# 7 In short, there are problems
## Literary journalism in the postcolony

In an epilogue to *Little Liberia*, his 2011 account of an African diaspora in New York, Jonny Steinberg records a telephone conversation with a man whose life he has just spent two years researching. The author has given Jacob Massaquoi a printout of the manuscript, along with a note proposing that 50% of the royalties be channelled to community projects. Four days later he receives a call:

> 'I have read everything', he said. 'There are very serious problems with this book: problems that will hurt family back home, problems that will have repercussions for me in Staten Island. And then there are still more problems I cannot discuss now. In short, there are problems.' (260)

Reading a book-length description of yourself for the first time, the author remarks, is a shock for anyone who has had the experience. It marks the moment at which your embellishments, evasions and self-presentations – as recorded in the researcher's notebooks or audio files over many months – are wrested violently into a narrative contrivance that is recognisable but other: 'The writer has cheated. He has written a you that is not you' (260). Most find the experience confusing: 'Something is wrong, but how to put one's finger on it? Where does one's complaint begin?' (260)

Where *does* one begin with Steinberg's non-fiction? Where to find a point of departure that has not been pre-empted by the self-aware and hyper-articulate persona at the centre of his works? Anticipating, articulating and even relishing the range of ethical quandaries generated by the process of writing so intimately about people from worlds very different to his own – this set piece of authorial consternation in *Little Liberia* recurs in different guises all through his wide-ranging body of work.

It is one that began by addressing, in quick succession, the murder of a KwaZulu-Natal farmer as a window into that region's racially charged land disputes (*Midlands*, 2002); social engineering, prison gangs and violent criminality in the Western Cape (*The Number*, 2004); and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, medical history and social stigma in Pondoland (*Three-Letter Plague*, 2008). This loose 'trilogy' of books on some of South Africa's most contested subjects established Steinberg as perhaps the country's foremost practitioner of narrative non-fiction or (as American respondents to his work tend to call it)

literary journalism. Though as with a writer whom he cites as a primary influence, Janet Malcolm, what is often called journalism might better be described as some other, more original art form: 'some singular admixture of reporting, biography, literary criticism, psychoanalysis', and one that also borrows liberally from fiction's codes of characterisation, world-making and plot development (Roiphe, online).

By the age of thirty-five, Steinberg had been awarded the Alan Paton prize twice for addressing subjects talked about constantly but often emptily within the public sphere: dealt with in the languages of myth, conspiracy and cliché. 'It is possible to chatter about AIDS incessantly, and many people in South Africa do, even while plummeting down the abyss of denial', he reflected in a column of April 2011, which traced the dearth of 'imaginative and intimate literature' on the subject ('An Eerie Silence', online). In fact, he went on, 'people talk about AIDS in South Africa all the time' – in newspapers and magazines, on radio and television – and yet, a special language is reserved for it: 'a numbed, meaningless, evasive language that speaks incessantly and abstractly of hope and togetherness and thus manages to change the subject even while raising it.'

Seeking to redress such evasions, his books turn to some of the most overwrought, heavily mediatised and phantasmatic signifiers of post-apartheid South Africa – 'farm murders', 'AIDS', 'crime' – and imbue them with dense historical and explanatory context, as well as the texture of intimate and often ambiguous lived experience. Later works like *Little Liberia* and *A Man of Good Hope* (2014) address more geographically dispersed and transnational stories; but they still turn on some of the most vexed and defining problems of the twenty-first-century nation-state: questions of armed conflict, trauma and collective memory in Liberia and the Horn of Africa; of lives shaped by forced exile, chronic insecurity and xenophobia.

As per Jacob Massaquoi's objections, it is precisely those realms of experience and representation which generate problems – multi-dimensional ethical and epistemic problems – that Steinberg's narrative and analytic gifts have been drawn to as he moved from book to book. Each focuses on a living person, and someone whose life is likely to be materially affected by the fact of publication. 'What is the protocol in your business?' Jacob goes on to ask: 'Because the book you have written: I did not expect you to write this book. It is very close, very private. It is the sort of book you publish when you are old and will soon be dead. It is not the sort of book you publish when you are thirty years of age' (261).

To deem something 'problematic' (a common accusation in contemporary intellectual discourse, virtually a cliché) is often to suggest that it should stop: that it is ethically inappropriate and best abandoned. Yet it is at precisely from these 'wicked problems' that Steinberg's non-fiction projects begin, and from

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which they derive their analytic energy.[1] 'I hope I am scrupulous about the fact that there are two adults entering the exchange and no one is being deceived or double-crossed', he remarks in a revealing interview with Daniel Lehman, 'But the very structure of the relationship is a deeply problematic one, and that is what makes it, hopefully, material for good writing' (37).

Scenes of costing, accounting and transaction; of double-crossing and deception – these are threaded through Steinberg's narrative architecture. This contractual metaphor refracts how a scrupulous attempt to ensure an ethical transaction rides in tension with a range of more dubious and vulnerable moments thrown up by the inherently exploitative, or at least, instrumentalist and transactional nature of the journalistic project – particularly when it operates within a social scene so corroded by racial and economic inequality. Yet such difficulties are in turn folded back into the reflective voice that powers the works, a voice that seems confident enough to absorb any situation, no matter how intractable, into its analysis: 'I am a middle-class white South African who has generally written about poor black South Africans', he says to his interviewer: 'Behind the ways in which my subjects perform for me, want to please me, resent me, need to conceal things from me, lies the story of a whole country' (32).

The comment is revealing of how the subjects of his books become diffuse as the texts oscillate between biography, autobiographical inflections and social history; as the portrayals of the figures at their centre weave between the psychoanalytically intimate and the socially representative. On the one hand we read the life stories of the farmer 'Arthur Mitchell' whose son has been murdered; of the prisoner and ex-gang member Magadien Wentzel trying to change his life; of the young man 'Sizwe Magadla' who refuses to test for HIV. At the same time we are presented with the story, the meta-discourse, of Steinberg's encounter with these worlds; and then what this encounter between writer and subject – uncertain, often ironic, sometimes irredeemable – might reveal about a larger social world.

In this chapter and the next, I am particularly drawn to moments in the first (South African) triptych, because my sense is that by the time of *Little Liberia* and *A Man of Good Hope*, Steinberg has evolved an approