cities, animals, fruit, flowers, and vegetables. As the days went on I seemed to grow less, not more proficient at this game. This was the time I should have been able to feed on the fat of my memory ... I was appalled at the absence of my inventive and imaginative powers. (70-71)

The Bible and stories she had read before her imprisonment sustain some form of coherent thought for some time during the early days of solitary confinement. Her suitcase full of clothes also becomes a point of fixation which allows her to keep some measure of her personal identity. Additionally, she uses it to while away time by unpacking and repacking the clothes in the suitcase endlessly. Later on, after her attempted suicide, she could even get a few books which had to be approved by the prison authorities. David Schalkwyk notes: “Confident at first that isolation will provide a much desired retreat from the public world, First soon realizes that ‘isolation and privacy [are] not the same thing by any means (27)’” (2001: 9). Mashinini, who is stripped of all her personal belongings right from the outset, never imagines that solitary confinement will become a private thinking space. Her work as a trade unionist had always involved constant interaction with people, and she missed that as soon she was arrested. She realises that although she is not physically abused, isolating a person is an extreme form of “emotional battery” (77). First’s solitary confinement allows her to realize that “[e]xperience is the prime matter of all creation, which is an elaboration of elements borrowed from lived reality, [and] that [o]ne can exercise imagination only starting from what one is, from what one has tried either in fact or in wish” (Gusdorf 45).

The experience of solitary confinement of both First and Mashinini enables us to realize “that the self seems absent at precisely the moment its presence is most urgently required, that discursive knowledge seems radically incapable of giving presence or authority to the self” (Roux 2005: 29). The opening words of First’s narrative indicate that, despite the existence of a cultural landscape where the individual has become conscious of the self, there are both material and immaterial conditions that destabilize one’s ability to narrate a self-reflexive and coherent autobiographical self. First writes: “For the first fifty-six days of my detention in solitary I changed from a mainly vertical to a mainly horizontal creature” (7). First is of course reflecting on a past event. Nonetheless, in these words, we can still isolate some features associated with the Western notions of an autonomous subject that her solitary confinement arguably debunks.

Firstly, First's lack of meaningful human interaction heightens her awareness of how the notion of time is largely socially constructed, like the idea of the self. This is illustrated by her obsession with the accurate record keeping of days during her early days in solitary confinement. David Schalkwyk observes that the "very title of Ruth First's prison memoir, *117 Days*, attests to an intense preoccupation with time" (2001: 7). Although not necessarily showing her awareness that "[t]ime is a historical construct" (Radstone and Hodgkin (2003: 15), First's above words can be read as an unconscious deconstruction of the Western notions of the development of linear, progressive temporality which emerged in the eighteenth century. This conceptualization of time views history as progress. Ironically, in First's case, she devolves to lower levels of being with the passage of time. After fifty six days in solitary confinement she has defied the evolution theory by digressing into a horizontal creature. In fact, towards the end of her solitary confinement she had ceased viewing time as linear and progressive at all. She says: "I had completely lost track of time and even interest in keeping a wall calendar" (129). After being placed under Section 6, Mashinini also becomes numb and completely loses her agency. She writes: "All my trade union experience of demanding to see and not being refused just fell aside. Even going to bed became an effort. I was just a lump" (63). Solitary confinement has rendered time cyclical and meaningless, and we can also assume that an autobiographical self is impossible in such conditions for it relies on culturally bound conceptualization of time.

Moreover, the fact that the limited space forces her to spend most of her time lying on the uncomfortable bed makes her realize how self-consciousness is reliant on things that unrestricted and healthy people may take for granted. She suddenly realizes that people who are confined to bed, whether by imprisonment, as in her case, or by some physical ailment, can have a radically changed perception of the self and of the world. The vertical self and the horizontal self cannot have the same self-consciousness despite sharing the same cultural landscape mentioned by Gusdorf. First's account illustrates that a cultural environment that develops self-consciousness is a maze, since it is linked to many things. Literacy is supposedly one of the main determinants of a self that has the capacity of narrating itself autobiographically. With undisguised sarcasm Michael Lambek notes this, when he writes:

The (triumphal) history or historical consciousness said to be uniquely characteristic of Western societies has often been associated with literacy. In such arguments, whatever the attention given to the poetics of oratory or the training in memory, the oral ('pre-literate') society is inevitably characterized by an absence or lack. (202)

Mashinini indicates that white men who interrogate her have a challenge in accepting that a black person, and a woman for that, who did not complete junior certificate, can have the intelligence, organizational skills and courage to confront employers as she did. Their first assumption is that she is just a front for white communists. Mashinini says they would ask: “What was I doing with Alan Fine, and what was I doing with Neil Aggett, and what was I doing with Barbara Hogan?” (75). They also assume that Mashinini got her ideas from Marxist literature. She writes:

They wanted to know if I had ever read certain books – I can’t remember the names, because in fact I hadn’t read them, but they were Marxist books, because Marxists were the sort of people who have that type of thought, of bringing people together (75).

They insist “that somebody must have put this or that idea into [her] mind” (75). To use Lambek’s words, the assumptions that guide these men is that historical consciousness is uniquely a characteristic of Western societies and that Mashinini’s awareness of worker exploitation must be a Western ideological imposition. They condescendingly think that her black background is characterised by an absence or lack, an inability to individually feel oppression and exploitation.

In First’s case, she suggests that what exacerbates her disorientation in solitary confinement is partly her literacy in that she is unable to engage in sustained logical thinking without pencil and paper. She writes: “I had always had a bad memory ... and had relied all my life on pencil, notebook, Press clipping, the marking in the margin of a book to recall a source, a fact, a reference” (70). In First’s case, it is the lack of cultural props associated with the consciousness of the self which add to her experiencing her solitary confinement as a void, a nothingness where time eventually stops.⁴⁷ As a product of a post-event of her confinement experience, when her narrative opens, First seems to anticipate her descent into a creature who is unconscious of time if her stay in solitary confinement were to be prolonged. She writes: “Left in that cell long enough, I feared to become one of those colourless insects that slither under a world of flat, grey stones, away from the sky and the sunlight, the grass and people” (7). Breytenbach, who was allowed to write and paint in prison, experiences time in

⁴⁷On the other hand, it can be argued that the suitcase that she is allowed to take into her cell is another kind of cultural prop – this time one that supports her enactment of racialised gender assumptions. Despite being a woman Mashinini is not allowed to enact her gender in the same way as First. Patriarchal notions are at play in that while First is allowed a suitcase of clothes and toiletries Breytenbach is allowed to continue writing and painting. While the white woman must continue to look beautiful even in prison, she is not allowed to transgress her gender by being an architect of cultural thought through writing and drawing.

solitary confinement differently. He writes: “The Writer Destroys Time. I am a writer. I scribble ... Writing becomes for me a means, a way of survival. I have to cut up my environment in digestible chunks. Writing is an extension of my senses” (154-5). First’s rapid psychological collapse as evidenced by her attempted suicide can therefore be partly attributed to her being denied to write, something which had been an extension of her senses before her arrest.

It is important to note that First writes the account of her solitary confinement in the relative comfort of exile and not in the claustrophobia of the cold concrete walls of the Marshall Square police cell. She writes in order to re-gain the trust of her political friends by showing that she had not betrayed them during her agonizing one hundred and seventeen days in solitary confinement. She also seems determined to show that the psychological tactics that she was subjected to through solitary confinement are as violent as the physical torture that black prisoners, and later also some white prisoners, were subjected to. In addition to being a product of a self-conscious individual, First’s narrative becomes an unconscious plea for absolution. This is seen in her words after her attempted suicide precipitated by self-blame that she had betrayed her political colleagues. After some time she says she in fact had won:

How desperate they were for a statement and I would not give them one! At last I permitted myself my first scent of victory. I determined to shake off the all-devouring sense of guilt at my lapse. I had been reeling towards a precipice and I had stopped myself at the edge. I had *not* been too late to beat them back. I had undermined my own resistance, yet I had not after all succumbed. In the depth of my agony I *had* won. (135-6)

There is a dramatic shift from the collective to the individual in the above quotation. In just seven sentences First uses “I” nine times, “my” four times and “myself” twice. Despite her overt ideological intentions of casting her prison experience in the collective, in the end, First runs full circle and fails to escape the confessional logic of solitary confinement. Breytenbach is less self-congratulatory than First, and is very pessimistic about any victory that one may claim to have won by walking alive out of prison. He writes:

People say, how did you survive? I say, I did not survive. People say, but prison is a clear instance of opposition, of resistance. I say, resistance, if that is what you want to call survival, is made up of a million compromises and humiliations, so subtle that the human eye cannot perceive them. (258)

What First's account does not reflect, and what is emphasized by Breytenbach's account, is that the self is largely a matter of re-constructing the past for the present needs. This idea is put across strongly by James Olney who claims that in writing an autobiography the *autos* or the "I" half discovers and half creates itself" (1980: 21).

While First's account is preoccupied with her fear of losing a "bounded self" (Radstone and Hodgkin 5) that she assumes she inhabits, Breytenbach deliberately adopts a deconstructive stance that denies any possibility of understanding reality. He writes:

One mustn't be like those who always simplify 'reality' by attempting to understand it. One must live it; one should flow with the rhythm. You develop an awareness of the living structure – of that which is constantly doing itself: the patterns, the dialectic, the breaking points, the *limits* which are only the outer edges of pages and pages of silence, the relationships, and then where you lose all comprehension as the earth tilts away from you. Such is the structure of understanding. (308)

So, for Breytenbach, human understanding will be forever partial. The differences in the conceptualization of 'reality' between First and Breytenbach is partly a result of the fact that First was a committed Communist while Breytenbach's political ideology seems to have remained hazy even though he was involved in political activism against the apartheid regime.⁴⁸

The irony of course is that Breytenbach's refusal to take a strong position about anything makes a mockery of the seven and half years he spent in prison accused of being politically dangerous to the apartheid state. It will appear then that his non-committal philosophical posturing is a result of the disillusionment he suffered as a result of his long imprisonment.⁴⁹ If this view is correct, Breytenbach becomes one of those who surely did not survive prison as he himself claims; instead he is broken by solitary confinement and prison experience. Despite the fact that the bulk of what he says in *True Confessions* is obscure and evasive, the reader cannot fail to detect Breytenbach's strong revulsion towards the prison and its regimes

⁴⁸ In the end Breytenbach was not even jailed on a political charge but on a criminal one – a combination of political indecisiveness and poor legal counsel.

⁴⁹ Roux points out that Breytenbach may have come into prison with some of these ideas and the prison then reinforced them. He writes: "The self-reflexivity, philosophical digressions, formal experimentation and the insistence on the deeply personal nature of experience that characterise *True Confessions* are all evident in his earlier work in Afrikaans. To a certain extent, in other words, his experience of incarceration is inflected through the literary sensibility that he brings to prison" ("Presenting the Prison: The South African Prison Autobiography under Apartheid" 2007: 232).

and how it left permanent marks on his subjectivity. Reflecting on his experience after being taken out of solitary confinement at Pretoria Central Prison and transferred to Pollsmoor Prison, he says:

Prison, for me, is the absolute stripping away of all protective layers: the sounds are raw, sights are harsh, smells are foul. The scars are there, like tattoos on the mind. You are reduced to the lowest – common denominator – being alone (and scared and weak to the point of being suffocated by a self-disgust) whilst always surrounded by others. (258)

While for First it is only solitary confinement that has a debilitating effect on the self, for Breytenbach the communal cell and the solitary cell merge; both strip away all human pretences and reduce the individual to the lowest common denominator, the level of a vulnerable animal.

For First, solitary confinement becomes a painful accidental experimental space which almost enables her to realize that the self is formed at the intersection of personal mental endowments, material environment and the social realm. She discovers that the formation of subjectivity is not a solitary process. However, on reflection, what she finds alarming is that the apartheid South African security agents may in fact have been consciously conducting experiments on human beings by subjecting them to solitary confinement and other methods of torture. She muses:

Perhaps one day the South African Security Branch will plead that it used psychological torture for the benefit of science: that from its files one can study the case histories of its victims to discern ‘cracking-points’, resistance to suggestion, the correlation of psychological types with will and ability to exist over long periods of time in isolation.(133)

First herself, courtesy of the torture methods of the Security Branch, is peering into her own subjectivity and those of others who went through similar experiences trying to discern ‘cracking points’. For example, reflecting on the experience of solitary confinement she observes:

It is so difficult to know beforehand who would fare well or badly. Men holding key positions in the political movement, who had years of hard political experience and sacrifice behind them cracked like egg shell. Others, with quiet, reticent, self-effacing natures, who had been woolly in

making decisions and slow to carry them out, emerged from long spells of isolation shaken but unbroken. (132)

So for the victims of apartheid cruelty, too: the brutal methods of the state security forces inadvertently worked as a refining furnace among their rank and file. The irony of course is that my own analysis of First's, Mashinini's and Breytenbach's solitary confinement narratives is a quasi-scientific study of the human condition that First postulates the apartheid Security Branch torture files may one day shed light upon.

All the prison auto/biographical narratives discussed so far are about political prisoners. All these people were individuals with a fair amount of Western education, and except for Mashinini, they had at least been to university. As a result, the concerns and selves that are presented in their narratives are largely shaped by either their political ideologies or by their academic background. This in itself is not a weakness, but it results in a partial understanding of what constitutes Kenyan and South African crime and prison experience. The next chapter, and others that follow it, are attempts to expand our understanding of power, criminality and imprisonment in Kenya and South Africa by exploring prison narratives about or by "non-politicals" and "non-academics".

Chapter 4: Crime, Prison and Narrative in Jonny Steinberg's *The Number: One Man's Search for Identity in the Cape Underworld and Prison Gangs*.

1. Prison, Power and Representation

The African prison has often been represented through polarities. One camp approaches it through the question of human rights and examines the inherently oppressive historical processes that attended the birth of the prison on the continent. For example, Florence Bernault in a *History of Prison and Confinement in Africa* (2003) argues that the post-colonial African prisons should be understood through the prism of exploitive and oppressive political and economic colonial and imperialist discourse of late 19th century Europe. Similarly, Jeremy Sarkin (2008) in *Human Rights in African Prisons* traces the trajectory of the current deplorable human rights abuses in most African prisons back to the way the prison first emerged as a tool of political and social subjugation of Africans when European nations scrambled to establish their political and economic dominance over the continent⁵⁰. However, other writers seem to be more concerned with how the prison structures prisoners' consciousness, subjectivity and identity. This is largely the way Bosman in *Cold Stone Jug* (1949), Breyten Breytenbach (1994) in *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* and Ruth First in *117 Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation under the South African 90-day Detention Law* (1965) explore their prison experience in South African colonial and apartheid jails. Interestingly, the divisions of these auto/biographical accounts seem to relate to racialisation. In the above texts the prison is understood as a purely social/political phenomenon by some writers, while other writers focus on the subjective experience of the prison. In contrast, *The Number* is a text that tries to engage both. My analysis of Steinberg's *The Number: One Man's Search for Identity in the Cape Underworld and Prison Gangs* (2004) asserts that in his biographical narrative of Magadien, Steinberg, with varying levels of success, attempts to offer an examination of the prison that seeks to break down these divisions associated with the study of the African prison.

Steinberg's *The Number* is a self-reflexive and sophisticated re/presentation of Magadien's life story as it is framed by crime, prison and other exigencies that impinge on the lives of many coloured people during and after apartheid. *The Number* is the story that Steinberg tells about Magadien, a 43 year old coloured man from the Cape Flats who, at the time Steinberg meets him, has spent a quarter of a century in South African jails as a senior member of the 28

⁵⁰ The prison auto/biographical narratives of Nelson Mandela and Ngugi wa Thiong'o that I have examined in chapter one can be viewed as participating in this discourse of compartmentalizing the prison alongside all historical oppressive processes and institutions that attended the violent colonial invasion of Africa.

Number prison gang. The narrative is also what Coullie et al (2006:4) would call a collaborative auto/biography or mediated testimony. I will refer to Steinberg's book as an auto/biography, because as Daniel Roux points out, "as much as Steinberg recounts Magadien's life story, he is ... also producing an autobiographical narrative about his own encounter with Magadien and his world" (2007: 262). If I may corrupt the title of Roland Barthes highly deconstructive autobiography, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977) in order to reflect its collaborative nature and the instability of both Steinberg and Magadien as unitary self-knowing subjects, I may call Steinberg's book *Steinberg and Magadien by Steinberg and Magadien*. Coullie et al point out that in collaborative auto/biographies "matters can become less amicable ... as struggles erupt for control over the narrative of a life" (4). Steinberg being an academic white man, and Magadien an underprivileged coloured man, *The Number* may be read as a book that explores the extent to which Steinberg's and Magadien's narratives harmonize or come into conflict over the issue of race and privilege. Gloria Anzaldúa claims that boundaries are sites of contestation (1987: 18), and Carole Boyce Davies argues that collaboratively written "life stories are boundary-breaking texts" (1992). The conflict between Magadien and Steinberg, which Steinberg faithfully records, may therefore be read as an inevitable consequence of the collaboration of two different stories colliding or pulling in different directions. Over and above this, *The Number* displays what Coullie et al refer to as "the heteroglossic nature of individual and collective identities shaped by the intersection of a web of narratives" (7).

The Number bears out Coullie et al's (2006) observation that the "relationship between fact and fiction, truth and metaphor, and its particular inflection in auto/biographical accounts is another much debated feature of the genre" (52). In *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981) Bakhtin gives the name chronotope to this problematic of representation. He defines chronotopes as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84). This suggests that all narratives are by their very nature artistic expressions which attempt to capture an intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships of one kind or another. Commenting on the challenges that attend any process of representation, Bakhtin observes that "the articulation of actual historical persons in ... time ... has a complicated and erratic history" (Bakhtin 84). Since *The Number* is an attempt to articulate the experiences of actual historical persons narratologically, it creates an interesting convergence of genres which leads to a text "whose importance resides in the fact that it flirts with the relationship between fact and fiction" (Coullie 52). Steinberg's book shows that prison and nation are intimately connected not only materially but discursively. In this regard

Bakhtin's notion of chronotopes is useful in trying to see how Steinberg's auto/biographical narrative grapples with the representation of time, space and place in relation to prison, prisoners and nation.

Foucault's claims that power does not operate in a hegemonic manner is also useful for analysing the distribution of power in Steinberg's collaborative auto/biography and for discussing the distribution of power between warders and Number prison gangs that we see in *The Number*. This Foucauldian conceptualization of power, where it "is born out of a plurality of relationships which are grafted onto something else, born from something else, and permit the development of something else" (Foucault 1989: 187), is absent in most colonial and apartheid prison auto/biographical narratives.⁵¹ In these narratives the prison is depicted as unambiguously supporting a clear binary between subject and subjected. For example, *Long Walk to Freedom* portrays an unproblematic Manichean universe. Mandela and his fellow political prisoners are justly fighting against an oppressive, exploitative and dehumanising racist state apparatus. They are on the side of justice, therefore they will be victorious. The protagonists use every means necessary, including the colonial justice system, to pursue the righteous agenda of national liberation from colonial or apartheid oppression. *The Number* problematises this simple binary of the oppressed versus the oppressor. Steinberg shows that the Number prison gangs do not just use the legal system to achieve what they term social justice within the prisons, but they in fact possess and constitute the legal apparatuses in a menacingly ambivalent way.⁵² The task of political prisoners seems straightforward because "[t]he dominant model power – and interest-relations in all colonial societies is the Manichean opposition between the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native [and the opposition is always between] white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other, subject and object" (JanMohamed, 1985: 63). In *Long Walk to Freedom*, court appearance is viewed and employed for different purposes by both the oppressor and the oppressed. The oppressor uses it as a platform for giving his

⁵¹ Instead of focusing on how power functions in complicity with the State, in his last years Foucault was interested in the way power is practised in marginal everyday social settings that have a bearing on the formation of the identities of individuals. William Chaloupka notes that Foucault studiously avoided theorizing a confrontation between "Power with a capital P, a kind of lunar occurrence, extra-terrestrial," on one side, and "the resistance of the unhappy ones obligated to bow before power" on the other. But he then observes that this move is precarious, opening Foucault to charges of political evasion. Chaloupka in *Getting a Life Everyday Uses of Autobiography* (ed.) by Sidoine Smith and Julia Watson, 1996 (369-370).

⁵² In addition to other theoretical thinking that I have already mentioned, this chapter also explores Steinberg's discussion of the complex Number prison gangs' lore and the tantalizing relationship between the warders and Number gangs through Bhabha's provocative notions of ambivalence, mimicry and hybridity as presented in *The Location of Culture* (1994).

oppressive and exploitative project a human face by going through the motions of justice. On the other hand, the “criminal” colonial or apartheid subject views it as another arena for extending the struggle against the evils of colonial or apartheid rule. *The Number* as a post-apartheid text undercuts this distinction. Steinberg’s narrative shows that the polemic binaries created by the Manichean world of colonialism and apartheid is misleading and become notably blurred and problematic after the demise of colonial rule and apartheid. The Manichean epistemological worldview of the colonial and apartheid worlds which produces diverse but uncomplicated binaries are exposed in Steinberg’s narrative. *The Number* can therefore be regarded as critiquing both the Manichean worlds of colonialism and apartheid on one hand, and that of the anti-colonialism associated with the national project, on the other. In this light, Steinberg’s narrative may be said to be participating in the post-colonial discourse which has often been associated with challenging both the colonial-apartheid and national Manichean dichotomies.

The Number participates in, and comments on, a general post-apartheid inclination to retell South African myths and stories, this time devoid of polarized binaries. Similarly, the Number gangs are also engaged in a process of reinvention. When colonial and apartheid oppression were removed at the attainment of majority rule in 1964 and 1994 in Kenya and South Africa respectively, the Manichean categories of understanding relationships among citizens were destabilized. National liberation leads to a crisis in terms of national identity and subjecthood. It is as if, to quote from Yeats’ famous poem, the centre can no longer hold. For South Africa as a nation “the first decade ... was a transitional moment, a period in which new myths, symbols and political structures were generated” (Samuelson 2007: 1). With regard to the South African prison after 1994, Steinberg’s *The Number* suggests that the underworld of the prison enters a transitional process and embarks on a search for new myths and symbols. Steinberg’s narrative shows that in South Africa crime and the notorious prison gangs, the Number gangs, like any social institutions that have endured the test of time, possess a malleable history and are subject to changing material and discursive conditions.

One of the astute observations that Steinberg seems to make is that the history of the Number gangs, both during and after apartheid, resists the official dichotomies between good and evil, political and common criminal. His account demonstrates that the emergence of these prison gangs is embedded in European imperial expansion and the conquest of South Africa. However, Steinberg suggests that the Numbers gang’s fortitude and ubiquitous nature largely derives from a powerful narrative weaved by the prisoners themselves and the rituals that developed under peculiar prison conditions over many decades centring around Nongoloza

the chief bandit-cum-prison warder. Referring to the power of stories in prison, especially the ability to recite the myth of Nongoloza, Steinberg observes:

[P]rison is a world nourished by stories. It would be no exaggeration to say that that the master story – that of Nongoloza, the God of South African prisoners – organises life behind bars. A prisoner's capacity to imbibe and retell that tale is probably his most potent weapon ... Stories in prison are weapons, tools, the stuff of action; they are insinuated into the exercise of power. (*The Number 7*)

This suggests that the prison as a social institution, and the Number gangs in particular, do not only depend on material conditions but also on narrative(s) for their emergence, propagation and persistence. In the mythical Number narrative as told by Magadien, Nongoloza, the father of the Number, is represented as an anti-colonial figure who begins his career as a robber because of the injustices of the exploitative and socially destructive capitalist culture ushered in by the discovery of gold at some undisclosed location in South Africa. However, Nongoloza surpasses the role of a mere anti-colonialist in that his criminal activities are not restricted to the robbing of the imperialists since he targets especially the vulnerable, the disposed and exploited African black mine labourers. Finally, his complicity with the oppressor is capped by the fact that the historical Nongoloza in his later years becomes a prison warder. Interestingly, both the mythical Nongoloza of the Number gangs and the historical one resist classification by occupying a space that is simultaneously envied, hated, despised and feared by both the colonial oppressor and the oppressed. Similarly, Nongoloza's progeny, the now country-wide Number gangs, see themselves as fighters for prison reforms and justice, but they are also perpetrators of heinous prison crimes and they tacitly collude with prison authorities to oppress and victimise their fellow prisoners. These disconcerting and uncanny insights question the simple binaries of political prisoners versus common criminals that have been evident in most South African prison narratives that emerged out of the apartheid prison experience.

Steinberg locates the prison at the intersection of particular global narrative routes. He shows that the emergence of the prison itself, as well as certain narratives and subjectivities which have come to be inseparably associated with the prison, owe their existence, propagation and perpetuation to discourse, and more specifically to their ability to be mythologised and narrativised. For example, I have already noted that Bernault (2003) persuasively connects the birth of the prison in Africa with the colonial narrative which portrayed colonial prisons as

participating in the noble project of weeding out the incorrigible and unproductive African from society to facilitate the unhindered spread of enlightened European civilization. Meanwhile, the colonial prison as experienced by Africans was as a violent physical tool of colonial subjugation, a means of intensifying ideas of racial segregation, political oppression, and a way of extracting cheap and often free labour from the natives, especially in the case of South Africa (3-4).

In apartheid South Africa, the prison was at the centre of the economic management of the country as the mass incarceration of mainly black and coloured people ensured that wealth remained firmly in the hands of one racial group.⁵³ Steinberg reports:

The tiny prisons that dotted the Western Cape hinterland were, in reality, stations for the distribution of cheap labour ... farmers' district associations were permitted to build 'prison farm-stations' which were managed by the Department of Prisons. Farmers throughout the district could employ prisoners in proportion to their contribution to building the prison. The inmates themselves were paid nothing. (*The Number* 172)

Interestingly, Steinberg suggests that the coloured ghetto was also an economic management tool of the apartheid regime. He shows that ghettos created after the forced mass removals of the coloured and black people in the 1960s from areas that had been declared white were clear attempts by the apartheid regime to exercise power over the powerless through spatial reorganisation. The isolation and squalor of ghettos allowed them to function as prisons for whole communities of coloured people. Although few women were incarcerated in apartheid jails, Steinberg suggests that the ghettos were themselves forms of imprisonment. Steinberg's depiction of Rusthof, a coloured ghetto in the Strand, is instructive in this regard. Steinberg writes:

Rusthof ... is entirely flat. It is laid out in a symmetrical grid, some roads tarred, others sand, the houses one-roomed matchboxes, packed together in dense rows. There isn't a patch of grass in the township's public spaces; it is as if the place is forever a few days old, the soil just turned, the flora not yet

⁵³ Another example of the use of prison to regulate labour in South Africa is the use of the infamous Influx Control Act which led to the mass incarceration of mainly black people whose only crime was to be in an urban setting without a pass book. With regards to colonial Africa in general, Peté (2008: 44) also indicates that the imperialists constructed a narrative of the innately criminal African to justify the development of colonial prisons when in fact the controlling of crime was not the real agenda of these prisons. Sarkin (2008) also concurs with Bernault and Peté that "the subjugation and control of the local native populations for economic, political and social purposes" was always the real motivating factor in the development of colonial prisons (13).

planted ... The combination of the flat, arid township, the gigantic peaks and the wild energy of the weather, leaves one feeling small and exposed (*The Number* 159).

What is striking about the above description is the mechanised nature, lifelessness, claustrophobic quality and the hostile natural environment in which Rusthof is located. Steinberg seems to imply that this location was deliberately chosen, and the conditions engineered to engender feelings of psychological disorientation and powerlessness in the inhabitants of this ghetto. This suggests that the architects of apartheid wanted these ghettos to exist in splendid isolation under prison-like conditions.

It is clear then that both colonial and apartheid regimes used the prison and spatial engineering not only to subjugate the majority African native populations, but also primarily as an economic tool. Said's observation that Africa is "a part of the world whose modern history is largely intelligible as a result of colonialism, and whose present travail cannot be detached from the operations of imperialism" ("Interview" 1976: 36) helps us to appreciate that we cannot fully study the African prison without acknowledging its link with European colonial expansion and the modern Western imperial regimes, an expansion that ultimately delivered the globalised world of today.

In addition to prison and spatial organisation, Steinberg indicates that the apartheid state also used the welfare system as economic management tool. He shows that for the ghetto coloured communities in the Western Cape the prison and the welfare system served the same purpose of excluding the coloured people from playing a central role in the economic and political life of South Africa. Steinberg writes:

The government of the early and mid apartheid eras locked itself ... into a welfarist relationship with Cape Town's coloureds ... The women of the Flats were bombarded with advice and child welfare cheques; industrial schools and places of shelter; many young men were imprisoned. Reading through the figures of incarceration rates of the 1960s and 70s is an astonishing experience; coloureds were incarcerated at twice the rate of Africans. (*The Number* 124)

Loic Wacquant's (1999) notion of carceral-assistential complex helps us to understand the apartheid regime's use of both the prison and the ghetto to manage the economic and political landscape of the country. He argues that the United States of America is characterised "by

carceral-assistential complex which carries out its mission to surveil, train and neutralize the populations recalcitrant or superfluous to the new economic and racial regime according to a gendered division of labor, the men being handled by its penal wing while (their) women and children are managed by a revamped welfare-workfare system designed to buttress casual employment” (97). Steinberg shows that the apartheid state followed a similar system in order to perpetuate white economic privilege.

When it comes to the South African post-apartheid prison, Steinberg indicates that it may be continuing the tradition which characterised the colonial and apartheid states where the prison was a major political tool of economic management. The post-apartheid prison may be participating in the global trends of modernist states, where Zygmunt Bauman (1998) claims prisons play a central role in the management of excess labour produced by the capitalist system. According to Bauman imprisonment is, for many post-modern states, “*an alternative to employment; a way to dispose of, or to neutralize a considerable chunk of the population who are not needed as producers and for whom there is no work ‘to be taken back to’*” (111-112). He argues that prisons are laboratories “of the ‘globalized’ society, where the techniques of space-confinement of the reject and the waste of globalization are tested and their limits are explored” (111-122). Bauman points out that this excess labour is a resultant of the global changes that make it easy to translocate firms and factories to the parts of the globe where the production cost would be cheaper than in industrialized nations.

Despite the strong link that Bauman argues for between mass incarceration in a number of late modern societies and global economic trends, in *The Number* Steinberg shows that in colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid settings prisons are both materially and discursively constituted. This coincides with Said’s view that the concept of nation itself is largely constituted discursively and that the “power to narrate, or to block other narratives from emerging, is a very important to culture and imperialism” (1993: xiii). Similarly, the European colonial project was motivated by economic considerations, but it was also given impetus by its ability to effectively propagate notions of civilization which asserted the superiority of Western culture over those of the colonised. This is not to play down the economic considerations in the colonial and imperial projects and the constitution of such institutions as the prison. It merely emphasises the fact that we come to experience our material conditions through the medium of narrative. Steinberg shows that the prison becomes a revealing national story if it is read carefully. He shows that in the case of South Africa, especially with reference to the emergence of the Number prison gangs, the colonial prison metamorphosised and did not remain in the absolute control of its progenitors. While it

largely continued to be used in the service of producing a narrative of the criminal African, the colonial prison started to be haunted by forces that could not have been anticipated by its creators. Eventually, in the post-apartheid period, the haunted prison started to possess and constitute the state in ways that continue to baffle the South African nation. This suggests that power is never merely a totalising narrative imposed from above, even in coercive institutions such as the prison. Once power enters a network of people, it becomes disseminated and appropriated in unexpected ways.

Locating the prison within the global discourses of colonialism and imperialism also allows us to read *The Number* through Said's views on the individual agency and the operation of knowledge and power in the colonised and formerly colonised world as articulated in *Orientalism* (1978) and in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). *The Number* can also be read through Said's notion of being "in and out of things" or the fascination with in-between zones which, as Said himself points out, informs all his work (Edward Said Interview with Imre Salusinszky, 1987). Said's *Orientalism* is especially useful because in addition to transforming the way we look at the literary representation of the orient, it explores how knowledge is used to legitimize and defend power (Barsamian 2003: xi). In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said argues that "recent criticism has concentrated on narrative fiction, yet very little attention has been paid to its position in the history and world empire" (xiii). In his prison narrative of Magadien, Steinberg does not only show the centrality of stories in the constitution of national and individual identities and subjectivities, but he also interrogates the position of narratives in what Said calls "the history and world empire". Said clearly connects stories or the ability to block or propagate them to the notions of the operations of power in both colonial and post-colonial/post-apartheid settings. What *The Number* shows, however, is that even amongst individuals relationships are negotiated or contested through the ability to make one's story heard. Steinberg's book dramatizes this through his relationship with Magadien and also the relationship between the warders and the Number prison gangs.

In a way, Steinberg's narrative bears testimony to Foucault's observation that the introduction of the biographical was important in the history of penality and that power started to operate through the practices of autobiographical narratives (*Discipline* 252). Similarly, Spivak's argument that what complicates the process of representation is that it is impossible to represent one's life or experiences of other people without the mediation of ideology (1987: 145) reverberates throughout *The Number*. For Spivak writing or storytelling is not only an exercise in theory but also praxis. Although Steinberg did not intend to invite power into his story of Magadien's life, both he himself and Magadien are intensely aware of its presence in

their daily interaction. Magadien complains that Steinberg's interrogative and detective-like procedures of obtaining information cause him intense psychological pain. He rebukes Steinberg:

You thought you could get me to tell my story without causing me pain. Are you mad? How can I talk about my life without feeling pain? (240)⁵⁴

Magadien experiences his encounter with Steinberg as a violent process that invades his private space through exposure and surveillance. This is the way the TRC's techniques were experienced by some victims of apartheid abuses.⁵⁵ Meanwhile Steinberg indicates that at one point he adopted the superciliousness of the TRC architects in thinking that the process of confession offers both public healing for the nation and private healing for the victims as they experience closure. He retorts to Magadien: "I'm writing a book ... I am sharing your pain with the world" (241). Magadien indicates that it is precisely the fact that Steinberg is telling his story for him that contributes to the pain that he feels. He says: "I want to write a book about my life, but I can't ... I need you here ... And the result is that it's your book, not mine" (241). Spivak's question echoes strongly here, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" But we can also extend the question, "Can Steinberg Speak?" Both Magadien and Steinberg think that the privileged academic can. Nonetheless, Steinberg's intense consciousness of the theoretical caveats pertaining to power renders his speech somewhat provisional; always potentially under erasure. We have seen that Magadien is incapacitated by his position of weakness in relation to Steinberg. What complicates Steinberg and Magadien's relationship is that the stories they want to tell diverge and compete for space.

What Georges Gusdorf says about an autobiographer is also true of a biographer like Steinberg. He claims that in his or postulating of meaning and deciding which facts to use or not use he or she is guided by a "preconceived intelligibility" (1980: 42). This is made clear in Magadien's following words:

⁵⁴ Antjie Krog is of the opinion that healing of individuals and nations aside, the stories that the TRC generated justifies their own existence. She writes: "Because of these narratives people can no longer indulge in their separate dynasties of denial" (*Country of My Skull* 1998: 89). Despite the glaring unequal power relations that are evident between Magadien and Steinberg, *The Number's* existence can probably be justified by the mere fact that it serves as an amazing archive of the under-researched Number gangs and their relationship with the prison regimes.

⁵⁵ Graybill reports that some 50-60 percent of the victims seen by the trauma centre had suffered serious difficulties after testifying. For example, Yazir Henry writes about his experiences after testifying: "I could not interact with anybody other than the members of my immediate family. It felt as if I had spent everything that was inside me and the slightest bit of external pressure would finally and completely crush me" (in Graybill, 2002: 83).

I wait for ten o' clock, and I think, Jesus, what is he going to ask me now? Is he going to ask me something, something important, and I will have forgotten? ... So, ja, every time you come into this cell, I am scared, scared to find that I haven't been there for most of my life, scared that you will have discovered something about me I can't afford to remember. (241)

What causes conflict between Steinberg and Magadien is that they have different preconceived understandings of the stories they want to tell. Weintraub (1975) makes a similar point about an autobiographer who has gained a vantage point from which it is possible to offer a retrospective view of a life. He argues that such an autobiographer "imposes on the past the order of the present. The fact once in the making can now be seen together with the fact in its result. By this superimposition of the completed fact, the fact in the making acquires a meaning it did not possess before. The meaning of past is intelligible and meaningful in terms of the present understanding" (826). As it emerges Steinberg and Magadien's different pasts and their different understandings of the present make them arrive at completely diverse meanings of Magadien's life.

As we have seen, what complicates Steinberg and Magadien's relationship is that Steinberg thinks that he is offering Magadien a therapeutic confessional space. Magadien on the other hand seems to be interested in what Gusdorf (1980) calls "a work of personal justification" (39), and realizes that as much as Steinberg is offering him the opportunity to tell his story, Steinberg's narrative also closes his mouth. In a statement that eloquently captures this conflict of interests, Magadien says:

Do me a favour. Shut up and write your book. Stop saying Magadien this, Magadien that. It is giving me a headache. Just write your fucking book. Do it from your heart. Make it true to how you have experienced me. Do that and I will be proud of you. (242)

While Steinberg seems not to doubt his ability to represent Magadien's life, he is nevertheless aware of the disturbing unequal power relations that characterize their relationship. Commenting on Magadien's above words where he completely surrenders over his story to Steinberg, he says:

But he had, of course, told the "I" precisely what every "I" wants to hear. He had assuaged my bad conscience, had given me a licence to scorch his

heart and open his soul. The victory was mine, not his, and it left me feeling no less anxious than before. (241)

Steinberg's emotional turmoil seem to support Schalkwyk's claim that "[e]ach 'I' brings different rewards, explores different terrains, is able to withstand different pressures, ... and is liable to complicit with very different structures" (2001: 35-36). Steinberg experiences the nagging dissatisfaction (a nagging dissatisfaction that Magadien seems to find affected and pointless) that most well-intentioned academics experience when trying to represent the subaltern. In comparison, one of the major dissatisfaction with the TRC was the inescapable ambiguity that resulted from trying to escape the penal regimes while utilizing its apparatuses. The perpetrators of past atrocities were tried and interrogated in public, and they were expected to fully disclose their crime and show that it had a political motive in order for them to escape imprisonment. In other words the TRC, while healing the nation hoped to produce a self-reflective and reformed subject. The South African poet Roshilla Nair, for instance, penned a poem entitled "an unforgiving poem" where she criticises the TRC for assuming that the perpetrators of apartheid atrocities would expose all in an unprecedented remorseful gesture which would then touch the hearts of the victims to a magnanimous act of forgiveness. She seems to suggest that the process failed specifically because confession and forgiveness cannot be tortured out of unwilling individuals. (In *Seasons Come to Pass* (eds.) Moffett and Mphahlele, 2008: 240). Although Steinberg cannot offer amnesty for Magadien's crimes, his narrative operates within the TRC paradigm.

In the light of the above, at a more personal level, the discourse of the TRC ushers in an array forms of unequal power relations with regard to what Roux (2007) calls the "collaborative, interview driven memoir" (261), of which *The Number* is a good example. Although Steinberg's narrative can indeed be rightly hailed as a clear departure from polarized binaries that characterize the South African political prisoners' auto/biographies, and for its reflexive nature and being a poignant critique of post-apartheid prison narratives which have been "marketed as survival stories or as anthropological studies" (Roux 2007: 259), the narrative itself is riddled with ambivalences when it comes to the question of whose story the narrative is telling. Therefore, no matter how self-reflexive Steinberg's narrative is, it is still operating within the constraints of market forces that determine cultural productions and also emerges out of identifiable discursive fields. Steinberg's narrative seems, among other things, shaped by his background as a journalist in addition to drawing from the discourse of the TRC, which seems to exercise a pervasive shaping and driving force on most cultural productions of the first two decades of the post-apartheid era.

The TRC had a powerful discursive influence because it was putting forward an idea that reflected global ways of conflict resolution while at the same time informing and shaping the evolving and shifting power relations of the nascent post-apartheid era. As I have already pointed out, Steinberg is aware of his perilous position when it comes to his relationship with Magadien and the means through which he extracts his life story from him. He observes: “The relationship between a journalist and his subject is never a relationship between equals” (240). Steinberg’s narrative can therefore be viewed as operating at once within and without these profound mutations of the penal logic that the TRC inaugurated after the demise of apartheid. As we have seen, Magadien himself is vaguely aware that in telling his life story to a journalist he is responding to the appellation of a force whose power and intentions he does not fully comprehend.

The reader is constantly aware of the dependence of both Magadien’s story and Steinberg’s related meta-narrative on the overarching national narratives. However, the irony is that both narratives oscillate on the verge of collapse under their irreconcilable contradictions. The closure of the South African police museum in the late 1990s dramatises the difficulty of sustaining a coherent national narrative in times of rapid change which are often attended by the revelation of a past and an evolving present which elude narrativization by their sheer incompatibility. In trying to account for the closure of the police museum, Comaroff and Comaroff (2004) write:

State museums, of course, are more or less blatant statements, conjuring up the national populations, subjects, and interests for which, and to which, they speak. In times of historical change, they offer glaring indictments of denatured ideologies, of a slippage between state and nation, signifiers and signifieds. (810)

Since Steinberg’s narrative relies on the South African national narrative, especially that of the TRC discourse, Steinberg almost abandons his project when Magadien’s life first fails to fit into Steinberg’s preconceived models. Steinberg is only able to proceed with the project when it dawns upon him that the national narrative itself is convoluted and haunted by similar ambivalences that are mirrored in Magadien’s story.

Just like the Pretoria police museum, which finally shuts its doors to the public, there are moments in Steinberg’s narrative in which the menacing hybridity of Magadien’s narrative threatens to rapture the boundaries of the meta-narrative that Steinberg has erected to make sense of Magadien’s story, and of course his own and that of South Africa as a whole. I have

already emphasized how Steinberg is constantly haunted by the unequal power relations and the moral issues that are created by his unusual relationship with Magadien. After bringing documents which contradict the mythological Number narrative of a militant Nongoloza by showing that Nongoloza ended up as a prison warder, both Steinberg and Magadien become aware that the story that will be written is not a transcription of Magadien's words by an impartial journalist. Moreover, it becomes evident that in addition to Steinberg's and Magadien's, there are other narratives that are jostling for space. But what is deeply ironic is that none of these narratives can claim freedom from ideological constraints. This is so because Magadien's story of the self and the one that Steinberg subsequently tells in *The Number* mimic the way national narratives are selectively constructed through both conscious and unconscious gaps and silences, calculated omissions and strategic fabrications which to a large extent reflect a particular image of the nation at different historical periods. What upsets Magadien is that while advancing its vague ideological agenda, Steinberg's narrative threatens this sacred process of self-induced amnesia, partial and selective recall which is the basis of both national narratives and stories about the self. To his credit, Steinberg brings to light all these fascinating conflicts and aspects of narrative construction.

Steinberg's *The Number* is an immensely sophisticated take on numerous issues related to criminality and imprisonment in South Africa. The next section discusses the notion of narrative and narrativity, and also expands on some of the issues discussed above by using the concept of transculturation in reading Steinberg's text.

2. Transculturation and Narratives

In addition to showing that crime and prison are inseparably linked to questions of power and representation, *The Number* describes a process of transculturation and how it has a bearing on the narrative structure of auto/biographies. Mary Louise Pratt's definition of transculturation as a process whereby "subordinated or marginalized groups select or invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture" (*Imperial Eyes* 1992: 6) is dramatised in *The Number*. This text offers a number of life narratives, none of which can be regarded more 'ideal' than the other. The story of Po, Nongoloza and Kilikijan, that of Doggy Dog and Magadien, that of the numerous women that appear in Magadien's life, and indeed *The Number* itself; the encounter of Steinberg with Magadien, are all offered up as exemplary instances of model-free life stories which nevertheless reflect Steinberg's main preoccupations in his narrative.

A good starting point to illustrate my argument is the story of Po and Nongoloza. In *The Number* Steinberg recounts two parallel narratives of Nongoloza. There is what he calls the story of mythical Nongoloza which is recited in South African prisons today by the Number gangs, and a second narrative that relates to the historical Nongoloza of Steinberg's own research. Although the two stories differ slightly in detail they both contain what David Attwell considers to be two fundamental elements of transculturation; "cultural destruction followed by reconstruction on entirely new terms" (2005: 18). Both stories converge in that Nongoloza's banditry was a by-product of European colonial industrial expansion which destroyed the traditional African way of life by separating husbands from their wives. In the mythical story, Nongoloza's recruitment into banditry by a Zulu sage Po is depicted as some kind of cultural reconstruction on entirely new terms. Po, a man who embodies the interests of all black people, intercepts Nongoloza on his way to find work in 1812 in the gold mines of the Delagoa Bay. Po, the aged Zulu seer, had journeyed to the mines to find out for himself why the young men of the village were not returning home after sojourning to the mines. After living and working in the mine compound himself, he began to understand the intensity of the exploitation of the young black miners. After leaving the mine compound, Po sets out to form a band of robbers who would get the gold from the white men without having to be mine labourers. To his first two disciples Nongoloza and Kilikijan, Po is reported to have said: "The gold of the white man is good. You must take it, but not from the ground. You must rob it from the white man himself" (*The Number* 45). Subordinated or marginalized by colonial industrial encroachment, Po's and his disciples' banditry becomes a selection or invention from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture. Their criminality mimics the colonial violence which destroyed their way of life. Theirs is transculturation because they are "faced with the problem of disadjustment and readjustment, of deculturation and acculturation" (Fernando Ortiz 1995: 98).

David Attwell also points out that a "transculturation relationship can and often does involve violence of every kind, both structural and direct" (20). Significantly, one of the first notable crimes committed by Po's first disciples was the murder of a white farmer named Rabie. Colonial structural violence on the culture of the natives leads to this direct violence against a figure who represents colonial violence and oppression. The Nongolozan story has it that the two bandits went down to Rabie and offered to buy his bull Rooiland, which he obviously was not selling. It would appear that this was an excuse meant to justify their subsequent criminal violence. As was to be expected, Rabie refused to sell his bull; and they then stabbed him to death with bayonets that they had previously looted from their encounter with the

colonial army. Subsequently, they took the bull to their master where the group of bandits, which had by now grown to 15 members “thr[e]w a tremendous feast as they slaughter[ed] Rooiland” (*The Number* 46). All three of transculturation processes described by Attwell, Pratt and Ortiz are illustrated in this mythical story. First, there is the deculturation of Po and his followers, and then the selective appropriation of the material and discursive culture of their conquerors. The visible aspect of this selective appropriation of the master’s culture is the acquisition of weapons and the invention of a new culture of banditry which inevitably means that they subsist through violence.

The same process of transculturation can be observed in what Steinberg calls the historical Nongoloza. Steinberg writes:

Severed from his family and his ancestral home, and with no desire to go back, Mzuzephi (Nongoloza’s birth name) abandoned his name and called himself Jan Note. The first name, ‘Jan’ is Dutch, the second, ‘Note’ is English. (*The Number* 36)

Although Mzuzephi seems to change his name out of his own free will, this passage also foregrounds the violent disengagement with his cultural heritage that was involved in the process. While Nongoloza’s choice of names indicates a desire to be like the dominant white man, it also affords us a glimpse into the process of transculturation in the Prattian model. Later, Nongoloza was to name his band of robbers Ninevites, finding inspiration from the Bible book of Nahum where the Ninevites are described as rebels against the Lord. Nongoloza himself says: “I selected this name for my gang as rebels against the Government’s laws” (*The Number* 38; Haysom 2). The ironies of transculturation are captured from the fact that Nongoloza found inspiration for his outlawry activities against the colonial government from a selective reading of the Christian Bible which teaches submission to governmental authorities.⁵⁶ The Bible is also a book that was brought into Africa by missionaries who were often aligned with the colonial governments.

Said seems to hint at this process of transculturation, probably not in Pratt’s or Attwell’s sense, but rather in Ortiz’s sense when he claims that “nations themselves are narrations” (1993: xiii). He argues: “[S]tories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world [and stories] also become the method colonized people use to

⁵⁶ For example, the apostle Paul commanded the Christians who were suffering from Roman persecution: “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God” (Romans 13 vs 1 The Holy Bible – King James Version).

assert their own identity and the existence of their own history” (1993: xiii). If this view is correct, it suggests a line of continuity between individual narratives, the prison and the ideas of the nation. Steinberg’s narrative shows that the Number gangs use narratives or stories such as the Po one, to assert their own subjectivity and existence, and to gain some measure of agency within the prison setting. In fact, Freeman and Brockmeier (2001) argue that “there is no way to speak of what a life means, what life *is*, apart from narrative” (97). This implies that life itself is lived according to some narrative, whether articulated or not. However, this does not mean that the story of Magadien, that of the Number prison gangs and that of the nation all emerge out of a process with a pre-set logic. Unlike Augustine’s *Confessions*, which has been called “*the* classic model of teleological self-understanding” (Freeman and Brockmeier 84), *The Number* shows that life’s random events; its twists and turns are its main constituents, if not *the* constituents. Perpetual narrative construction by individuals, groups and nation marks the attempt at imposing order upon an essential chaotic situation.

The prison itself is a space of transculturation. Imprisonment involves the forcible removal from one way of life to another. The prisoner has to reconstruct a new way of life on entirely new terms. The rigid and limited prison space presents a number of challenges to this process. One way in which the Number prison gangs reinvent a new culture is through stories. Steinberg suggests that the confined and confining space of the prison makes the prison Number gangs fantasise about expansive spaces. This is reflected in their ritualistic practices and language. Steinberg writes: “Everything about the metaphors of prison gang language is expansive. An overcrowded cell becomes a vast plain; a day becomes a year” (*The Number* 149). Steinberg suggests that the claustrophobic conditions of the prison and its imposition of immobility lead to the Number gangs living a highly ritualised life. He observes: “South Africa’s prison gangs are among the most ritualized structures you will ever find” (*The Number* 149). The extremely ritualised prison gang life should be seen as an attempt to reculture a deculturated environment.

The process of transculturation can also be observed in the interpretive appraisal of the South African national narrative(s) and Magadien’s life story that Steinberg offers. Steinberg writes that he chose to write about Magadien “because the cornerstones of his life coincide with so many of the beacons of modern South African history” (*The Number* xx). He claims that Magadien tempers with his formative years and associates his initial arrest with the Soweto uprisings of 1976, when in fact he may have been first arrested sometime in 1978. It is interesting that Magadien connects his initial arrest and recruitment into the Number with

1976, a significant year for all who were engaged in the struggle against apartheid.⁵⁷ Magadien chooses this important year in the fight against apartheid as a tool through which to impose order on his chaotic criminal life story. It is unlikely that Magadien lies deliberately to Steinberg. Jerome Bruner argues that “autobiography (like the novel) involves not only the construction of self, but also a construction of one’s culture” (2001: 35). That is how the self and the nation construct their narratives. Consciously or unconsciously, events that have a potential for causing tensions and contradictions are conveniently relegated to a state of wilful amnesia or are reconceptualised and realigned with the prevailing discourses. Bhabha argues that what makes nations and narratives resemble each other is precisely this process of inevitable forgetting. He writes: “Nations and narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye” (1990: 1). Bauman (1990) also alludes to the similarity of the operation of the human mind and the way a nation constructs its narratives when he says that they are both characterized by a quest for order, since they cannot tolerate ambivalence (1). Steinberg realizes this and comments:

That [Magadien] has fiddled with his own formative moment, placing it in June 1976, one of the most formative moments in recent South African history, is poignant and telling. For he is doing with his personal history precisely what a nation does with its own; it freezes a moment in time, paints it in bold and gaudy brush strokes, and uses it as a device to explain where it has come from and why it has turned out the way it has. (137)

What is deeply ironic of course is the fact that Steinberg’s own narrative is engaged in exactly the same process as Magadien’s and the nation’s where narrative construction is concerned. In telling Magadien’s life story, Steinberg engages in a form of transculturation. This is seen from the fact that when Steinberg first met Magadien, Magadien inhabited a no-man’s-land, “a hell of identities not yet erased, and identities not yet formed”, which Steinberg at first mistook for madness (*The Number* 33). “Through its naming/classifying function”, Steinberg’s narrative is driven by the quest to “impose order and deny or suppress randomness and contingency” (Bauman 1990:1), qualities which characterise Magadien’s life. Steinberg struggles to fit Magadien’s life in what Bruner calls “folk psychology” which is intrinsic in any given culture (2001: 30). In the story Steinberg eventually tells about

⁵⁷ In June 16, 1976 school children in the Soweto black township organized demonstrations against the imposition of Afrikaans to be a national medium of academic instruction, alongside English. The apartheid police opened live fire against these unarmed children and according to official figures 23 students were killed. In solidarity with their Sowetan counterparts students started to organize protest marches throughout the country. Magadien claims to have been arrested in one such demonstration as a student activist at the University of the Western Cape in July 1976. (See T. R. H. Davenport and C. Saunders’s *South Africa: A Modern History*, 2000)

Magadien in *The Number*, Magadien only features in it as a motif for the other stories that Steinberg's book is about. Steinberg alerts us of his intentions when he explains his choice of Magadien as the subject of his story: "Within the confines of a single life, he (Magadien) demonstrates the proximity of the history of crime to the central fault lines that shape the world" (*The Number* xx). This is a comment that registers a reflective victory of a biographer who has finally found a way of telling a story in such a way that it violates "canonical expectancy, but do so in a way that is culturally comprehensible" (Bruner 30). While some of Steinberg's considerations for choosing Magadien as his subject are clearly intentional, as the above words show, most of these considerations operate unconsciously at the ideological level.

What complicates Steinberg's task of making Magadien's life story fit the folk psychology and also fit what Bruner calls the "criterion of tellability", that "is to say a story that is at once recognizably canonical and recognizably noncanonical" (30), is that the South African folk psychology at the time was mirrored in what Steinberg perceives as an intense identity crisis in Magadien. It is probably to Steinberg's credit that his book shows that at about the same time Magadien was in a vortex of identities, South Africa as a nation was also trying to emerge with a coherent story of the self after the traumatic apartheid years. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission represented but one visible manifestation of this search for new national ways of telling. The TRC was both an instrument and product of transculturation in the wider context of the nation. Similarly, Steinberg's narrative is also a tool through which he attempts to make sense of the diverse strands of Magadien's life, but at the same time it is a manifestation of the processes of transculturation in the Ortizian sense in that it constructs something new out of an environment that appears deculturated. Over and above being the biography of Magadien and that of Steinberg's encounter with him, *The Number* can be seen as reflective of the post-apartheid exploration for new national identities.

That South Africa herself was going through processes of transculturation is aptly captured by Daniel Roux (2007), when he argues:

Steinberg's book participates in a more general post-apartheid shift away from political prison autobiographies towards a more collaborative, interview driven memoir ... One of the catalyst for the prevalence of this kind of auto/biography is perhaps the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), where the testimony of the victims and perpetrators of apartheid were assembled in a social and

legal space that foregrounded the idea of personal testimony as collective endeavour. (261-263)

But as Lyn Graybill (2002) indicates, the South African TRC itself was participating in a global discourse where TRCs were in proliferation.⁵⁸ She states that since the 1940s the “South African TRC brought the number up to twenty-one by 2000” (8). This would suggest that world-over, probably starting with the world-shaking events of world war one and two, there has been a serious global bruise on folk psychologies. This is not to argue for undifferentiated global patterns. Despite the fact that post-apartheid South Africa was participating in this proliferation of search for a stable folk psychology, Graybill points out that “these precedents (of TRCs) offered warnings more than guidance for South Africa” (1). The TRCs in other countries had either been used as instruments of dispensing harsh retributive justice to the perceived perpetrators of violence or as a way of offering blanket amnesty to perpetrators of violence while keeping the truth about the atrocities that had been committed hidden. The South African TRC could not entirely escape all these pitfalls because it was participating in a clear political discourse aimed at consolidating a so-called miraculous political transition which had ushered in a rainbow nation (Boraine and Levy 1995: 27). Roux (2007) also concurs with this view when he argues that the “TRC [was] really a machine for producing autobiographical accounts to serve a communal or national interest” (271). Although not necessarily legitimating the post-apartheid state through his narrative, Steinberg’s modus operandi and his entire logic in *The Number* are heavily influenced by the TRC discourse and are implicated in the national transitional discourses that characterised the first decade of the post-apartheid state.

Magadien’s sanitising of his criminal record with a political narrative should not be simply mis/understood as a criminal who wants to escape the harsh public judgement of his life but should also be seen within the paradigms of what Jerome Bruner (1993) has called narrative truth (38). Bruner (1996) defines narrative truth as the combined result of specific ways of meaning-making that are highly flexible with respect to verifiability, truth conditions, or logical justifications (93). Magadien’s pre-Number criminal activities and his criminal record as a Number gang member are indeed disturbingly superimposed with a militant anti-apartheid narrative, just as his predecessor foster-ancestor Nongoloza’s banditry had been

⁵⁸ I am using the term discourse in the Foucauldian sense. Ashcroft and Ahluwalia argue that “Foucault’s notion of discourse is a firmly bounded area of social knowledge. For him, the world is not simply ‘there’ to be talked about, rather it is discourse itself within which the world comes into being. It is also in such discourse that speakers and hearers, writers and readers, come to an understanding about themselves, their relationship to each other and their place in the world (the construction of subjectivity)”. (See Ashcroft, B. and Ahluwalia, P. *Edward Said*, 2001: 14).

driven by a fierce anti-colonial narrative. It is clear that for both Nongoloza and Magadien, their criminal activities are perceived and represented “as a means of production – or, rather, of productive redistribution” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004: 806), for those alienated by colonial capitalism and the racist apartheid state respectively. In Magadien’s case it is noteworthy that before joining the Number he claims that he stole mainly from the *sturvies*, the more affluent coloured people whom he viewed with a mixture of envy and hatred as he saw them as colluding with the white oppressors. After joining the Number, whenever he was out of prison he claims to have stolen from his employers and then donated the goods or the proceeds to his soccer team in the Cape Flats or distributed the loot among friends and relatives.

At least according to the narrative truth of Magadien’s story, the profound truth that emerges from Steinberg’s narrative is that the criminal life stories of both Nongoloza and Magadien are indeed deeply political in more than one way. Magadien’s and Nongoloza’s weaving of their stories into that of the nation reminds us of Appiah’s observation that the story of the nation is a crucial element in the way individuals and institutions make sense of themselves (9). Magadien himself equates the selective manner in which he narrates his story to how the apartheid state seemed to have fiddled with records which seemed to deny that he ever set foot at the University of the Western Cape in 1976. When he is confronted with the fact that there is no record that he was ever registered as a student at the University of Western Cape, in angry despair he makes this insightful observation:

Who do I trust, my fucked up memory or the fucked-up record system? I did so much violence to my name and my history that maybe my word should mean nothing. My head was such in a mess that half my life passed me by. But the records are just as violent to me. Sometimes they remember me, sometimes they forget me. They treat me like a thing that can be kicked around, not a human being. All I have is the way I remember things. (136)

It is telling that Magadien equates the way his personal memory operates to the way a state keeps its records and regards both processes as inherently violent in that they only save certain events for purposes of constituting a particular narrative. This seems to bear out Ernest Renan’s observation that unity, be it of national narratives or individual subjectivities “is always effected by means of brutality” (1990: 11). For example, with regards to the Soweto 1976 uprising, the state records at that time registered only 23 deaths. However, post-apartheid sources put the death toll of children at the hands of the police between 200 and

500. Although none of these figures may be factually correct, the huge discrepancies between them show the subtle and selective ways in which state and individual narratives are constructed. Renan argues that forgetting “is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation” (11). Similarly, Steinberg’s narrative shows that forgetting is important in the constitution of the self as a narrative. But this forgetting is not equivalent to complete memory loss. It is a forgetting that facilitates the construction of orderly and coherent narratives. The way Magadien constructs the self through amnesia and remembering, resembles the way Renan says the nation constitute itself. He argues: “[T]he essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things” (1990: 11).

G.A.M Widdershoven (1993) suggests that in addition to forgetting, the merging of a number of narratives, be they individual or national stories, is an essential part of meaning-making. Widdershoven claims that our remembrance of the past has little value if it is not connected to narrative. He writes: “We only become aware of the significance of these experiences [that shape our narrative identity] by telling stories about them and fusing them with other stories” (7). This connecting or fusing of stories seems akin to the Ortzian process of transculturation. The inescapability of the fusion of experiences that shape an individual’s identity is further seen by the fact that although he claims to be a Muslim, Magadien kept a Christian Bible with JR, his Number gang name, uncannily inscribed on it. This suggests that as much as nations are narrations, according to Said, and are always going through some kind of Ortzian transculturation, so are the subjectivities of individuals who constitute it, as Magadien’s case suggests. Steinberg’s narrative clearly parallels Nongoloza’s story of transculturation with that of Magadien. He goes to great lengths to prove that Magadien’s dabbling with the criminal world as a little boy is a result of a troubled childhood and muddled, but intense sense of social and economic exclusion which culminates in his staying in a children’s foster home before he even becomes a teenager. Steinberg’s narrative implies that it is Magadien’s economic and social alienation that leads to his being caught up in the student activism of the late 1970s which leads to his initial arrest and his subsequent recruitment into the Number prison gangs. Through all these incidents, Steinberg demonstrates that Magadien’s life story is indeed “intertwined with other stories” (Freeman and Brockmeier 2001: 81).

After being initially arrested as a student political activist, Magadien quickly transforms into a prison gangster. Steinberg postulates that this shift is not difficult for Magadien because his life in the ghetto exposed him to the harshness and traumas which developed a tendency for gangsterism in most teenagers. Interestingly, Magadien does not connect his joining the Number prison gangs with the fact that he was a street gang member in his teenage days.

Instead he is struck by the similarity of the Number prison gangs with the political activists fighting against apartheid. He says:

Meeting with [the Number] was an eye opener ... I was shocked to see that they were as political as we were. They were fighting apartheid prison system. That is what they were about, before anything else. (*The Number* 142)

This seems to support Gusdorf's (1980) argument that no auto/biographer is engaged in a wholly objective and disinterested pursuit, but in a work of personal justification. He writes: "[T]he task of autobiography is first of all a task of personal salvation" (39). Freeman and Brockmeier also claim that "[a]utobiographical memory and interpretive appraisal ... go hand in hand" (81). This alleged similarity of the Number gangs to political prisoners is not just a figment of Magadien's imagination, but the interpretive workings of auto/biographical memory. Furthermore, Steinberg's narrative shows that what has sustained the Number for the past one hundred years is a narrative of power and resistance which is almost political, but not quite. In Steinberg's book the space of the prison attains some metaphoric function in that it rarefies the identity narrative of the Number prison gangs. Reduced to its barest minimum, what has ensured the resilience of the Number gangs during apartheid years is a narrative of binary polemics that "the [prison] world is divided into *bandiete* and *boere*, and the *boer* is always the enemy" (*The Number* 23). This narrative is similar to the Manichean understanding of the world of the political prisoners that I mention in the opening section of this chapter. However, the polarised nature of the narratives of political prisoners and Number gang prisoners is not cast in stone, they are both ambivalently malleable and responsive to discursive and material changes. The insight that we glean from Steinberg's book is that all narratives are constantly confronted with the problems of transculturation in the way Ortiz uses this term.

As a way of further interrogating other strands of transculturation, narrative construction and the formation of identity as these intersect with criminality, imprisonment and nation I will now turn in more detail to Steinberg's depiction of David Ruiters, Nongoloza's alter ego, popularly known as Doggy Dog in the South African media.

3. Coded Narratives: Nongoloza, Doggy Dog: Narrating the Self and Nation

Achille Mbembe's observation that "contemporary African modes of writing the self are inseparably connected with the problematics of self-constitution and the modern philosophy of the subject" (2002: 240), captures some of Steinberg's main preoccupations in *The Number*. But over and above this, through the story of Doggy Dog, Steinberg illustrates how narratives of the self, even obscure ones such as those of the prison underworld, are constituted and also constitute not only the identities of prison gangsters but are also possessed and haunted, and in turn possess and haunt the national and global narratives in very subtle ways. Doggy Dog is the gangster name of Dawid Ruiters, the man who led a group of four men that murdered two women and a toddler and brutally stabbed a man and left him for dead in a farm near Nieuwoudtville in 1996. Previously, Doggy Dog had been a 26 Number gang member but before being sentenced to an indeterminate prison sentence in February 1999, he spent a dramatic two year period at Pollsmoor Remand Prison which led to his metamorphosis into a 27.⁵⁹ Through this story, Steinberg also shows that narratives, and not just material needs, drive crime and criminality.

Steinberg tells the story of Doggy Dog in a way that demonstrates the power of narratives and how an individual's life experience and worldview are mediated through narratives. With Doggy Dog, Steinberg shows the implosion of the Nongolozan narrative. The story of Nongoloza, a bandit driven by a fiery but ambivalent anti-colonialist narrative, who wins the hearts and loyalty of many followers within a short space of time, has been recited again and again within the walls of South African prisons. Steinberg points out that it is this story that has created a community of prisoners known as the Number in almost all South African prisons, and that it is this narrative which largely accounts for the Number's resilience. When Steinberg asks Magadien early in their relationship which story best encapsulates what Nongoloza means for him, Magadien, without even posing to think, says the story of Doggy Dog. Magadien suggests that stories or narratives, especially those about crime that seem to

⁵⁹ According to the Number lore the founder of the 27s was Kilikijan, and Nongoloza of the 28s. This is so because he led a group of 7 or 27 bandits when he and Nongoloza quarrelled and split into two groups about the permissibility of homosexual relationships. Many years after going their separate ways, Kilikijan was the first to be arrested and incarcerated at Point Prison, Durban. When Nongoloza was subsequently arrested and also put in the same prison he found Kilikijan already a senior prisoner. He had quarrelled with and stabbed a warder, and had been saved from imminent death by a group of six *franses* (non-gangsters) who smuggled salt and other foods into his solitary confinement cell. These six *franses* were to become the 26s. However, the likely source of the name Number is the mines since most of Nongoloza's bandits had been former miners. One anonymous miner reportedly said that they were first given an identification Number. He went on to say: "They do not know your name, but they call you by the number" (In *Workers and Warriors: Masculinity and the Struggle for Nation in South Africa* by Thembisa Waetjen, 2004: 85). In colonial and apartheid prisons, prisoners were also largely identified by their numbers.

emanate from perceived injustices of the disadvantaged groups are very powerful since they constitute both the state and the prison and the subjectivities of individual prisoners. He illustrates his point through Doggy Dog's story. Magadien says:

The whole country was talking about Niewoudtville, it was on the front page of every newspaper. And then Dog walks into prison and starts talking as a 27. It means the whole country is talking because Kilikijan is back. Because the Number is powerful. Every time he walked down the passage, 26s would ask him for advice. They made him a god. And once that happened, the 28s had to accept him too ... He could *sabela* (recount) the whole history of the Number on the valcross, just like an old and experienced 27 does, and so we could not question him. Nor could we deny the blood he took at Niewoudtville. (*The Number* 68)

The dramatic and symbolic power imbued in the Doggy Dog story is seen from the fact that, 12 years after Doggy Dog's "Flower Gang" murders, his name continues to make newspaper headlines. The *Cape Argus* of Tuesday November 4 2008 had the following headline: "'Flower Gang' killer seeks move 'Doggy Dog' wants to be nearer home". Earlier, on the 2nd of November 2008, the Afrikaans Sunday Newspaper Rappport had the following headline: "Doggy Dog en ander moordenaars sê hulle is eintlik glad nie gevaarlik nie ... Ag, sjeim, hulle is nie honde nie. Bendes 'hou tronke veilig'. 'Ons werk vir menseregte'" ("Doggy Dog and other murderers say they are not really dangerous ... Oh, shame, they are not dogs. Gangs 'Keep prisons safe'. 'We work for human rights'"). Steinberg observes that Dog understood the power of stories and "knew that if he acted out the most powerful story of all, he could do anything" (*The Number* 69). There is no doubt that Doggy Dog was exercising some measure of perverse agency as he acted out the Nongoloza-Kilikijan myth. However, Doggy Dog's agency is not a guarantee of "the autonomy and unmediated self-knowledge of the speaking subject" (Arnott 1996: 86). Moreover, it can be argued that his story had no meaning outside the lore of the prison: in the mainstream media, it was entirely subsumed by the hegemonic discourse of "the crime problem".

However, Steinberg suggests that Doggy Dog's crime seems to have gained a national audience as a result of the way the journalistic reportage of the time superimposed it on the template of the post-apartheid national narrative(s). In other words, it was the way that this crime was mediated performatively through journalistic narratives that enabled it to capture the imaginations of many South Africans. Comaroff and Comaroff observe that despite the

prevalence of real violent crime, South Africans are preoccupied with the mediated representation of law and order. Comaroff and Comaroff further point out that globally, “the spectre of illegality appears to be captivating the popular imaginations” (2004: 800-801). For the Comaroffs the symbolic power of crime in the postcolony lies in that it enables the state to spectacularly stage law enforcement. In a similar vein, quoting Thomas Mathiesen, Bauman argues that it is the illegalities or crimes of the “bottom” rather than that of the “top” which lend themselves to this spectacularization. Bauman argues:

Whatever one may do about safety is incomparably more spectacular, watchable, ‘televisable’ than any move aimed at the deeper, but – for the same reason – less tangible and apparently more abstract, layers of the malaise. Fighting crime, like crime itself, and particularly the crime targeted on bodies and private property, makes an excellent, exciting, eminently watchable show. The mass media producers and script writers are well aware of this. (1998: 118)

In South Africa this preoccupation with the mediated depiction of law and order was dramatised at a national scale through the Truth and Reconciliation process (TRC). The TRC captured people’s imaginations because it did not just encourage national healing by playing down retribution, but it also put forgiveness and reconciliation on stage, dramatised them and attracted large audiences to watch and listen to its hearings. In Bauman’s theorisation, the TRC could be seen as participating in the global market forces aimed at selling South Africa as a safe investment destination by assuring international investors that the state is in firm control of the poor masses that could be tempted to violent crimes of appropriation after the demise of apartheid. On the other hand, for the local population, through its watchable and televisable shows of complete disclosure aimed at closure, the TRC gave the impression that justice was being done. This penchant for the theatricalization of law and disorder as seen both in the TRC process, and the way Doggy Dog’s crime was interpreted and depicted both in and outside prison, seems to suggest that power functions more diffusely and is not as centralised as is described by Foucault’s notion of panopticism. This also problematises Said’s contention that power and discourse can solely be possessions of the oppressor (1978: 7).

Bhabha observes that at the narrative or discourse level, the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed is permeated by a disturbing and destabilizing ambivalence

which ensures that power is never a preserve of the oppressor.⁶⁰ This ambiguity that appertains to the location of power is very evident in Steinberg's narrative. During apartheid, people found novel ways of resisting the isolationist apartheid policies. For example, Steinberg indicates that the reformatories and prisons where young men from different ghettos were bunched together became the nerve centre that connected all the ghettos. In this way, the mega-street gangs that emerged in the 1970s were able to spread their influence throughout the Cape Town ghettos. Commenting on how the apartheid project of isolating the ghettos and saving its young men by putting them in institutions backfired, Steinberg observes:

If the kids of the new ghettos were stranded in their isolated pockets, the one thing that brought them together, that created allegiances crossing ghetto boundaries, highways and deserted scrublands, was the magical tales and the exotic initiation rites of the reformatories and jails. (*The Number 124*)

Although the prison, just like the ghetto, enforced a proximity of bodies, it is significant that Steinberg suggests that it is not merely this physical closeness of human beings which brought these young people together, but the stories, in other words the *narratives*, that issued out of such institutions. The way these institutions were perceived and represented as places where heroes were born by those who had passed through them is what made them enticing and intriguing to the rest of the young men. Under the deprivations of ghetto conditions, the young men who sojourned to the reformatories and prisons were able to wrest the official narrative away from these institutions which depicted them as places of penance, and instead coloured them with a flamboyant ideology of manhood and heroism. This suggests that the way Doggy Dog manipulates his crimes to get power in prison enjoys some precedent in South African life.

At both material and discursive levels, Steinberg shows that this symbiotic relationship between the state and prison has continued to haunt the post-apartheid state. He demonstrates that while the state has appropriated crime by turning it into shows in the public media, the underworld of prison gangsters has in turn constituted the state in subtle and pervasive ways. Steinberg observes:

Prison is the great networking centre of criminal South Africa. Spend four or five years of your life in the 26s, and wherever you go after that you will

⁶⁰ Interestingly Bhabha has also been criticized for perching his discussion at a theoretical level which ignores the profound unequal distribution of power and the physical conflict and pain which characterizes the relationship of the colonizer and the colonized. (For example, see Abdul R. JanMohamed in "Colonialist Literature", *Critical Inquiry*, 1985 (60-61).

always find a brother with whom to do business. Prison has taken the illicit market to every village in the country. (*The Number* 62)

In the above words Steinberg paints a picture of a prison which serves as the heart, the source of life of the very crimes which it is set up to prevent. Steinberg's description of the post-apartheid South African prison conjures a picture of a heart with its complex blood vessels that form a network which keeps the entire organism alive with its circulatory system. The irony of the whole situation is heavy indeed. Unlike the real heart, the prison does not distribute life-giving blood to the body, which is the state; it pumps the poison of crime to the remotest village of South Africa.

The haunting effect of crime and prison upon identities of individuals and the South African national psyche as a whole may be illustrated by Mr 'Whisky' Sisodia's drunken stammer in Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. He says: "The trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don't know what it means." (*Satanic Verses* 1988: 343). Steinberg's *The Number* shows that the trouble with the South Africans is that a large part of their history happened, and is still happening in prisons, so they do not know what it means, if I may appropriate Sisodia's words. Writing at the height of apartheid, Nicholas Haysom noted that the South African "general public [was] often indifferent to the plight of prisoners and not very interested in the prisons themselves" (1981:36). Haysom's general public was likely that section of the population that viewed all the incarcerated blacks and coloured as terrorists or indolent criminals who did not deserve any serious consideration except being locked away for life. Despite this mentality of denial, Roux argues that during the apartheid years the prison was at the centre of social visibility because of the large number of political prisoners. He writes:

The massive influence of the prison in South African society has meant in effect that the prison defied narrow delimitation as a repressive institution, and started functioning as an instrument in the production of ideology. (2007: 255)

This suggests that in South Africa the prison started to operate insidiously and pervasively at the level of the unconscious. Steinberg's narrative suggests that may still be the case in post-apartheid South Africa.

While the prison was forcibly brought to the social centre due to the large number of political prisoners that were incarcerated during the apartheid era, with the demise of apartheid, Roux

sees the same kind of general public indifference to the plight of prisoners and a lack of interest in the prison that was noted by Haysom among the white population in apartheid times now creeping into the entire nation as prisons are increasingly de-politicized. He observes: “Real prisons are increasingly forgotten as the material space of the prison loses its power to shape notions of self and nation” (279). Where does Roux then place Steinberg’s narrative? He argues:

For Steinberg, the prison remains a privileged space in society that remains deeply marked by mass criminalization and imprisonment of its citizens. *The Number* insists that the construction of identity in prison discloses the play of power in society in general. (270)

Indeed, Steinberg’s narrative demonstrates that no amount of denial will push the prison and the prisoner away from the societal centre. He shows that present and future generations of South Africans have to confront a haunting web of colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid national narratives which were told, and are being told by thousands of prisoners who moved and still move to and fro, from society into prison, from prison into society, and again from society into prison, in an incessant passage that keeps shaping and reshaping, and defining and redefining the identities not only of individual prisoners but the South African national narrative itself. In this regard, the prison and its regimes become an important institution that possesses and constitutes, and is similarly possessed and constituted by the state (Rodriguez 2006: 43).

The crime and the Pollsmoor remand story of Doggy Dog is illustrative of this incessant interactive passage between crime stories, prison, the individual and the state as a whole. The newspaper reportage of the murders at the time clearly linked the crime to the new democratic dispensation and the TRC process. Journalists emphasized the fact that the victims were landed whites and the perpetrators were black and self-styled outlaws. What made the killings uncanny is the fact that they seemed to be unrelated to robbery as such. The crime seemed to take the ambivalence of the Nongolozan banditry, which indeed was banditry, but received its initially breath of life from the racially exploitative colonial system. Similarly, Steinberg points out that what captured people’s imagination about Doggy Dog’s crime was not only its superfluous nature in relation to the criminal loot but also the political climate under which it occurred; the racial, class and political overtones that seemed embedded in it. Steinberg writes:

[T]he Niewoudtville murders carried a symbolic weight in 1996 that would have been absent several years earlier. To say, in 1996, that Kilikijan is roaming the countryside once again, that he has killed Rabie, is to say that nothing has changed, that authorities are still authorities, and bandits are still bandits. (*The Number* 70)

This suggests that people saw the unravelling of the rainbow national narrative in this incident. As Steinberg points out, in the minds of most people who heard of this crime, it indicated that South Africans “were to pay dearly for the ordered political settlement that ended white minority rule; the price would not be open civil war, but an endless relay of quiet, inarticulate sniping from the margins of the new democracy” (*The Number*, 55). But crimes of the “bottom” like Doggy Dog’s offer the state and its law-enforcing apparatus the opportunity to spectacularise crime, as noted above by Bauman and the Comarroffs. To demonstrate to the world that the rainbow nation was not going to be held hostage by criminals who murdered law abiding citizens and looted their property, the judge presiding over Doggy Dog’s case handed down a dramatic sentence. Steinberg reports: “[T]he judge dusted off a law that had never been used; he gave them all an indeterminate sentence. Dog [was] told to return to court in 50 years” (*The Number* 74).

While the national narrative was threading itself into the Doggy Dog’s story, and the public was actively weaving this crime into the national narrative, Doggy Dog himself was merging it with the myth of Nongoloza in the remand prison. Steinberg shows that as Doggy Dog was killing three defenceless white people in Hendrina Louw’s farm on the outskirts of Niewoudtville, in his mind he was re-enacting Nongoloza and Kilikijan’s exploits at Rabie’s farm which, according to the Number mythology, took place almost two centuries earlier. Doggy Dog’s words when he commanded his lieutenants to start killing was: “Up bayonet!” (*The Number* 63). These words enable us to catch a glimpse of the hypnotic power of the Nongolozan myth on the prison Number gangs. However, Steinberg suggests that it would be wrong to simply conclude that Doggy Dog was mindlessly re-enacting a two centuries old myth. As much as his actions were laden with symbolic significance, they also translated into real physical action and real power for him in the here and now of prison politics. First, his actions led to the loss of three lives. Secondly, they transformed him and inducted him and his collaborators, who were all 26s before this incident, into the 27s. Up to that time, the 27s was the only Number prison gang that was joined through the spilling of blood.

These events also show the interaction of the prison, the state and global forces in other complex ways. According to the Number myth, the 26s were constituted in the four walls of the prison. Only the 27s and the 28s, in the form of Nongoloza and Kilikijan, started their life out of prison before being forced to retreat into colonial prisons by the crackdown of colonial authorities. The murder of Rabie had been a sacred event in that it defined who the enemy of the bandits was, but this murder also enabled Nongoloza and Kilikijan to undisputedly assume leadership positions of their respective gangs after Po's death. When the Number gangs' activities were restricted to prison during the long years of apartheid, one could only be inducted into the 27s or 28s through stabbing, usually of a warder. However, the warders' blood only represented that of Rabie, the exploitative and stingy white farmer murdered by Nongoloza and Kilikijan in about 1812. During their long incubatory years in prison the Number mutated and eventually the 27s emerged as the soldiers, the killers, and the defenders of the Number gangs as a whole. As a result of the stringent way in which one became a 27, the 27s were always a dwindling minority in every South African prison.

In Doggy Dog's case, Nongoloza and Kilikijan had gone full circle. Nongoloza and Kilikijaan had started as bandits outside prison during colonial rule and ironically now, in 1996, two years after the vanquishing of what one would call the last vestiges of colonialism, Nongoloza and Kilikijan burst out of the walls that had imprisoned them for decades. Doggy Dog's crime and story played both a symbolic and a physical force in breaking down the prison walls and returning Nongoloza and Kilikijan back into society where they had originated from. Figuratively, the post-apartheid murder of the white farmers by Doggy Dog was an affirmation that Nongoloza's and Kilikijan's enemies had not changed. The end of apartheid had threatened to destroy the idea that had sustained the Number for many decades. Doggy Dog's actions revived it and re-affirmed once more that to the Number gangs the world is forever divided into *bandiete* and *boere*, and the *boer* is always the enemy (*The Number* 53), whether in prison or outside of it. It was a symbolic confirmation that the colonial conditions that had created Nongoloza were still in place in the post-apartheid South Africa. This continuation of the Number, albeit with a difference, challenges the notion of a definitive break embedded in the designation post-apartheid.

The constitution of identity or identities of the nation and the subjectivities of individual South African prisoners ever since the inception of prisons at the dawn of colonial rule can be compared to the function of a bridge as it is lyrically expressed in the words of Heidegger below. He says:

Always and ever differently the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to other banks ... The bridge *gathers* as a passage that crosses. (1971: 152-3)

As we have seen, the South African prison of Steinberg's narrative operates like a bridge in that it collects individuals and gives them an illusory sense of solidified subjectivity and agency, especially with reference to the Number gang members, when in fact these subjectivities are in a constant state of flux. This fluidity attends on the changing nature of the prison, which is shaped and reshaped by the state at different historical moments, and which in turn shapes and reshapes the state. In the case of Number prison gangs some of this vacillation and fluidity is cauterized through reference to a utopic, ethnically "pure" authentic moment of origin that the gangs have to strive to reclaim. The fact that the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artfully expressed in Steinberg's narrative do not suggest a progression which leaves behind the past is suggested by the application of Showalter's observation that "[b]eginnings and endings may be the sustaining myths of the middle years" (1990: 2). These beginnings, endings and middle years are themselves constructed through narratives. Steinberg's narrative intricately connects the pre-apartheid, apartheid and the post-apartheid prison narratives in an attempt to show that subject formation can never be concretized at a single historical moment except through a narrative.

Steinberg's narrative suggests a strange connection between the criminal underworld and prison on one hand, and national and global politics on the other. The text also shows that an ambivalent relationship between narratives and material needs drive crime and criminality, and that there is both a discursive and material carry-over of apartheid in the post-apartheid state. In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela also shows that as early as the beginning of 1980s, the apartheid state had already started ideologically to ingratiate itself with a possible post-apartheid state. This is seen in Mandela's being transferred from Robben Island to Pollsmoor Prison in 1982, and the apartheid state's entering into secret and protracted negotiations with him up to his release in early 1990. Before that time the ideological gap between the apartheid regime and that of those who opposed it appeared unbridgeable. Interestingly, the demise of the apartheid state coincided with the demise of the Cold-war that culminated in the collapse of communism in the USSR and the fall of the Berlin wall. Steinberg makes it clear that the changes that were occurring in prison and in the criminal underworld were partly being driven by these national and global changes. For example, Steinberg points out that before the political changes of the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the wall that divided the world of street gangs and that of the prison Number gangs was almost impermeable. The materialistic

street gangs with their lack of any strong ideological conviction could not and did not desire to be part of the fiercely ideological and extremely frugal life of the prison Number gangs. It is as Steinberg puts it: “When a Born Free Kid (street gang) had finished his sentence, he left the 26s behind in jail, and when he came back to prison he left the Born Free Kids on the streets” (*The Number* 72). This double life had been the life of Magadien for almost two decades. But the altered national and global politico-economic environment led to the development of extremely wealthy street drug lords, such as those that led the Americans and the Firm. When these street drug lords went into prison bereft of their street armies, they found themselves at the mercy of the Number prison gangs who had little respect for them. It became one of their urgent tasks to make the prison look like the streets so that they would be safe. Steinberg points out:

In the early 1990s, something strange began happening on the streets. The Americans took scraps and pieces of the ancient 26 ritual – recruitment, rank structure, and so forth – and began to emulate it, in a cobbled bastardized fashion. The Firm did much the same with the legacy of the 28s.
(*The Number* 73)

The legacy of the 27s was too bloody for any of the street gangs to appropriate, and that task was left to Doggy Dog. With his Niewoudtville reputation he was able within a few months to populate Pollsmoor prison with half-baked 27s who were all Americans who had been supplying him with free drugs to gain this very favour. In turn, these new 27s who were in fact Americans who had not shed any blood were soon released into the streets. In this strange manner, Kilikijan and his 27s, who had been forced into prison almost two centuries earlier, were back in the streets in the form the Americans. But now in addition to possessing and reconstituting the streets these prison-street gangs were networked with the global underworld. In this light, Kilikijan came out of prison into the streets as a virulent mutant that overflowed the South African borders.

As Doggy Dog had surmised, once in prison, what he had done in the outside world at Hendrina Louw’s farm was correctly interpreted by the Number gang members. He had come to typify the Number and as a result became a feared defender of the Number and the undisputed leader of the 27s not only by the virtue of the blood he had spilled, but largely through the story he had appropriated. The blood that Doggy Dog had spilled symbolically returned the Number to its original state and returned the battle to the place where it started and where it belonged, outside the prison. But the ironic pathos of course is that exactly as in

the case of the historical Nongoloza, whose banditry led to a long spell in prison, Doggy Dog instinctively prepares himself for his life imprisonment while he is still outside the prison. Magadien, the man about whom *The Number* is supposedly about, accurately reads Doggy Dog's mindset as he was committing the Niewoudtville crimes. Confiding in Steinberg, he says:

You see, there comes a stage in your life when you know you will be spending more of your life inside than outside. So you plan for your future, your life in prison ... Dog ... did what he did outside to plan for inside (*The Number* 67).

This is a disconcerting observation because what it means is that the prison plays itself on the outside. For the Number gang members who have come to regard prison as their real permanent home, the world outside prison is a somewhat unreal space, a theatre for the performance of iniquitous spectacles that ultimately serves the social world of the prison, which is awarded a kind of ontological priority. This mentality is also seen in Magadien for whom the few years he spent outside prison intermittently from the time of his inception into the Number in about 1978 were but a mirage, wasted time which could have been fruitfully spent climbing up the rank structure of the Number in prison.

What is striking about both Doggy Dog and Magadien's mentality, which completely rejects the world outside prison in preference for prison life, is that it faithfully mimics what happened to Po and his two lieutenants. Po left home because he was chagrined by the loss of young men of the village to the early colonial industrialization. So, at first his narrative seems to be inspired by the need to save the village from extinction. But no sooner does Po discover what happens to the young men in the mines than he decides to form a gang of bandits who would never return to their homes. In this way, the wise old man of the village is transformed into a monster exactly like the one he initially intended fighting. The story speaks of disturbing discursive links between the oppressor and the oppressed despite their different material conditions. This reminds us of Paulo Freire's famous formulation that the desire of the oppressed is to be like. And to be like is to be like the oppressor (2004: 8). Doggy Dog's "deranged, maniacal road journey" (*The Number* 61) of crime which culminates in the Niewoudtville murders shows how former prisoners feel alienated in the outside world due to their incapacity to earn a living that does not depend on criminal underworld. So their desire to go back to prison seems to be the result of a pathological helplessness which rationalises that between the harshness of prison and the outside world, prison is the better option. This

helplessness led Po and his disciples to abandon their villages and live in holes and disused mines. During colonial and apartheid rule, for many South Africans this powerlessness meant abandoning their villages for hostile mine compounds and urban hostels, institutions that resembled and were managed like prisons.

However, there is another ambivalent dimension to Doggy Dog's story. Steinberg shows that Doggy Dog is, indeed, producing a form of speech from the position of the subaltern. This "speech" further erodes the boundary between "inside" and "outside", and effectively reinvigorates gang lore which is threatened by the narrative shifts and reinventions that attended on democratization. Steinberg himself alludes to this fact in his narrative. In contrast to Herman Charles Bosman's claim in *Cold Stone Jug* that prisoners "are merely battered receptacles of stories" (1949: 70), Steinberg says "[t]he prisoners *are* the djins. They emerge from their tales transmogrified, haloed by the magic dust they gather from the myths. And with this magic they garner real power in the politics of the here and now" (*The Number 70*). Through the "re-staging" of the Nongolozan myth, Doggy Dog is able to acquire power in the prison politics for himself. The appropriation of his crime and its spectacularisation by the state media also indicates Doggy Dog's possessing and constituting the state in intricately haunting ways.

The importance of crime and prison stories of Doggy Dog, Nongoloza, Magadien and the Number prison gangs in general is suggested by Bhabha's assertion that increasingly, "'national' cultures are being produced from the perspective of the disenfranchised minorities" (8). Bhabha is wrong, of course, in assuming that this production of national cultures by the "powerless" is a recent phenomenon. Steinberg's narrative suggests subtle but unbreaking and unbreakable discursive linkages between prisoners' culture and that of the nation. The next section seeks to show that the South African Number prison gangs as "the subaltern" (Spivak 1998:7), develop their own disturbing papnotics to compromise the authority of the penal regime and keep it under surveillance.

4. Inverted Surveillance and the Panoptics of the Subaltern

The fact that Doggy Dog is able re-stage the Nongolozan myth suggests that he has some agency. We have already seen how he acquires power in the prison politics for himself through the appropriation of this story. I also alluded to the fact that his crime is apparently appropriated by the state by being theatricalised in the media. In this section, I explore these observations and other additional insights by largely using Foucault's theorisation of the panopticon.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), in a chapter entitled “Panopticism”, Foucault utilizes the Benthamite concept of the panopticon to explain what he thinks is the way power operates in modern societies, especially in total institutions.⁶¹ Zygmunt Bauman (1998) summarizes Foucault’s concept of the panopticon as follows: “In its ‘ideal type’, Panopticon would allow for no private space; at least for no *opaque* private space, no private space un surveilled or worse still un surveillable” (49). Foucault insisted that the panopticon should not be understood as a dream building but rather as “a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use” (*Discipline* 205). In *The Number* a myriad power forms may be disentangled through a critical and interpretive use of the Benthamite-Foucauldian panoptic mechanism. This is vital because, as Bauman points out, “[b]eing a near-perfect metaphor for the crucial facets of modernization of power and control, the image of Panopticon may ... dwell too heavily on the sociological imagination, thus preventing rather than facilitating, the perception of the nature of present change” (49). In fact, despite presenting a sophisticated analysis of the plurality, transformations and operations of power, in the chapter “Panopticism” Foucault comes very close to viewing power as unmediated domination. Commenting on the use and effect of the Benthamite Panopticon on power relations Foucault writes:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power ... The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen. (*Discipline* 202)

This presupposes hegemonic, pre-existing and unequal power relations. This becomes clear when Foucault further argues that although the inmates of the Panopticon are “caught up in a situation of which they are themselves the bearers [of self-regulating power]” (*Discipline* 202), the power that they bear is oppressive, undesirable and imposed upon them by the Panopticon mechanism. In Foucault’s formulation, it is significant that while the panopticon automatises and de-individualises power, this power to observe is unidimensional, and is only exercised by those who have been co-opted into the dominant power system. Foucault writes:

⁶¹ I am not going to summarize Foucault’s entire understanding of the concept of power, its production and uses. I believe that this is a futile attempt since Foucault’s ideas were still evolving at the time of his death. Although referring to his other works, I will largely limit my discussion to how Foucault discusses the notion of power in relation to total institutions such as the prison.

Consequently, it does not matter who exercises power. Any individual, taken at random, can operate the machine: in the absence of the director, his family, his friends, his visitors, even his servants. (203)

Bauman argues that the Foucauldian panoptical techniques “called for the asymmetrical of surveillance, for professional watchers, and for such organization of space as would enable the watchers to do their job, and would make the watched aware that the job was being done, and could be done, at any moment” (1998: 49). Viewed in the above light, the panopticon metaphor leaves no room for resistance. *The Number* reveals a more complex operation of power than Foucault’s panopticon model allows. The inadequacy of Foucault’s panopticism as an all-encompassing model of power relations reflected in Steinberg’s *The Number* demands that we juxtapose his views with those of Said and Bhabha in order to fully explore the operation and distribution of power in the prison and within the Number gangs of Steinberg’s narrative.

In *Discipline*, Foucault argues that, in Europe, by the end of the 18th century, there was a sudden transformation in the exercise of power. He says that there was a movement “from a schema of exceptional power to one of generalized surveillance” and claims that this change was a result of historical transformation (*Discipline* 209). In Thomas Mathiesen’s (1997) words, the introduction of panoptical power led from a situation where the many watch the few to a situation where the few watch the many (215)⁶². According to Foucault, then, there was a sudden shift from the theatricality of pre-modern operation of power to the implicit, internalised, capillary kinds of discipline in modern societies. Comaroff and Comaroff (2004: 804) have argued that the depiction of crime, especially in the media in post-apartheid South Africa, inverts the Foucauldian model laid out in *Discipline and Punish*. I am therefore interested in exploring the extent to which Steinberg’s *The Number* bears out Comaroff and Comaroff’s observations about the workings and functions of power in colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid South African prisons.

Steinberg’s narrative suggests that the colonial modernity ushered into Africa in the late 19th century by European powers may not have led to a transformed exercise of power whereby exceptional power shifted to one of generalized surveillance. In particular, in the case of the South Africa prison, Steinberg shows that the Number prison gangs’ emergence was strongly

⁶² In his essay “The Viewer Society,” Mathiesen argues that surveillance in post-modern societies is equally distributed from the many onto the few – an opposing force to that of the Panopticon where the few watched the many. He points out that this development is largely the result the television (219).

linked to the colonial use or abuse of exceptional sovereign power in connection with the recruitment of Africans as a source of cheap mine labour. As I have already shown, Nongoloza and Kilikijan are depicted, in both historical and mythical narratives, as starting their banditry, which leads to their imprisonment in colonial jails, in direct response to, and rebellion against, an oppressive and exploitative capitalist colonial modernity. For example, Steinberg writes the following about the historical Nongoloza:

It was, ironically, thanks to the brutal labour regime, the very system Nongoloza had spent his early life skirting, that the Ninevites (Nongoloza's band of robbers) were able to grow into a formidable force, a veritable army of working class and unemployed men. During the early years of the new century ... the new British administration developed a tight labour regime, enforced by a host of laws restricting the urban movement of black migrants. The result is that thousands of working-class men lived their urban lives being shepherded from prison to compound, compound to prison ... And in compounds, the Ninevites would infiltrate and recruit among the ranks of the gold mine workers. As vast numbers of men were shuffled from one total institution to another, so the law of Ninevites spread (39-41).

The fact that Nongoloza is produced by as much as responding to capitalist colonial modernity appears to be a Foucauldian point. However, Nongoloza overflows the Foucauldian model. Despite Steinberg's unsympathetic portrayal of Nongoloza and his original band of bandits – he calls them career criminals – it is clear that in the minds of many Africans back then they occupied a zone of indistinction. They were simultaneously feared as merciless outlaws but also revered for daring to challenge the colonial exceptional power and its system of capitalist exploitation. Nongoloza's brutality alone cannot explain why he was able to recruit such a large following in such a short space of time before his imprisonment, and the fast spread of his ideas once he and his men started to enter colonial jails. It is clear that they were peddling an ambivalent but appealing anti-colonial narrative which wooed the colonially embittered, victimised and abused African men.

Nongoloza's banditry before his arrest suggests that Africans responded in varied ways to colonial power. It is clear that colonial power was not exercised in a panoptic manner suggested to be operative in Europe by this time by Foucault's studies. Although dependent on colonial power, Nongoloza and his men did not internalise it and become their own monitors. Instead, they found innovative ways to create alternative centres of power which

stood either in partial or complete opposition to the development of colonial capitalism. Moreover, once they had been overcome by the superior power of colonial administration and put in gaols, Nongoloza and his men do not completely submit themselves to the panoptic surveillance of the colonial prison system. Instead, they actively create their own surveillance mechanism which does not only mimic but also subverts and undermines that of the prison authorities. This is seen in the words of a black prisoner who was a witness at a commission of enquiry conducted in 1904 into conditions at Johannesburg prison. The prisoner stated that fellow black prisoners had their teeth drawn out, or were thrown up to the roof and then allowed to fall down to the floor of the cell ten, sometimes up to fifteen times, by Jan Note (Nongoloza's pseudonym), after being accused of being sell-outs. In the evidence of these events the witness-prisoner posed a profound question to the commissioners: "I wish to ask, how many Governors there are here in this jail, because I find there are a lot of officers besides the Governor who punish" (*The Number* 40).

Haysom (1981) has also catalogued numerous instances where prisoners who were witnesses to the murders committed by the Number gangs and some witnesses who were actually murdered by the Number gangs in prison after giving evidence in court. He has also given a number of examples where prison gang members would rather face gallows than refuse to participate in suicidal murders. Pertinently then, Haysom asks a similar question similar to that asked by the prisoner of Nongoloza's day quoted above: "[W]ho actually wields power in the prisons [and] does it not seem that there are two authority systems operating in the prisons?" (32). Although Steinberg does not deny the power wielded by the Number gangs, he is of the opinion that they are a mere mirror image of their captors. He writes:

They become, in essence, a mirror to their custodians. 'We are what you are. You are an army, we are an army. Where you have a head of prison, we have a Judge. Where you have a head of section, we have a general. Whatever you do to us, we will do to you in turn'. Far from resisting authority, they are locked onto it like a deer in the headlights; their aim is to mimic it eternally. (*The Number* 180)

This view is close to Fanon's appraisal of what he calls the national bourgeoisie who take over power after the departure of the colonialists. He observes:

Since the middle class has neither sufficient material nor intellectual resources it limits its claims to the taking over of business offices and

commercial houses formerly occupied by the settlers ... The national middle class discovers its historic mission: that of intermediary. (Fanon 1963: 122)

It is true that the Number gangs are not revolutionaries and they lack any desire to be out of prison because they have rationalised that conditions on the outside do not favour their survival. Despite their considerable power in the streets since their merging with the street gangs, their violent tendencies prevent them from being a force for positive change in their impoverished neighbourhoods. To again use Fanonian language, their situation becomes that of mere intermediaries who lack all ambition of getting out of prison and their imprisoned and imprisoning mentality. They are content with indulging themselves in scant prison luxuries and loot from drugs, and exercising terrorist power over the helpless prison and impoverished street populations.

However, their choice of the prison as their permanent home over the “free” outside life is a serious indictment of South African’s social, political and economic environments in general. This view contrasts dramatically to white prisoners’ experience of the penitentiary that Herman Charles Bosman relates in *Cold Stone Jug*. This may as well change as race and class become increasingly uncoupled in the post-apartheid state. Despite Steinberg’s observations, there is a sense in which the Number gangs resist the prison, especially by forcing warders to acknowledge their power. Since they have made the prison their permanent home, it logically follows that they are fighting for recognition and social justice within the prison. This suggests that the power of the Number gangs is not a straightforward co-opted mimicry of prison authority, but rather, it is a Lacanian mimicry which is able to reveal something because it is not only different from what it mimics but it is also a form of subtle resistance.⁶³ While in the examples that Steinberg gives it is obvious that the warders were aware and probably tolerated the underhand prison activities of the Ninevites, possibly because it was brutality of “kaffirs against kaffirs”, the setting up of the above-mentioned commission of inquiry indicates that on the whole colonial authorities viewed prison gang activities not as harmless “mimetic activity” but rather as “a travesty, camouflage [and] intimidation”, (Lacan 1977: 99) that threatened their sole right to exceptional power.

⁶³ Jacques Lacan writes: “Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage, in the strictly technical sense. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled – exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare. (‘The line and light’, *Of the Gaze, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 1979: 99 (ed.) Miller, J.). Lacan thus understands mimicry as a tactical move of survival and resistance and not as a mindless imitation of the superior Other. Developing Lacan’s ideas Bhabha says “mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite ... the discourse of mimicry is constructed around *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference”. (See Homi Bhabha’s “Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse” *The Location of Culture*, 1994: 122)

This suggests that their being trapped in the sterile prison and prison-like environment does not mean that the Number gangs have simply been co-opted into the prison power system as may be suggested by Foucault's understanding of the panopticon.⁶⁴ No matter how closely the Number gangs resemble the prison authorities, what marks them as different is the gangs' desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, to be subjects of difference which are almost the same as warders, but not quite. If their power completely matched and merged with that of the authorities, they would cease to exist as the Other, as subjects of difference. What can be called the slippage, the excess and the difference of the mimicry of the Number gangs, is their ability to invert the official panopticon mechanism, or rather to create alternative observatory towers; other centres of power which stand ambivalently opposed, but also in a complimentary position, to the official centre(s) of power. That is why Bhabha says that "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" (1994: 123). The power of the Number gangs simultaneously strengthens and threatens the power of the prison authorities and by extension that of the state.⁶⁵

Steinberg suggests that from the times of Nongoloza the history of South African prisons has been characterized by this contest for power by prison authorities on one hand, and by the Ninevites-cum Number gangs on the other. Commenting on the words of the black witness in the 1904 prison commission of inquiry, Steinberg says: "[The words] embody so much of the next hundred years: these parallel, quasi-judicial structures, warders on the one side, [and] gangs on the other, vying to control the prison population" (41). It is in the light of the foregoing that a strategic and selective application of the panopticon mechanism, what Foucault calls a figure of political technology, opens up Steinberg's narrative to various insightful interpretations.

Contrary to the Foucauldian formulation of a panopticism that is only wielded by prison authorities to paralyse inmates into self-imprisoning surveillance, Steinberg's narrative suggests that both in the case of Johannesburg prison of the early 20th century, and the

⁶⁴ Interestingly, the Number prison gangs do not simply mimic the prison authority. Haysom notes: "They have a structure, ranking and disciplinary code that pre-dates the South African Prisons Department ... Each rank a symbolic replica of position in the white military, police, or justice administration" (1981:1, 12). Their rank structure and disciplinary code is an odd syncretic mix of the Zulu regiments, British colonial and Afrikaner armed forces. This is because they started as outlaws outside prison. When they were finally forced to retreat into prison they then incorporated some of the prison authorial structure.

⁶⁵ This idea is also suggested by Haysom who argues: "It may be suggested that within the prison context the gangs have positive functions. They control and discipline their members. They offer some status and commitment to people who might otherwise have nothing to live for. However, they are also parasitic in the sense that they live off the backs of their fellow inmates" (1981: 34).

Pollsmoor prison of the early 21st century, from lock-up time until the next morning the panoptic power of surveillance shifts from warders to the Number gangs. This fact is acknowledged and even often tacitly approved of by prison authorities.⁶⁶ Andrew Bosch, one of the warders who acts as Steinberg's tour guide and seems to be privy to the workings of Pollsmoor prison's underworld, points out:

There is a high-ranking position common to all three major prison gangs called the Glas ... He has two imaginary tools: a pair of binoculars that hang from his neck, and a bunch of keys tied to his waist. The binoculars mean he can see everything that happens in the prison. The keys mean he can go anywhere in the prison; he can open any door.⁶⁷ (*The Number* 8)

Rather than a unitary panopticon mechanism as suggested by Foucault, this suggests a sedimented panopticon system with varying and often antagonistic objectives. While the warder does indeed possess real keys to every cell, the Glas's imaginary tools; binoculars and a bunch of keys, do not give him any lesser control of the prison population, both the inmates and warders⁶⁸. If anything, the Glas inspires more awe and fear in the prison population than the warder. The role of the Glas cannot simply be dismissed as prison-authority co-opted mimicry. His "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace [because it is a] sign of double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline; which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power" (Bhabha 123, 124). What makes the Glas's warder-like resemblance menacing is that it has appropriated the real functions of the warder, but it surpasses the warder in that it has incorporated mythical powers which operate at the level of the mystical which the warder cannot hope to have. The warder's real keys make his power limited since it only operates within the predictable realm of the physical, and therefore it can easily be anticipated and countered. On the other hand, although producing real physical consequences, the Glas's imaginary bunch of keys and binoculars operate in pervasive and indeterminate ways which are extremely difficult to fathom, anticipate and prevent.

Another instance where we see this anti-official Panopticon and diffuse workings of power is in the incident described by Steinberg in the prologue. The incident involves the murder of

⁶⁶ This suggests that the "official", public face of the Law is underpinned by disavowed and illegal but secretly tolerated forms of violence. It would appear as if Foucault *misrecognises* the repressed violence required by the panopticon to function.

⁶⁷ This compares with a warder Ruth First calls "the Key Man" in *117 Days*.

⁶⁸ The same of course can be said about other ritualised aspects of the Number prison gangs such the imaginary "uniforms" and the military rank structure that is strictly adhered to.

one Marthinus Hollander at Victor Verster prison in Paarl in 1978 by the Number gangs. Hollander's blood was to be the ransom for peace between the 26s and 28s who had been engaged in a bloody war since 1974. He was chosen to die a ritualistic death on arbitrary grounds because he was "decreed to be a *vuil mpata*, 'a dirty nothing', and the spilling of his blood was to symbolize the cleansing of the prison" (*The Number* xii). This incident is important in illustrating the limits of the Benthamite-Foucauldian Panopticism and also in showing how power is not just imposed upon "the unhappy ones who are obligated to bow before it" as suggested by the Foucauldian panoptic mechanism (*Foucault Live* 187). Foucault argues that the Panopticon is a seeing machine designed like a dark room into which individuals spy, but it is also "a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole" (*Discipline* 207). The Hollander incident related by Steinberg render these Foucauldian notions of power problematic in relation to the workings of South African prisons.

Clearly then, the Foucauldian claim that the "panopticon mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and recognize immediately" (*Discipline* 200) is compromised by the Glas's reversal of the process, which renders the victim the victimizer, and by the Hollander incident.⁶⁹ The Hollander case adds another dimension to our understanding of the Benthamite-Foucauldian panoptic establishment. Commenting on how the Hollander's murder and the subsequent trial of his murderers, Steinberg observes:

Perhaps the story is apocryphal. But it is legendary; the old Number veterans talk of it with pride – the day the coloured man in the gallery stood up and began shouting at a witness in prison language, the white prosecutor and judge staring at him in bewilderment, the meaning of their own trial suddenly unintelligible to them. (*The Number* ix)

Foucault claims that the panopticon machine serves to dissociate the see/being seen dualism. The inmates who occupy the peripheric ring of the panopticon are completely visible without ever knowing who their watcher(s) is or whether they are being watched at all. The person who occupies the central tower is able to see everything without being seen. In other words, with the development of the panopticon mechanism power is exercised in a Godlike manner,

⁶⁹ Thomas Mathiesen criticises Foucault for failing to describe the development of what he calls the Synopticon model of power in modern societies. He says that the television has developed new ways in which many watch the few. (Mathiesen, T. "The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault's "Panopticon" Revisited", *Theoretical Criminology*, 1997, pp. 215-34). Bauman adds that the few who are watched are the celebrities. Bauman also points out that while the Panopticon forced people into position where they could be watched, the Synopticon needs no coercion – it seduces people into watching (Bauman, Z. *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (1998: 52).

where one automatically knows that no matter how hidden one is, one is being watched. One then begins to police not only one's own actions and behaviour but one's very thoughts and intentions. The Hollander murder and trial contradicts this Foucauldian formulation.

The Number gangs did not only refuse to be the self-bearers of the permanent surveillance power of the panopticon by carrying out an internecine war for five years, they also demonstrated that the occupier(s) of the central tower of the panopticon do not possess a permanent and all seeing eye. They went on successfully to plot how to solve their own problems without the authorities knowing or discovering what was afoot. But they did not end there: they even made the authorities complicit with their act without these authorities being fully aware of the role they were being forced to play in this ritualistic drama. In the quotation above, where the coloured man in the gallery started shouting at a witness, the reader catches a glimpse of the reversal of the panoptic mechanism. It is the Number gangs who are in the know and it is they who watch carefully to see that there is no deviation from their plan. Had the witness not slightly strayed from the guidelines given to him by his Number bosses, this incident that Steinberg relates would not have been recorded in the court archives and the power of the Number gangs which Steinberg's narrative tries to excavate would have remained in inaccessible darkness. Even with this revelation it is doubtful that the state authorities became aware of how deeply involved they were in the enactment of some drama which they themselves were not authors. As Steinberg notes, the meaning of their own trial suddenly became unintelligible to the white judge and prosecutor. What this suggests is that the trial had never been in the control of the authorities in the first place. The Number gangs had been running the show behind the scenes right from the onset.

The Hollander incident demonstrates how the Number prison gangs invert Bentham's two principles of power, that is, power should be visible and verifiable with the use of the panopticon. If the "parliament of the 26s, 27s and the 28s, South Africa's three national prison gangs, operative in every jail around the country" (*The Number* xi) had had constantly before its eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which they are unceasingly spied, they would not have been able to meet and decree that an informer be killed as a symbolic gesture for ending their brutal conflict. Had the power issuing from the imaginary tower of the panopticon been truly unverifiable to the Number gang inmates they would not have been able to stage such a cruel performance right under the nose of the prison authorities. In this instance, in an ironic reversal of roles the power of the Number gangs is rendered invisible and unverifiable to the authorities.

This invisibility and unverifiability of the power of the Number gangs is dramatised in the language that the coloured man from the gallery uses to angrily rebuke his straying protégé. Steinberg reports:

Judge and prosecutor strained to understand what was being spoken. Some of the words spewing out from the court spectator's mouth were clearly Zulu, others derived from Afrikaans. Still others entirely unintelligible.⁷⁰ He was emphatic and angry. The witness stood still in the box, staring at his hands, listening intently. The man set down and the witness tried to resume his testimony, until the judge interrupted him and asked what the hell had just happened. (*The Number* xi)

The polyglot language developed by the Number prison gangs which only the initiated can understand renders the often unintelligible legal jargon absurd, and its elitism ridiculed, since now the judge and the prosecutor will need the Number gangs to interpret and explain to them what is happening in what they thought was their space. In this way, the South African prison gangs do not only possess and constitute the prison but they also haunt its regimes through these stage-managed court cases.

Explaining the rationale behind the actions of the Number gangs, Steinberg says: "The prison gangs regarded the courts as their only public platform ... the witness stands of South African courts were their press galleries, the witnesses their spokespeople" (*The Number* xii). Through these insidious actions the Number gangs initiate a process where the prison starts to possess and reconstitutes the entire state. This haunting effect was also demonstrated by the story of Doggy Dog which I discussed above. Elsewhere, Steinberg observes:

Despite the extraordinary continuity of myth, structure and meaning that has characterised prison gangs throughout the 20th century, the gangs are malleable: they are keenly responsive to changing historical forces in society at large and to the changing conditions of prison life itself. (*Nongoloza's Children* 2004: 3)

The mutations that occur to the Number gangs that become evident in the 1990s show that they are responsive to change and this may be a useful pointer to how not only prison authorities but the entire society may prevent or minimise the chances of the development of such necrophilic social institutions.

⁷⁰ This language is similar to *fanakalo* the lingua franca in colonial and apartheid mines. (See Thembisa Waetjen, 2004: 85).

Commenting on the power that gangs wield at Pollsmoor the Centre for Conflict Resolution observes: “Gangsterism is a potent feature of Pollsmoor Prison life ... Due to the fact that warders are present in the sections for less than two-thirds of the day, the gangs are enormously powerful in the communal cells” (2009: 1). Number prison gangs also exercise enormous power over the warders themselves. Any warder who does not toe the line is stabbed with a short blade that is not meant to kill him, but rather to inspire fear and respect of the gangs. Talking about how a troublesome warder is disciplined, Magadien aptly captures the power that both warders and the Number gangs wield in prison. He says:

It was like a game. The question is who’s afraid of whom at the end of the day? We chose warders we needed to fear us, and we stabbed them. Sure, they fuck us up afterwards, but put yourself in the shoes of the individual warder, the one who has been stabbed. You go away for a while on sick leave, maybe a little longer on stress leave; but then you are back. When you walk in the yard, with all the prisoners around you, you are worried. When you walk alone down the corridor, or into a cell, your heart is beating fast. Maybe, in the front of your mind, you think these people stabbed you because they are animals. But at the back of your mind, you know why you were stabbed. You do not shout; you do not scream; you do not clip a prisoner on the back of the ear. You are afraid. (*The Number* 178)

It is this ability to propagate strategic fear among both warder and fellow inmates that allow the Number gangs to exercise considerable power within the prison walls.⁷¹ Haysom points out that the power of the Number prison gangs is not just localised within one prison. The Number gangs are powerful because they are nation-wide and no prisoner or warder is beyond their reach. They even have “a communication system that relays information and orders between prisons” (Haysom 1981: 14). Although the Number gangs are trapped within the prison walls and often have no desire to escape, their power is not merely symbolic. They dispense both within and without the prison walls their brand of justice. As we saw in the case of Doggy Dog, with the demise of apartheid, the power of the Number gangs has been transformed and expanded reaching all the way beyond the South African national borders.

⁷¹ In a poem titled “the night train” the South African poet Fhazel Johennesse depicts the apartheid state as a night train whose passages are paralysed by the fear of the pervasive terrorism of the state and that of those who claim to be fighting for freedom. In a similar way, most citizens of the post-apartheid state are so paralysed by the fear of crime that only a few dare-devils and the extremely desperate would take a night train. The more affluent exhibit this fear by flocking into super-secure housing estates.

Steinberg's narrative does not suggest an uncomplicated polarity of power relations within Pollsmoor prison: that of the prison authorities versus that of the Number gangs. The Number gangs' exercise of power is characterised by multiple layers. Significantly, each of the Number gangs, the 26s, the 27s and the 28s has its own complex rank structure. Among the Number gangs themselves there is a lot of rivalry, some of which dates back to the days of Nongoloza and Kilikijan, the two mythical fathers of the Number. As we have seen, Steinberg's narrative opens with an account of an internal power struggle between the Number gangs at Victor Verster prison which raged for five years until it was solved by the gruesome ritual murder of a prisoner who had nothing to do with the conflict and the subsequent hanging of those selected by the Number to stand in the dock by the state. Steinberg clearly indicates that this was a power contest. He calls this conflict a "war" and "a violent contest to rule the prisons" (*The Number* xii)⁷².

It will be naïve, however, to think that the Number gangs are characterised and sustained by a single narrative of violence and wanton destruction of life. As I have pointed out, in the mythical Number narrative, Nongoloza is represented as an anti-colonial nationalist who begins his career as a robber because of the injustices of the exploitative and socially destructive capitalist culture ushered in by colonial administration. The Nongoloza-Kilikijan myth is clearly anti-Saidian (Said of the pre-1978 period) in that despite the glaring power disparities between Nongoloza and colonial authorities, it acknowledges the existence of counter narratives or discourses to the hegemonic colonial discourse. In a similar way, his progeny, the ubiquitous Number prison gangs, also weave a narrative which portrays them not as mere villains but as fighters for prison social justice.

This can be seen in the instance where Steinberg tells of the occasion when the Minister of Correctional Services visited Pollsmoor prison in 2003. The minister spoke of rehabilitation, of employment, of growing vegetables for the impoverished children within prison grounds. But he also did not forget to moralise. Addressing the prisoners directly he said: "You are here because you have done terrible things to people on the outside. Don't do terrible things to people on the inside. Don't rape people here. The gangs are unacceptable and must go" (22). Then Steinberg makes a perceptive and disconcerting observation. He says:

⁷²This civil strife within the Number has its parallels in the acrimony that characterised relations between anti-apartheid movements. In *Long Walk to Freedom* Mandela chronicles a long history of conflict which turned extremely bloody just before the democratic elections of 1994 between organizations that claimed to have a common enemy.

The prisoners listened in polite silence. They always listen. They always imbibe the words of authority and churn them around with their own words, making a strange mixture of the two; Number Generals talk of the imperatives of the reintegration, and their soldiers speak of growing vegetables for the children of the poor. (*The Number 22*)

This suggests that Bhabha's observations about the ambivalence and hybridity of colonial discourse is also applicable to post-colonial/post-apartheid situations. What makes the Number gangs disturbingly uncanny is that they do not perpetually stand opposed to authority and officialdom; they absorb it and blend it until the distinction between the two becomes problematised. On one hand, they commit atrocious crimes against their fellow inmates and against each other. On the other hand, they view themselves as zealots; fearless soldiers against the evils of the state. Interestingly, Steinberg shows that the Number gangs are not the only contenders for power within the prison. The Firm, The Americans and The Big Five, although first emerging from the impoverished streets of the Cape Flats, have, since the early 1990s, infiltrated the South African jails and added other rings around the imaginary tower of the prison panopticon. Discussing the way in which the prison regime has come to possess and constitute the state in America, Loïc Wacquant (1999), talks of "the *fusion of ghetto and prison culture* [and] the melting of street and carceral symbolism, with the resulting mix being *re-exported* to the ghetto and diffused throughout society via the commercial circuits catering to the teenage consumer market, professional sports, and even the mainstream media" (116; emphasis in the original). Steinberg's *The Number* recounts a similar process taking place in South Africa.

Steinberg's account of Nongoloza's life is also illustrative of the permeability of the prison and the streets that we see taking place in post-apartheid South Africa. Steinberg notes some interesting facets of Nongoloza's life after his capture and becoming a prison inmate. At first Nongoloza is uncooperative and prefers to talk to the prison authorities through an interpreter. But when it dawns on him that his interpreter may be misrepresenting him to his captors he decides to cooperate, with the result that he renounces his past criminal way of life and ends up becoming a warder himself. But Nongoloza's intriguing multi-identities do not end there. Upon his retirement from the prison service he fails to live a straight life and finds himself on the margins of mainstream society and resorts to his old criminal self from time to time to supplement his income. This leads to a life-long confrontation with the law enforcing state agents. This suggests that Nongoloza becomes a prototype, a model of the now ubiquitous

Number prison and street gangs which all owe their existence and resilience to the Nongolozan narrative.

The assimilation of the once feared robber into the repressive prison apparatus adds a disquieting layer to Nongoloza's already multi-layered personality and implies that oppositional forces are always on the brink of co-optation. Interestingly though, Steinberg's narrative shows that even the dominant authority, that which in Foucauldian terms we can call the panopticon central tower represented by the warders, is not a unified force poised against the dissenting power of the Number gangs. As much as Nongoloza and his progeny can be co-opted into prison authority, this same authority suffers from punctures and dents inflicted on it by its daily contact with the corrosive social environment which gave birth to the Number gangs in the first place.

Steinberg's narrative shows that what is called prison authority is a strange amalgam of parallel, counter-parallel and undefined webs of power forms that all give shape and character to the everyday operations of power in South African prisons. For example, the warder prison structure, especially that of the apartheid prison, was characterized by racialised power struggles which mimicked and sought to legitimize and reproduce power forms which characterised wider society. For example, prison warders were sharply divided along racial lines which ensured the supremacy of the white warders (*The Number* 322). After apartheid, when Freddie, a coloured man took over as Pollsmoor Area Commissioner in 1996, and tried to implement some reforms, there was an exodus of high-ranking white warders. Appearing before the Jali Commission of Inquiry into Prison Corruption in 2002 Engelbrecht, the then Pollsmoor Area Commissioner, said: "All in all (within a year), 40 senior staff cleared out: 23 on medical pension, 14 severance packages, and the remaining three resigned within 48 hours' notice" (*The Number* 322). In both the apartheid and post-apartheid prison, power becomes "something like the stratification, the institutionalization, the definition of tactics, of implements and arms which are useful" in all the specific everyday struggles that happen in the contestation of issues of identity (*Foucault Live: Interviews, 1966- 1984*: 187).

Therefore, instead of the simple panopticon mechanism suggested by Foucault, the situation that obtains in the South African prisons of Steinberg's narrative may be better understood through Shil's metaphor of the composition of societal power relations. Shil argues that the power structure of any given society has neither a centre nor a periphery but comprises a succession of overlapping "onion leaves" (in Nikos Papastergias 1996: 182). But even Shil's schema falls short of fully accounting for all the complex power plays in South African jails.

As Steinberg shows, South African jails seem to have at least two centres; that of the prison authorities and that of the Number prison gangs; to which all the other power forms respond and revolve in varying subordinated positions. But these power centres themselves are not impermeable, since through a complex process of diffusion they confront and at times compliment each other. This description comes closer to Foucault's later understanding of power where he emphasized its plurality and pervasiveness rather than seeing it as the possession of one dominant group who use it against the less powerful ones. The Number prison gangs do not perceive themselves as helpless victims who are always at the receiving end of the prison authority. Rather, they rule the prisons and to a large extent influence the decisions that are made on how the prisons are run.

However, as I noted earlier, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault's description of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* seems to imply hegemonic power on one hand, and on the other hand, its pervasive and almost a self-sustaining operation in the rest of the society. He argues:

The Panopticon mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately ... Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but he does not see; he is the subject of information, never a subject in communication. The arrangement of his room, opposite the central tower, imposes on him an axial visibility; but the divisions of the ring, those separated cells, imply a lateral invisibility. (201)

Steinberg's description of the Number gangs shows that they assert their subjectivity in ways that are denied by Foucault in the above words. The imaginary binoculars of the Glas are not only meant to observe fellow inmates, but they are also for breaking down the works of the official Panopticon. The binoculars of the Glas are for reversing the one-way visibility imposed by the official Panopticon and make the prison authorities themselves objects of unceasing surveillance of the Number gangs. Each warder walks the corridor knowing that he cannot escape the Glas's all seeing binoculars. Furthermore, the Glas's imaginary keys are for the annulment of segmented confinement. Instead of having individuals locked-up in separated cells rendering communication with fellow inmates impossible as the Benthamite Panopticon requires, the Glas opens it up and makes it one big communal cell. All this is aptly captured by Steinberg's discussion with warder Bosch who gives him his orientation tours around Pollsmoor prison. In Pollsmoor the prison kitchen becomes the imaginary tower of the

Number gangs' unofficial Panopticon. It is from the kitchen that the lines of communication are kept open and orders issued. From the different Number gangs the Glas appoints the right gang members to the kitchen and these become his eyes. Bosch understands this arrangement perfectly. He says:

You can't keep the gangsters off the food teams ... If you cut off the ability of gangs in your section to communicate with other sections, they get nasty. We have the safety of our members to think about. (8)

One has here a situation where the Number gangs have developed a series of panopticon mechanisms of their own which run parallel to the official one(s). Steinberg seems to understand this apparently post-Foucauldian situation. Echoing but also interpreting warder Bosch's comments, he observes:

Seems to me it's big game ... Your job is to keep the prison closed, the sections separated from each other. Theirs is to keep the prison open. But if you won, if you really kept the prison closed, they would stab you. So you lose on purpose. (8)

The warders do not lose on purpose though, but yield to what Foucault calls the diffuse institutional acts of power. However, whether they realise it or not, both the warders and the Number gangs are involved in a great performance of power which is a clear inversion of the panopticon mechanism. At least Magadien, the 28 gang member whose story *The Number* is largely about, realises that what happens between the prison authorities is some kind of tragic play, but a play nevertheless. After relating how he had to stab a warder before being recruited to be a 28, and how he allowed himself to be beaten almost senseless by the warders without retaliating, he says that "[i]t was a bit like a game" (178). Referring to how both the warder and the Number gangs had come to an unspoken consensus of inflicting non-fatal bodily injuries on each other, Steinberg also suggests that the relationship has become some kind of performance. He writes:

What struck me ... was not so much the brutality of the relationship between warders and inmates, as the delicate filigree of the unwritten rules and corresponding tactics ... the violence was ritualized, formulaic. (178-9)

Both Magadien's and Steinberg's words suggest that when it comes to the relationship between warders and Number gangs the panoptic surveillance becomes bi-cameral. There is a mutual but unspoken acknowledgement of each side's power. Magadien says the warders

“sensed the atmosphere; they knew that, for their own safety, they are places they must not go” (179). Entering into dialogue with Magadien’s boastful logic, Steinberg also observes: “Inmates, too, knew that there was a threshold they must not cross” (179). Unlike in Foucault’s panoptic mechanism, where inmates have completely lost all agency to the ever-visible power symbolised by the central tower, the Number gangs of Steinberg’s narrative have some agency, even if it may be considered circumscribed agency. The Number gangs do not expect the prison authorities to completely give up their power, for that would not only be detrimental to prison authorities and state power in general; it would render the operations of Number gangs impossible, since they thrive in prison and in the stalemate situation that obtains between themselves and the prison authorities. The highly ritualised system of the Number reveals a deep seated desire for a stable and predictable existence. In prison, they have created a community that ensures not only their survival but their power as well.

5. Concluding Remarks

Our examination of *The Number* has confirmed Bhabha’s argument that “[t]erms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively” (1994: 3). The Number gangs’ interaction with the warders suggests that the Foucauldian panoptic power relations do not operate in most South African jails, if Steinberg’s study (of mainly Pollsmoor prison) can be considered as fairly representative. That the relationship between the warders and Number gangs is made possible by an unspoken delicate performance or theatricalisation of power is seen in two incidents that Steinberg relates. The first one has to do with the situation that obtains when hardened Number gangs are transferred from Pollsmoor prison to Robben Island. Steinberg writes that Robben Island “was a place where prison life as inmate knew it was suspended” (201). This description of Robben Island strangely resembles what Giorgio Agamben (1998) says obtained in the Nazi concentration camps. He argues: “[T]he camps constitute a space of exception in ... which not only is law completely suspended but fact and law are completely confused – everything in the camps is completely possible ...”. (170). Interestingly, Magadien describes Robben Island in terms that closely resemble Agamben’s camp. He says: “At Robben Island there was one phrase: ‘Everything dies at sea.’ Nothing that happens reaches Cape Town. You know that if you stab a white warder at that place you die ...” (202). The juridical protection that enables the Number gangs to function in the mainland prisons such as Pollsmoor is inexplicably suspended at the island prison of Robben Island. This account illustrates that the relations between warders and Number gang inmates are not regulated by an unceasing panoptic surveillance but by a subtle and ritualized understanding which is regulated by certain well-known but unofficial chronotopes. These

roles have been learnt performatively in an antagonistic cultural engagement between warders and the Number gangs, if I may use Bhabha's terminology.

I have also argued that the self, the nation and national institutions are narratives in the sense that there is no reality that is not mediated through a narrative. The legendary status of Robben Island again enables us to see that geographical spaces are themselves read and experienced through stories that are told about them. For example, the legendary status that suddenly suspends the normal warder-inmate behaviour on Robben Island is not only a result of the island's unique geographical position which indeed sets it apart. It is, more than anything else, the narratives that have been constructed first by the coloniser, and then appropriated by the colonised, that has shaped people's perceptions of Robben Island. To once again use Said's words, we can say Robben Island itself is a narrative. When warders suspend all penal conduct that regulates the interaction of warder and prisoners by giving hardened Number gangsters knives with which to hunt abalone and crayfish, this is a dramatisation of the power of narratives. As Steinberg observes, Robben Island becomes an experiment which shows a complex interface of the narratives that are told about geographical space and the way it affects people's real physical interaction.

Within the paradigm of the power of narratives, I tried to understand the claims of the Number that there was a holocaust in South African apartheid prisons which their activities intended to counter. While there is nothing in the recent South African prison history that may compare with the Nazis holocaust, it cannot be denied that something insidious, a compelling haunting spirit pervaded colonial and apartheid prisons, leading to the emergence and resilience of such an uncanny social phenomenon as the Number prison gangs. The understanding of the construction of the narrative of the self and that of the nation makes us see that rather than concerning ourselves with a factual comparison of the numbers that were killed in colonial and apartheid South African jails, and those executed in Nazi camps, the issue for a literary critic is to try and understand what it is about South African prisons which leads to some of its inmates, to believe or perceive themselves to have entered a camp, that "place in which the most absolute *conditio inhumana* that ever existed on earth was realized" (Agamben 166). Agamben's ideas are illuminating in this regard. He argues:

Who ever entered the camp moved in a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective right and juridical protection no longer made sense.

(170)

As we have seen, to the Number gangs, all South African prisons are camps in the Agamben sense. To both warders and Number gang prisoners, Robben Island was also a place where individuals occupied the very peripheric position so that the application of subjective right and juridical protection became an illusorily abstract concept. What makes the study of South African prisons pertinent, however, is that it is related to Agamben's argument that the camp, envisioned as a state of exception, is not a historical fact and an anomaly belonging to the past, but in some way it is instead the hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space in which we are living (1998: 166). This reasoning is significantly similar to Bhabha's exhortation:

As literary creatures and political animals we ought to concern ourselves with the understanding of human action and social world as a moment when *something is beyond control, but is not beyond accommodation*. (1994:18)

Said also claims that his exilic situation makes him feel that he is always simultaneously inside and outside things and for him this becomes a rich site of literary theorisation. The South African prisons, be they colonial, apartheid or post-apartheid, and issues of criminality, especially with regards to the existence of the Number prison gangs, can be viewed as phenomena that emerge and exist beyond control and are both inside and outside things, and as a result become rich sites of signification. My study of the prison and the Number gang culture, since they are often viewed as things beyond but still within our social environment, is a humble contribution to this exhortation of Bhabha and Said to focus our literary attention to the apparently peripheric social institutions.

In South Africa a veritable genre of prison literature has emerged largely due to the writings of the victims of apartheid political imprisonment. Since the demise of apartheid political prison narratives have dried up. What has been coming out as prison literature are collaborative biographies such as *The Number* and *A Human Being Died that Night*, or short semi-autobiographical narratives collected in anthologies such as the ones I examine in Chapter Six. Post-colonial Kenya, unlike post-apartheid South Africa, has seen a proliferation of a recognisable genre of popular crime and prison narratives. Using mainly theories of popular culture and autobiography, in the next chapter I turn my attention to a small selection of this Kenyan literary phenomenon.

Chapter 5: Kenyan Popular Narratives of Crime and Imprisonment

“Prison is just like prison ... I mean how can one describe a prison except maybe a whole chain of woes and lamentations” (Protagonist in Charles Githae’s novel *Comrade Inmate*)

Introduction

In the above caption, Githae alludes to the difficulty encountered by both narrative and academic critics of writing about prison without falling into the cliché of discussing the appalling conditions and the abuse of human rights that characterize prison in most post-colonial African states. While these larger issues of social justice cannot and should not be neglected, they usually lead to “instrumentalist and functionalist accounts” (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004: 358) of the prison which normally place less emphasis on various other facets of prison life and prison experience. This chapter departs from such renditions. It does so by reading the postcolonial Kenyan prison depicted in a number of popular crime and prison auto/biographical narratives written between 1984 and 2004 through theories of popular culture and those of auto/biography. The twin use of these theories is possible because both cultural and auto/biographical theorists describe popular culture and autobiography, respectively, as sites or arenas of struggle.⁷³ The popular and autobiographical are sites where power is seized but also relinquished in analogous ways.

The main texts that I examine to develop my argument are John Kiriamiti’s *My Life in Crime* (1984) and *My Life in Prison* (2004), John Kiggia Kimani’s *Life and Times of a Bank Robber* (1988) and *Prison is not a Holiday Camp* (1994), Benjamin Garth Bundeh’s *Birds of Kamiti* (1991), and Charles Githae’s, *Comrade Inmate* (1994). I argue that attempts by these writers to politicise their predicament is unconvincing. This suggests that the true site of ‘the political’ might in fact be located in experiences and moments that seem personal, as when these authors are engaging with notions of personal confession and contrition. To state it differently, in these texts, we encounter the hegemonic power of the prison and its individualisation processes in its closest literary form, the confessional life writing. The more satiric texts suggest that the boundary between prison and society is completely arbitrary – the prisoners were just the unlucky citizens who got caught. This poses a major challenge to the whole confessional project and re-politicises personal experience.

⁷³ On popular culture see Karin Barber (1987, 1997), Stuart Hall (2005a, 2005b), John Storey (2003a, 2003b) and John Fiske (1989a, 1989b). Philippe Lejeune writes that “autobiography is not an act of analysis but a lived activity of synthesis” (1971: 104). For more on autobiography both as a concept and body of texts see Mary Jacobus (1984), Robert M. Young (1988), Barbara Johnson (1989), and Laura Marcus (1994).

1. Prison-City and Prison-warder Matrix and Popular Culture

This section focuses primarily on John Kiriamiti's *My Life in Crime* (1984) and *My Life in Prison* (2004). Out of the five books by Kiriamiti, these two texts are the foremost crime and prison Kenyan popular narratives, respectively⁷⁴. For this reason, and for the reason that they openly claim to be auto/biographical, my study of Kiriamiti focuses on these two narratives in particular. *My Life in Crime* can be said to be an exemplary prison narrative because it is not only about Kiriamiti's life of crime, but was written and published while he was serving a twenty year sentence in Naivasha Maximum Prison. In *My Life in Prison* Kiriamiti tells the reader how his first book was written and how its publication while he was still in prison resulted in his sentence to one hundred days in solitary confinement. He writes: "I experienced days of loneliness, hunger, bitterness and cold, sleepless nights ... [in] solitary confinement, a prison within prison" (2004: 197). Ironically though, *My Life in Crime* is not about prison. It is specifically about Kiriamiti's precipitous journey to prison. Kiriamiti was aware of this omission of the prison, and as a result he promised the reader that some day he may be able to tell the prison story. After finishing the manuscript of *My Life in Crime* Kiriamiti tells the reader that he gave it to G.G, one of his partners in crime who was also serving a long term at Naivasha Prison. The dialogue that ensues after G.G has read the script is important in its anticipation of *My Life in Prison*, a book that Kiriamiti was to publish twenty years later. The exchange goes like this:

'I did not know you could write that much. You really hit it while it is hot. But there is one thing I am not satisfied with'. So I asked him, 'And what is that old timer?' He said, '*You haven't written about prison. You should at least write something concerning Naivasha Prison. We have come across a hell of incredible things. Think of it brother and write something about it. We still have plenty of time ahead.*' At last I said, 'Prisons? For God's sake don't remind me about prison, and the things man do to others! Let us leave

⁷⁴ Kiriamiti has also written *My Life with a Criminal: Milly's Story* (1989), *Son of Fate* (1994) and *The Sinister Trophy* (1999). Although *My Life with a Criminal* is Kiriamiti's autobiographical account of his life of crime told from the perspective of his girlfriend Milly, it is really a study of the negative effect of the criminal's activities to those dear to him. The other two are crime fictions that exploit the fame that Kiriamiti had attained through *My Life in Crime* and *My Life with a Criminal* (See Preface, *Son of Fate*).

it at that.’ And for sure, we left it at that. *But maybe ... Tomorrow ... tomorrow ... you never know!* (*My Life in Crime* 216; my emphasis).

As G.G correctly observes, in *My Life in Crime* Kiriamiti fails to write about prison. In the above quotation Kiriamiti himself alludes to the fact that it may be the trauma of prison that prevents him from doing so. Besides trauma, it could be that his memory, an indispensable tool in auto/biographical narratives, has not yet managed to process the prison to position Kiriamiti as a likeable hero of the prison narrative. Jennifer Musangi (2008) observes that “in all his works Kiriamiti manages to make his fictionalized self so likeable that instead of being the villain that crime has turned him into, he becomes the reader’s hero” (3). The long quotation above from *My Life in Crime* does not only bear out Musangi’s observation, but also explains the reason why Kiriamiti could not write about his prison experience while still inside. Contrary to G. G’s comment that Kiriamiti had hit it while still hot, the fact is that Kiriamiti manages to write about his life of crime more than ten years into his prison sentence and only writes about prison almost twenty years later.⁷⁵ In *My Life in Crime* Kiriamiti is intent on eliciting the readers’ sympathy. Instead of representing himself as the villainous criminal that he was, he depicts himself as a disempowered victim of the Nairobi environment in which he found himself. It is through Kiriamiti’s positioning of himself as a powerless victim of the pervasively powerful forces of the Nairobi underworld that he is able to appeal to the popular. He writes about his life in crime because fourteen years later, through memory re/construction and the distance acquired through the passage of time, he is able to insert himself as the hero of the narrative. He is able to narrate his life of crime because he has not only survived it, but has also presumably escaped it. In the preface of the book, he appeals to the reader not to view him as a criminal: “As concerns my part in it (book), be good and forget it, I am a reformed person” (Foreword).

Compared with *My Life in Crime*, *My Life in Prison*, is not only a superlative example of prison narrative because part of it was written while Kiriamiti was still “inside”, but more importantly because from chapter one up to the last chapter it unflinchingly focuses on prison life with Kiriamiti as the likeable hero-survivor-narrator. In this narrative, Kiriamiti captures the kind of power equilibrium that is required in the daily interaction between all the prison inmates and the unspeakable brutality which occurs when this stability is upset. He shows that prison is a place “where everything went opposite” (2004: 110). He writes: “Speak the truth

⁷⁵ There is an interesting parallel here with Herman Charles Bosman, one of the few early South African proponents of a more “popular” prison literature, who also waited two decades before he managed to record his prison experience.

or search for it in prison and you might very easily end up in solitary confinement. The rule in prison, if you want peace learn to say yes when you know the answer is no” (2004: 99). Similarly, Bundeh calls the prison a “jungle” and “a world ... of the tragic twist of fate” (7). With a slight touch of humour, Kiriamiti further observes: “If you want to get the best picture of prison, you have to take everything the opposite way. Doors are locked from outside when you go to sleep, instead of from the inside; cigarettes buy money, instead of money buying cigarettes” (2004: 110). When he turns to the city Kiriamiti shows that despite its enticing vibrancy it is also the inverse of the rural village’s stability and predictability. This rendition of the prison, the city and the village helps to magnify the relativity of all cultural practices, especially those that have become a permanent feature of the prison and city that people have come to take for granted and assume are cast in stone.

Kiriamiti’s narratives suggest that the elusive embeddedness of the auto/biographical subject in the city parallels that of the love-hate relationship characteristics of warders and prisoners. The very opening page of *My Life in Prison* reveals disturbing ambivalent entanglements between prison authority as it is represented by the warders on one hand, and, on the other, that of the criminals over whom they have oversight. Kiriamiti declares:

I would rather be employed as a grave digger than look for a job as a warder. I’ve never met a warder who is proud of his work in all the years I have been with them. Every time I hear them talk of retiring soon. But when the time comes, each one starts praying for an additional two or three years of service, for one reason or another. I suppose their job is as addictive as crime is to some criminals. (Kiriamiti 2004: 1)

Above, Kiriamiti does not only deride the profession of prison warders but he also captures the logic that regulates the warder-prisoner relationship that he chronicles in his narrative. It is an ambivalent mutual love-hate relationship characterized by a strange desire to both preserve and annihilate the other camp. The warders despise the prisoners for being the scum of the earth and the prisoners in turn despise the warders for being social outcasts who have somehow become their brutal captors. Prison warders seem to be instinctively aware of the lowly social status of their job, and their brutality over prisoners is presented as an attempt to assert their power and compensate for their inferiority complex.⁷⁶ Kiriamiti realises that as

⁷⁶ In *Cold Stone Jug*, Bosman suggests the violent relations that characterise the warder-convict relationship are similar to those of master-slave relationship captured in Paul Gilroy’s work. Gilroy argues: “The extreme patterns of communication defined by the institution of plantation slavery dictate that we recognize the anti-discursive and extralinguistic ramifications of power at work in shaping communicative acts. There may, after all, be no reciprocity on the plantation outside the possibilities of rebellion and suicide, flight and silent

much as crime is addictive, so is being a prison warder. He similarly depicts many city cultural practices that urban dwellers have naturalised as irresistible and addictive. The prison warder's addiction to work beyond the retirement period derives mainly from his or her poor remuneration which leaves him or her with little hope of enjoying a financially secure retirement.⁷⁷ Similarly, Kiriamiti depicts criminals as addicted to their social deviance. Few criminals that Kiriamiti depicts in *My Life in Crime* have the ability to avoid the illegal pleasures that the city dangles in front of them. Using a trope of didactic confessional literature, Kiriamiti depicts the city as a place of evil and degradation where innocent young men from the countryside are led astray and completely fail to defer happiness and save some of their criminal loot for old age. For example, after spending the money in the city on women, alcohol and designer suits, Kiriamiti claims that he would be left with only one option: going for a last score. This would go on and on, like a warder who hates guarding the prisoners but goes on working and having human interaction with them anyway.

Kiriamiti refuses to present a simplistic view of either his city life, prison life or the warder-prisoner relationship. He adopts a philosophical stance towards prison and prisoners, claiming: "Prison and Prisoners. To tell you the truth, I don't know which is worse. In my opinion they are equally bad" (2004: 114). Unlike the Number prison gangs depicted in Steinberg's *The Number* who view themselves as forces of social justice ranged against the evils and excesses of warders, and the Manichean world of Mandela's political prisoners versus warders and common law prisoners in *Long Walk to Freedom*, Kiriamiti does not hold such illusory conceptions about the warder-prison relationship. Further down the page, with tongue in cheek, he declares: "I do not like prisoners in general" (2004: 114). As I have noted, Kiriamiti writes and publishes *My Life in Crime*, which is largely anecdotes about his criminal city exploits, while a prisoner at Naivasha Maximum Security Prison. This could not have been possible without the co-operation and help of some warders and to a certain extent fellow prisoners.

mourning, and there is certainly no grammatical unity of speech to mediate communicative reason." (1993: 57). Later in this discussion, we will see that Kiriamiti, like Bosman, suggests that as a result of lack of this grammatical unity referred to by Gilroy, prisoners have no space for linguistic expression of their feelings towards warders except through suicidal violence. In turn, warders respond to the threat to their position as sole custodians and possessors of instruments of violence within the prison space with murderous violence.

⁷⁷ Breyten Breytenbach also describes the destitute condition and the imprisoned mentality of white prison warders during the apartheid regime. He writes: "Their whole life is that of prison. They adopt the stance and accents of their charges ... When they leave on holiday it is to a bungalow in another prison compound". He goes on to relate a story of baboons which bolted when someone threatened to recruit them to be prison warders. (*True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* 1984: 223-225)

In both his autobiographies, Kiriamiti suggests that there is moral agency which resides within every city dweller and prison inmate (both warders and prisoners), and this is what compels him to narrate his experiences. Robert Young (1988) suggests that this agency is a product of or is enabled by the auto/biographical process itself. He talks of auto/biography as celebrating “the validity of the subject’s subjectivity” (108). In Kiriamiti’s case, this celebration of the subject’s subjectivity begins before the accused has even been sentenced while he or she is still in remand prison. Kiriamiti says that prison remandees would hold mock court sessions in their cells “intended to teach amateur criminals the court procedures and the kind of tactics to use in one’s defence” (2004: 3). This is very similar to Jonny Steinberg’s account in biographical account *The Number* (2004), where he shows that the Number prison gangs have an elaborate penal regime of their own which partly mimics and partly subverts that of their captors. While the Number gangs use their mimicry to garner oppressive personal power, in the case of Kiriamiti it is meant to empower prisoners by demystifying the court procedures. Kiriamiti writes:

Some of these jailbirds, having been in various courts – some more than thirty in their lives – would adopt the roles of judge, prosecutor, defence lawyer, and witness. One then saw how the whole thing worked, and a criminal would be advised to tell his true story so that those more experienced in courtroom defence could give him valuable tips on how to defend himself. It was surprising how these experienced jailbirds could catch a person telling a lie. They seemed to be experts in law. After this kind of drama, the “judge” would pass a mock sentence to give the inexperienced ones a taste of what to expect. (Kiriamiti 2004: 3)

Clearly this is empowering mimicry. The remand prison is turned into a space for both the consumption and production of meanings of the penal regime. What the remand prisoners are doing when they play-act their forthcoming court appearance is similar to what Michel de Certeau (1984) calls the practices of space which “correspond to manipulations of the basic elements of constructed order” (455). De Certeau’s further comment about how walking in the city manipulates the panoptic spatial organizations also seems applicable to this mimicking of the workings of the justice system. De Certeau writes: “[Walking] is neither foreign to them [the city’s panoptic spatial organization] (it can take place only within them) nor in conformity with them (it does not receive its identity from them). It creates shadows and ambiguities within them” (de Certeau 456). What Kiriamiti calls “drama” or mock court session in the quotation above is also not foreign to the penal panoptic regimes since it can

only take place within them. But it is clearly subversive and does not conform to them, since its intention is to empower the accused and ensure a favourable court decision. What is interesting here is that a prison is a place that *proscribes* the walking that De Certeau describes; it renders the subject immobile. The fact that a similar subversion is nonetheless available to prisoners, by their very nature arrested in one place, suggests that they have found another way of traversing the space, perhaps one that is ultimately more symbolic in nature than in De Certeau's account.⁷⁸

Kiriamiti's *My Life in Prison* shows that there are many ways in which human objectification is contested in prison. His argument that in "prison there [is] very little difference between fact and fantasy" (2004:71) seems to suggest that this lack of difference *facilitates* the undermining of authority. He writes:

[P]risoners like to live in a world of fantasy. Just to escape from wretchedness they would indulge in a lot of wishful thinking, telling each other the most beautiful, colourful lies, and nobody seemed to mind when they found out the dark truth. Beautiful lies are very welcome. (2004: 61)

These stories, which most prisoners know are not true, but still tell and listen to anyway, exemplify what the cultural theorist John Fiske calls "the desire of the subordinate to exert control over the meanings of their lives, a control that is typically denied them in their material social conditions" (1989: 10). Fiske goes on to argue that activities like these enlarge the space of action for the subordinate and effect shifts, however minute, in social relations. He argues that these are tactics of the subordinate in "making do" within and against the system, rather than opposing it directly (1989: 11).

Kiriamiti suggests that prisoners deliberately live in fantasy-land because the prison is characterized by "a terrible lust for news which [is] never satiated" (2004: 131). A news blackout is one way the prison tries to exercise domination over the inmates. To try and wrest a measure of control, prisoners disseminate news that claims to be emanating from reliable outside sources. The truth of course is that this news is manufactured right within the prison walls. As a result, the prison becomes a self-enclosed world of echoes where the only new voices that one hears are the rebounding or recycled voices of the prisoners themselves and that of their warders. The sarcastic question that one warder asks Kiriamiti about the prisoners' culture equally applies to the warders' culture. He says: "Is there anything else you

⁷⁸ What Kiriamiti describes is comparable to the subversive activities of the Glas of the South African Number gangs which I discussed in Chapter Four.

people think of except what you have in prison” (2004: 155). Kiriamiti underscores the idea that the prison is a cultural cul-de-sac when it comes to news when he notes:

Our news agency had something for everyone, so we liked it. Word travelled from prisoners to warders and then back again. Or maybe it went from warders to prisoners and back; it was especially good to listen to news from a warder who you believed must have listened to a radio. It was hard to realise that whatever news the warder had given you, he had heard first from prisoner (2004: 130).

What is ironic is that as a result of their poor remunerations the prison warders who “did not even own radios, and did not even have an idea of how much *Taifa Leo* (a cheap Swahili daily newspaper) cost” (2004: 130), suffer from the same news blackout as the prisoners they guard. In light of the above, the prison news becomes a space of popular culture, in the sense described by Stuart Hall (2005) for all those who find themselves in it. Hall writes: “It (popular culture) is an arena that is *profoundly* mythic. It is a theatre of desires, a theatre of popular fantasies. It is where we discover and play with the identification of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message but to ourselves for the first time” (Hall 289). Like the auto/biographical where the “subject’s subjectivity” is celebrated, the fictitious or imaginary prison news as described by Kiriamiti functions as a space for the expression of desires and fantasies. It is a space where both prisoners and warders construct their identities, (re)imagine and represent themselves. It is a space of hope and potential where these mutual prison enemies interact almost at the same level, although not quite.

Although all those involved with the penal regime, including prisoners, have some measure of agency, Kiriamiti’s narratives show that this should not lead us into thinking that it is exercised in egalitarian terms. As much as there is a rank structure that ensures that prison warders wield unequal power, warders versus prisoners and prisoners versus prisoners also occupy different social positions within the prison world. In the South African prison, Steinberg shows that the Number gangs occupy important positions of power especially after lock up and during weekends. Significantly, Steinberg also indicates that like their captors, the Number prison gangs are themselves hierarchically ordered. Kiriamiti also mentions the existence of gangs such as the Black Power and the Congo by Force in the Kenyan prison. However, these Kenyan gangs do not wield as much power as the South African prison Number gangs. For Kiriamiti, whose prison I have argued mirrors the city, the most

dangerous people (from the perspective of criminals) are police informers and prostitutes because of their ability to move in and out of multiple worlds. Their activities blur the boundary between the lawful and the unlawful, the morally upright and the morally degenerate. They become the very epicentre of popular culture which Juan Flores (2005: 75) claims transverse and transgresses boundaries. For example, both informers and prostitutes entertain criminals and law enforcing agents depending simply on who promises to pay better (*My Life in Crime* 59-60).

Kiriamiti and the other writers mentioned in this chapter show that commodities such as cigarettes, rations of *ugali* and pieces of meat are also important ways in which prison subjectivities are constructed and contested. The availability of cigarettes in prison, despite the fact that “cigarette smoking is treason” (Bunde 6), is an example of how the dichotomy between warders versus prisoners, or those with power against those without it, is a relative concept. Kiriamiti’s narrative shows that although generally speaking the warders would always have more power than prisoners, the practice of everyday prison life is characterised by diffuse hierarchical power relations. For example, Kiriamiti is able to establish a constant supply of cigarettes through a wader from his section. This allows him to exercise a measure of control over the said warder, but more importantly it makes him one of the “prison tycoons” (2004: 64). He explains what this means: “I could afford any amount of food I needed” (2004: 65). Kiriamiti also indicates that through gambling and betting those with luck could become extremely rich by prison standards. He says that these prisoners “would then be said to own *wholesale shops* and they were known as the new prison *tycoons*” (2004: 125). Having cigarettes and other commodities considered valuable in prison also enables the individual to obtain sexual favours from “pansies” or beautiful boys. The prison, which appears to be only a space of unremitting misery to the uninitiated, when examined closely, turns out to be an expansive universe of possibilities and opportunities to the enterprising prisoners and warders, much as the city is to many people.

Kiriamiti’s narratives suggest that in prison the quest for cigarettes mirror the consumerist impulse of Nairobi. Mica Nava (1987) argues that among other things, consumerism is “about dreams and consolation, communication and confrontation, image and identity ... [and that it] is a discourse through which disciplinary power is both exercised and contested” (209). For prisoners, cigarettes represent what Werner Graebner (1992) calls “creativity even in the face of adverse conditions” (4). Marie Gillespie (1995) also argues that in capitalist societies there is what she calls “re-creative consumption” (3). Cigarettes seem to operate within the realm of prison popular culture and symbolise what Nachbar and Lause refer to as “a quest for

meaning [and] not merely entertainment” (1992: 6).⁷⁹ Prisoners are ready to face solitary punishment and even die for cigarettes. Kiriamiti reports: “In 1975, one unfortunate prisoner was beaten to death because he was found in possession of a small piece of Rooster cigarette” (2004: 122). Indeed, Kiriamiti shows that smoking is an important activity in prison not only because it relieves the boredom of prison life, but because of its empowering effect. He writes: “Without a cigarette one felt miserable and empty and there was little joy. With a cigarette hidden somewhere, you had something to look forward to after the long monotonous hours of the prison regime” (2004: 64).

In the same way, Kiriamiti indicates that gambling and betting thrive in prison not only for their immediate material benefits but for their empowering effect. He says that “the game made life pass more easily since the hope of one day winning a piece of meat made life just a little sweeter within the prison walls” (2004: 125). If one may appropriate Karl Marx’s words one can say “[t]his fetishism of commodities (such as cigarettes and pieces of meat) has its origin ... in the peculiar social character of the [prison] labour that produces them” (2005: 90). Although these products are not necessarily produced in prison, the difficult and sometimes painful way in which they are procured and consumed under prison restrictions, give them and those who possess them an aura that they would not have under different conditions. As a result of these commodities, peculiar class formations start developing in prison which may not always be perceptible to a passing observer.

Another example through which Kiriamiti in particular attempts to exercise agency is that immediately after being “sent to prison for twenty years with hard labour and 48 strokes of the cane” (Kiriamiti 2004: 4), he decides to resist this fate by murdering two warders. This, he imagines, will lead to his own death at the hand of the warders, and will allow him to avoid his stiff penalty. He fails in his mission but is beaten unconscious. Four days later, he awakens to find himself completely naked in a solitary confinement cell drenched with water. When this suicidal route fails, he embarks on a mission to break from prison. But to do this is almost impossible in a maximum prison like Naivasha. He then gets advice from a fellow prisoner friend named G.G, who says:

Forget suicide – act mad and be free. But, my dear friend, you will have to sweat it out. You will undergo so many tests of insanity that sometimes you

⁷⁹ In Bosman’s *Cold Stone Jug*, it is dagga that is synonymous with prison life. Bosman claims that dagga rookers or smokers were the only prisoners who produced original and haunting soulful songs which captivated his emotions (88).

will wish you had never started ... You will really have to prove you are mad. (Kiriamiti 2004: 15)

G.G's words lead us back to de Certeau's zone of "shadows and ambiguities". G.G implies that if Kiriamiti is to succeed in being sent to Mathare hospital of the mentally insane where there is a chance of breaking from prison, he has to push his mock-madness to a level where he enters a zone where neither he nor the prison authorities know the truth about his mental state. But what is ironic is that the narrative also casts doubts on the very sanity of G.G, Kiriamiti's counsellor. G.G says that in order for Kiriamiti to be certified mad, he has to empty "the chamber pot into the prisoners' porridge, and then drink it". Upon hearing this, Kiriamiti says: "I couldn't help laughing weakly. Was G.G already mad?" (2004: 16). There is a similar incident in Bosman's *Cold Stone Jug* (1999: 182) where one prisoner called Parkins manages to spend five years in the comfort of the prison hospital because he has succeeded in keeping the prison medical authorities unsure of his state of mind. He advises Bosman on how to go about feigning madness. But when Bosman is almost convinced that the prisoner is a brilliant actor, Parkins says something that convinces Bosman that Parkins, and probably Bosman himself, may in fact be authentically insane and not play-acting at all.

The case of Kiriamiti, Bosman and Parkins raises questions which demand further exploration about the extent to which the subject's agented subjectivity can be celebrated if the individual always runs the risk of losing control of it. Parkins thinks that he is successfully exercising his agency by pretending to be mad. Parkins has this advice for Bosman: "Act up as if you're screwy. But not too much, mind. Just enough to get the old horse doctor really interested in you. If you overdo it, before you knows where you are you are certified for the Criminal Lunatic" (182). Ironically, Kiriamiti's mission is to overdo it so that he is certified for the Criminal Lunatic in Mathare. But the challenge does not end there. Once certified mad, he has to keep his record of madness clean in order for him to continue staying in the Lunatic. As Kiriamiti himself writes: "To keep it clean in order to be recommended to stay, you have to play dirty, talk dirty, sing dirty songs, play dirty games, do the craziest things. I had to remember to stay mad" (Kiriamiti 2004: 33). Kiriamiti's narrative suggests that this alone is enough to drive one mad.

While Parkins seems confident that it is possible for the individual to maintain the balance between sanity and insanity, Bosman's and Kiriamiti's examples show that this is not an easy task. Both these cases illustrate that in prison, the battle is not only to play insane convincingly but also to avoid going insane altogether. While Kiriamiti and Bosman suggest

that there is a danger of going mad in prison in general, Bundehe, another Kenyan writer whose narrative I explore below, argues that the death cells are the “place where you find some of the most imbalanced imaginations” (99). In his over two year stay in the death cells of Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, his refrain is: “I must not go mad ... Oh God! Don’t let me go mad ... I must conquer madness” (99). Similarly, once Kiriamiti has started playing insane, he discovers that in prison what is difficult is, in fact, avoiding going crazy. On one occasion, he unlocks his handcuffs and breaks them and then spends the entire night singing celebrating his victory. But then he writes:

I was beginning to believe it myself. I was afraid that if this continued, I would cross a certain line beyond which I would no longer be pretending, and this was a bit threatening. Perhaps, by the time they let me go to Mathare I would really be mad, and what was the use? While fighting to prove I was insane I realized I had to fight equally hard to keep my sanity. (2004: 19)

Just like Bosman, Kiriamiti realises that while playing mad gives the prisoner some sense of agency, it is also a threatening moment since the prisoner cannot be sure when real madness may set in. After all, both Bosman and Kiriamiti imply that which makes the prisoner start playing insane in the first place may be insanity. The case of Bosman and Kiriamiti’s madness or lack of it is aptly summarised by John Storey’s observation that “what signifies is not the ‘facts’ but how the ‘facts’ are interpreted, how they are articulated to make meaning in the present” (2003b: 83). Kiriamiti, for example, comes to a moment of profound recognition when, after he breaks two sets of handcuffs, prison authorities decide to immobilise him with a straightjacket. This is how Kiriamiti describes this novel way of restraint:

This strange apparatus was mainly made of leather. The wide leather band went round my waist and was fastened at the back, just below the buttocks. On either side of the hips were the cuffs, to immobilise my arms. With my arms locked to my sides, there was little I could do. (2004: 21)

He feels completely cornered and reflects: “I concluded that the people who invented things are themselves mad, especially whoever invented this kind of handcuffs” (2004: 21). This implies that even the inventor of the prison system may have been thoroughly insane, and all those who took up the idea are also by implication mental cases. In the end, the fact that Kiriamiti is eventually sent to Mathare Hospital for the mentally insane, where he also finds a number of patients who claim to be merely feigning insanity, leaves the reader uncertain

whether he was a convincing play-actor or genuinely mad. The case is further complicated by the fact that although he escapes from Mathare, he walks right into a trap when he decides to go and say goodbye to his parents. Kiriamiti himself says: “One thing was obvious – I was not quite sane!” (2004: 49). A little further he writes: “If only I hadn’t become partially mad, after acting thus for so long, I wouldn’t have taken the risk of going home” (2004: 58). The result of his ‘partial madness’ meant that his freedom only lasted twenty four hours.

Madness, with its ability to trouble boundaries of the criminal and the law-abiding, the exercise of agency and the process of objectification, outside and inside, almost attains the status of an extended metaphor in Kiriamiti’s *My Life in Prison*. For example, what he calls the Naivasha massacre, which turns the prison into a living hell for almost an entire decade, is triggered by the actions of a former inmate of Mathare Mental Hospital called Mwangi. John Kiggia Kimani’s *Prison is not a Holiday Camp*, the narrative of which I examine below, also corroborates Kiriamiti on this incident. What both Kimani and Kiriamiti call the Naivasha massacre illustrates that the mentally insane are not only found in mental hospitals. After all, Kiriamiti shows that quite a significant number of patients at Mathare Mental Hospital claim to be only playing mad. Mwangi, a former mental patient, narrowly misses smashing a warder’s head with a hammer when it slips out off his hand. The warder had repeatedly beaten him on the chest with a baton stick because Mwangi had not kept a deadline to finish some work assigned to him. Kairu, another former Mathare patient, jumps into the fray and cracks open the warder’s skull with a hammer. When the warder collapses, Kairu loses control completely and keeps on hammering the warder’s head. When the brain mixed with blood starts oozing from the open skull, Kairu starts eating it in full view of the terrified fellow prisoners and warders.

In a bizarre manner, this madness of the two prisoners triggers the latent insanity of warders which demonstrates that prison relationships are characterized by dormant but potentially explosive paranoia. The incident also allows us to see that the prisoner-warder relations are regulated by stable but tense power relations. This is similar to what Antonio Gramsci (1971), in explaining his concept of hegemony, terms “compromise equilibrium”. Gramsci’s notion of hegemony implies that the dominant group’s use of force and violence indicates a moment of weakness in the functioning of ideological hegemony. In the case of the prison, this is seen from the fact that in most cases both Kiriamiti and Kimani show that one of the indispensable conditions of prison life is that both warders and prisoners act instinctively according to the unwritten cultural code that prevents prison from spiralling into a gladiatory field of warders ranged against prisoners. This means that although the prison as a whole may rightly be

viewed as a repressive state apparatus, on a daily basis it functions through Gramscian hegemonic principles. The cultures of prison warders and prisoners should not be understood as being perpetually at war against each other. Stuart Hall (2005) helps us to make sense of this situation when he says: “Cultures, conceived not as separate ‘ways of life’ but as ‘ways of struggle’ constantly intersect: the pertinent cultural struggles arise at the points of intersection” (70a). If the different way of life of warders versus that of prisoners can be viewed as constantly intersecting ways of struggle as Hall points out, the Kairu-Mwangi incident offers us a magnified moment where two ways of struggle violently intersect, producing devastating consequences for all concerned. After Kairu and Mwangi are arrested and put in custody, the paranoid warders from all surrounding prisons converge at Naivasha prison to come and teach the prisoners an unforgettable lesson. After spending the entire day of the 24th of April 1972 brutalising and seriously maiming hundreds of prisoners, and killing eight prisoners to avenge their fallen comrade, the warders were still not satisfied. By nightfall, they decided to lock up the prison and start their reign of terror the following morning. Kiriamiti reports that he heard them threatening: “Tomorrow is the finishing day ... That one you killed will have to be paid by half of you” (2004: 107). I have related this incident in detail because it illustrates the delicate balance that is needed to keep the Kenyan prisons of Kiriamiti’s narrative functioning with some semblance of sanity. Magadien, in Steinberg’s *The Number*, indicates that the Number prison gangs understand how far they can take their violence against warders without running the risk of being annihilated. After a Number initiate gives a warder a non-fatal stab wound he allows himself to be beaten to pulp without hitting back. Magadien explains why: “The rule was that you never provoke. If you provoke, if you fight back in a situation like that, they will kill you. It was all tactical. Sometimes it was necessary to retreat, for the sake of the survival of the Number” (Steinberg 2004: 178). Unfortunately, Mwangi and Kairu are too crazy to know the prison golden rule: Never kill a warder.

In the above quotation, Magadien implies that prisoners can only survive the overwhelming power of warders by employing guerrilla tactics since a frontal attack means certain doom. Discussing the kind of resistance that takes place within the arena of popular culture, John Fiske (1989b) remarks: “Guerrilla tactics are the art of the weak: they never challenge the powerful in an open warfare, for that would be to invite defeat, but maintain their own opposition within and against the social order dominated by the powerful” (19). The Naivasha incident and Magadien’s remarks above both suggest that the prison is a principal site for the contestation of power relations. The culture produced on the site of the prison is an exemplary

example of popular. In the everyday practice of their lives, prisoners employ various evasions and other hidden forms of resistance in their struggle against warder-power and the general domination induced by their perpetual subordinate condition. For example, in *My Life in Prison* Kiriamiti relates the use of such guerrilla tactics when he orchestrates the formation of a syndicate that advocates peace in prison. Using what Spivak (2000: 383) calls “the mind-changing one-on-one responsible contact”, this group aimed not only to tame violent prisoners through love, but it also attempted to transform the minds of cruel warders. But not all warders could be won through “love”. At times it was necessary to use “peaceful” intrigue to get rid of incorrigible warders. Reporting the success of this group, Kiriamiti writes: “With such techniques (such as trapping and framing a warder) and several others, we were able to have over ten warders who were on our black list sacked or transferred. The syndicate operated secretly and got rid of the enemies of peace” (2004: 179).

However, if the prison, like the city, can also be viewed as an arena of popular culture as I have tried to argue so far, the prison is not just a space of subjection, but also a place “where hegemony arises, and where it is secured” Hall (2005a) (71). The Naivasha incident suggests that the relationship between prisoners and the dictatorial power of warders probably can be seen as participating in a process Achille Mbembe (1992) calls “mutual zombification” and cannot be understood in the usual binary terms of outright resistance and co-optation. Similarly, Kiriamiti relates other forms of prisoners’ defiance which cannot be said to constitute outright struggle. For example, prisoners are able to communicate their grievances to the Prison Commissioner through songs with which prison choirs entertain their important guests. The fact that Kiriamiti writes and publishes a book while in prison can also be regarded as a guerrilla form of resisting power. If one applies Mbembe’s notion of mutual zombification to the prison situation, the prison becomes an illuminating microcosm of the postcolonial city.

Kiriamiti’s narratives allow us a rare glimpse into how the post-colonial prison operates and how some prisoners experience it. His narratives are informed by his acceptance of his criminal status and his ability to exploit this designation by inserting himself as the likeable hero of his narratives. John Kiggia Kimani, Kiriamiti’s contemporary, also does not contest his status as a criminal but lacks the self-satirising humour that characterises Kiriamiti’s narratives. Kimani employs different literary techniques to position himself in ways that will engage the reader. More than Kiriamiti, Kimani tries to imbue his crime stories, especially in the second narrative, with a political theme. Kimani’s narratives are also marked by a lot of

moralising digressions that are absent in Kiriamiti's stories. To further explore these and other issues, the next section examines mainly Kimani's narratives in more detail.

2. Prison, Crime and Historical Crossings in Kimani's narratives

Like Kiriamiti's two books examined above, John Kiggia Kimani's two narratives also fall under the category of what Kurtz (1998) calls the "my life in crime" subgenre of Kenyan popular writing which are characterised by the "crime doesn't pay" concluding refrain (83). Couched as stories of redemption through growth and "pre-meditated examination of conscience" (Kimani 1988: 132), *Life and times of a Bank Robber* (1988) and *Prison is not a Holiday Camp* (1994) are the meeting point of multiple historical passages in which Kimani recounts his fifteen years in crime and almost two decades in Kenyan prisons. Kurtz observes: "In fact, as these works show, the extralegal activities of city life [and prison life] can not only pay quite well, they can be quite exciting at the same time" (83). These narratives help us see the truth of Edward Said's (1993) post-Foucauldian words when he says: "I do not believe that authors are mechanically determined by ideology, class, or economic history, but authors are ... very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure" (xxiv). Kimani's narratives show that in Kenya, criminality and the prison and the narratives of criminality and prison exist in a dialectic relationship with the ever changing political, economic and political conditions of the nation coupled with global trends. But these narratives also show that individual subjectivity is always in a state of formation because the individual's fluid consciousness also exists in a symbiotic relationship with the unstable material world. These two narratives testify to the accuracy of Storey's (2003b) observation that "our memories change as we change" and that the coherence and bounded-ness of the autobiographical subject is a fiction of the narrative itself (84). Examined together, these narratives complement each other to reveal a complex matrix between crime and the prison on one hand, and the unfolding of multiple Kenyan political, economic and social landscapes on the other.

Life and times of a Bank Robber skims through the events of burglaries and robberies of 1956 when Kimani first settled in Nairobi at the age of fourteen up to 1970, and focuses on a dramatic and daring daylight armed bank robbery in Nakuru. The narrative dwells on how Kimani was arrested, convicted of the crime, and subsequently served a fifteen year jail sentence until his release in early 1985. Despite the fact that the narrative *Prison is not a Holiday Camp*, written six years after *Life and Times of a Bank Robber* and eight years after his release from prison, recounts most of the events found in the first autobiography, Storey

(2003a) helps us understand some of the reasons (besides the obvious monetary considerations) why Kimani might have felt the need to recount the same events twice. He writes:

If meaning is not something fixed and guaranteed in nature, but is the result of particular ways of representing nature in culture, then the meaning of something can never be fixed, final or true; its meaning will only forever be contextual and contingent and, moreover, always open to the changing relations of power. (6)

The existence of the later autobiography is not only justified by the fact that Kimani seems to remember more of his life in crime than he had initially done in the first book, but also by the fact that the changing relations of power six years after writing his first autobiography called for a revision of meanings he had ascribed to certain events. Maurice Halbwachs (1980) helps us to make sense of the inclusion of material which had been omitted or the detailing of other events which only had been mentioned in passing in the first narrative. He claims that “remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with the data borrowed from the present” (69). Halbwachs further argues that “the individual memory, in order to corroborate and make precise and even to cover the gaps in its remembrances, relies upon, relocates itself within, momentarily merges with, the collective memory” (50-1). It is in the light of Halbwachs’ above observation that we can explain the apparent contradiction that Kimani’s memory seems to get stronger with the passage of time. A prison sentence of about six years in the early 1960s which had been completely omitted in the first autobiography is recounted in great detail in the second narrative. Although the title of the later narrative suggests that there will be a revelation of more horrors of prison life, Kimani rarely gives new information on prison. This is in sharp contrast with Kiriamiti, who, twenty years after his release from prison, writes a perceptive exposé of the Kenyan prison of the 1970s and early 1980s in his 2004 *My Life in Prison*. Despite being an almost revised version and differently titled copy of *Life and Times of a Bank Robber, Holiday Camp* allows the reader to see the complex nature of crime by showing that it was not just a male dominated pastime. This later narrative perceptively shows how and why some women became accomplices and even actively participated in Kimani and his gang’s organized crime. While the first narrative is ten chapters long, the three additional chapters of the second narrative provide useful indications of the devastating effect of imprisonment on personal relationships. Kimani manages to do this by his revealing moralising digressions about his sexual life and his bitterness about being deserted by his “wife” while serving his fifteen year prison sentence. He claims that this

incident taught him “that women make fragile decisions”. Interestingly, the event of his perceived betrayal concludes the narrative and almost eclipses the prison and criminal themes of the autobiography despite the fact that its title explicitly refer to prison tribulations (Kimani 1994: 148). While the inclusion of women in the latter narrative who were originally excised from the first narrative may point to some changes in Kimani’s personal relationship to his memories, it may also be a reflection of the changing demands of the literary and cultural life of Kenya.

When Kimani’s *A Bank Robber* and *Holiday Camp* are read side by side, they reveal that the individual’s memory and the criminality and the prison that Kimani narrates, like “[p]opular culture reflect ... change and stability” (Nachbar and Lause 1992: 5). This may also be reflective of similar processes that take place in the prison both at the material and discursive levels. Some of these entangled but unstable spaces of cultural production, reproduction and consumption, can be summarised under the following historical headings: the dying years of colonial rule; the period of independence up to the death of Jomo Kenyatta in 1978; Daniel Arap Moi’s presidency up to Kimani’s release from prison in 1985; and the agitations for democracy of the 1990s after the fall of the Berlin wall and the demise of communism in the former USSR. These national, continental and global momentous periods together with numerous individual vicissitudes shape Kimani’s consciousness. Consequently, these milieus should also frame our reading of his narratives.

Kimani casts his criminality and imprisonment in the forgiving and self-sacrificing Christian ideology of individual responsibility. Read this way, these narratives may be viewed as the “concoctions of the culture industry [which] are neither guides for a blissful life, nor a new art of moral responsibility, but rather exhortations to toe the line, behind which stand the most powerful interests. The consensus which it propagates strengthens blind, opaque authority” (Adorno 2005: 107). For example, Kimani writes:

I shall never blame the freedom struggle for my failure to get education, for it was necessary that colonialism be fought so that Kenya could be free. The chances that some of us missed in life were the price we had to pay for the patriotism of our parents ... The conclusion I came to is that life is how you shape it. (1994: 1-2)

However, the larger portions of the narratives tell a story of blame-shifting and collective responsibility. For example, in *Holiday Camp* Kimani’s bitterness about the lost opportunities caused by the struggle against colonialism registers itself in the following passage:

I wasn't born with a silver spoon in the mouth and so, it was necessary and even inevitable for me to go through many ups and downs to understand the world better ... My life would perhaps have been different if the state of emergency had not been declared in Kenya. It is likely that I would not have become a criminal. (1994: 2)

In the above excerpt, Kimani locates his fall into criminality and subsequent lengthy imprisonment at the global, national and familial level. His failure to get an education as a result of the struggle for liberation, and his father's decision to support Mau Mau freedom fighters, are clearly placed at the centre of his life of crime and imprisonment. This attempt by Kimani to gain sympathy for his fictionalised self from the reader stands in sharp contrast to Kiriamiti's construction of the self in his two narratives. For example, in *My Life in Crime* Kiriamiti discounts any childhood economic and social privations as causes of his descent into criminality. He writes: "I was born to a relatively well-to-do family. My father, Albert Kiriamiti, and my mother, Anne Wanjiru, were teachers, and therefore in my youth, I was well provided for" (1). Moreover, nowhere does Kiriamiti mention the colonial and post-colonial political situation as having played a part in the choices that he made in life. Kiriamiti also shows that robbery and crime in general are not the preserve of the uneducated and poor. A number of Kiriamiti's violent robbers are well-educated individuals and most of their accomplices are gainfully employed or own prospering businesses. Significantly, Kimani himself, in *Holiday Camp* (39- 41) shows that women, whether employed in the formal sector or not, participate in crime to varying degrees. They do this especially by providing criminals with vital information and by shielding them from arrest. Most of these individuals who are not actively involved in crime precariously negotiate an existence within and without the legal economies.

In both *A Bank Robber* and *Holiday Camp*, Kimani offers sociological and political explanations for his life of crime. For example, in *A Bank Robber* it is less the liberation struggle than his being enticed by the irresistible glitters of Nairobi at a tender and naïve age of ten which leads him to abandoning school. He writes:

I visited Nairobi for the first time when I was very young and fell in love with the city's glamour. My young mind was gripped by the city that it was, to me, the best of all possible worlds. Little did I know that it would turn me from an innocent rural boy into a hardened criminal and eventually into a long-serving prisoner. (1988: 1)

In this passage, the enticing glamour of Nairobi lures an innocent boy into its underworld. In *A Bank Robber*, Kimani clearly indicates that his studies had been affected long before his mother failed to pay school fees as a result of his father's arrest and detention. He writes: "Every time I returned home from Nairobi, my heart remained in the city. Even while in classroom, I could not concentrate on my lessons since my mind was on the city's glamour" (1994: 2). In this regard, Kimani's explanation for his criminality resembles that of Kiriamiti. Explaining how he quit secondary school in the rural town of Murang'a, opting for the enticing but perilous existence in the hustle and bustle of the capital, Kiriamiti writes: "I did not care what kind of school it was, all I wanted was to be in Nairobi. If only I knew Nairobi would turn me into a helpless person I would have hated the look of it for good as I now do" (1984: 1). In this way, both Kimani and Kiriamiti portray Nairobi as an alluring place infested with all sorts of social ills which the young and inexperienced can neither avoid nor resist. Significantly, Jennifer Musangi draws parallels between Kiriamiti's perception and depiction of his life in the city in *My Life in Crime*, with his portrayal of his prison life in *My Life in Prison*. She writes: "[P]rison just like the city is the custodian of certain possibilities that perhaps he cannot get elsewhere (say in the village)" (10). Musangi further argues that Kiriamiti is basically doing the same thing with the city and prison. In the city, he depicts himself as a criminal hero who outwits the agents of law and order for a long time. For example, after escaping from soldiers who were guarding him armed with machine guns, he writes: "If life in crime was like in the legal armed forces, I don't see why I should not have been decorated" (1984: 150). In prison, Kiriamiti becomes popular to both the prison authorities and fellow inmates and maintains his heroic position throughout his prison life. With more instances of regret and moralising, Kimani in his two narratives seems to be doing exactly what Kiriamiti does in his.

In writing his life-story, Kimani seems to realise that the theme of an errant school boy who runs away from home because of the city's allurements will not elicit a lot of sympathy from his readers for him. Kimani decides to superimpose a political theme and eventually depicts his escape from his village as a heroic fight against colonial oppression. Almost as an afterthought and in an almost contrived manner, in *A Bank Robber* he relates an incident where the police put a bullet in his pocket at a roadblock and then accused him of being an ammunition courier for the Mau Mau. When he is later released from this traumatic ordeal, he says that the woman he was walking with consoled him, saying that "even if the sky fell down, Kenya would one day become independent and such suffering would end" (Kimani 1994: 3). Magadien, in Steinberg's *The Number*, also locates his criminal activities within the

political domain by claiming that he was initially arrested in 1976 as a student political activist. In *Holiday Camp*, Kimani's later autobiography, he tries to foreground the political theme with more sophistication. He suggests that he became politically conscious at a very tender age. He writes:

As a young boy then, I would sit nearby my father and his fellow patriots and eavesdrop whatever they discussed on colonialists. They said it was necessary for all patriots in Kenya to fight colonialists by all possible means. They said they would spend their energy to see that the property owned by colonialists would be destroyed by all available means. I therefore grew up knowing beyond doubt that the British were our enemies and robbers of our land and freedom. (1994: 2)

In a much more pronounced manner, in *Holiday Camp*, Kimani recasts his criminality and imprisonment in the heroic mode of a freedom fighter. For example, on his initial journey to Nairobi at the age of ten, he walks 72 kilometres. He reports that he is subsequently congratulated by some men who say: "This boy is a future hero and should be congratulated for his ability" (1994: 5). Later on, he tells the reader that his trial for the Nakuru bank robbery attracted crowds which turned him into a celebrity. These and other anecdotes are clear attempts to (re)construct his criminal activities in the mould of the struggle against colonialism. In this way, it is implied that his criminal activities and lengthy imprisonment are to be consumed at the level of meanings as a just redistribution of resources which the colonialists had violently appropriated from the natives. Read this way, Kimani's narrative challenges the straightforward dichotomy of the criminal versus the lawful.

Kimani's narratives locate the prison alongside repressive colonial state apparatuses which were targeted against the entire black population of Kenya. He situates criminality not at the level of individual psychology or biology, but at the intersection of adverse social forces, repressive and corrupt political systems, and the choices that the individual makes within conditions that he/she has not chosen. Both narratives indicate that it is Kimani's father's arrest and detention in 1954 as a Mau Mau sympathizer that precipitates his disastrous sojourn to Nairobi at the tender age of fourteen in search of freedom and a better life. Significantly, he has to escape from his village which has been immobilised, quarantined and is ceaselessly surveilled by the colonial authorities in an attempt to stamp out the Mau Mau insurgency in a similar manner to which outbreaks of plagues and contagions were controlled in 18th century

Europe, if we follow Foucault's (1977: 195) description. Foucault pointedly indicates that these surveillance mechanisms were prototypes of the prison.

Kimani's narratives attempt to excuse his criminality and indict his imprisonment by implicating colonial confinement and imprisonment in the violent technologies that attended the inception of colonial invasion. He writes: "I had indulged in crime as a small boy because I had learned from the elders' discussions that it wasn't wrong to steal from a white man since the white race was oppressing us" (Kimani 1994: 118). Colonial places of incarceration are not depicted as Durkheimian socially consensual institutions of criminal rehabilitation. This is evident in the way villagers are brutalised and their villages turned into huge detention camps during the State of Emergency which spanned almost the entire decade of the 1950s. This is how Kimani recounts the events of 1956 that drove him to abandon his home village and seek refuge in the anonymity of the beguiling Nairobi:

People were clubbed with gun butts as they flooded the field, afraid of a future they did not know ... It was announced that from that day on, people would be escorted to their gardens at 5 a.m. to get provisions and at 6 a.m. everybody would be required to be in their huts where they would stay until the following morning ... It had been announced that if anyone wanted to confess anything about the alleged [Mau Mau] oath, he or she should open the window and hold out a white piece of cloth. A guard would then come and open the door for the willing confessors. (1988: 18)

It is from this "segmented, immobile, frozen space [where the] gaze is alert everywhere" (Foucault 1977: 195) that Kimani escapes from when he finds his way to Nairobi. He recalls: "I remember the day very well. It was August 1956 when I looked back on the village where people were caged like animals" (Kimani 20). Kimani escapes to the city because in contrast to the closely monitored rural village, the colonial city is depicted as offering more spaces of freedom from, and resistance to, colonial oppression.

Interestingly, Bernalt (2003) notes that in addition to immobilising people in their own villages, colonial authorities put up detention camps where entire villages were imprisoned. She writes:

During the Mau-Mau crisis, in the mid-1950s, the government organized fifty additional 'emergency camps' in which entire villages and thousands of Gikuyu prisoners were forced to resettle. At that time, the entire colony -

whites excepted – was subjected to incarceration on a massive scale. (2003: 13)

Kimani's narratives suggest that it is this logic of criminalisation of the entire black population and the colonial authority's ability to confine with impunity whomever they wished which defined the everyday meaning of life for teenagers and adults of the 1950s, both in the rural villages and in the urban areas. Although as a youth Kimani does not show serious political consciousness or express the need to join forces with an organised group of political agitators against these colonial excesses in his pre-1964 criminal activities, his narratives are subsequent meditated attempts at persuading the reader to see moments of political defiance in his acts of criminal self-aggrandizement. However, Kimani is not very convincing in arguing for this coalescence of the criminal and the political.

Kimani's narratives can be seen as attempts to convince the reader that his becoming a teenager during the height of Mau Mau activities and the subsequent State of Emergency contributed to his choosing a life of crime. Interestingly, the colonial penal history of Kenya indicates that confinement technologies played a significant part in the administration of the colony even before the Mau Mau activities which led to a dramatic multiplication of penitentiaries. As early as 1911, there were already thirty fully fledged prisons in Kenya. Florence Bernault observes: "In East Africa, British Kenya offered the most extraordinary attempt to organize a full hierarchy of penal institutions" (2003: 13). Kimani insists that this ubiquity of prisons is not a reflection of levels of real criminality in Kenya, but rather points to Kenya as a settler colony and the colonial social engineering that was aimed at entrenching the supremacy of the colonialists. By implicating the colonial administration in criminality, Kimani persuades readers to see his own criminal activities in a new positive light.

In both narratives, Kimani indicates that this great colonial confinement was to hound him even in Nairobi. He shows that to be in Nairobi without a valid passbook granted by colonial authorities was in itself a serious crime. Recounting his ordeal of sleeping in bushes and incomplete urban buildings because no one was willing to give him a place to sleep, he says: "I had no valid passbook permitting me to be in Nairobi and so nobody would give me accommodation lest they be arrested for harbouring an undesirable element" (988: 22). This suggests that criminal or not, it was almost near impossible for boys in the 1950s to totally escape confinement of one kind or another. For example, once he arrives in Nairobi he is arrested with hundreds of other boys for loitering and street hawking. He writes: "The police had launched a round-up campaign against all boys who were out of school in the city and

were destined for borstal institutions” (1988: 27). Being in the rural areas did not ensure that a boy would not end up in a detention camp or borstal institution either. Kimani writes: “After the colonial government discovered that young boys were being used to transport ammunition for Mau Mau fighters ... some of them were detained with adults in such notorious camps as Manyani” (1988: 27). Kimani’s narratives suggest that this calculated mass confinement of the 1950s must have had a long-lasting and devastating effect on the family’s ability to inculcate stable moral values in the younger generation. Kimani’s narratives imply that most young people developed an undesirable independence and bitterness which resulted in the burgeoning of criminal activities of the 1970s which Kimani himself gets caught up in. After his father’s arrest, Kimani himself had been put in foster care and some of his gang members were former Mau Mau fighters or individuals who had been in detention camps or borstal institutions in the 1950s. There is an interesting comparison here with what Jonny Steinberg (2004) says was happening in the 1960s in apartheid South Africa. He indicates that in a complex and cruel economic management strategy, a whole generation of coloured men was imprisoned while the young boys were taken to foster care institutions on the excuse that they were living in dysfunctional homes. At the same time, the single mothers and those with “irresponsible” husbands were inundated with welfarism projects calculated at both developing a dependence syndrome and assuaging the consciences of the oppressors. Ironically, Steinberg indicates that most of the boys who were put in foster care institutions ended up in prison themselves and most of them joined the notorious prison Number gangs which they viewed as offering some spaces to resist the overpowering apartheid penal regimes.

Kimani presents his criminality as one way of resisting colonial oppression. He says: “Survival instincts ... drove us into escaping the tight nets that were often thrown around us by the determined police” (1988: 22). This suggests that for the powerless colonised, escaping the tight colonial nets took many forms, which were always viewed as unlawful by the authorities. By arguing that he was already on the wrong side of the law in both his rural village and in the streets of Nairobi before he even became criminal, Kimani depicts his descent into real criminality as a smooth and normal transition dictated by the harsh environment that he has to negotiate in order to eke out an existence. He writes: “The germ of the criminal ... was sowed by my determination to survive in the city at a time of crisis and was watered by friends that I acquired” (1988: 23). In this way, Kimani insists that criminality should be perceived as a desperate but heroic means for a black underclass youth to hit back at an oppressive and exploitative administration.

Interestingly, in Kimani's narratives the closely monitored city of Nairobi is an ambivalent space of escape and imprisonment. About the concept-city, Michel de Certeau writes:

One can analyze the microbe-like, singular and plural practices which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress ... one can follow the swarming activity of these procedures that, far from being regulated or eliminated by the panoptic administration, have reinforced themselves into the networks of surveillance. (2005: 453)

Kimani insists that the colonial city was especially designed to exclude undesirable persons and keep those that it admitted under its surveillance. But the "microbe-like" presence of the likes of Kimani who are without valid passbooks and engage in illegal activities, is a result of their microbe-like self-insertion into the city's networks of surveillance. Similarly, as we saw above, Kiriamiti's narratives suggest that the prison operates like the city. The prison, which is designed to regulate or eliminate undesirable conduct and attitudes through its panoptic administration, fails to stamp out these unlawful practices because they make themselves almost unreadable and, like a deadly virus, conceal themselves within the very surveillance mechanisms of the city.

After independence, Kimani's narratives suggest that the criminal world had to redefine its enemies and reinterpret its activities so as to imbue them with meanings which were in line with the new dominant discourses. Kimani suggests that after independence, he and his fellow criminals tacitly understood their activities as participating in the general resistance against all vestiges of colonialism. He writes: "After independence, I believed that banks such as Barclays and others belonged to the foreigners and even if I robbed them our country would not suffer" (1994: 119). Kimani and his gang also targeted rich Kenyans who had not cared for the poor during the struggle. This perception is made clear in an incident in 1969, where Kimani and a fellow gang member decide not to rob a woman who is taking the money of J.M. Kariuki, a famous anti-colonial nationalist, to the bank. He explains:

We all knew that he fought for the poor and decided it would be an unforgivable crime to steal from him. We left the car then and returned our weapons to their hiding places ready for another robbery that would not involve a person we knew or liked. (Kimani 61)

This suggests that, like all social institutions, crime is sustained by the consumption and (re)production of definitions that makes it a meaningful activity. It is animated and influenced

by, and derives its meanings from, its continual interaction with larger social, political, and economic discourses.

Kimani's narratives allow the reader to discern that both before and after independence, with crime's individualistic streak, it becomes another way in which the powerless are fragmented into self-destructive social activities which leave the powerful as a group only lightly scathed. Despite his conscious efforts to deny it, Kimani's narrative shows that the theme of individualism is a dominant one in the criminal world. Foucault argues that the introduction of the biographical was important in the history of penalty because it established "the 'criminal' as existing before the crime" (1977: 252). Interestingly, as we saw earlier, after colonial authorities have turned Kimani's entire village into a prison, as it were, they urge villagers who want to escape confinement to come forward and confess their involvement with Mau Mau activities. After spending many years in confinement, Kimani himself develops the urge to confess his life of crime. Ultimately, both his criminal activities and two autobiographies can be viewed as sites where he both acquires and relinquishes power. In the Gramscian view, these may be seen as hegemonic sites where power is constantly negotiated, resulting in transformations but with no outright victories. While achieving literacy and becoming a writer are perceived as instances of personal empowerment, at the same time, the penal regime can publicly parade him as evidence of the success of its penitentiary efforts. In both narratives, Kimani is aware of this ambivalence that his transformation introduces. In *A Bank Robber* he writes: "Having spent a decade and a half in Kenyan prisons I learned that it is impossible to rehabilitate a human being through the prison system" (1988: 132). Similarly, in *Holiday Camp*, he says: "I came to believe that a man can only be rehabilitated after going over his past himself and finding out where he went wrong. No penal system on its own can change a criminal" (1994: 128). Although vanquished, he is unwilling to surrender all the honour for his transformation to the Kenyan penal rehabilitative regime.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault points out that the aim of the panoptic exercise of power is to make it efficient by making individuals internalise power, resulting in the self-monitoring of the individual. The subject must be under the illusion that he or she is not under any compulsion to act the way he or she does. Foucault writes: "Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power ... it automatizes and disindividualizes power ... A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation" (1977: 202). By educating himself and confessing to his crimes in his autobiographies, Kimani hopes that he has made a voluntary, liberating decision. However, Foucault's above observations serve as a warning

that the individualistic confessional mode of the autobiography may itself be evidence of the automatic functioning of power through its internalisation. Kimani is at pains to show that his leaving the life of crime was his own voluntary and premeditated decision. He writes: “When I was jailed, I was a young man who had not known the value of freedom ... I came to the conclusion that crime does not pay and if it pays, it would have paid me very well” (1988: 133). In *Holiday Camp* he says: “I also learned to accept the inevitable and not to blame anybody for my faults since I had led myself into crime” (1994: 147). In the two quotations above, Kimani has conveniently forgotten all the political, economic and social pressures that he so elaborately documents that limited most young people’s life options. Evident here, are traces of the panoptic functioning of power which requires that the responsibility for one’s actions fall squarely on the shoulders of the individual and his or her conscience.

The focus on the individual and skirting of collective responsibility seems to be a feature of the Kenyan autobiographies by self-confessed criminals. In *A Bank Robber*, Kimani’s earlier narrative, he refers only in passing to defining moments of Kenya’s recent history. For example, he views Kenyatta’s death only in terms of how it would affect his personal welfare in prison and shows little concern for its national implications. Kimani’s autobiography is largely silent about the imprisonment of political activists during Kenyatta’s rule. Although he mentions the imprisonments of the alleged coup plotters of 1982, there is no sense in which he explores the prison in an extended manner as participating in the political and economic management of both the colony and post-colony.

Kimani depicts the post-colonial Kenyan prison as a functional social institution which is there to curb crime. For example, in *Holiday Camp* he says that there was a time when he shared a cell with Okello, a political prisoner who had plotted a coup against the sultan of Zanzibar. He is very dismissive of Okello and says that he “was only liked by people who were imprisoned for political offences” (1994: 125). He vehemently defends the Kenyan government and says to Okello: “You and I are suffering here because of breaking the laws of this land and we should not blame the government for it” (1994: 125). While his lengthy imprisonment as a dangerous criminal can be a source of power in the here and now of prison, these also limit Kimani’s understanding of the prison’s, and hence the government’s, implicatedness in the individual’s everyday struggle for survival and the ways in which power is deployed to serve mainly the interests of the dominant groups. In fact, this is a very good example of how a confessional, individualistic mode plays into the hands of power. Kimani does not just fail to address the political dimension; he actively supports the social status quo.

Unlike Kimani, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who was also imprisoned during the rule of Kenyatta in the 1970s for political reasons, views Kenyatta as a mutant nationalist responsible for the wave of political imprisonments which began in the late 1960s. Curiously, Kimani attributes prison stability and predictability to the Kenyatta period. Individual law-enforcement agents and warders can display violent savagery, but Kimani insists that this was not a general government decree. For example, on one rare occasion when they pressurise the prison authorities to have audience with them, and Kimani stands up to talk on behalf of the prisoners, this is what he has to say:

We are all aware that every year, the government sets aside enough money to sustain us ... We also know that the government has not decided to kill us by starvation. We are jailed so that we could reform and become good citizens on the expiry of our terms. The government would not wish us to die before the set goal has been achieved. (1988: 118)

Kimani generally excuses the "government" from the criminality performed by its officials. For example, after his arrest he is severely beaten up and subjected to all kinds of torture by investigating police officers. When he reports this to the presiding magistrate during his first court appearance, he says that the magistrate ordered that such violence should stop. During his stay at Naivasha prison, he recounts the same incident which Kiriamiti refers to as the 'Naivasha massacre', where a criminally insane prisoner attacked and killed a warder. Unarmed prisoners were then savagely beaten, resulting in the death of eight of them and the maiming of many more. To cover up their crime, the warders turn around and call it a prisoners' riot. Although the violence was sanctioned by the Commissioner of Prisons and his deputy, Kimani seems to suggest that this did not represent general government policy towards the treatment of prisoners but rather the misdirected zeal of a few powerful individuals. He writes: "The violence against the prisoners didn't please the Head of State and he ordered an investigation into the matter" (1994: 129).

This inability to discern how the macroeconomic and political conditions impact on the individual's choices or lack of them is also evident in the way Kimani relates his quest for education while still in prison. His educating himself, while heroic, is also a lonely and individualistic way of solving problems. It is telling that "the word education ...acquired a powerful meaning" (1994: 110) for him when he realises that escape from prison has become impossible. He understands his prison self-education to be a way of seizing agency by defying authorities, just as his criminal career had enabled him to do before his imprisonment. That

Kimani understands his studying and learning to be a form of empowering resistance is seen from the fact that the violence of prison warders fails to stop him from studying. He tells of an incident when he was thoroughly beaten up by warders for possessing a pen. He says:

The beating that I had received because of possessing a pen and a paper did not deter me from wanting to learn. I was determined the harder they tried to stop me from reading, the harder I would look for learning material. (1988: 107)

It is ironic, however, that prison authorities punish Kimani both for his criminal activities and also for his determination to escape them through self-education. He writes: “Instead of encouraging me, many prison warders taunted me. They mocked me and asked where my prison education could take me” (1988: 110). In *My Life in Prison* Kiriamiti also spends one hundred days in solitary confinement for writing and publishing *My Life in Crime* while still in prison. In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela also relates how warders made it difficult for political prisoners at Robben Island to organise literacy classes. These somewhat disparate incidents suggest that attempts to write the self in prison, which is also a process of educating the self, is viewed, especially by prison warders, as a dangerous way in which prisoners may acquire power. This is the reason why, once in prison, warders resist the prisoners’ efforts to exercise this kind of agency because they are aware that in the prison institutional power tactics, prisoners’ attempts to educate themselves and write their stories will enable them to wield a certain measure of control over their prison environment.

Ironically, in *Cold Stone Jug*, Bosman lampoons as naive efforts by fellow prisoners to try and get an education in prison. In the light of this mixed reaction from both prisoners and prison authorities towards education, Paul Willis’s (1990) adapted words about the capitalist market accurately capture the prison situation. We can say that through getting an education prisoners find “incentives and possibilities not simply for their own confinement but also their own development and growth” (27). This of course is in accord with the Foucauldian view that all institutions in modern societies participate in the disciplining of populations. According to this view, by educating themselves prisoners do indeed seize agency as they master certain kinds of dominant societal discourses, but they also insert themselves more powerfully into self-monitoring mode of disciplines, as it were. This is well illustrated by the moral lesson which Kimani wrings out of his criminal and prison days. He writes: “I lived to write this story which should be a warning to those who might think that the path of crime is an easy one” (1994: 127). He also writes:

If the urge to continue being in crime had not deserted me, I would not have written this book. The bug to write would not have bitten me as it did in 1977 while still in Naivasha Prison. After my serious attempts to become literate, I decided to record my life (Kimani 132).

It can indeed be said that the successful production of Kimani's autobiographies is a victorious, empowering moment but it is also the very moment of incorporation into the disciplinary mechanism of power.

Further, Kiriamiti tells of the occasion when he was allowed to do sign-writing, something which was considered prestigious in prison. A white fellow prisoner who is an instructor in this section sees Kiriamiti's excitement and warns him:

Do you think they brought you here as a special favour for your own good?
No. It is for their benefit. They know you have education; they know you will learn quickly and be productive. You have a long stretch in which to serve and serve. (2004: 62)

In a statement which echoes a Foucauldian insight, Stuart Hall (2005) writes: "Educational institutions, along with the many positive things they do, also help to discipline and police this boundary [of what becomes canonical and what remains popular]" (69). The eloquent words of Karl Marx (1919) aptly describe the situation in which Kiriamiti and Kimani find themselves: "Man makes his own history, but he does not make it out of the whole cloth; he does not make it out of conditions chosen by himself, but out of such as he finds close at hand" (9). Alluding to how choices are always made at the intersection of the individual's will-power and one's material and ideological exigencies, Kiriamiti writes: "The Swahili say that what you are not taught by your parents, you'll be taught by the world" (1984: 9). In making their history, Kiriamiti and Kimani have to contend with the many limitations imposed by their material and ideological circumstances.

As the foregoing shows, Kimani and Kiriamiti admit that their pursuit of education generally turned them into disciplined and productive prisoners. But it is the same education which enables Kimani to stand up in front of the officer in-charge and more than a thousand other prisoners to present their case when they decide to refuse work and demand to be addressed by the relevant authorities about their condition of starvation. Similarly, because of having some education, Kiriamiti is elected spokesperson by a group of prisoners to demand that the officer in-charge meet their basic rights as prisoners. As a result of Kiriamiti's eloquence, the

officer in charge agrees to most of their requests and says: “I agree that this should be different for you, and from now on your food will be prepared differently” (2004: 113). In this instance, education allows Kiriamiti to arm-twist the officer in-charge. The idea that education is a double-edged sword is summarised by the warder who is in charge of the tailoring section where Kimani was working prior to the strike, when he is asked to give a character witness of his charge. The warder says: “I cannot explain his involvement in the strike. I didn’t imagine he could ever involve himself in such a daring political move. All the same, he is both honest and obedient” (Kimani 1994: 140). This illustrates that there is no cultural institution which simply produces passive consumers of its meanings. The world of meanings exists both in a state of reproductive consumption and contestation. John Storey’s (2003b) paraphrase of Marx’s famous words clarifies both Kiriamiti’s and Kimani’s situation. “[W]e make meanings and we are made by meanings” (x). Kiriamiti and Kimani’s ambivalent educational quest suggests that the cultural field refuses to be concretised and insists on being unstable and multi-functional.

The foregoing comparative examination of Kiriamiti and Kimani offer interesting insights into some of the ambivalences that characterise the intersection of the criminal, prison and the autobiographical in post-colonial Kenyan prison narratives. Kiriamiti’s and Kimani’s self-confessed criminal statuses compel them to adopt various narrative strategies that gains them readers’ sympathies. The next section examines two post-colonial Kenyan prison narratives of a different kind. In *Birds of Kamiti*, Bundeh has no problem procuring an audience for his story since he presents himself as a victim of the miscarriage of justice. On the other hand, Githae’s novel, *Comrade Inmate*, has the playful tone of a writer who has only encountered the post-colonial Kenyan penal regime through the media. The next section offers a detailed discussion of Bundeh’s and Githae’s narratives.

3. Criminality and Imprisonment in Bundeh’s *Birds of Kamiti* and Githae’s *Comrade Inmate*

Benjamin Garth Bundeh’s *Birds of Kamiti* (1991) provides a contrast to the narratives of both Kiriamiti and Kimani. While Kiriamiti and Kimani are self-confessed criminals who seem to accept their imprisonment as their just deserts, Bundeh claims innocence of the crime he is condemned for. Bundeh’s insistence that he is innocent leads him into presenting a much more complicated Kenyan post-colonial prison than that of the almost straightforward moralising confessional narratives of Kiriamiti and Kimani. After being accused of murdering his white business partner, he is sentenced to death by hanging, and subsequently spends two

and half years in Nairobi Remand Prison and in Kamiti Death Cells. While both Kiriamiti and Kimani become likeable by depicting themselves as reformed criminals, Bundeh gains the sympathies of the reader by consistently portraying himself as a victim of a corrupt criminal justice system and an insensitive penal regime. Charles Githae's *Comrade Inmate* (1994) is a fictionalised autobiography of Fred, a former police officer, who finds himself in prison with a former judge, a lawyer, a member of parliament, a priest, a medical doctor and some mentally insane inmates. Githae's fictional narrative is a satirical exposé of the entire post-colonial Kenyan criminal justice system and penal regime. Although there is no evidence to suggest that Githae was ever imprisoned himself, in *Comrade Inmate* he seems interested in how the prison is akin to the city in that both places have the ability to facilitate the rapid upward or downward social mobility of individuals. Githae's detachment from prison tribulations allows him to adopt a somewhat philosophical stance about the post-colonial Kenyan prison.

Fred, the narrator in *Comrade Inmate*, excuses his crime of causing grievous bodily harm to a former friend by pointing out that among what he calls "spectators of justice" (2), people who attended his court hearing, there are some who are as guilty as he is but remain unprosecuted. He claims that "there were others in the same court who had committed offences and their rightful place should have been next to [him] in the dock but somehow they had evaded the long, and often wrong, arm of the law!" (5). This cynical perception that post-colonial Kenya is full of criminals and that only the few unlucky ones find themselves in prisons, inform the narrator's detachment from his prosecution and his satirical depiction of what happens in prison. In a way Githae's prison mirrors the city in that it is populated by the "ordinary" people who make things happen outside prison. Fred, the criminal narrator, is a former police officer-cum-motor mechanic, who finds himself in prison with a former magistrate, a lawyer, a member of parliament, a priest, a medical doctor and even some mentally insane individuals. Fred contemptuously and satirically refers to this group of prisoners as the V.I.P.s or very important prisoners (16). This imprisoned cross-section of society implies that post-Kenyan society is criminal to the core.

By the imprisonment of a former police sergeant in the form of Fred, Githae suggests that the criminal rot starts with those who are entrusted with ensuring that there is law and order by prosecuting law breakers. But not only do police officers commit violent crimes such as the one committed by Fred, Githae also implies that the entire Kenyan police force is corrupt. Githae has the officer-in-charge of Kamiti Prison, one of the characters in *Comrade Inmate*, say to Fred: "The Police allow only the scum of the society to come and rot here while the

rich buy their freedom at the police station no matter what crimes they have committed!” (19). Githae goes on to paint a police force and prison service which are characterised by petty rivalry which is detrimental to the performance of their constitutional duties. For example, the officer-in-charge goes on to complain bitterly to Fred that his stubbornness results from his view that “the prison service staff are inferior to the elites in the Police Force” (19). To be sure, Fred is very dismissive of the prison staff. On his first morning in prison he contemptuously thinks: “In prison, the warders do all the thinking! And what thinking!” (7). Dismissing the prison services as stupid and dull, on another occasion he says: “The whole damned prison service seems to exist for nothing more than that figure – that is, the number of prisoners inside at any given time” (23).

Githae’s inclusion of a former magistrate and a former lawyer among these very important prisoners suggests that post-colonial Kenya’s lawlessness is so deep that it has infected the very dispensers of justice. Cheruiyot, the former magistrate, indicates that the bribery of magistrates and judges in post-colonial Kenya is the order of the day. He becomes embroiled in this corrupt activity himself until one of his seniors traps him when he starts taking bribe money without sharing it with him. Karugu, the lawyer, misappropriates some money entrusted to him by some of his clients when he uses it on a get-rich-quick scheme which goes sour. Githae uses their imprisonment not only to show the pervasiveness of crime in post-colonial Kenya, but also to show how justice is undermined from the inside and from the top. While in prison, both Cheruiyot and Karugu use their legal expertise to help some convicted prisoners such as Fred to win their appeals against their conviction and sentencing. So not only do they undermine justice when they are still inside, serving as magistrate and lawyer, respectively, but they also undermine it as convicted criminals when they use their legal knowledge to help self-confessed convicted criminals escape their full sentences.

Githae depicts Kenyan society as incurably sick by including Kigwe, a medical doctor who is in prison for stealing state medication. The author seems to be asking: ‘If doctors are corrupt, who is going to take care of the sick?’ The body politic is also shown to be ailing by the imprisonment of a former member of parliament, Mr Kanyanja, who is imprisoned for land misappropriation. Religion is also not spared. Kyalo, the former priest, is among these very important prisoners, a sure testimony that nobody is to be trusted in post-colonial Kenya. Kyalo succumbs to the fleshly temptations by sleeping with one of his teenage congregants. The irony of course is that these former society’s luminaries are now housed together with insane inmates in prison. In this way, Githae indicts the entire Kenyan post-colonial society as so decadent that its rightful place is the insane section of the prison.

The fact that these individuals, who were among society's most important functionaries, are now housed together with the insane, shows the prison's ability to invert and blur social hierarchies. Although prison authorities house these formerly influential individuals with the insane for fear that they may be harmed by the sane "common" prisoners who may have been aggrieved by these "special" inmates as they carried out their duties before coming to prison, this strategy also allows Githae to cast doubt on the very sanity of these individuals. This idea is suggested by the prison rivalry and bickering that characterise these prisoners' relationships. Viewed this way, Githae's prison, like that of Kiriamiti, is not only a melting pot of social hierarchies and cultures, but it is also a site of complex social, political and psychological struggles. The cosmopolitan nature of Githae's prison allows it to reflect the cosmopolitanism of Nairobi. This suggests that both the city and the prison have permeable boundaries. Prisoners and warders, the lawful and the unlawful, the sane and the insane have zones of convergence which challenge a straightforward classification.

Clearly then, Fred, the protagonist in Githae's *Comrade Inmate*, finds a moral voice to condemn post-colonial Kenya by claiming that the entire society is as guilty or as mad as he is. As the title of the narrative implies, all Kenyans, including the insane, are comrades in one form of crime or another. This collusion of the law and the unlawful is dramatised when Cheruiyot, the former magistrate, and others help Fred to craft an appeal which he goes on to win. In *Birds of Kamiti* Bundeh engages the reader by employing a different strategy. He insists that he is an innocent victim of the pervasive police corruption and miscarriage of justice. Bundeh's claim to innocence results in him depicting an extremely polarised prison characterised by an almost impassable divide between warders and prisoners. Prisoners are largely depicted as helpless victims of the incorrigible violence of sadistic warders. In his description of warders, Bundeh resorts to popular physiological explanations for their brutal and strange actions. For example, when Bundeh and fellow prisoners arrive at Nairobi Remand Prison, all the newly arrived inmates are searched with military thoroughness. The warder in charge of the search relishes touching the inmates' private parts and derives pleasure from peeping into their anuses. The reader is made to anticipate this kind of behaviour from the way Bundeh describes the warder. He writes: "In charge of the operation was a warder with a large head sitting squarely on his shoulders. As sporadic orders oozed out of his evil mouth, his hands crawled on my naked body like serpents" (4). Bundeh automatizes and depicts the warder in beastly terms by referring to his head, which he claims sits with mathematical precision on his shoulders, and his hands, which crawl like a snake. By satirising the warder Bundeh seems to be taking revenge on the entire Kenyan penal

regime which he views as having failed him. Bundeh similarly renders as sub-human fellow prisoners who seem to have a cosy relationship with prison authorities. For example, all the prisoners who work in the kitchen and those in charge of the stores are “common criminals of the lowest kind, pickpockets, rapists, shoplifters, bhang smokers, peddlers, etc” (31). Since the narrative has rendered these warders beastly automatons and the “guilty” prisoners as sub-humans, the reader is led to anticipate and even excuse their unnatural behaviour. In an attempt to portray “innocent” prisoners as excessively disempowered and brutalised victims deserving of the reader’s sympathy and understanding, Bundeh also makes the behaviour of warders and their suckers excusable since his narrative removes them from the human moral realm.

While on the surface Bundeh’s narrative depicts prison as a Manichean universe, the complex nature of the warder-prisoner relationship alluded to by other writers is also obvious in *Birds of Kamiti*. For example, like Kiriamiti, Bundeh also writes most of his narrative during his stay in the cells of Kamiti Prison. This suggests that as much as the city simultaneously represents freedom and entrapment, warder authority is always fractured or leaking, to use Mbembe and Nuttall’s terminology (2004:353). This is evident in his acknowledgements, where Bundeh indicates that not all warders were hostile. He writes: “I feel obliged to return gratitude to the ... few generous warders at Kamiti, with whose help I managed to smuggle out pieces of paper and leaves of toilet rolls on which the original of this manuscript was written”. Instances like these where prison authorities participate in the subversion of the surveillance mechanisms of the penal regime are not a mere reflection of corrupt warders seeking material gain from helpless prisoners. Rather, it is also an indication of the existence of real fault-lines which exist within the penal system where warders, instead of being brutal automatons as Bundeh at times implies, exercise a measure of agency by discreetly and selectively implementing the penal surveillance procedures.

Interestingly, an attentive reading shows that both Githae and Bundeh do not portray the criminalised individual as a mere punching bag of the penal system. Within the penal system itself the individual is able to exercise some measure of agency. In *Birds of Kamiti*, Bundeh expresses his agency and asserts his subjectivity aggressively in his self-conducted appeal against both the judge’s guilty verdict and the subsequent death sentence. In the appeal, he is intent on exposing how post-colonial Kenyan law courts collude with the violence that police use to extract statements or confessions from suspects, and then send not only real offenders, but also innocent people, into the misery of prison life and even death. For example, in his appeal he declares and then asks the judges of appeal:

The police were mocking the court when they said they did not torture me. Could it be true that our courts secretly consent to the torture of suspects in police custody? Could there be collusion? What greater injustice could the society perpetrate? (124).

Bundeh does not entertain the illusion that the state or government cannot commit crimes. As Githae's novel also shows, crimes are committed right in the halls of justice by the very custodians of the law. Bundeh makes it clear that what exacerbates the use of violence by the police and the prejudicial manner of the white judge in his case is the fact that the murder victim was white. Again in his appeal, he writes:

Throughout the Kenyan history the death of a white man has always received much attention and concern while the life of a black person has always appeared insignificant and meaningless. Does my life mean anything at all to the State? (128)

Bundeh's words suggest that the spectre of the colonial state which I discussed in Ngugi's narrative still hangs heavily over the postcolony. This seems to confirm Robert M. Young's (1988: 108) argument that an auto/biography is not just an exercise in mechanical remembrance of an individual mind, as Bundeh himself suggests at the beginning of his narrative by claiming that there "is no creativity involved in [his] writing, just remembrance" (1). Rather, Bundeh's narrative seems to be celebrating the history of ideas, narrative, will, character and the validity of the subject's subjectivity in the hostile environment of the penal regime. Just as Young observes about auto/biography at its best, Bundeh is clearly combining the structural and epochal causation and the historicity of the construction of the subject and subjectivity (1988: 108).

However, Bundeh shows that at the heart of the penal regime's power in constructing subjectivities is its immense ability to commandeer violent technologies. The statement that the judge uses to convict Bundeh, a statement extracted in a violent and dubious manner from him by a high ranking police officer, offers the reader a classic way in which the subject both writes and is written by his or her environment. Before he has gathered any substantial information against Bundeh, the officer who investigates the case makes it clear that the police have the power not only to arrest criminals but to construct or manufacture them. He angrily declares: "Murderers are not people! We can do whatever we like with them" (2). The words of the police officer are translated into reality when he tortures Bundeh to the extent that he succumbs to signing 35 blank papers. After gathering details about Bundeh's personal

life from various sources, the police officer surreptitiously proceeds to write a statement which, later on in court, he claims was dictated to him by the suspect. This process of inscription is then taken to the next level where the state appoints a lawyer for the murder suspect. Pointing out the illogicality of the whole process, Bunde writes: “To this day it still strikes me as absurd and irresponsible for a prisoner condemned by the government, to allow the same government to engage a lawyer to defend his life” (118). The processes of inscribing the suspect is then completed by the judge, who using an extorted confession statement, labels the suspect murderer, and then proceeds to condemn him. In this way, power manages to write the subject against his own will.

Interestingly, during his appeal, Bunde seizes agency by refusing legal help from the state. He perceptively observes: “After all, it was the same government that employed the police who arrested me, the State counsel who prosecuted me, and the judge who condemned me” (119). Ironically, it is largely from the forged 35 pages of his alleged confession that Bunde re/writes his own subjectivity during his appeal. His becomes a classic case of opposing the system from within the system. Using devastating logic, he proceeds to dismantle the case against him word for word. Before the judges of appeal, he argues:

Ex(hibit) 29 is therefore false in its material particulars. The length of Ex 29 – 35 hand written pages. (Judge says it’s too detailed P250). Does length suggest that the statement is true? A James Hadley Chase novel is about 500 typed pages - homicide fiction from the imagination of the author. The length of a statement does not prove its authenticity. Pw wrote Ex 29 from his imagination (130).

This quotation sheds considerable light on the processes of auto/biographical discourse. What is being contested here is a statement which claims to be auto/biographical. In writing the suspect, the police officer was meticulous in ensuring that a great deal of biographical details cannot be disputed. Around these, the police officer proceeded to use his imagination to fill in the gaps that would lead to a subsequent conviction. The method of the police officer mimics that of a real auto/biography. An auto/biography appropriates pivotal events that reside in what Maurice Halbwachs (1980: 22) calls collective memory. This is memory that, although open to re-interpretations, is not susceptible to disputation by the majority of people who share the same social and ideological space.

According to Halbwachs, the individual auto/biographer as well as entire nations, engage in the process of (re)construction of personal memory from events that reside in collective

memory. Halbwachs is of course echoing a Freudian insight when he refers to the incomplete nature of people's memories. The only difference is that Freud sought memory completion from the individual's unconscious, while Halbwachs is suggesting that it happens within the social space itself. It is therefore within this post-Freudian insight that memories are fragmented and incomplete, that we should examine Bundeh's opening claim that his narrative has no creativity at all, but that it is instead a mere product of remembrance. While for Sigmund Freud the individual's memory gaps can only be completed through the bringing of the unconscious to consciousness, an examination of Bundeh's narrative and the other narratives which I examine here, insist that we adopt a Halbwachsian stance of seeking for memory's completion in the social world outside the individual or what Pierre Nora (1989: 7) refers to as "sites of memory". This argument is in line with Fiske's (1989a) claim that "texts are activated, or made meaningful, only in social relations and intertextual relations" (3).

What makes Bundeh's and Githae's representation of post-colonial Kenyan criminality and imprisonment differ from each other is that Bundeh relates something very close to his heart, having escaped execution by a whisker, while Githae's text is largely an academic meditation and a creative take on the same issues. Despite this difference they are in agreement that the Kenyan police force, law courts and prisons are essentially corrupt, unjust and brutal. These two writers challenge the confessional objectives of post-colonial Kenyan prison narratives by suggesting that society and prison mirror each other since prisoners are simply unlucky citizens who get caught. Viewed this way, the post-colonial prison becomes a very political space, and suggests that as a state repressive apparatus, it still obeys the colonial logic that is so passionately documented by Ngugi in *Detained*. Although not entirely convincing in connecting his criminality to colonial injustices, Kimani's narratives offer thought-provoking ideas about the way colonial power turned the Kenyan landscape into zones of immobility in the 1950s. Kiriamiti seems to position the city and prison at the same level by largely depicting himself as a hero of both places. The next section focuses on post-apartheid representation of crime and imprisonment in an attempt to further explore notions of the self and questions of subjectivity in the South African context.

Chapter 6: The Post-Apartheid South African Prison and Interdiscursive Voices

Introduction

The narratives of crime and imprisonment considered so far in this thesis show that in all historical epochs the prison, whether narrated by political prisoners or common criminals, is largely depicted as a space of physical and psychological domination. While in the political autobiographies that I consider earlier in this thesis, historical and social forces seem particularly intractable and hostile, there is still a pronounced sense of agency in the writers' depiction of themselves.⁸⁰ On the other hand, post-colonial Kenyan narratives, which I discuss in Chapter Five, suggest that the site of the political is apparently located in experiences and moments that seem personal, as when these authors are engaging with notions of confession and contrition. In post-apartheid⁸¹ narratives of crime and imprisonment there is a shift – or rather, what Foucault (*Essentials* 58) calls “interdiscursive dependencies” – resulting from the nation's grappling with numerous transitional instabilities and turbulent questions of nationhood and personhood. One consequence of this condition of a nation in transition is a convergence of discourses leading to what Roux calls “the depoliticisation of imprisonment” (2007:261).

Although I have not discussed issues of gender in imprisonment in detail, it is interesting to note that the “depoliticised” post-apartheid narratives re-inscribe gender into the prison experience in quite obvious ways. Political prisoners seem to have lacked space to offer a gendered experience of their imprisonment. This dimension of experience is deemphasized, sometimes even foreclosed. The narratives that I explore in this chapter foreground gender but also show that crime and prison remain central in the understanding of both national and personal selfhoods despite certain significant shifts in their perception and portrayal. The irony is that the gendered focus comes with its own sets of political problems; it seems to announce the return of “private” experience but only in order to demonstrate that private experience is everywhere continuous with cultural politics. To explore the above

⁸⁰Despite the fact that Barbara Schreiner (1992) argues that political prisoners' “experience of prison is frequently psychologically damaging and tends to bring anti-social, dehumanised and criminal behaviour to the fore” (3), unlike the “common criminals”, political prisoners avoid depicting themselves as entirely helpless victims of forces beyond their control.

⁸¹I am aware of the pitfalls of using the term post-apartheid narratives since post-apartheid literature may no longer be easily classified as a single category, but rather as one with stratifications. However, I find it useful to deploy it advisedly as a discussion category.

observations, I examine *Journey to Myself: Writings by Women from Prison in South Africa* (2004) compiled and edited by Julia Landau, *Fifteen Men: Worlds and Images from Behind Bars* (2008), compiled and edited by Margie Orford, *A Human Being Died that Night: A Story of Forgiveness* (2003) by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela and *Red Ink* (2007) by Angela Makholwa. In a way, these narratives illustrate that crime and imprisonment in post-apartheid South Africa are still political entities despite the dominant discourses's attempt to read them otherwise. Ironically, at the discursive level, these narratives participate in this masking of the political theme. All of them, although showing an awareness of the political and social rootedness of crime and imprisonment, focus on the prisoner as an individual. Although this may seem to be empowering the prisoner through voicing, the result is the avoidance or the downplaying of what Andrew Dilts (2009:95) calls "the foundational exclusion" that led to crime and imprisonment in the first place. All these narratives are characterised by the paradox that while the prisoner/criminal is posited as "responsible for all the harm committed by that individual" (Dilts 92), the individual is simultaneously represented as a victim of his or her macro-environment.

A common denominator in these four books is that women feature in all as narrators/writers or as compilers/editors. In a way, these prison texts written or edited and compiled by women can be read as women seizing political and cultural agency. Crime and prison, especially in South Africa, have always been predicated upon what Dobash et al call "patriarchal and gender-based assumptions" (1986:9).⁸² Referring to Southern African writing in general, Dorothy Driver (2002) points out that gender is disregarded as an analytical tool. She argues: "Southern African literary and historical accounts pay unequal attention to women and men, and exclude gender as an analytical tool, so that political and cultural agency is still seen as male" (153). South African prison literature is surprisingly full of women's voices. We have Ruth First, Emma Mashinini, Jean Middleton, Caesarina Kona Makhoere, and Fatima Meer, among others. There is clearly a long tradition of empowered women intellectuals writing about their experiences in both Trade Unions and organisations like the Communist Party. However, as the political scaffolding that used to empower women in the struggle against apartheid starts to collapse, the fact of women's gender starts to matter *more* – suddenly what is interesting is not so much that one is a *political* prisoner, what matters is that one is a *woman* prisoner. One's gender shifts to become the primary frame through which one is understood, a more "personal" and apparently immutable and embodied category than one's politics. In the post-apartheid period there are even more women writing about their

⁸² For example see my discussion of First's, Mashinini's and Steinbergs books.

experiences, and they are a number of women who are drawn into the post-apartheid dialogue about prison. But gender is not an unproblematic ontological ground. My study seeks to examine these and other issues through the prison narratives that I mentioned above.

Landau's *Journey to Myself* is a collection of autobiographical and creative writings of 12 women who were incarcerated at Pollsmoor Women's Prison. To use Driver's terminology, this anthology enables us to trace something of the complexity of responses that "women make in different situations around them – the intricate combinations of acceptance, refusal, complicity, resistance and revolt" (2002:156). Landau suggests that her book project with women prisoners is driven by a Scarryan objective, where language is seen as having the ability to destroy pain through objectifying it.⁸³ She writes: "The impetus for this collection was to provide a healing process for any of the women in prison who wanted to participate in the creative writing workshops and to impart an understanding about the experiences [of] women inmates to the people on the outside" (2).⁸⁴ *Fifteen Men* by Orford can also be seen as a journey into the selves of self-confessed male criminals, which the editor sees as a means of "objectify[ing] pain through naming it" (Young 2009: 97). Whereas *Journey to Myself* comprises autobiographical and creative pieces by twelve women prisoners, *Fifteen Men* is made up of pieces by fifteen male criminals who are serving various prison sentences and is edited and compiled by a well-known South African female writer who experienced imprisonment herself under the apartheid regime.⁸⁵ While both projects seem to be driven by the noble objective of giving prisoners voice, I want to argue that the editors/compiler underestimate questions of hegemony which always trouble the notion of voicing, especially in anthology projects such as the ones that they have embarked on.

⁸³ Elaine Scarry argues: "To bring pain into the world by objectifying it in language, is to destroy one of them" (in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, 1985: 50). Ada Uwakweh also argues that writing in general allows feminist writers healing, attainment of an identity and liberation. She writes: "Voicing is self-defining, liberational, and cathartic. It proclaims an individual as a conscious being capable of independent thought and action" ("Debunking Patriarchy: The Liberational Quality of Voicing in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*" in *Research in African Literatures*, 75).

⁸⁴ Another post-apartheid prison text which has contributions from both female and male political prisoners and shares the same objectives as *Journey to Myself* is *Mapping Memory: Former Prisoners Tell their Stories* (2006), edited by Lauren Segal et al. This book, a project of Constitution Hill, aims at helping former prisoners to re-live their trauma and by so doing help them achieve "some degree of completion" (2). The editors of the anthology claim that it also benefits the South Africans in general by affording them "collective catharsis by hearing these stories" (2). It is clear that the editors of this book, like Landau, are using the same metaphor of seeing the prisoner and the nation as a wounded body that will achieve healing by objectifying their pain through narrative or confessional language.

⁸⁵ Margie Orford is a prolific writer known for her popular crime fiction. Some of her novels include *Like Clockwork* (2006), *Blood Rose* (2007) and *Daddy's Girl* (2009).

Similarly, Gobodo-Madikizela's *A Human Being Died that Night* and Makholwa's *Red Ink* are two books about crime and prison that demand to be read side by side because they seem to belong to what Dilts calls the "neo-liberal proposal to radically reconceive the human subject as a rational actor" (94). Both writers seem to share the objective of trying to understand the psyche of an imprisoned serial murderer and connect it with that of the nation. Their quest is similar to, but also exceeds, the one Hannah Arendt set herself when she wrote about the Nazi killer Eichmann. Her objective was "to know how long it takes an average person to overcome his innate repugnance toward crime, and what exactly happens to him once he has reached that point" (1994:23). *A Human Being Died* is a true account of Gobodo-Madikizela's encounters in 1998 with Eugene de Kock, apartheid's infamous killer, at Pretoria Maximum prison. The book falls within the paradigm of what Driver (2002) calls the sentimentalising concept of national reconciliation (164). Gobodo-Madikizela declares the purpose of her visit to the C section of Pretoria Central Prison as "to understand the inner mind of evil, to follow its thought processes, and to expose [herself] to its human face, stripped of the media stereotypes and the easy distance of hatred" (123). While *A Human Being Died* is a true account of the interactions of the author with the imprisoned apartheid commissioned killer De Kock, Angela Makholwa's *Red Ink* (2007) is a fictitious crime and prison story of the interaction of Lucy and a notorious serial murderer and rapist Napoleon Dingiswayo set in post-apartheid Johannesburg, South Africa. Makholwa's protagonist, Lucy, and the imprisoned serial killer Napoleon, resemble Gobodo-Madikizela's rendition of her experiences with De Kock in striking ways to the extent that it is possible that Makholwa owes aspects of the plot of her novel to Gobodo-Madikizela's book.

By translating De Kock's purportedly "politically motivated" crimes into obvious criminality – that is by making De Kock equivalent to Napoleon Dingiswayo – Makholwa unintentionally does at least two things. Firstly, she is confirming and strengthening the juridical view that De Kock was guilty of an ordinary crime, and not a political one. This goes against the grain of what Gobodo-Madikizela tries to claim in her book – she presents an argument that De Kock is a political scapegoat. So, while *Red Ink* copies the structure of *A Human Being Died*, it also undermines its primary contention, the idea that organises the narrative. Second, Makholwa *translates* the idea of a political prisoner unambiguously into that of what Mandela and others used to call the "common law criminal". If *A Human Being Died* starts this process of depoliticisation and personalisation, it is at least aware of the fact that the political exercises a

complex influence on the personal. In a sense, then, *Red Ink* completes this trajectory – it goes a step further – when it removes the important framing idea of a “political crime” altogether.

With varying degrees of explicitness, the four texts that I examine here seem to be participating in what Dilts calls “the well-intentioned attempt to reform and perfect the liberal ideal of an unencumbered, atomistic, and universal subject before the law” without recourse to the political redress (94). In *Human Being Died*, De Kock “the quintessential apartheid killer” (Gordin 1998:14), is a former apartheid secret agent serving two life sentences for his political criminal murders of anti-apartheid activists. Although De Kock is a product of a particular political milieu, Gobodo-Madikizela’s narrative ultimately deals with him as an individual. Similarly, Makholwa’s villain, Napoleon, is serving five life sentences for his non-political criminal offenses of raping, maiming and killing over 41 young women in and around Johannesburg. Although Makholwa indicates that Napoleon is a product of his fractured past and perverse environment, her narrative foregrounds his individual responsibility over and above the concern about the redress of the political and social environments that enable Napoleon’s evolution. Gobodo-Madikizela’s use of the first person narrative voice in relating her conversations and encounters with De Kock makes her narrative reflectively compelling. Makholwa’s narrative is an introspective thriller told in the third person which derives its power from the fact that although the narrative perspective shifts from time to time, the focaliser is largely the heroine of the novel, Lucy Sibongile Khumbule, a 26 year-old public relations consultant and former journalist whom Napoleon invites to write his biography. The titles of both books are ominous. Gobodo-Madikizela’s title, *A Human Being Died that Night*, alludes to one moment in De Kock’s murderous spree when he is haunted by an imaginary smell on his clothes and body after he kills a family suspected of being ANC sympathizers in Botswana. Her subtitle, *A Story of Forgiveness*, indicates that she is operating within the paradigms of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which had the objectives of fostering national reconciliation through public confessions and forgiveness.⁸⁶ On the other hand, the title of Makholwa’s book derives from the red ink of the ballpoint pen Napoleon uses in prison to write romantically haunting letters to Lucy. The title also alludes to Napoleon’s bloody career and the danger that Lucy exposes herself to by closely interacting with him.

⁸⁶ Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela was a commissioner in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). It was a TRC idea to interview De Kock. Gobodo-Madikizela eventually incorporated some of the information that she gathered through her encounters with De Kock into her psychology PhD thesis and she used the rest of the information to write the narrative that I am examining. More recently, South African literature has started to move beyond the logic of the TRC but its stratification was quite dominant in the early 2000s. At present there seem to be a *constantly evolving* body of literature that is not easy to categorise.

1. Gendered and Hegemonic Voices in *Journey to Myself* and *Fifteen Men*

Dobash et al indicate that in its origins and purposes the Western prison has always been a gendered space. They write: “From the very beginning, women in prison were treated differently from men, considered more morally depraved and corrupt and in need of special, closer forms of control and confinement” (1986:1). Ward and Kassebaum (1965: 14) claim that imprisonment is “more severe for women than men”, and Nawal El Saadawi (1992) advances the same point when she says that “the oppression which is exercised against women and against the poor is always greater and more brutal” (9). However, the prison narratives explored here suggest that female prisoners do not necessarily suffer more from physical and material privations more than their male counterparts, but rather that their “greater and more brutal” suffering is due to patriarchal and gender-based assumptions that govern prison relations, assumptions which prisoners have also internalised during the socialisation process before coming to prison.

Interestingly, the female editors/compiler who are not prisoners themselves are also victims of this internalisation of a gendered understanding of human existence. For example, the blurb on the cover of *Fifteen Men* sees the process of writing the self for the imprisoned criminal as an act of heroism due to the self-control it requires, and the courage it calls for, to narrate the self for the convicted male prisoner. It reads: “*Fifteen Men* is a literary tribute to the power of quietness, and the quiet heroism of fifteen writers who dared to face the dark places of the mind”. Orford herself in the introduction expresses a similar view when she writes: “The reason people write is to give voice to the human spirit. Writing demands that one go to the dark places of the mind and face them” (2008:13). Although it may seem as if Orford is referring to the experience of writing in general, it should be borne in mind that she is introducing the autobiographical writing of the male prisoners in her collection. It is interesting to compare these comments with Landau’s view about what writing does for women prisoners in *Journey to Myself*. She writes that the project provides “healing for the women and the chance to flex their creative muscles” (2004:2). Both these comments are steeped in unconscious gender stereotypes. While for male prisoners writing the self is an empowering act of quiet heroism, for their female counterparts it only provides healing through the flexing of mental muscles. The female prisoner is viewed as damaged or made sick by her imprisonment, and the male prisoner has scary dark places of the mind which can only be visited by heroes. A closer analysis of these two compilations indicates that this gendered view and experience of the prison and writing the self is not only evident in these

editorial comments, but permeates the actual contributed written pieces, which among other reasons may be evidence of editorial interventions and mediations.

The title, *Journey to Myself*, suggests that the writing process enabled these women prisoners to engage in a confessional self-reflexive autobiographical process and discovered a hidden and wounded essential self. While the notion of discovery of an essential autobiographical self is a problematic concept on its own,⁸⁷ as we shall see, most of the narratives in this book simultaneously confirm and challenge the concept of seeing the prisoner, and especially the woman prisoner, as a wounded victim who needs “healing”. The imagery that Landau uses to describe the imprisoned women equates them to the post-apartheid state, which was viewed as a wounded motherland that needed to be healed through discourses and social projects of national confession, forgiveness and reconciliation after the demise of the traumatic apartheid era. This impetus towards facilitating reconciliation between the prisoner and the outside society from which she is estranged through her confessions is obvious in Landau’s introductory words. She writes: “Too often, they are women who felt disempowered and, taking a step in the wrong direction, ended up being relegated to the bottom of the snake pit” (5). Landau assumes the role of a psychiatrist who facilitates these women’s autobiographical confessions, which will supposedly rid them of their emotional and psychological pain. In *A Human Being*, Gobodo-Madikizela also takes an interceding and psychotherapeutic role. In the closing words of her narrative, she makes an impassioned plea for mercy and empathy from society on behalf of De Kock. She argues that our “capacity for such empathy is a profound gift in this brutal world we have created for one another as people of different races, creeds, and political persuasions” (139). Although Gobodo-Madikizela is clearly self-reflexive about gender roles, these intercessions may be interpreted, to use Judith Butler’s terminology, as gender performance (1999:24). She ultimately fails to transcend the social stereotypes which depict the feminine as empathetic and forgiving, although these qualities are not necessarily negative.

The fact that in its multifarious manifestations, patriarchy is a common denominator of all the prison autobiographical texts in the collection *Journey to Myself* may be evidence of editorial directing and prompting. This is very much evident especially in the female prisoners’ use of language of nurturing affiliation and domestic support in narrating their experiences. Evidently, compilers bring in their particular ideas about gender, often derived from

⁸⁷ For a detailed discussion on the problematics of narrating the self in autobiographies see my chapter on “Prison and Solitary Confinement: Conditions and Limits of the Autobiographical Self in First’s *117 Days*, Mashinini’s *Strikes have Followed Me*, and Breytenbach’s *True Confessions*”, in this thesis.

epistememes that Foucault would say are deeply implicated in the dissemination of knowledge and power in society. However, editors' preoccupations with gender politics aside, the prison really *is* a gendered institution: the prison *makes* gender matter. *Journey to Myself* allows us to see two superimposed templates that reveal a faultline. The prisoners are forced to deal with sexual politics in a unisex space. Inevitably, they reflect on this experience in ways that are somehow but not necessarily critical of gender structures.

This focus on patriarchy and the gendered nature of imprisonment seems to be typical of post-apartheid or non-political prison narratives by women. What emerges from this anthology from both the editor's and the prisoners' writings is what Hans Toch (1992) terms the female inmate's ideal, "*a pattern of advertised weakness* rather than the self-image of strength and ability to withstand the frustrations of prison life dictated by the Manliness Myth" (232; emphasis in the original). Ironically, and largely in an unconscious way, most of these women also indict the prison as a patriarchal institution participating in perpetuating the autonomous but related structures which together exploit and oppress women. The inability to fully comprehend and openly confront patriarchy in all its different guises results in these women experiencing and narrating the prison with a certain level of ambivalence. The majority of the narrators feel that in different ways they are victims of patriarchal macroeconomic and social state forces, which compelled them to commit the crimes that lead to their imprisonment. Within this large paradigm, they express a range of unique views and perceptions about prison. Some see it as place from where they will emerge as better people. Others see prison as a place of utter physical, mental and emotional annihilation. Yet still others express noncommittal, nonchalant, defiant attitudes towards prison and the penal regime in general, and their imprisonment in particular. They are many factors that account for these different perceptions. The most determining factors, however, seem to be motherhood or lack thereof, age, race, the amount of material loss suffered as a result of imprisonment, the level of emotional and material support received from relatives and friends before and during imprisonment, level of education, and whether there is any hope of a better life after release.

In a *Journey to Myself*, most of these imprisoned women represent themselves as not only paying for their actual crimes, but as also experiencing multiple punishments for rebelling against social norms of femininity. Cecilia Cox's autobiographical narrative "Disconnected" and the poem "I Remember" suggest that she experiences prison as being part and parcel of what Sylvia Walby (1986) calls "patriarchal structures which together compose the system of patriarchy" (69). In an apparent moment of disconnection, Cox rejects her socially defined role of motherhood and kills her own daughter and is subsequently sentenced to a fifteen-year

jail term. This moment of mental instability suggest intense emotional desperation. The killing of her child does not lead to some relief which Cox may have anticipated. She has been socialised to see the nurturing role of a mother not only as natural but as sacrosanct. She is therefore not haunted by the long jail term per se, but by the feeling that she is not being punished enough for her ‘unnatural’ crime. She writes: “I thought that I would be hanged for what I had done” (10). Through her admission of guilt, Cox experiences what Dobash et al call “personal subjugation” (100), or what Hans Toch (1992) terms “self-victimization” (234). Not only does she suffer from self-torment, the nature of her crime also ensures that she is disconnected from fellow criminals incarcerated with her. She reports that when she was transferred to Worcester prison one woman prisoner looked at her “with hostility because of [her] crime” (6). Her crime does not fit into the survival crimes which Landau says are synonymous with most imprisoned women, and therefore has the capacity to trouble the comfortable boundaries of normative female criminality. Her crime is stigmatised because it has elements of madness and transgressive violence that defy proper social containment. That prison has the capacity to drive one insane as a result of the malicious talk and rumours of fellow prisoners also comes out strongly in Nasheeba Kleinboo’s poem “It’s a mad place”. She points out that fellow prisoners wear her down emotionally and psychologically by labelling her insane.

Not only does Cox suffer from self-victimisation, the penal regime exacerbates her disconnection by forcibly sterilizing her a week after her conviction and sentence. Dobash et al’s observation that women’s crimes are likely to be treated as the result of a medical condition than men’s is evident in that there is no parallel account in the South African penal history where men are castrated or sterilised for raping or killing little children.⁸⁸ Cox’s is not only held fully responsible for her crime, but she clearly undergoes a gendered experience in prison. In a way, by sterilising her, the prison strikes directly at what it sees, in patriarchal fashion, as the definition of womanhood, the womb. Cox is devastated by this loss of her reproductive capacity, which seems to have been central to her feminine identity, and regrets that she did not “die under the anaesthetic” (6). This pre-emptive action of sterilising Cox to prevent her from killing any of her future progeny, and the glaring lack of psychological therapy to get to the bottom of her bizarre crime by prison authorities, suggest that there is an overpowering collusion between the outside forces and the penal regime that serves to widen Cox’s self-disconnection and severance from the world in general. This patriarchal logic of

⁸⁸ Although she does not mention the date of her sterilisation, Cox was evidently sterilised under apartheid legislation which was still in operation up to the end of 1996. Dr. Aubrey Levin’s shock therapy and castration of homosexual white apartheid soldiers was clearly motivated by gender stereotypes about manhood.

the penal regime finds expression in the outside world in the figure of the father of Cox's two sons, who prevents the boys from visiting their mother because he "felt that it was not appropriate for them to come to the prison" (8). In this way, Cox shows that "the legal violence of the patriarchal state in the ... prisons ... plays a further role in sustaining patriarchy" (Walby 62). Subsequently, her confinement and the physical distance that separates her from her boyfriend evidently contribute to her boyfriend's vanishing without even informing her that their relationship has ended. As a result of this, Cox experiences her imprisonment as a paralysing disconnection from all psychologically and emotionally sustaining social interactions. Her prison autobiographical narratives are expressions of her yearning for what she feels are lost connections that can make her life whole again. Cox's narrative indicates that, for her, the prison, just like the outside, is another space of disorientation where it is impossible to regain lost connections.

I have pointed out that Ward and Kassebaum (1965) argue that imprisonment is more severe for females, especially mothers. They observe that the "confined mother's concern is not only with separation from her children but also with how they will be cared for" (14). They further point out that for the female prisoner "[d]ispossession of the mother role also removes an important personal emotional object from the inmate" (15).⁸⁹ The title of Cox's autobiographical piece, "Disconnected", alludes to the feelings of intense disempowerment, sense of loneliness and isolation connected with being deprived of not only the physical care of her children but also psychologically, of performing her motherly role. Her inability to be there for her sons when they need her seems to dominate her experience of prison life. For example, on one occasion after being informed that her youngest son is missing, she experiences extremely agonizing pain.⁹⁰ She writes: "It was as if a dam had burst. I started crying, and not just tears, I sobbed" (9). Natalie Bester's prison experience, like Cox's, is dominated by thoughts of her daughter, and whether she is being taken good care of. Similarly, Nicole George in "Circle of sadness" presents herself as mainly thinking about the welfare of her two daughters, eleven and five years respectively, and her 60-year old mother. She writes: "I feel stressed most of the time and I worry about my children. I am lucky in that my mother looks after them" (43). Thinking about these people who matter most in her life

⁸⁹ Hans Toch also concurs and argues: "A major concern of women in prison is their status of motherhood ... Women in confinement experience anxiety because confinement separates them from their families and renders them unable to fulfil their maternal obligations" (*Mosaic of Despair: Human Breakdowns in Prison*, 1992: 231)

⁹⁰ In *Strikes have Followed Me*, Emma Mashinini relates a similarly agonising moment in her solitary confinement when she forgets the name of her own child. The incident marks Mashinini's most destitute moment in the narrative as she experiences intense "personal subjugation" and "self-victimization".

seems to both paralyse her and also fill her with hope by giving her something to live for despite experiencing her life as a circle of sadness. Nasheeba Kleinbooi also portrays herself as a self-sacrificing mother, despite having an abusive and irresponsible spouse. She depicts herself as a victim of poverty who committed petty crimes of survival in order to feed her children. She writes: “I was married to an abusive man addicted to drugs ... I love my [children] dearly. They are everything to me. I breast-feed my son until he was two years old” (52). In “These are my children”, the prison is depicted as a vacuum, a space where nothing happens, specifically because she does not have her children with her. She writes: “In prison, time stands still” (54). These imprisoned women seem to be performing the normative ideal of motherhood for the interviewer, or the abstract social order that the interviewer represents. If one compares these experiences with the experiences of Magadien, a male prisoner in Steinberg’s narrative *The Number* (2004) who also has children, it is clear that although he thinks of his children his prison existence is not dominated by thoughts of their welfare as is the case with Cox. Interestingly, Ruth First hardly talks about her children in *117 Days*. Mandela in *Long Walk to Freedom* deliberately avoids talking about his wife and children – perhaps because it is too paralysing, but more likely because of his relentless focus on the political at the expense of the personal. Although there are always exceptions, the concern with the personal in post-apartheid narratives seems symptomatic of a nation in transition where there are attempts to strip the prison of its political significance. At the same time it allows writers the freedom to reflect on other experiences such as parenthood.

Cox’s narratives, like others in this anthology, show evidence of prompting and coaching from the convener/editor to enhance the creativity of the pieces. The formulaic structure of her poem “I remember” readily shows this mediating, framing, and directing. This autobiographical poem, made up of twenty stanzas all beginning with the reminiscing and contemplative phrase “I remember”, is presented as Cox’s attempt to come to grips with her loss of motherhood by depicting her own childhood as having been an interconnected experience progressively degenerating, and climaxing in the total disconnection that results in her taking her own daughter’s life and her subsequent imprisonment. This editorial prompting to portray the prison experience creatively is also suggested by Shireen Nazley Constable’s choice of metaphors. In one of her poems, the clogged basin and broken toilet become metaphors of the claustrophobic prison life. She observes that despite their seemingly dysfunctional state, the basin and the toilet are still forced somehow to perform their functions. Her resigned acceptance of prison privations is problematically captured in the title of this poem, “It works for me” (22). The poem gives the impression that as a result of her

traumatic experiences outside, prison becomes an ambiguous space of physical hardship, re-education and a refuge even, from the unpredictable and precarious existence on the outside. However, there is little attempt to engage critically with what can be done to redress the wider political and social issues that clearly contribute to her crimes and subsequent imprisonment. Instead there is an attempt to posit the prison as a place of education completely insulated from the traumatic events that characterised the outside. She writes: “Being in Pollsmoor is like being in standard eight all over again. I will be a better person for having experienced it ... I feel that my life is stable, but that can be because this is a controlled environment ... I have fears about my release” (20-21).⁹¹ Susan Kruger also calls her prison experience an “education for the future” from where she will emerge and find “[b]igger things waiting for [her]” (65). By depicting the prison as a friendly school environment despite its lack of freedom and other privations, these female prisoners may be framing their experiences in a way that meets what they assume to be readers’ expectations.

The way most women depict their prison experience in a *Journey to Myself* is comparable to what Dobash et al (1986) call “voluntary committals” by 19th century Scottish women. They write:

These women had not committed criminal acts, though occasionally they would commit crime in order to be sent to prison. They committed themselves because of poverty and starvation created by economic depression often accompanied by the desertion or ill-usage of husbands. (96)

Despite their failure to seriously interrogate the connectedness of the prison with the outside, both Cox and Constable depict their criminal behaviour as rooted elsewhere and not in the incorrigibly criminal individual self. Cox’s disconnection from herself and the world sets in as she becomes a young adult. In “A case of hit and run”, the title of Constable’s autobiographical narrative, she imagines her disconnectedness from the world as having a deep-rooted psychological and sociological origin. It begins with her accidental conception. She writes: “I was brought into the world as the result of a hit and run accident. My father

⁹¹ It is interesting that even political prisoners during apartheid compare prison to school. Robben Island was known as “the university” during Mandela’s time there. Hugh Lewin in *Bandiet* (1974) claims that prison taught him how to be black. He writes: “Being white, it was a useful lesson to find out what it is like – in a South African context - to be black” (131). But political prisoners meant a completely different kind of school. Theirs was a school where they *taught each other* in defiance of the prison’s attempts to limit and silence them. Constable and Kruger’s prison *is* the school, it does not accidentally provide the site for a revolutionary school. In both cases we see the prison as a place where normative knowledges are transmitted and disrupted, but in other respects these “schools” are instructively extremely different from one another.

scored with my mother and then disappeared” (14). Her accidental conception becomes a metaphor for her entire existence. It is implied that her lack of parental love and guidance makes her life resemble a rudderless ship which is aimlessly tossed hither and thither by contrary winds. Her narrative suggests that prison is almost an unavoidable destination for her seemingly aimless existence. She claims that her lack of wholeness as a child is worsened by the fact that she not only discovers her irresponsible white father at the age of twenty for the first time, but her mother too was always absent. As a live-in domestic worker, her mother had only one off-work day a week. Even then, when she came to see her daughter she brought along an abusive boyfriend who wanted Constable’s mother all to himself. It is because of fatherlessness, near motherlessness, having to live with a rich but cold and loveless aunt, her struggle to find employment despite being a matriculant, being raped by a work colleague, and having an emotionally abusive boyfriend, that Constable comes to equate prison with a haven of peace and security. The failure to position prison alongside the traumatising outside experience may be evidence of the directing and framing under which Constable’s narratives were written.

While political prisoners are guaranteed of readers’ sympathy based on the fact that they are fighters of social injustices, “common criminals” do so by depicting themselves as completely lacking in agency due to their social status of poverty or general disempowerment. This is what Constable evidently does above. Charlene van Niekerk also portrays both herself and her mother as victims of forces beyond their control. Implied in her narratives is that living in abject poverty and being homeless for most of her life cushions her from experiencing prison as an intolerably harsh space. Similarly, although prison is at the centre of Natalie Bester’s brief autobiographical narrative, her confessional narrative speaks very little about prison privations. They indirectly engage with the prison by relating their difficult life before entering prison. For example, Van Niekerk’s “From fields and open spaces” is a story of being abandoned by wealthy father, being raised by a poor nomadic mother who keeps having children because men have control over her body, and describes how Van Niekerk herself subsequently enters into two dysfunctional marriages which end up in divorce. During her childhood, she has her first prison experience as a little girl when she is sent to Faure Girls Reformatory. Reflecting on this experience, she writes: “Faure Girls Reformatory was another story altogether. It was the first time that I had a real bed – and all to myself. I was given free meals too” (59). Her later prison experience as an adult is therefore framed by this early encounter with the penal regime. Prison experience as an adult becomes something banal. She writes: “I was caught for stealing and sentenced to a year in prison” (60). The second spell is

similarly related in one sentence: “I started stealing and I was caught and sentenced to a short spell in prison” (62). Then her third and current imprisonment: “I started to steal again; until I was caught” (62). Prison deprivations do not dominate her narrative mainly because her life outside resembled prison. But another reason for most of the prisoners do not focus much on prison deprivations is that they have to live with their fellow inmates and prison officials after the publication of the book. It is a case of self-serving censorship.

In “Sometimes when I’m happy I cry” Pamela Wagenaar earns the readers’ sympathies by exhibiting candour which borders on naivety about her criminal activities. Her young age – she is just over twenty when she writes her account – and the fact that hers are what Landau calls petty crimes of survival, all seem to position her as a victim of an intolerably hostile environment. Her narrative suggests that at the centre of her criminal activities are a lack of parental guidance, poverty and social circumstances where crime is almost the norm. Wagenaar’s father is arrested and imprisoned for seventeen years when she is still a toddler. Wagenaar’s narrative implies that her father’s extended absence had a debilitating psychological effect on her, in addition to placing the obvious financial burden on the single mother. She suggests that her father’s long imprisonment locked her in an infantile stage of unfulfilled desire.

This theme of childhood neglect as a major contributory factor to a descent into a life of crime connects quite a number of the narratives in *Journey to Myself*. Susan Kruger’s “A letter of yearning” also implies that the emotional and psychological gap that was created by her growing up without parental support and guidance is responsible for her criminal behaviour. Growing up in a children’s institution, abandoned by both her mother and father, makes Kruger very resentful and prepares her for subsequent institutionalisation in prisons. Kruger’s letter registers bitterness in the veiled language of forgiveness about how growing up without parents contributed to her becoming a criminal drug addict who has ended up in prison. The letter is an ironic moment of achieving ‘healing’ at the moment of loss of power. She extends forgiveness upon realizing that she has lost her superior moral pedestal by landing in prison. She writes: “I have gone from someone of whom a mother could be truly proud, to someone who would be ashamed to meet her mother ... Today, I ache for you. I know that when we meet, you will not judge me” (65). Her reconciliation with her mother through the letter also becomes a moment of making peace with her limiting prison environment and appealing to the reader not to judge her harshly for her crimes.

Due to their difficult childhoods, most of the women in a *Journey to Myself* characterise themselves as “finely tuned instrument[s] on which malignant forces insist on playing cacophonous tunes – until the delicate strings must break” (Toch 245). For example in “Circle of sadness”, Nicole George depicts her imprisonment as resulting from a moment of uncontrollable disengagement facilitated by an environment where drugs are readily available.

She writes:

When I was growing up, it felt as though something was missing. One evening, as I was sitting on a chair in the corner of our little kitchen, a little inside voice said, “Nicole, why don’t you try drugs?” So, I went to a party and took Ecstasy. (41)

Moreover, for George, prison is not a refuge but a loveless, impersonal, claustrophobic place where personal reflection is rendered impossible. She observes: “Inside Pollsmoor’s cold walls, you want to be alone and have time to think, but people are always disturbing you” (40). Margie Orford also captures this irony of the prison when she points out that “[d]espite, or perhaps because of, the extreme overcrowding [prisons] are intensely lonely places” (2008:13).

Similarly, Ongeluksvoël’s use of a pseudonym shows her refusal to accept prison as a place of refuge, and indicates a realisation that it has the capacity to wreck her life even after her release. This also supports the point I make above about the way these stories are tailored to suit quite practical reasons. The prisoners are thinking about their welfare both inside and outside prison after the publication of their stories. What distinguishes Ongeluksvoël from most women in this anthology is that she seems to experience imprisonment through her middle-class background. This might also be why she chooses a pseudonym. The stigma of imprisonment is apparently experienced according to class: it is more damaging to be a middle-class person with a prison record. She experiences prison as a bewilderingly disabling and disempowering space, probably because of what Becker and Geer (1960) call “latent social identities” (306). By this they mean that the prisoner’s response to imprisonment pains and deprivations is not only related to prison life but to factors that are germane to outside life. Describing her experience of imprisonment, Ongeluksvoël writes: “In prison, it feels as though your hands have been cut off. I lost my house, car, job, my friends, my children, and my children’s grandparents; the only family I have” (50). Like Cox in “Disconnected”, Ongeluksvoël experiences imprisonment as a process of complete loss and dispossession. Early in the narrative she suggests that she experiences prison as a place of ceaseless torment.

She writes: “Ten months into my sentence and it feels like I am in hell” (47). For her, imprisonment is characterised by decay and lifelessness. She observes: “Like death, that is how prison smells” (47). It is a place where all sustaining hopes perish. “There is no way out for me. The room just keeps on getting smaller and smaller” (51). The prison for Ongeluksvoël is like a door-less room which keeps on getting smaller and smaller until it completely squashes her into thin paste. Ongeluksvoël’s view of prison is close to that of Nicole George’s, who declares that she feels “like something that is trapped in a cage [and that] life is a circle of sadness and [she is] trapped inside it” (43). In the prison of Ongeluksvoël and George, there is no possibility of what Raymond Suttner (2010:5) calls “liminal moment where one has agency”: their imprisonment is just a continuous nightmare of powerlessness.

Despite the fact that some of these female prisoners, for example Cox and Bester, discount poverty and troubled childhoods as important factors that pushed them into crime, they nonetheless still employ a particular kind of victim narrative. Rather than poverty, most of the women in *Journey to Myself* suggest that they are pushed into crime by either sexual violence or marital problems. About her family and childhood, Bester writes: “I was born into a wonderful family. My childhood was magical. My parents gave us everything that we wished for” (28). Likewise, Cox in her poem “I remember” indicates that as a child her material and emotional needs were quite provided for. Male sexual violence is therefore posited as a determining factor in these women’s descent into lives of crime. For example, while it is rape by a trusted work colleague that seems to trigger a chain of events that eventually land Constable in prison, Bester also suffers from a gang rape by strangers. But before that, Bester claims to have experienced the devastating shock of catching her cherished husband red-handed in bed with two of her best friends. She maintains that this event so completely unhinged her that she descended into a life of drug abuse, drug peddling, fraud and shoplifting. Even in the case of Constable, who had a somewhat troubled and unguided childhood, ultimately her narrative implies that poverty was not a determining factor in the crimes that she committed. Rather, emotional and physical abuse at the hands of a well-known and trusted male figure seem to completely disorient these women and send them over a precipice that ends in prison.

Jayne Valentino’s “Is anyone out there listening” also peddles a victim narrative. Her prison experience is entirely informed by the extremely violent and traumatic rape incident that she experiences before coming to prison. She casts her criminality as an unfortunate consequence of this sexual abuse and the injustice that she experiences from the penal regime when it fails

to convict her abusers. Her piece is both a plea for justice to be done and a cautionary tale to other women in the sex industry to be vigilant. She is kidnapped and raped the whole night by two drunken men. Although the men are swiftly arrested, the courts fail to convict them. This injustice is what preoccupies Valentine's consciousness day and night while in prison and it is what gives her piece the flavour of a victim narrative. Revealing what should be the feelings of most victims and survivors of such violence and brutal rape who fail to see justice, she writes: "I live with scars both inside and out. I have recurring nightmares and have to take sleeping tablets" (68). Her living with "scars both inside and outside" becomes a metaphor for her entire existence. Her economic vulnerability which makes her susceptible to repressive state apparatuses is foregrounded by the fact that her work in the dangerous sex industry leads her to drug addiction, which in turn leads to petty theft and ultimately prison.

Similarly, Micka'yla Weideman indicates that sexual violence hound women not only before their imprisonment but even after their release. This is evident in her piece "There is a freedom within". Her experiences confirm Sylvia Walby's (1986) argument that the "key sets of patriarchal relations are to be found in domestic work, paid work, the state and male violence and sexuality" (50). Her narrative has resonances with that of Helene Pastoors, a female political prisoner whose narrative "The Road to Solitude" is in the anthology *A snake with Ice Water* (1992). Writing after she has been physically set free from prison in 1990, Pastoors laments: "They say they're freeing their prisoners. THEY LIE ... Can you help me my brother, to free me? Why this endless sentence?" (19). Weideman's is an equally painful story of power abuse and endemic corruption that characterise the South African Correctional Services Department. The title of her narrative alludes to her world that has been turned inside out as a result of her prison experience. As in the case of Constable, the prison has ironically become more of a place of freedom and security than the outside. Avoiding the likely unpleasant crimes that landed her in prison in the first place, Weideman starts her short account at the time when she is released on parole. She is released into the hands of a seemingly pleasant male parole officer. As it turns out, this man is disguising his desires since he is only interested in sexually abusing Weideman. As in the case of Cox, Constable, and Bester, Weideman experiences the prison through her traumatically sexed female body. Her poem titled "He gave me flowers" apparently refers to the parole officer who would abuse her and then buy her flowers as some kind of emotional blackmail. Interestingly, in this poem, she shows how she herself feels complicit in her own abuse and is plagued by guilt after each instance. She suggests that her toleration of his abuse may one day lead to her being beaten to death. She writes: "He bought me flowers today./ ... These flowers are beautiful spray/ of

white lilies and red carnations,/ the centrepiece of on my coffin./ I wonder if this too was my fault?” Her narrative suggests that the sexual, emotional and physical abuses that she undergoes as a parolee are specifically because she is female and ultimately contribute to her going back to prison.

Ongeluksvoël draws the readers’ sympathy by using a victim narrative of a different kind which nonetheless is ultimately peppered by sexual abuse. The name Ongeluksvoël, which means “bird of misfortune” or “one who is unlucky”, alludes to a series of tragic events in the narrator’s life and it suggests that she feels she had no control over the circumstances that led to her imprisonment. In addition to her pre-imprisonment traumatic tragic experiences, during her first night in prison she is sexually and physically abused by three women prisoners who are in prison for murder. They insert sharp objects into her genitals causing her injury which subsequently requires surgery. She indicates that for two years after this traumatic prison experience she had to see a psychologist. Her narrative suggests that the tragedies she experienced as a child remained at the centre of her tragic decisions which led her into prison on two occasions.

Ongeluksvoël’s use of a pseudonym also suggests that as much as one of the consequences of imprisonment is an acquisition of a new and forced identity; “prisoner” or “former prisoner”, this identity “carries a stigma that can wreck marriages and destroy employment opportunities” (Schreiner 1992: 6). For example, her husband divorces her while she is serving time in prison, adding yet another socially stigmatised identity, namely that of being a single mother. In the first two sentences of her narrative she boldly declares: “My name is Ongeluksvoël. I am a single mother serving three years for shoplifting” (47). As Sandra Young (2009) perceptively observes, the “liberating potential of prison narratives is circumscribed by the conventions (and, quite simply, the terms) of the genre, creating a tension around identification that, for some writers, remains insoluble” (99). Ongeluksvoël’s narrative suggests that negative notions of the self, especially those acquired through one’s encounter with the penal regime, have a way of stubbornly attaching themselves and at times even effacing more positive self-perceptions through a relentless layering process. Her imprisonment and prison ordeals ensure that she now understands herself as a victim of sexual, physical and emotional abuse and a traumatised mentally unstable single mother. Contrary to Scarry’s assertion that language objectifies, diminishes and destroys pain (1985: 51), Ongeluksvoël’s refusal to use her real name is a realisation that no amount of voicing can do this. Ongeluksvoël persuades the reader to view her criminal activities and imprisonment within the larger frame of her being a victim of macro-forces which seem to be ceaselessly

driving her towards mental and emotional destruction. Commenting on her being convicted and sentenced for shoplifting, she writes: “The magistrate gave me three years. He knew what had happened to me in prison, yet he still sent me back” (50). It is significant that the magistrate is male, since Ongeluksvoël depicts the prison and its regimes as masculine and callous and as participating in the same overpowering process which characterises her entire existence.

Unlike many of her fellow prisoners, in “I know I am free”, Lola Nguza adopts what may be called a political victim narrative to explain her descent into crime. Nguza’s narrative highlights the palimpsestic survival of the political narrative even after apartheid. This enables her to resist confession and contrition which a purely criminal narrative seems to demand. Although the political victim narrative is not a dominant form in *Journey to Myself*, in Nguza’s case, it provides a completely different kind of frame for experience, and allows the possibility of another kind of “I”. In a style not typical of most narratives in *Journey to Myself*, Nguza adopts a daring voice and a tone of defiance in narrating her criminal activities which lead to her subsequent imprisonment.⁹² She seems to attribute her criminal activities to lack of employment and the inherent and largely racialised economic disparities that still characterise post-apartheid South Africa. She views her situation as a prisoner in post-apartheid South Africa as part of the same process which saw her mother running away from Cape Town in the 1980s because she was a wanted UDF activist. About her mother she writes: “She was on the organizing committee which was organizing a UDF rally. She had to leave Cape Town because the police were looking for her” (44). She seems to see this event as shaping her entire childhood and the choices that she makes as an adult. Her experimentation with drugs and house burglaries are all framed within this anti-apartheid narrative. Her narrative insists that there is a slippery line between activist politics and criminality. She suggests that apartheid penal system’s criminalisation of people for doing very normal things made the boundary between the normal and the abnormal seem extremely flexible to her generation. In this way, she implies that apartheid prison laid down the foundations for present criminality. She goes on to depict prison as a space characterised by senseless and rigid routine. She writes: “I didn’t know that life in prison was like this ... Life in prison is different from life outside. I can’t relax in here because the sound of the keys constantly reminds me that I am in prison” (45-6). Despite portraying prison as a space that is

⁹² This defiant stance is common with female political prisoners. For example, Caesarina Kona Makhoere in *No Child’s Play: In Prison under Apartheid* (1988) writes: “I am tough. They did not break me” (75). Similarly after relating a near psychological collapse during the 117 days she spent in detention Ruth First is triumphant. She writes: “[In] the depth of my agony I *had* won” (138; emphasis hers).

removed from freedom outside, she insists that she is free. Restating the title of her story she writes: “I know I am free. My mother struggled so that black people like us could have our freedom. I am free to talk to white people. My life is changing. I am free” (46). This insistence on the abstract freedom that she imagines she enjoys in incarceration seems to be an attempt at understanding why she should be imprisoned when her crime activities are participating in the same liberational process that her mother partook in. Her claim to be free therefore is a statement of defiance as there is no trace of remorse about the criminal activities that brought her to jail.

Although not necessarily imbued with a political theme, Jayne Valentine’s narrative shares Nguza’s defiance in a number of ways. She proclaims herself as a prostitute and is not apologetic about her fall into crime. Even though she occasionally falls into the trap of depicting herself as a submissive female, her narrative largely challenges the stereotype that presents women as passive wounded victims of a monolithic and abusive patriarchal system. What emerges from her narrative is not her actual prison experience, but her anger, and her determination to survive and see justice done. She writes: “I am consumed with the desire to see these men behind bars where they will learn what it feels like to be raped” (68). Valentine sees prison as feminising. Men who are sent to prison will be abused like women. In this sense, the technologies and beliefs that inscribe women into a passive and victimised social position are in some ways analogous to the technologies and beliefs that produce the subject of the penal regime, whether male or female.⁹³ Her narrative suggests that her self-confessed profession of prostitution, a trade that is illegal and still carries social stigma and moral condemnation in South Africa, may also have contributed to the failed conviction of her abusers who may have claimed that they had consensual sex. Her determination to survive and resist all these clearly gendered injustices is expressed by her attempt to re-open her rape case even as she is serving a sentence for crime herself. She writes: “I have tried from prison to re-open the case against the rapists. I will continue trying until someone listens to me” (68). Her own imprisonment is given meaning by this fighting spirit and the determination to see justice done.

The collection *Journey to Myself* appropriately ends with Nontsikelelo Vivienne Wata’s “The Dreamseller” since her story shows evidence of coaching and directing and encapsulates the

⁹³ There is also a constant violent aversion in male writing towards the idea of prison homosexuality, despite its obvious prevalence. It is seen as a “feminising” effect of the prison, and it is resisted in narrative. Probably a lot of contemporary homophobia can actually be drawn back to the forced proximity that colonialism demanded of men in mine compounds and prisons. Being “made into a woman”, which is understood under patriarchy as a violent and traumatic invasion, becomes analogous to disempowerment at the hands of the “feminising” institutions of colonialist modernity.

victim narrative foregrounded by most writers in this anthology. She claims that she is persuaded by a suave male drug peddler to travel to Brazil and carry 96 condoms filled with cocaine in her stomach. She then sells her dream to her 69-year old mother who swallows 24 condoms, and her son swallows 40. Hers is a risk worth taking because she dreams big. She hopes to start a taxi business with her loot and retire from her R1500 a month domestic work in Constantia. The swallowing of the cocaine-filled condoms becomes a metaphor for the life of poor and vulnerable South African women who have to accept all sorts of dangerous and humiliating and invasive procedures in their daily struggle for survival. Later on, her ordeal at the hands of law enforcers of being force-fed laxatives until she miscarries (she was three months pregnant) also figuratively illustrates how the post-apartheid state wittingly and unwittingly colludes with various patriarchies to rob women of their agency and dignity. Wata's narrative shows a general inability to focus anger on anything in particular. This may be an indication of her general powerlessness and being overwhelmed by oppressive and exploitative forces. If Judith Lewis Herman (1992: 133) is correct in arguing that the "first principle of recovery is the empowerment of the survivor [of traumatic experiences]", Wata's fatalistic acceptance of her powerlessness and that of a number of other women in *Journey to Myself*, may offer a sobering counterpoint to Landau's optimistic belief that writing provided these women with healing.

The examination of the autobiographical stories in *Journey to Myself* show that the prison imposes narrative forms in a particular social context and that these forms do not only transform but also survive across time. Many of these women claim they are in prison because of socio-economic deprivation or sexual abuse. Some of these narratives suggest that there is a connection between class and what these women perceive as the catalyst for their crimes. All the narratives in this anthology are generally victim narratives that nonetheless perform a kind of confessional function. The content of these narratives is constantly mediated by the (often invisible) interlocution of the editors, who have their own agendas, embedded in particular historically located forms of knowledge. All this notwithstanding, these stories also provide real insight into the factors that drive women to the ostracisation of prison.

2. Self-Exculpation in *Fifteen Men*

While the women prisoners in *Journey to Myself* succeed in self-exculpation by depicting themselves as victims of complex familial and state patriarchal structures, the fifteen prisoners in Orford's *Fifteen Men* do the same by positing their age and harsh economic environment as determining factors in their life of crime. Except for two who are in their

forties, most of these male prisoners are in their mid and late twenties, and about four are in their early thirties. Even where prisoners are in fact older than this at the time of writing their autobiographical pieces, there is evidence that they first entered prison when they were in their early and mid-twenties. If these fifteen men can be considered a random but fairly representative sample of the male prison population in South Africa, this suggests that male criminality has a pattern. The prisoners' age pattern, social class and race which Orford meticulously documents suggests that most of what we read in *Fifteen Men* is a result of editorial prompting, directing and framing as is Landau's *Journey to Myself*. However, Orford is more sensitive to the issues of self-representation and the cultural processes of scripting. Her attitude towards her collaborators is much more ambivalent and fraught than Landau's.

Most of the men in *Fifteen Men* place blame for how they turned out upon their respective social, economic and political environments. Although one's environment shapes one's character and influences one's decisions, this blame shifting may also be evidence of their condition of incarceration, the mediation or editorial interventions of their female editor and what the prisoners think their intended audience or readers want to read. This is a point acknowledged by Arthur Brittan who argues that how people behave depends "upon the existing social relations" (2001: 52). Their imprisonment puts these men in a weaker social position where they need the protection and sympathies of others. Orford says that several of these men sent their stories to their families and a few of them told her "moving stories of reconciliation as a result" (14). About the thematic patterns that emerge in this collection which she compiles and edits, Orford observes:

The childhood unearthed, unrelentingly violent; marked by neglect, abandonment and the absence of nurturing fathers; by an idea of masculinity that is simultaneously brutal and brittle, have scripted the adult lives of these men. (13-14)

Therefore, the way these prisoners write the prison and their life in crime is partly shaped by what they think their editor and their families want to hear. This is evident in the five pieces by Michael Dakets that open this collection. In "The mysterious boy" Dakets suggests that the mysterious boy may ultimately succumb to the temptations of crime because of the callousness of the society in which he finds himself. He writes: "All alone at Bob's Corner ... he stands, neglected and waiting to be seen" (17). He is hungry and poorly dressed for the harsh winter of the town. As he stands at Bob's Corner begging for food he is completely ignored by passers-by. "Fast the people pass him by, not looking nor peeping ... Devastated he

turns as he waits for another. And so the day goes by as no one bothers” (17). In the poem “At Bob’s Corner” Dackets shows that the boy came to be viewed as a nuisance that scared away customers by Bob, the shop owner who “chased him away/ As he did not want him to stay” (19). Eventually the mysterious boy goes to the bins and “wasted food becomes his mother” (18). The disappearance of the boy from Bob’s shop after he suffers from food poisoning, and the relief that Bob feels as customers start returning to his shop, all reflect the extent to which society is complicit to what this boy would subsequently become.

The experiences of destitution and the neglect of the mysterious boy are a commentary on Michael Dackets’s imprisonment and the ambivalent feelings of relief and guilt the community grapples with as he is incarcerated. The narrative suggests that the mysterious boy is bound for prison the same way as Dackets ends up in prison, if the community continues to ignore his plight and pleas for food. The fact that most of these young male prisoners feel rejected by society and view it as responsible for what they have become also comes out strongly in Clayton van Coller’s piece “The monster within”. In a sarcastic tone, he observes and then asks: “They say I must become rehabilitated to meet society’s standards, but was it not society itself that created the monster within?” (*Fifteen Man* 100). His piece is full of anger and accusations against the hostility that Van Coller claims society holds towards him. He writes: “People gave me scars, people gave me sabotage” (100). Since he believes that these unidentified “people” have “[d]eliberately destroy[ed his] sensibility”, the piece ends in a foreboding tone: “Then the monster will grow inside” (100). Robert Morrell (2001) argues that for black and coloured men in South Africa, “the harshness of life on the edge of poverty and the emasculation of political powerlessness gave their masculinity a dangerous edge” (18). Strangely, Van Coller suggests that imprisonment has transformed him into a loving and caring man but ironically it is outside society that will determine whether this transformation is permanent or not. This is made clear in his piece “This is who I am and want to be”, where Van Coller adopts an impersonal and threatening third person narrative voice and makes a declaration in a rhetorical question: “His first mission will be to go out of the place they call prison to meet society standards, but he keeps asking himself: what if society will change the good, strong and courageous person into a monster again?” (101). Van Coller does not see himself as exercising agency over what he can become, but views himself as a helpless victim of society’s whims. This contrasts very sharply with the political prisoners’ sense that they have complete agency over their own actions.

In contrast to Van Coller’s almost belligerent attitude of “I will not be a monster if you treat me well”, Rashied Wewers in his “This is who I am” unconditionally appeals for society’s

understanding on the grounds of a shared humanity. He writes: "I am a living being just like you" (*Fifteen Men* 109). The "you" refers to any section of society which may be prejudicial against anyone who has the label of prisoner or former prisoner. Wewers then goes on to openly admit, confess and ask for society's forgiveness for the mistakes that landed him in prison. In an unconditional apology he writes: "I am sorry and I ask for your forgiveness" (109). He goes on to call himself "a book with a damaged cover". Wewers may be using the metaphor of the book drawing from what Bhekizizwe Peterson calls the "book motif" which dominates the post-apartheid narratives of truth and reconciliation. He argues that both national and personal past experiences are cast as books that are full of traumatic experiences, hence the need to close them and open new ones filled with hope. Interestingly, Wewers casts himself as a book that has never been opened because of its damaged cover.⁹⁴ In other words, he does not think his crimes and prison experiences have irreparably damaged his humanity. In fact he promises to make restitution for any damage his criminal behaviour may have caused by leading an exemplary life from the time of writing these words onwards. In desperate sincerity, he declares: "Indeed I have repented and promise to/give back to society proof of my regret" (109). In a way, most of these written pieces are different attempts at trying to make loved ones and society in general understand that these imprisoned men are humans who need to be understood and forgiven, rather than labelled and condemned. The sponsor of the writing project, Siri Hustvedt (2008:7), puts the above observation more eloquently. She writes: "The writers whose work is presented [in *Fifteen Men*) shatter the comfortable clichés that dictate so much of our perception, not only of criminals and law abiding citizens, but of identity itself because who we are is always multiple and often conflicted" (Preface *Fifteen Men*).

Dakets's other poem, "Jessica, where are you", captures the heart-rending loneliness that a prisoner feels when he is abandoned by those he loves upon entering prison. In the poem, the speaker is yearning to talk to his girlfriend over the phone on Saturday, since it is on weekends only that prisoners are allowed to make phone calls. Despite his numerous attempts nobody answers the phone. He complains: "I keep calling but no one answers". The frantic last two lines of the poem "Jazz, please answer/ I am calling", is a resounding and agonizing call for society as a whole to pay attention to the plight of prisoners. This generalised meaning of the speaker's plea is suggested by a series of rhetorical questions that he poses: "Who can I tell?/Who shall I ask?/Is there any help for me?" In his last piece "This is who I am", Dakets

⁹⁴ "Dignity, Memory and Truth under Siege: Reconciliation and Nation Building in Post-Apartheid South Africa", Seminar Presentation at Stellenbosch English Department, 13 May 2010.

indicates that what landed him in prison is his “seeking purpose in a questionful life ... a life filled with people’s sin” (21). Despite being an imprisoned criminal, he claims a higher moral ground and emphatically re-appropriates those tender human qualities which his imprisonment has put in question. He declares: “I’m loving and caring, a person open to learn” (21). Interestingly, in Dakets’ all five written pieces, the word prison or prisoner is completely absent. He is so immersed in it that, although he never mentions it directly, all his written pieces are permeated by the anxiety of his imprisonment which exists all the more by its absence from his narratives.

In contrast to Dakets, who only engages indirectly with the prison in his written pieces, Paul Dromgoole, a 30 year-old man who has already served seven years of his 25-year jail term, starts with the description of the prison itself in his autobiographical piece, “Reaching Beyond”. Dromgoole is keen on presenting himself as an exemplary prisoner. This is why his narrative opens with the description of his first day at Drakenstein Maximum Prisoner after his transfer from Pollsmoor Remand Prison without taking the common detour of confessing the crimes that result in his imprisonment in the first place. He is aware that dwelling on the gory details of his likely murderous career which earned him 25 years in prison may lose him the reader’s sympathy. Reminding the reader of Jonny Steinberg’s description of the life of prison gang members in *The Number*, Dromgoole indicates that a prison first-timer is confronted by the gang menace from day one of entering prison. Despite his attempt to present himself as a prison novice, Dromgoole seems quite knowledgeable about the workings of the prison gangs. When he is confronted by the various gangs who are keen on recruiting him, he identifies himself as a *frans* or non-gang member and reports that he is determined to resist the pressure of joining any of the prison gangs. One old timer who is likely a tired and despondent ex-gang member reminiscent of Steinberg’s Magadien Wentzel, tells him that to survive in prison he does not have to be a gang member. All that he requires are “good manners, respect for everyone and a strong heart” (24). The piece, “Reaching beyond”, as the title suggests, registers his victory in refusing to be swallowed by the pessimism that characterises prison existence and his determination to leave crime behind. Recalling the terrifying first day when he was pressured to join one of the contending prison gangs, he writes: “Seven years later and my last year as a ‘maximum’ category prisoner. Many things have changed for the better” (24).

Dromgoole attempts to gain the editor and readers’ understanding by depicting prison not just as a space of barbarous darkness but also as space that provides opportunities for growth and self-improvement to a determined prisoner like himself. For example, he manages to pass his

matric and also participates in the project that leads to the publication of this autobiographical piece and another fictional one titled “Mrs Abrahams’ last dance”. Written from the perspective of his mother Mrs Abrahams, this piece takes the reader back to the time when Dromgoole was only seven years old. In vivid language, Dromgoole describes a day in the difficult life of his mother as a 30-year old single parent. At the centre of these apparently happy childhood memories is the celebration of his mother’s resilient patience amidst the economic and emotional tribulations of bringing up two children alone. Dromgoole also suggests that what he became is largely due to his absent father’s irresponsibility. As the focaliser of the narrative, Mrs Abrahams thinks: “Why are men such untrustworthy slimeballs? They just dumped the children on her” (26). This dance which the story describes is to be the last because Aunty Betsy, who has been taking care of the children for Mrs Abraham, has announced “that this will be the last day she will be able to take care of the kids” (25). Mrs Abraham uses her last night of freedom from the kids to go for a blind date where she dances away a lifetime of accumulated stress and loneliness. She dances with an old acquaintance named Mr Lionel King who is endowed with chivalric characteristics when he rescues Mrs Abrahams from the clutches of a violently abusive drunk man. The irony is that despite blaming men for being “untrustworthy slimeballs” for always dumping the children with her, the story ends on a highly suggestive note that Mrs Abrahams is on her way to making another “fatherless” child. After their energetic and sexually charged dance which enthral the crowd, the narrator says: “Lionel hugged Jenny closer to him. She drew in under his arm, putting her head against his chest and for a single moment she felt as light as the air” (31). While the story is indeed a child’s celebration of her single mother’s momentary release from care, the narrator inadvertently places her mother right into the clutches of another man, men who are also portrayed as responsible for her single motherhood. What he perceives as his mother’s moment of freedom seems to be a projection of his own desire to walk free from prison and regain his mother’s favour. In his concluding poem called “This is who I am” he verbalises this desire for freedom and says: “But one day when I am free/Stroll a street, touch a leaf/ ... Capable to pay my fee/For the writer I wish to be” (31). While her mother’s freedom is momentarily achieved through an actual dance, Dromgoole’s “last dance” is to be freed from prison and realise his dream of being a writer.

The theme of mothers’ resilience amidst the pain of being abandoned by their lovers or husband is also taken up by more of these imprisoned men. This romanticisation of the mother seems to be a prison trope rather than a reflection of reality.⁹⁵ Clayton van Coller’s

⁹⁵ In *Cold Stone Jug* (1999), Bosman relates how prisoners literally wept for their mothers on Mothers’ Day.

piece “Mothers” celebrates the strength, independence, love, tenderness and faith of single mothers. Single mothers are portrayed as both manly and as well as the preservers of posterity. Van Coller writes: “You are the shadow of a man, the walking stick of my father. You carry in your womb the future of tomorrow” (*Fifteen Men* 99). In Andile Sehole’s piece “Thandi’s father”, although apparently about a father who was shot dead while committing a robbery, the piece in fact celebrates Stompie, the single mother who single-handedly raises her daughter. In the same way Faizel, Ronaldo Plaatjies’ friend who is killed by gangsters and Plaatjies himself are raised by single mothers. When Plaatjies is assailed by a hail of bullets from Faizel’s killers, he is saved by one motherly and courageous woman. When everyone has closed their doors as the gun-toting gangsters terrorise the neighbourhood searching for Plaatjies, this unnamed woman opens her door and protectively calls out: “In here boychie”. It is this selfless courage of mothers, not only in the face of hardship but even death, which seems to deeply touch Plaatjies and which prisoners use to masquerade their sensitivity and tenderness. The figure of the mother seems to be also used to fill the void that attends on the absence of women in the all-male prison space.

Thandisizwe Mashwawu, in his poem “Prison”, taps from and feeds into the popular notion that after the democratic elections of 1994 South African prisons are transformed into places of comfort and not punishment and penance, and hence the alarming increase in violent crimes. The poem offers a thought-provoking comparison of how a prisoner spends his time versus that of a free citizen worker. Most of the poem’s humour derives from the fact that a prisoner seems to have more rights and privileges in comparison to a free citizen. He writes:

It is at work /Where you get fired for watching TV and playing games/It is
in prison /Where I can watch TV and play games ... It is at work/ Where
they are called managers/It is in prison/Where you must deal with sadistic
wardens/Have a great day at work and I’ll do in prison. (33)

While the poem seems to be offering harmless comic relief, it helps the reader reflect on the purpose and objectives of prison and whether the South African penal regime at present is fulfilling these. Moreover, this suggests that there may not be that much difference between life inside and outside for people from particular economic class and from certain

Bosman makes it clear that there was something insincere about the prisoners’ show of “emotionalism”. For example the Dutch Reformed Church Predikant who was presiding over the service on the occasion brought paper labels, coloured respectively green and purple. Prisoners with living mothers were to stick green labels, and those with dead mothers purple ones. But what ensued was less than honouring mothers. Bosman reports that “through ignorance or misguided zeal” some prisoners “stuck whole rows of labels, purple and green mixed up just anyhow, on their jackets, like they were military ribbons” (47-8).

neighbourhoods. Mashwawu's poem indicates that some prisoners do not perceive prison as a complete break with normal existence and do not sense it as a place of destitution and complete self-loss.

3. Manhood, Fathers, Prison and the Failed Postcolony

The exploration of the idea of modernist rituals of the prison in the postcolony as being yoked to the traditional rituals of entry into manhood in *Fifteen Men* also seems to be a product of Orford's editorial urging and guidance. In "Becoming a man", the now 30 year-old Thandisizwe Mashwawu is meditating on the emotionally debilitating effect of his 25 year-long sentence which he got when he was still an impressionable and susceptible 18 year-old for the murder of his step-father. In this autobiographical prose piece, Mashwawu is ambivalent about the kind of masculinities that are fostered by the Xhosa cultural rituals associated with circumcision.⁹⁶ He relates how three months after coming from a three-month long circumcision training ritual in the Eastern Cape he comes back to Gugulethu Township in Cape Town, and stabs his abusive step-father to death. He sarcastically suggests that becoming a man is concretised through heavy drinking, crime and imprisonment. He writes:

When he came back from the Eastern Cape three months later he was a grown man and had totally changed. He was drinking heavy. A week wouldn't go without drinking. However drinking needed money. Sizwe didn't have any because he wasn't working. He ended up earning money by shoplifting. (35)

This convoluted idea of manhood and how to achieve it is also captured in the short piece titled "Thandi's father" by Andile Sehole. In this piece, Thandi's father thinks that being a man is measured by his ability to make his wife pregnant. Once the wife is pregnant he realises that he now has to provide not only for the wife but the child who would be born. Since he is not employed, he decides to participate in an armed robbery as an attempt at making a lot of money and ensuring the financial security of his unborn child. The narrator says: "He was shot dead by cops in a robbery which he was doing so that he could raise up his unborn child" (*Fifteen Men* 94). Morrell observes that in South African black townships many boys are "brought up in a socially fractured environment with little prospect of well-paid

⁹⁶This is in contrast with the way Nelson Mandela portrays his own circumcision in the late 1930s. Mandela suggests that the painful process in which one is initiated into manhood in many Xhosa ethnic groups through circumcision and its associated painful regimens may be comparable to his long imprisonment which he depicts as preparing him for his future leadership role as the first black president of a democratic South Africa (See Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom: the autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, 1994: 24).

work” (22). The irony in Sehole’s narrative is that the narrator ambiguously casts the death of the armed robber as an act of self-sacrificing love for his unborn child. In a way, the ambivalence with which Sehole characterises the dead robber depicts the writer’s own refusal to be labelled a criminal. This rejection of the category criminal is openly expressed in the poem “This is who I am”, where Sehole writes: “My name is Andile/...Perceiving me as criminal,/That’s idiotic/ghastly” (*Fifteen Men* 95).

Mashwawu seems to suggest that his crime of murdering his step-father can be located at the interface of cultural and social definitions of manhood. As I mentioned earlier, Orford (2008) argues that the adult lives of these imprisoned men are scripted by an idea of masculinity that is simultaneously vicious and fragile (14). It is at the age of 18 that Mashwawu’s mother decides that the boy is old enough to know that the violent man he has been calling father is in fact not his biological father. It is only then that efforts are made to locate his biological father, who up to now has not played any fatherly role. Despite his eighteen-year old selfish irresponsibility, patriarchal social structures ensure that Mashwawu’s biological father is searched for so that he can bless his son for the new manhood role that he is about to assume. It will seem that in continuously stabbing his step-father, he is also symbolically killing his father who never made any material and emotional contributions for his upkeep. While his step-father is physically abusive, his father is even more so because he abdicated his role as a provider and spiritual guardian for his son.

That spousal abuse has an enduring psychological impact on the individuals is seen from the numerous times the writers in *Fifteen Men* seem to use it as an excuse for their own subsequent violent deviance. For example, Steve Sam, in his poem “My father”, indicates that whenever his father beat up his mother he felt like an orphan and it turned his dreams into a nightmare. He suggests that his father’s behaviour had a bearing on how he turned out when he writes: “My past was tearing apart my future/I was feeling that I was useless as dust under feet” (85). These feelings of worthlessness are also evident in the violent manner in which Mashwawu butchers his step-father with a kitchen knife. Mashwawu’s emotional and spiritual confusion is illustrated by the fact that after murdering his step-father in cold-blood he “took his jacket and left for the shebeen” (36). He does not seem to have any sense of regret for his actions at all.

While the shebeen is portrayed as another place that produces confused and violent masculinities, it is revealing that it is the place where Sizwe attempts to find refuge after his bloody crime. During his arrest and subsequent conviction and imprisonment, Sizwe shows

that brutal masculinities are not only restricted to the ‘lawless’ township and shebeen but that it permeates the entire South African social fabric, including the penal regime. The manner of his arrest shows a dramatic valourisation of violence within the police force. He is arrested by “[f]ourteen armed men” (36). There is a sense in which there is dramatisation of violence in the way the police officers go about their arrest of an eighteen year old, who at the spur of the moment killed his step-father with a kitchen knife. The violence is re-enacted by the prison officers when he arrives at Pollsmoor after his sentencing. Yelling obscenities the guards shout: “Welcome to Pollsmoor Max Prison! We are going to see that you like it here” (37). The narrator shows that the prison warders’ words are ominous and are not empty threats but a sure promise of violence which reigns supreme in the Pollsmoor prison cells. Describing their welcoming ceremony at the hands of prison guards he writes:

Everything was a rush, everything had to be done in a hurry under the constant menace of being beaten ... Anything of value was confiscated. Sizwe’s watch which was a present from his mother when he came back from circumcision school, attracted a guard’s attention, and he almost broke Sizwe’s wrist as he ripped it off him. (37)

The ripping of the watch, a symbol of his newly attained manhood, indicates that he is entering into a zone where his manhood would be redefined. This is a place where another kind of time predominates, where one does not *need* a watch because one’s time is profoundly regimented. This also links to the idea of prison as an “unmanning” space. In this sense, the violent, insensitive and corrupt masculinities that Sizwe experiences at the hands of his abusive step-father, biological father and is inducted into through his circumcision; run full circle as he has to confront them again in prison. In prison, Sizwe starts “praying and seeking God’s help” (38). His definition of manhood undergoes a complete re-conceptualisation as he is converted to Christianity, and instead of using kitchen knives to solve problems he starts speaking of “the sustaining grace of the Lord” (38). But this conversion seems to be a result of Sizwe’s being forced to contemplate his mortality and vulnerability when he is almost beaten to death by prison warders (Morrell 2001:31). Moreover, this story of conversion seems to be specifically framed by the intention of winning the hearts of Mashwawu’s readers.

In his poem “Shame”, Rashied Wewers deflects some of the blame for his criminal activities that land him in jail onto what he characterises as a failed post-apartheid state. He insists that the lawlessness which characterises township and ghetto lives should be viewed within the

context of the prevalent corruption of the “[f]athers, the builders of the nation” who have become “the destroyers/Of our future, tsunami of all mankind” (50). He points out that in post-apartheid South Africa it is “[h]ard to find positive role models/Politicians [have] turned to corruption” (50). The poem suggests that as long as the majority of South Africans continue to lack economic empowerment “13 years after” the fall of apartheid it will be “hard to send little ones to the shop/They are going to be victims/Tomorrow’s headlines” (50). Steve Sam’s poem “When things fall apart” also takes advantage of this popular notion of portraying post-apartheid crime as a symptom of a failed post-colonial state. While Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* is preoccupied with the fall of pre-colonial states at the direct assault of colonial invasion, Sam sees the same fall in post-colonial/post-apartheid [South] Africa as “[r]ebels and autocrats take over on this continent” (85). The result is that Africa becomes “just a continent of disease and poverty” because its autocrats “are corrupt like wine made from the venom of snakes” (85). In this way, Sam situates his descent into crime and prison in the social realm of a continent plagued by a leadership crisis and not as a manifestation of individual pathology.

The theme of lack of leadership both at the family and national level as the explanation for crime is further pursued in Ngxeke’s “I’ve been there”. The narrator finds himself in the cold and violent streets of Cape Town because his father plunges the family into homelessness when he gambles everything away. Despite living in a “beautiful city with lots of sites” (50), he has no means to enjoy them. He writes: “I have been here in Cape Town for ten years and I’ve been living off handouts for ten years” (50). In the freezing Cape Town winter, the desperate narrator chooses what Dobash et al call “voluntary committal”. He writes: “I used to use prison as my motel. I would break a window of a shop and admit it at court. They would give me two months sentence or more. I was always back on the street after winter” (53). Although it can provide shelter and warmth, prison is a home “in ashes” for it can neither teach “religion, tradition [nor] norm” (54). Ngxeke’s yearning for safety and security which the prison does not provide is seen from the rhetorical question that he asks: “With whom will I find refuge?” (54). He points out that the street kids who later become criminals are just youngsters who lack proper guidance from responsible grown-ups. He observes: “They (street children) are just confused youth looking for something better in life, in a wrong place at the wrong time. They just need someone older to show them the right side of life” (53). Using himself as an example he shows that most street children long for home. But most often the fathers are either absent or violent and abusive alcoholics. The painful irony of course is that in an attempt to gain “freedom and control” in the streets, the street children

discover that they are “not different from [their] father[s] although [they were] so determined to make a difference” (54).

The sense of displacement that the prison engenders for these mainly youthful prisoners and the desire for reassuring father figures is also captured in Ronaldo Plaatjies’ poem “In the absence of the father”. As in the case of Ngxeke’s father, who abandons his family as he seeks the solace of alcohol, Plaatjies’ father also “succumbed to lustful pleasures” leaving his wife “forsaken” and his offspring “without a leader” (67). In the case of Plaatjies’, however, the mother quickly takes the abandoned reins as “[s]he embarks on the unforgiving road/With a heart that still aches” (67). Plaatjies’ mother’s leadership is admirable. In a tone full of admiration, respect and love for his mother Plaatjies writes: “The household now with a leader/And she’s outdone her predecessor” (67). Unlike the proverbial home which collapses in the absence of a father, Plaatjies’ mother provides leadership which negates the stereotypes which portray a woman who crumbles as soon as she is deserted by her husband.

While Ngxeke wins the reader’s sympathy by depicting a father who abdicates his responsibilities, Malusi Nkohlhla achieves it by portraying himself as a prodigal son. He calls his father “a hero and breadwinner” (57). In contrast to the alcoholic father of Ngxeke, Nkohlhla’s father “is not drinking and he is not smoking” (57). The father provides guidance and leadership to his family. Nkohlhla writes: “My father likes to create communication with his family by calling each and every member of the family for a meeting” (57). This is the kind of a father that Ngxeke says street children need but do not have. In an endearing tone Nkohlhla writes: “My father is a role model” (57). Nkohlhla’s short and only piece helps the reader appreciate that children do not necessarily end up in crime and prison because of hostile home environment. Despite having a father that he ‘respects very much, a man he talks to when he has problems’, Nkohlhla still finds himself in prison.

Sakhumzi Sakhlu Nonnies wreaks havoc on the reader’s emotions by depicting the prison as a place where he hears his name being called by mixed, unidentifiable and haunting voices. The paradoxical nature of the prison is captured in that it calls his name in a “scary, sweet, soft, murmuring ...voice”, and at other times the prison’s voice is “[a]nxious, curious [and] excited” (59). This uncanny voice evokes deep pathos in Nonnies and makes him cry. At the same time as it emerges and disappears, it shocks him to the core. Nonnies’ being deeply traumatised by the prison is captured in his other poem titled “My father”. In this poem where he uses terms similar to those of Nkohlhla by calling his father a “role model, example and a go-getta” (61), Nonnies also refuses to name the prison and merely calls it “a place like this”

(61). In contrast to the indistinct voice of prison which appears and disappears, his father's is "pure and clear" (61). Where the prison's voice is anxious, curious and excited, his father's is "loving, generous [and] gentle". While being in prison is "a temporal thing" (61) for Nonnies, being his father's son is forever. In a desperate voice which captures his youthful fear of being rejected by his father and bewilderment at being bereft of fatherly love and guidance, he tells his father: "For me being your son I'll always be/For together we'll always be/As we belong together" (61). This desire for a dependable and loving father-figure by Ngxeke and Nonnies, results from their experiencing prison as a place of intense deracination.

In his piece "The father's pain", Clayton van Coller displays an ambivalent view of his father in comparison to the views of Ngxeke, Nkohla and Nonnies. The piece is set up in the form of a conversation between the father who was never there for his son, and the son who is now in prison. The piece opens with two paragraphs where the father is apparently expressing his regret for abandoning his child before he was even born. The remorseful and apologetic father declares: "My body was not there when you were born, but my heart and soul were there. I am not worthy to be called your father. I couldn't afford to buy or send you nappies" (97). Masking his seething anger in the rhetoric of forgiveness, the son responds: "My father, even if you schemed to get away from my mother, I don't blame you but I know out there you are thinking of me" (97). The son indicates that he has learnt forgiveness as a result of the hardships he has faced. He says: "Through chains, pains, gates and jails I have learnt to be your son and you my father" (97). Van Coller is plagued by the pain of the fatherless childhood that he was subjected to and seems to wonder whether his life would have turned out differently if he had had a responsible father. Indicating that fatherhood lies in performance and not only in name, van Coller says: "A father is a caring man. He walks around the earth like the sun. He is obedient, caring and supportive" (97). Van Coller's volcanic anger comes through in the question that he immediately directs to his father after spelling out the above definition of fatherhood. He asks: "But where were you?" Then in a statement that seems directed to all fathers in general, he admonishes: "If you are a father, treat your loved ones with love" (97). The irony of course is that noted by Ngxeke above, that most of these jailed young man soon discover that they are not different from their fathers although they were so determined to make a difference.

4. Ghetto-Township Streets and Prison

Loïc Wacquant (2009:198) argues that the ghetto and prison "belong to the same genus of organizations, namely, institutions of forced confinement". He further observes that "the

ghetto is a manner of ‘social prison’ while the prison functions as a ‘judicial ghetto’”. That is exactly how some of the writers in *Fifteen Men* seem to experience the post-apartheid coloured ghetto, black township and prison. The stereotypical depiction of the post-apartheid streets of the black township and the coloured ghetto as unpredictable, chaotic and violent by a number of prisoners in *Fifteen Men* seems aimed at appealing to the heart of the female compiler and editor of the anthology. Similarly, any reader also unfamiliar with the life in the townships and ghettos is likely to be intrigued and drawn in by the tragic lived experiences of these incarcerated men. Frederick Moses’ two pieces “14th Avenue, Elsie’s River” and “In this place”, speak of the ubiquitous violent masculinities in the coloured ghettos of Cape Town which ultimately results in the premature death or imprisonment of many young men. Moses’ autobiographical piece “14th Avenue, Elsie’s River” relates the events of 1995 when his friend was shot dead and he himself was shot and wounded by unknown male assailants while relaxing at the corner of 14th Avenue in Elsie’s River. The story is painfully similar to Ronaldo Plaatjies’ “The day that sticks”, which relates how his friend’s skull is shattered into fragments by a hail of bullets while they are driving through Mitchell’s Plain. In both stories the unidentified assailants are never caught, suggesting that the majority of “[m]urderers, rapists, stranglers, thieves and savages” (45) may actually be outside prison rather than inside. This complicates the conceptualisation of a rigid boundary between society as a place for law abiding citizens and prison as a place for criminals. It is also interesting that in many of these stories men locate their criminality on the streets while in *Journey to Myself* the majority of women situate theirs in the domestic space. This implies a gendered experience of space.

Clearly, although these prisoners largely play to the gallery, there is a sense in which their narratives deconstruct and subvert the editor’s and the ethnographic reader’s expectations. In “In this place”, a euphemistic reference to the prison, Moses grapples with the identity crisis and condemns the labelling processes that an accused person experiences as he goes through the penal regime. He writes: “Frederick is my name and prisoner I am” (45). As much as one’s name has a way of attaching itself microbe-like in one’s consciousness, Moses suggests that the designation prisoner has a way of permanently etching itself upon the individual’s notion of the self. While he cannot contest the designation prisoner because he is in prison, he contests other labels that attempt to dehumanise him. In a sarcastic tone he exclaims: “They call me a beast! ... Murderers, rapists, stranglers, thieves and savages are we called by them” (45). He indicates that these “they” and “them” are “[j]udges who sentenced [him], and the society who went along with it” (45). Challenging these views which he sees as biased, he

asks a series of questions which seek to establish his humanity alongside that of all members of society. He asks:

Does a beast smile like I do? Can it feel lonely like I do? And can it miss someone like I'm missing my family? Can a beast get afraid like I do? ... Does a murderer cry like me? ... If I pray all your lost souls out, then, when I pray, am I a savage? (45)

Since these questions suggest that he is no worse than free members of society, Moses seems to be calling for a re-conceptualisation and redefinition of society's crippling labels on those it regards as incorrigibly deviant because they are in or have been to prison.

What gives Moses's and Plaatjies's narratives a disturbing quality is that as much as their narratives show that prisons are over-populated by prisoners, the streets are similarly filled with murderers, rapists, stranglers, thieves. This is seen in how Moses emphasises the ubiquitous fear that characterises people's lives in his community, which is filled with senseless violence that occurs in the streets where people are going about their everyday business of living. We are reminded here of how Steinberg indicates that towards the end of apartheid period the Number prison rituals spilled over into the streets and the prison Number gangs themselves became indistinguishable from street gangs. Capturing the banality of violence of the post-apartheid ghetto streets, Moses writes:

We were enjoying ourselves. Music was playing, some were dancing while others were busy pouring drinks. Everything was cozy as we were chilling, making jokes and laughing at each other ... People were moving up and down the street, children were playing in the park. (41)

Without warning, guns start barking and bullets wheezing through the air. Similarly Faizel, Plaatjies' friend, is shot dead at the traffic lights. Moses and Plaatjies insist that it is in these homely scenes that the beastly predominates, and not necessarily in prison. As we have seen earlier, Moses and Plaatjies show that these aimless and terrorist-like attacks are committed by people who may never see the prison door.

Mario Rousseau's thrilling story of participating in the endemic gang wars in the streets of another coloured ghetto, Bonteheuwel, is presented as a repentant confession that appeals to the reader's understanding and forgiveness. He relates how at one time in 1996 some parts of Bonteheuwel became warzones as gangs fought for turf. He writes: "[O]ur township was upside down with violence and blood, with gang kids running up and down with guns and

knives, and families waiting for their last” (79). After escaping being shot dead by the opposing gang, Rousseau proudly declares that he went to his friend who had a gun and then they went shooting “through the enemy lines to take [their] stand in the war” (81). During the three-year “war” period Rousseau and his friends survive on “[s]tealing, killing and robbery” (81). Their motto was: “If you don’t kill, you’re going to be killed so stay alive!” (81). Rousseau insists that it is the streets that shape the prison. He writes: “I just went on living in prison the way I lived outside – fighting for survival” (82). Wacquant’s perceptive comment has resonated with Rousseau’s above words. He argues that “ghetto and prison tend to evolve relational patterns and cultural forms that display striking similarities and intriguing parallels” (198). In order to massage the consciences of some readers who may be overly disturbed by his melodramatic narrative of crime, Rousseau makes sure that there is a twist to his life story. After being badly beaten and put in isolation for stabbing and sending a fellow prisoner into a six months coma, he claims that he gets a personal visit from God and Jesus. The encounter is so vivid that Rousseau refuses to give details. But the crux of the divine visitation is that it provides him with a choice between life and death. His story ends with an apparent victory of life over death. He declares: “I chose life” (83). The title of his piece “Locked up but set free” expresses this spiritual freedom that he claims he now experiences even though still in prison.

Mthetheleli Mcebisi Ngxeke, who has four creative pieces in *Fifteen Men*, solicits the reader’s sympathy by characterising post-apartheid South Africa as a one-way street that leads to crime and ultimately prison, especially for a black homeless street child like himself. All his pieces bear out Morrell’s observation that “township youth generally live dangerous lives on the edges of crime” (24). In “Lansdowne Road”, this long and busy road which stretches from Lansdowne and weaves through almost all of Cape Town’s black townships, all the way to the end of Khayelitsha, becomes a metaphor for the post-apartheid black condition. While it connects and intersects through black township, it has become a deadly trap where one can meet untimely death from speeding cars, a stray bullet from bus and taxi drivers who “fight about this same road” (47), or at the hands of daring desperate young criminals. About one particular spot along this road near Mxenge from Gugulethu, the narrator of “Lansdowne Road” says: “This place is famous for its activities. People are being killed, raped, robbed of their possessions. Even their body parts” (47). Ngxeke’s narrative, which he produces while serving a long prison sentence, implies that it is in this violent way in which he is forced to eke out his livelihood.

In “Street crisis”, Boebie Samodien elicits the reader’s sympathies by depicting the post-apartheid ghetto streets as places of tragic turn of fate. In the story, the narrator is standing in

front of his house and witnesses a gangster he knows very well reversing his car at high speed oblivious of the danger he poses to a toddler innocently walking into the edge of the street. The irony of the story is that although the narrator is the hero of the occasion as he saves the toddler from being run over by the car, he ends up being perceived as the criminal and is arrested by the police. In a moment of uncontrollable rage he knocks down the reckless driver who in turn produces a gun. The gun ends up in the hands of the narrator, and when the police arrive they arrest him for attempted murder and possessing an obviously unlicensed firearm which had likely been used to commit numerous crimes. Rashied Wewers' "On the streets" is similarly aimed at manipulating the reader's feelings. In this story the narrator is savagely attacked by school-going, glue-sniffing kids as he walks "joyfully down Van Zyl Street" (*Fifteen Men* 108). He ends up with broken ribs and jaws as he refuses with his wallet and watch which the young criminals are demanding. The criminals beat him unconscious, and to cap it all, put an unlicensed gun in his pockets so that when the police arrive they would assume he is a criminal beaten up by neighbourhood vigilantes.

Finally, the prison's portrayal as a determined but failed attempt at making a difference in these youthful prisoners' lives of crime seems to be a product of Orford's indirect influence upon these imprisoned men. This is seen in Plaatjies story "The morning after" which can be read as a metaphor of what happens to most of these young prisoners when they are uprooted from society into the 'protective custody' of the prison. The narrator, who in his other piece, "My landscape", describes the Newlands Forest as providing him "with peace and serenity because of the untouched beauty that it holds" (63), depicts himself as an intense nature lover. In one of his forays into the mountain he finds a bird nestling in its nest and takes it home because he thinks that he can provide it with better care and protection. However, when he calls his friend Pedro the next morning to come and celebrate his new find with him, he is terribly disappointed. Pedro is infuriated when the narrator tells him that he is going to raise the bird. He points out that "by taking the bird out its natural habitat [he] had decreased its chances of a healthy life, because it needed its mother" (65). In the end, Pedro convinces his friend to take the bird back to its natural habitat. Without mentioning a word about prison, Plaatjies' story seems to suggest that no matter how good the intention of the penal regime, ultimately the prison decreases the chances of a "healthy life" for its youthful occupants. This view of prison seems to coincide with Orford's. Commenting on her own political imprisonment experience in 1985 she completely rejects prison as an institution of rehabilitation. She says: "For me that prison experience was the before, of my life, and then the after. A watershed. I found it unbearable being incarcerated" (*Wordsetc* 2010: 32). The

prison that emerges out of *Fifteen Men* therefore belongs to Orford, as much as to the fifteen men themselves.

5. Prison, the Writer and Dis/Continuities of Dysfunctional Masculinities in *A Human Being Died* and *Red Ink*.

Among other things, both *A Human Being Died* and *Red Ink* are also about how the criminal, prison, and unstable masculinities are products of, inscribe themselves into and perpetuate themselves through social structures.⁹⁷ By adopting a functionalist view of social structures, Gobodo-Madikizela's and Makholwa's narratives suggest that the twisted view of manhood can initially be located in childhood characterised by dysfunctional families or abusive parents. Gobodo-Madikizela observes: "De Kock's childhood was marked by emotional abuse at the hands of his father" (55). *Red Ink* also indicates that the mother of the Dingiswayo brothers was an abusive alcoholic and that they subsequently suffered abuse at the hands of foster parents. Napoleon, the imprisoned rapist murderer, says to Lucy: "D'you think I was born like this? Do you think God decided, yes, this one is going to spend most of his life in prison? No. It is people who have made me like this. From my mother to the rest of the stinking poison that kept on appearing in my life over and over again" (60). Makholwa's narrative suggests that malformed notions of manhood are at the heart of violent crimes against women, and the general ubiquity of violent crime in the post-apartheid state.⁹⁸ More importantly for the purposes of my study, both narratives are about how the criminal and the prison relentlessly haunt the individual, specifically the female writer, and how they possess the entire logic of post-apartheid South African state.

As in Orford's *Fifteen Men*, in Makholwa's narrative the post-apartheid street is not only the location of many crimes but also has a symbiotic relationship with prison. That the prison haunts the streets, and vice versa, is dramatised by the fact that the very first time Khumbule

⁹⁷ Makholwa seems to adopt Freud's "pleasure principle" model to explain Napoleon's and Sifiso's violent crimes. Freud insisted that the ego's goal is to avoid unpleasant states of mind. But since victims of childhood violence like Napoleon and Sifiso lack the ability to avoid their traumatic experience, their ego solves the problem by identifying with the aggressor. According to this theory, the helpless victim of previously traumatic experience turns it into a pleasurable one when he steps into a position of action and power and becomes the perpetrator of violence. (See Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Anna Freud's *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, vol. 2). Gobodo-Madikizela subscribes to the same model and argues: "Whether individuals turn out this way or that depends on a complicated set of factors, one being whether they are 'violently coached,' another whether they are exposed to positive experiences that can help mend the humiliation they suffered and restore their sense of identity" (2003: 57).

⁹⁸ Katharine Wood and Rachel Jewkes (2001) observe: "Power relations between men and women take multiple forms, but in South Africa they are commonly manifested as and imposed through sexual violence. An estimated 1.3 million rapes take place each year" ("Violence, Rape, and Sexual Coercion: Everyday Love in a South African Township" in *The Sociology of Masculinity*, 2001)

steps into prison to meet Napoleon for their proposed book project, her life is turned into a nightmare. When Khumbule announces her book project to Patricia Moabelo, her business partner, Patricia has a sense of premonition and tries to dissuade her from doing it. When Patricia wisely points out that Napoleon is a psychopath who will get her into trouble, Khumbule naively retorts: “I’ll take my chances, remember, he’s in jail and I’m not” (21). On another occasion, thinking about the possible danger that Napoleon could pose to her, Lucy concludes: “Behind bars he was, after all, no more harmless than a trapped mouse” (44). Lucy naively imagines that there is something final and permanently secure when a person is serving a life prison sentence. Ironically, it is Patricia who is subsequently brutally murdered at the orders of Napoleon after Lucy inadvertently confides in Napoleon about how she has become selfish and only wants to give her thirty percent share of the company instead of the forty percent they had initially agreed upon. Her gullible view of the prison as a space of complete isolation and utter powerlessness prevents her from linking Patricia’s murder with her interaction with the incarcerated Napoleon. The novel thus explores the reach of the prison beyond its apparently impermeable boundary. Fiction is perhaps a good way of making this case precisely because it allows us to model complex chains of human interaction with great specificity.

As for Napoleon, who is in some ways De Kock’s fictional counterpart, the prison becomes for De Kock a space that is simultaneously empowering and disempowering. Firstly, it results in his real physical confinement and the hopelessness that forced introspection engenders. However, as he uses his prison time to grapple with his past and present condition, the prison is transformed into a launching pad for his battles against politicians who used him as a cog in the apartheid death machine only to dump him when he became a liability. What the imprisoned De Kock is able to achieve proves the truth of Robert Morrell’s (2001) observation that “power is exercised differently depending on the location and the specific arrangement of the relations which are in place” (9). De Kock exercises some measure of agency by telling the world what he considers to be the extent of apartheid government’s involvement in his criminal offenses. The book that he writes in collaboration with Jeremy Gordin, *A Long Night’s Damage: Working for the Apartheid State* (1998), is a powerful tool that exposes the extent to which apartheid crimes are not reducible to the individual. Gordin writes: “De Kock was merely a continuation of apartheid by other means” (1998:15). The moment of writing the book is also empowering since it allows De Kock to articulate in language his lived experience of what apartheid meant for him. Gobodo-Madikizela’s *A Human Died* also serves as evidence that the prison, and his collaborative life writing

projects, help to empower De Kock and to a certain extent allows him to see the futility of his past murderous actions and state wars in general. Using the self-objectifying third person narrative voice to describe the time he spent serving the apartheid regime, he says: “[I]t’s not a life ... It’s not even an existence. You are in some twilight world of no peace, no rest, no trust, nothing. *Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing*” (109). Being confined in prison does not only sober him up by forcing him to take stock of his vain life of violence, it also gives him a national audience through the books that he collaborates in writing.

Although society tries to exclude the prison from everyday life on the outside, Makholwa’s and Gobodo-Madikizela’s narratives show that both the prison and the outside exist in a state of ambivalent mutuality. For example, both writers are drawn to the prison because they hope it is an interesting enough subject to draw a sizable readership. Makholwa’s protagonist, Lucy, unashamedly ignores all her moral qualms about being involved with a sex offender and murderer because she hopes that Napoleon’s notoriety will establish her as a writer. As the focaliser, Lucy muses: “She’d give this venture her best shot ... she might end up being an accomplished writer” (44). It is interesting here that Lucy needs Napoleon for her own purposes as much as Napoleon wants her to “numb the boredom of his lonely life” (44). Makholwa engages in a self-reflexive process as she uses the topics of criminality and imprisonment to sell her book. Unlike Gobodo-Madikizela’s *A Human Being*, Makholwa’s *Red Ink* is a work of fiction and not an empirical document. Through her fiction, Makholwa seems to address a number of popular conceptions about criminality and imprisonment in the post-apartheid moment. She is not speaking from “inside”; yet her idea of what it is like “inside” is interesting because it is one put together from books such as Gobodo-Madikizela’s, newspaper stories and everyday discussions. As such, it represents a popular understanding of the prison, rather than an informed exegesis of its operation.

In Gobodo-Madikizela’s case, De Kock’s life and imprisonment offer themselves as excellent material for her PhD research and her career as a psychologist. Her prison encounters with De Kock proved extremely rewarding in advancing her academic career. She writes: “I started to see my work on de Kock as culminating in two processes, one that would be purely scholarly (a Ph.D. thesis) and another that would be a deeply personal account of my conversations with de Kock – this book” (170). Makholwa’s novel and Gobodo-Madikizela’s narrative illustrate that the post-apartheid prison is a space where the “outside” is shown to exist in a parasitically symbiotic relationship with the prison.

Makholwa's novel demonstrates that the relationship between the "outside" and "inside" is not benign at all in the post-apartheid environment. Lucy's underestimation of the prison's virulence leads to disastrous consequences, as we shall see. When one of Lucy's friends, Fundi, is hesitant about accompanying her to see Napoleon because she suspects that the prison has dangerous links with the outside, Khumbule reasons: "[R]elax Dingiswayo's harmless. Remember, he's behind bars, we're not, so don't give him too much power" (*Red Ink* 105). On an earlier occasion she imagines that behind bars Napoleon is "no more harmful than a trapped mouse" (44). Soon, however, it becomes clear that the imprisoned Napoleon does not only enjoy disturbing patriarchal power over his female interviewer, but also still rules the streets. While Lucy thinks that Napoleon is under her benevolent control, he is busy tricking her into playing the role of a gullible lover. Gobodo-Madikizela similarly treads on that slippery ground when she empathetically touches De Kock's hand. On another occasion she is tempted to give the apparently agonized De Kock a hug. In Napoleon's case, that he is deeply satisfied by the power games that he is playing with Lucy is seen when he muses that it is "better to observe from inside". He assumes that his imprisonment offers him more insight and wisdom about the prison's interconnectedness with the power structures of the rest of society. De Kock also wastes no time in gaining psychological mileage over Gobodo-Madikizela as a result of her lapse in professionalism by touching his "trigger hand".

Gobodo-Madikizela's interaction with De Kock helps her realise that although he may be a murderer serving two life sentences, their relationship is still governed by rigid and condescending patriarchal notions about gender roles. This helps us see what Sylvia Walby (1986) means when she argues that "patriarchal relations form a system, and are not confined to discrete occurrences in specific social institutions at isolated points in time and space" (52). Gobodo-Madikizela points out that although De Kock "revealed even the most gruesome details of his life story in a book written by Jeremy Gordin" (27) he seems reluctant to do so when talking to Gobodo-Madikizela. In one of their meetings De Kock has an expression of embarrassment on his face and avoids eye contact with Gobodo-Madikizela, apologising profusely for being unshaven. Clearly De Kock thinks that it is not gentlemanly to appear "unshaven before a lady". Gobodo-Madikizela interprets this as an "alarming irony of being concerned about rules of social etiquette when one has violated some of the most fundamental tenets of morality" (49). What is also obvious is that what Gobodo-Madikizela calls "rules of social etiquette" are not just innocent moral tenets but are deeply entrenched patriarchal relations of power which allow the imprisoned De Kock to exercise some measure of control over Gobodo-Madikizela. Summing up the assumptions which seem to govern her

relationship with De Kock, Gobodo-Madikizela observes: “[D]e Kock’s discomfort concerning the details had something to do with my being a woman; ... he perceived my sympathy for him and was afraid that if we focused on the gory particulars of his past, he would lose it” (28). This is the same relationship which I have argued exists between Margie Orford with her fifteen imprisoned male writers. Ironically, De Kock experiences Gobodo-Madikizela’s feminine empathy as both empowering and emasculating. “He was more comfortable seeing himself as an actor or initiator than as the object of another’s compassion” (Gobodo-Madikizela 42). In so far as prison takes away his agency, De Kock experiences prison as a feminising space. In *Red Ink*, despite suffering from the agonies of confinement, Napoleon also holds similar patronizing masculine views about Lucy. He takes a great deal of liberty with Lucy, something that he would not dare do to a male interviewer. For example, during their second meeting, Napoleon steals a quick kiss on Lucy’s cheek as she momentarily looks aside in distraction.

The Lucy-Napoleon and Gobodo-Madikizela-De Kock relationship of aversion and attraction, fascination and repulsion can be read as a metaphor for the way South African society in general views and relates to prison. While the stories of desperate and daring criminals and prisoners occasionally shown in the media would hold the audience spell-bound for a few moments, at other times crime and prison exist as spectres in the periphery of most people’s imagination. After one of Lucy’s prison visits, the narrator reports the following thoughts of the contented Napoleon: “He was certain that Lucy Sibongile Khumbule had much to learn. Their lives touching and penetrating each other so deeply ... that was no accident” (92). Lucy’s naivety may mirror that of many South Africans who assume that their fate is separate from that of incarcerated criminals. Napoleon’s actions and those of Dawie Botha, the corrupt prison warder who assists Napoleon get what he wants in exchange for money, indicate that the “inside and outside” touch and penetrate each other very deeply, as Napoleon astutely observes about his interaction with Lucy.

Gobodo-Madikizela’s emotional and empathetic touching of De Kock’s “trigger hand” makes her realise that her relationship with De Kock cannot remain at the impersonal “interviewer and subject” level since it is basically a field of power contestation (40). While in another context the hand-touching incident could have been dismissed without any second thought, in the constricted confines of the prison its significance explodes into astronomical metaphoric level. In retrospect, both De Kock and Gobodo-Madikizela realise that it was a moment when power relations became diffuse as the subject-prisoner and his interviewer momentarily connect at a purely human level unencumbered by any ideological considerations. For this

reason, the moment is empowering for the prisoner but deeply disorienting for the interviewer, as it makes her realise how implicated she is in her apparently evil subject. But the hand touching is also a moment of ambiguity because in a way Gobodo-Madikizela's act of empathy draws her "into intimate complicity" (46) with De Kock. Implicitly, De Kock and Gobodo-Madikizela symbolically become partners in crime.

Both Makholwa's and Gobodo-Madikizela's narratives suggest that not only is there a mutually disturbing relationship between prison and the outside but also "that good and evil exist in our lives, and that evil like good, is always a possibility" (Gobodo-Madikizela 34). This is forcefully brought to Gobodo-Madikizela's attention by a coincidental event at Westville Prison in Durban. A few months before starting her interviews with De Kock at Pretoria Maximum Prison, she has a meeting with Gcina Hlongwane, a black prisoner at Westville Prison who was formerly an Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) hit man, who, like De Kock, had been abandoned by his organisation when his crimes were exposed. When Gobodo-Madikizela learns that she shares a birthday with this man who "had killed so many ANC members he couldn't tell the exact number", she is terribly disturbed. For Gobodo-Madikizela the moment illustrates that the prison, with all its evil and criminals, has an unbreakable bond with society. What exacerbates Gobodo-Madikizela's distress is that during the course of her interview with Hlongwane she finds herself colluding with this notorious killer when he indicates in coded language that they should switch over to Zulu since the guard who is hovering around them was an IFP spy. As she leaves prison she drives furiously as she is seized by paranoia, imagining herself to be followed by IFP spear-wielding men in traditional regalia. She experiences the same haunting feeling after the hand touching incident with De Kock. During one of her visits to De Kock, he tells her how people were killed through letter bombs and even ball-pen bombs. Afterwards, she throws away her pen which she had borrowed from a young white man at the Home Affairs office because she imagines that it has been exchanged with one equipped with a bomb. Even after travelling thousands of kilometres to America, she is troubled by the tapes and the interview transcripts with De Kock. At the centre of her haunting is her "own empathy for De Kock" (116). She seems to have internalised the logic of the penal regime and finds that it has become her own shirt of flame that she cannot take off.

What Gobodo-Madikizela calls "this sense of paper-thin line" between evil and good, prison and outside, is also evident in *Red Ink*. In Makholwa's narrative the prison is depicted as reaching the outside through the corrupt activities of warders and also through visitors of the incarcerated criminals and the criminals' connections with the politically influential and

criminally inclined figures such as KK. Makholwa illustrates that her protagonist, Lucy, and Napoleon's brother, Sifiso, become dangerous and tragic links between the prison and the outside. Not only does Lucy's relationship lead to the death of her business partner and her boyfriend Karabo Monare at the hands of Sifiso, the novel shows that right from the first day she steps into prison, she is slowly but relentlessly drawn into the corrupt web of prison life. In order to record their conversation, she agrees with Napoleon that they discreetly but illegally use the notebook and pencil that he provides. Unbeknown to Lucy is the fact that she is playing along in a drama that has been set in motion by KK Mabote, The Sponsor, and Napoleon, with the aid of his warder friend Dawie Botha. By making Lucy and Dawie participate in crime, Napoleon cunningly connects them to himself and the pervasive logic of the penal regime.

Lucy and Napoleon's near-romantic involvement can be viewed as a metaphor for prison's entanglements with politics and society in general. The thin line dividing politics and crime is further highlighted by the fact that the friendship between the Dingiswayo brothers and KK Mabote has its roots simultaneously in crime and in anti-apartheid politics. As the Dingiswayos try to hijack KK Mabote's Mercedes Benz during the dying years of apartheid, he uses his political demagoguery to convince them that their crime is in fact a political act since apartheid has basically dispossessed every black person in one way or another. KK Mabote wins over the Dingiswayos, and during the apartheid regime the "two brothers carried out a number of hits on the regime's policemen and women. They planted bombs, they killed black spies and police informants and for this, they were well looked after by The Sponsor, known as KK to his friends" (195). The narrator indicates that this complex friendship of the Dingiswayos and KK survives well into South Africa's rise to democracy. Although the Dingiswayos' behaviour may be viewed as purely mercenary and perverse, it is clear that their behaviour contains both criminal and liberatory elements. They view themselves as fighters against forces of oppression of some sort, and their killing and raping sprees give them a sense of control as they "overpower, conquer and humiliate" (232).

Gobodo-Madikizela's project with De Kock is an extension of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) project, which aimed at healing the post-apartheid nation through the full disclosure of atrocities by the perpetrators and the extension of forgiveness by victims⁹⁹.

⁹⁹ About the objectives of the TRC, Gobodo-Madikizela writes: "The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a strategy not only for breaking the cycle of politically motivated violence but also for teaching important lessons about how the human spirit can prevail even as victims remember the cruelty visited upon them in the past" (2003:103). What is still debated, however, is not only whether these objectives were achieved or even achievable, but the fact that the TRC process seems to have been crafted to benefit the perpetrators of atrocities

Gobodo-Madikizela's approach to her interviews with De Kock seems to be participating in the same process driven by the principles of Christian forgiveness and restorative rather than retributive justice upon which the TRC was founded.¹⁰⁰ However, the extent to which the TRC found support from the new government and even from some leaders of former apartheid regimes makes it possible that Gobodo-Madikizela and other academics became unwittingly complicit in the denial of justice to thousand of South Africans due to the euphoria of the democratic dispensation. The fact that Gobodo-Madikizela is haunted by the idea that she may be colluding in, legitimising or performing a certain logic of forgetting, as the word "amnesty" suggests, is evident in that she devotes the entire last chapter, "I have no Hatred in my Heart", to the defence of the principle of forgiveness and by extension the TRC project. She argues: "The act of humanizing is ... at once both punishment and rehabilitation" (120). But she experiences inner conflict when she realises that this humanising stance stands in violation of the deep-seated desire to see justice done. She writes: "Part of my own struggle in my visits with De Kock stemmed from the fear of stepping into the shoes of a murderer through empathy" (120). The same observation can be made about the vague achievements of the TRC process especially in the light of the considerable human and financial resources that were channelled towards the project.¹⁰¹

In *Red Ink*, Makholwa also raises the question of the extent to which members of society should interact or be fascinated with the prison in general and with incarcerated dangerous criminals in particular. The protagonist, Lucy, finds herself in a moral quandary right from the time she receives Napoleon's letter inviting her to write a book about his criminal exploits. While Khumbule thinks that Napoleon's is a great story staring her in the face, she also realises that it is a story that she cannot share with her parents and even with her boyfriend.

more than the victims. The question that begs to be asked then is whether the TRC process unwittingly became complicit in the apartheid crimes.

¹⁰⁰ Some scholars believe that justice was a prerequisite for reconciliation rather than an alternative to it, and that the TRC had been weighted in favour of the perpetrators of abuse. For example, William Kentridge, director of *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, says: "A full confession can bring amnesty and immunity from prosecution or civil procedures for the crimes committed. Therein lies the central irony of the Commission. As people give more and more evidence of the things they have done they get closer and closer to amnesty and it gets more and more intolerable that these people should be given amnesty." (Kentridge 2007, p. viii). (See also Mahmood Mamdani, "Reconciliation without Justice", 1996, and Sandra Young, "Narrative and Healing in the Hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission", 2004).

¹⁰¹ Helena Cobban of *The Christian Science Monitor* reports that the TRC consumed 224 million Rand during the five years of its operation.

She observes: “He (Napoleon) wants to be immortalised; he enjoyed all the attention he received in the media during his heyday. I’m just worried that I may be glorifying a killer” (130). She soon understands that by accepting Napoleon’s challenge she automatically enters the league of the “eccentric”, and into a no-man’s land which is neither criminal nor non-criminal. Tellingly Napoleon equates writers’, and especially journalists’, quest for fame with his own criminal life of rape and murder. From chapter three onwards, Makholwa’s narrative juxtaposes Napoleon’s prison fantasies with Lucy’s delusional desire for success and fame in an unnerving way which shows that their destinies are intertwined in a manner that Lucy could not have imagined. For example, in chapter three the imprisoned Napoleon imagines himself having sex with Lucy, whom he has not yet met, and derives great satisfaction from self-manipulating his genitals. Hinting at the danger that awaits Lucy, the narrator juxtaposes Napoleon’s revolting thoughts and actions in prison with Lucy’s anxiety in her bedroom as she awakes on the morning that she will meet Napoleon for the first time. Her thoughts are hauntingly dominated by her daring project as much as Napoleon is fixated on his imaginary sexual relationship with Lucy. Read this way, Makholwa’s novel can be seen as foregrounding certain aspects of Gobodo-Madikizela’s journalistic account that are hidden between the lines or paved over in her text. Makholwa provides not so much a parallel story as a reading of the tensions and contradictions that Gobodo-Madikizela sometimes raises but fails to explore more subtly.

The way Lucy’s book project, which seems to be glorifying a serial rapist and murderer, and the real danger to her life and that of all those connected to her by her close interaction with a brutish killer, raises moral questions which Makholwa’s protagonist battles with throughout the novel. What exacerbates Lucy’s moral dilemma is that when she goes to meet Napoleon for the first time she expects to see a fiend, but upon seeing him she is completely destabilised by his “frailty” and his “gentle almost priest-like” appearance (24, 25). He was “a fairly normal, really nice guy” (27). This is comparable to what Gobodo-Madikizela’s friend, Marie-Claire Kamin, says after shaking hands with De Kock in one of the public hearings in Cape Town. Completely dumbfounded and bewildered, she blurts out: “He looks like my brother” (50). Lucy’s crisis is deepened by Napoleon’s over-familiarity with her. Instead of a formal handshake, Napoleon insists on a hug and basically treats her as if she were his lover.¹⁰² Eventually when Lucy cannot bear the pangs of her conscience on her own, she

¹⁰² Interestingly, Ruth First in *117 Days* reports how her relationship with one of her interrogators Viktor, was steeped in some kind of disturbing romance. She writes that “Viktor came laden with calculated charm and flattery thick with treacherous intent” (141). Viktor himself declares: “I know you better after a month than people who have known you your whole life” (137). Similarly Gobodo-Madikizela indicates that her friends

decides to confide in her maverick architect uncle about her weird book project. Uncle Qiniso tries to encourage Lucy to proceed with her proposed book by offering the following understanding of the function of art: “[Art’s] role is to expose some facet of the human soul. Whether it’s good or bad, express it the best way you know how, and don’t give a damn about other people. Art doesn’t kill anyone” (130). Similarly, after commenting on the frightening and discomforting moments when our lives connect with the likes of De Kock Gobodo-Madikizela tries to find a moral justification for her project. She asks: “Could it perhaps also be a source of hope, that through our recognition of evil as a constant possibility in human experience we can learn to prevent it from taking over our lives?” (50).

The relentless way in which the prison haunts society in general is illustrated by the imagery that Gobodo-Madikizela uses to capture De Kock’s painful yet futile attempt to rid himself of the guilt of his heinous crimes. She calls it the “intolerable shirt of flame” which De Kock tries to slip off in vain since “in some ways the cloak [is] part of him” (47). Similarly, both Gobodo-Madikizela and Makholwa in their narratives seem to come to a realisation that violent crimes and imprisonment are South Africa’s “intolerable shirt of flame” which she cannot slip off without losing a large chunk of her skin since they have painfully attached themselves to the political and socio-economic systems of the nation. These two texts help us see that steeped in the past of criminal violence of the apartheid state, the violent crimes of the formerly oppressed groups in the post-apartheid environment are a disturbing but unsurprising extension of the same logic which was once secretly sponsored and publicly condoned by the state and anti-apartheid activism.

Another unsettling aspect in the interface of prison and society highlighted by both Gobodo-Madikizela and Makholwa is the coalescence of politics, crime and perverse behaviour. KK, whom we subsequently learn is the man that Napoleon refers to as The Sponsor, is a tainted liberation hero who does not believe that crime and politics are mutually exclusive. About KK, the post-apartheid “exemplary” politician-cum-businessman, the narrator in Makholwa’s novel observes with a mild dose of sarcasm: “During the struggle he had spent many a day in various prisons, including Robben Island, so his struggle credentials were intact” (209). The interconnectedness of apartheid criminal imprisonment with aspirations for liberation is suggested by the fact that it is being imprisoned which ironically results in one being viewed

thought that she had become romantically attached to De Kock. Commenting on and dismissing this perception, she writes: “Romantic interest seemed to carry greater explanatory power for conversing with a murderous criminal than compassion ... Casting my professional interest in de Kock in terms of romantic motive ... makes it easy for my listeners to distance themselves from the reality of interacting with the man” (122, 123). But her narrative casts doubts as to whether their interaction always remained at a professional level.

as a valiant fighter against apartheid.¹⁰³ It is a painful irony that anti-apartheid fighters needed the accreditation of the oppressor through imprisonment, so to speak, to feel and be viewed as authentic heroes.

Makholwa's narrative seems to question the post-apartheid project of depicting apartheid prisons as places where heroes and 'real men' were manufactured. Her narrative insists on portraying the apartheid prison as a space of multiple ironies since it produced unstable masculinities. While imprisonment gives political activists an illusory sense of power, Napoleon claims that it is only when he rapes women that he enjoys sex and "felt powerful" (232). Interestingly, it is also in prison that KK develops bisexual tendencies. The narrator observes: "[I]t was also in prison that he discovered a taste for his own sex" (209). Despite the positive ideological functions with which anti-apartheid activists try to imbue the prison, Makholwa's narrative insists that it is a decadent and degraded space giving rise to sexual appetites that society finds unpalatable.

The development of prison homosexual relationships further entrench gender stereotypes. Not only does Makholwa show that prison homosexual relationships are modelled on the male-female patriarchal relations that characterise societal sex roles in general, she also demonstrates that they are essentially violent.¹⁰⁴ For Makholwa homosexuality is behaviour that develops out of a space of oppression and degradation, implicitly a Western space, or at least a space that figures modernity in one of its more coercive aspects. After his stint in prison, KK Mabote uses both homosexual and heterosexual sex to break the willpower of his obstinate underlings. The narrator says: "Homosexual sex was a power game for The Sponsor" (203). Early in his relationship with Napoleon's brother, Sifiso, KK used to make him "scream like a wounded animal from pain of penetration" as he established his domination over him (209). For his sexual stimulation he also forces his girlfriend, Fundi, to wear a nappy like a baby. After the attainment of democracy, the economically powerful men like KK Mabote, while practising homosexuality, never allow themselves to be penetrated,

¹⁰³ Mandela and First report of the Defiance Campaign of the 1950s in which political activists deliberately courted imprisonment. Gradually, being imprisoned became a badge of honour for those fighting against apartheid (See Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* pp.129 and First's *117 Days*).

¹⁰⁴ Jonny Steinberg also shows that right from the start, the Number prison gangs were steeped in homosexual relationships which were patriarchal and violent. From 1987 onwards, he indicates that one joined the number by being raped, something seen as feminising and disempowering (See *The Number* 2004). Similarly, in discussing Zimbabwean masculinities Muchemwa and Muponde observe: "Although women and children are particularly vulnerable in uncontrolled and violent patriarchy, men who belong to marginalised masculinities can be feminised through rape and torture" (In *Manning the Nation: Father Figures in Zimbabwean Literature and Society*, 2007: xvii).

and this allows them the illusion that their manhood remains intact despite the degradation imposed by the apartheid prison experience.¹⁰⁵

Makholwa also suggests that while in prison it is the absence of the opposite sex that seems to trigger homosexual desire, and that patriarchal notions of manhood are subsequently superimposed to justify and legitimate the behaviour, she indicates that gay relationships outside prison are also deeply tainted by the same unequal power relations. The feminisation through penetration of either physically weak or materially poor men gives the abuser a false sense of power since he starts to view himself as superman who can subdue both men and women. Sifiso, gay as he is, does not allow himself to be penetrated for similar reasons. Although he does not rape his murder victims because “the female sex represented filth, disease and whoring” (209), he ironically views his gay partners as women. The narrator says: “Somehow, being the one who always shoved it into them made him feel better about his sexual tastes. He was still the alpha male” (204). Interestingly, although he is never imprisoned, Makholwa suggests that Sifiso’s homosexuality is a result of feelings of emasculation and childhood trauma that he experienced at the hands of his mother and other abusive adults.

Conclusion

An examination of *Journey to Myself* and *Fifteen Men* has demonstrated that there is no evidence that female prisoners experience physical and material deprivations to a greater extent than their male counterparts. These narratives do not provide any conclusive evidence that prison writing projects provide any emotional healing, since it is problematic in the first place to depict these men and women as wounded and sick individuals who need language or narrative therapy. What these narratives seem to afford these prisoners is some kind of agency, agency rendered complex by their continued imprisoned condition, by their forced identity constituted in prison, and by the largely unchanged outside forces which led to their imprisonment in the first place. An examination of *A Human Being* and *Red Ink* indicates that confined male criminals exert considerable patriarchal and masculine power over their female interviewers. However, unlike Makholwa’s protagonist, Lucy, Gobodo-Madikizela is not a passive dupe. She is deeply conscious of the power that De kock exercises over her. Gobodo-Madikizela’s book documents her anxiety at slipping into socially prescribed gender roles and also represents an attempt to write herself out of them. On the other hand, Makholwa’s novel

¹⁰⁵ In *Mapping Memory: Former Prisoners Tell their Stories* (2006) one former prisoner, Zolile Mgwebu, relates how he was forced to wear a blanket skirt as the ‘wife of a prison boss’ (3).

highlights a gendered post-apartheid prison which has disturbing and often dangerous links with the outside.

Ultimately, the strand that connects these four texts is that they are all participating in the post-apartheid project which apparently prioritises the individual as a category that has more authenticity and more value than the collective. All four texts posit dealing with the individual, the “real person” behind the mask, the “inner self” supposedly “behind the political”, as a woman’s prerogative. However, the idea of an individual versus community ethics is a fraught one since they are always interdiscursive dependencies at any historical moment.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Few people would contest Jeremy Sarkin's (2008) observation that "[p]risons are still universally accepted and located as the central feature of criminal justice system" (2). With many nations doing away with capital punishment, imprisonment has emerged as the ultimate punishment for criminals. Post-colonial "African governments have unanimously preserved the penitentiary apparatus at the center of their judicial systems" (Bernault 2003: 26), despite the prison's clear links with the coercive and ideological violence of colonialism. As we have seen, both colonial/apartheid and post-colonial/post-apartheid prison experiences have led to the literary genre of prison narratives in Kenya and South Africa. In my examination of these narratives I have been especially interested in the role of crime and prison in the production of notions of the self and the literary. I argued that the narratives that I examined demonstrate that there is a certain excess that attends on the social production of criminality and the practice of imprisonment. This allows criminality and imprisonment to have a haunting effect both on individuals' notions of 'the self' and the constitution of national identities and nationhoods.

Both during colonial and apartheid periods, South Africa was characterised by mass incarcerations of mainly black people. In colonial times, blacks were imprisoned largely for violating Pass Laws legislation. In *The Number*, Steinberg shows that it was the brutalities of early colonial industrialisation that gave birth to Nongoloza's banditry and his subsequent imprisonment. Nongoloza's ideas resulted in the emergence of the Number prison gangs which quickly spread through out South African jails, thanks to the phenomenon of mass imprisonment of black and coloured people. On the other hand, the apartheid era led to the imprisonment of large numbers of anti-apartheid political activist. Ironically, it is this phenomenon that led to the production of political prison narratives that I examined in Chapter Two and Three of this thesis. Thinking specifically about these political prison narratives that had emerged before 1992, J. U. Jacobs wrote: "The experience of detention and imprisonment is a major determinant of literary production in South Africa today" (1992:115). Jacobs was referring to the literary production of political detainees and not that of "criminals". Eighteen years later, the narratives produced by the experience of detention and imprisonment can no longer be fully theorised without thinking about issues of crime and criminality.

Locked in the emotive and politically charged space of apartheid detention and imprisonment, few writers and literary scholars paused to envision the type of literature that could emerge from post-apartheid prisons. Today, with the benefit of hindsight, we see the necessity of a prison literary theoretical approach that goes beyond apartheid; as in going back to the pre-apartheid era; and examining the period after apartheid, as in exploring the current transitional post-apartheid period but also imagining a post-post-apartheid prison, or to use Terry Eagleton's (2003) phrase, an after post-apartheid prison. The South African prison has experienced significant material changes since the demise of apartheid. Coupled with this, there have also been discursive shifts which were not only results but also causes of the material changes that the place and space of prison continue to experience. Through all these changes, in South Africa, the prison has maintained its central societal role, either directly as in colonial and apartheid times, or indirectly and hauntingly, as in this period where the prison is a repressed other of the entire national consciousness. Although there is monumental work to be done in so far as theorising South African crime and prison narratives is concerned, my study is just but a fraction of a fascinating and enriching field of study which can only keep expanding.

Kenya does not boast political prison narratives of the same size as in South African. While the long apartheid years allowed for those detained in its prisons to narrativise their experience, the intense detentions of the Mau Mau period, and the longer stretch of colonial imprisonment in general, did not lead to a literary phenomenon comparable to the South African one. *The Trial of Jomo Kenyatta* gives us a glimpse of what could have been a veritable detention and imprisonment Kenyan literary genre. However, the independence that followed the Mau Mau detentions seems to have stifled and eclipsed whatever literary productions could have emerged from a different meditation on these experiences. With Ngugi's *Detained* we find ourselves dealing with post-colonial political imprisonment. Ngugi tries to recuperate Mau Mau mass detentions from ignominy and relate them to his own detention in an "independent" state. For him, the post-colonial prison becomes a "colonial" or "neo-colonial affair". What eludes Ngugi, much as it escaped a number of South African writers and scholars who have imagined a post-apartheid prison, is the centrality of prison in the state's exercise of power even when it is not directly used to incarcerate political opponents. In other words, the criminal prisoner is an absent other in Ngugi's narrative.

With the publication of John Kirihamiti's *My Life in Crime* (1984), a real genre of popular criminal imprisonment narratives was born in post-colonial Kenya. My study devoted significant space to this Kenyan literary phenomenon. Approaching these narratives as

products of popular culture or at least prison popular culture, enables us not to be evaluative and judgemental but to “listen” to these narratives’ “surplus” or “subterranean currents”, as Barber (1987: 7) puts it. I pointed out that a self-confessed criminal prisoner lacks the high moral pedestal that a political prisoner commands. More than the political prisoner, a criminal prisoner has to improvise literary techniques that gain him/her a sympathetic readership. It is ironic that Kiriamiti seems to have given birth to the popular genre of crime and prison narratives and also has had the last word through the publication of *My Life in Prison* (2004). From 1994 up to the publication of Kiriamiti’s narrative, nothing significant was happening in the way of the prolific production of crime and prison narratives that had characterised the last half of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. The few texts that I examined in Chapter Five show that the Kenyan prison economy mimics the economies of Nairobi city, the post-colonial Kenyan nation-state at large and the carceral colonial state. This may not necessarily give a complete picture of the forces that dictate the production of, and trends that characterise, popular autobiographical narratives of crime and imprisonment. However, this selection has enabled us to start peering into important factors that characterise the flux space of the interaction of crime and prison and the production of literature.

In the first sixteen years of the post-apartheid regime, South Africa has experienced a significant drought of autobiographical detention and prison narratives, a genre that originated with the publication of Herman Charles Bosman’s *Cold Stone Jug* (1947) and Ruth First’s *117 Days* (1963). Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) seems to have marked the beginning of the end of political prison narratives in South Africa. What have been emerging from South African prisons by way of literary products are collaborative auto/biographies between academic/writers and imprisoned criminals. Jonny Steinberg’s *The Number* (2004) and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela’s *A Human Being Died* (2003) mark the birth of this new strand of South African narratives of crime and imprisonment. Steinberg’s and Gobodo-Madikizela’s example has been followed by writers who have worked with imprisoned criminals and produced anthologies of auto/biographical pieces by prisoners. I argued that these criminal imprisoned writers face the challenge of imagining their criminality and imprisonment creatively, since most of them did not receive much formal schooling. In an attempt to procure a sympathetic readership most of these writers resort to the popular victim narrative as an attempt at self-exculpation. Nonetheless, these narratives reveal interesting insights concerning the complex interactions between society and the prison, links between criminality and the notion of political resistance, and insight into popular understandings of the prison that the more politically-oriented accounts sometimes simply glossed over or

omitted altogether. Beyond these anthologies and other prison writing projects, South Africa has not experienced the production of popular prison narratives that matches the Kenyan phenomenon.

The future of the literary study of prison both in Kenya and South Africa seems to lie in seeing that political narratives of detention and imprisonment are but one aspect of this expanding genre. Attention should be paid to the popular narratives that have been coming out of post-colonial Kenya and the collaborative projects, novels and other representational projects that are emerging from the post-apartheid South African prison. One of the things that I hope my thesis has demonstrated is that these non-canonical narratives of crime and imprisonment demand to be “read with respect” for us “to see the complexity and ‘otherness’” embedded in them, to adapt Dorothy Driver’s words to my context (2002: 170). To quote Julia Kristeva, crime and prison literature allow us to be “familiar ... with our own ghosts” (191:191). Whether by way of political prisoners or common criminals, crime and prison narratives suggest that the penal regime continues and will continue to play a significant role in the literary production of Kenya and South Africa. I believe that the examination of these texts sheds light on the subtle and not readily visible participation of crime and prison in shaping the mindset of a society and how in turn the entire society’s destiny becomes, both in a real and figurative way, bound up with the fate of its criminals and prisoners.

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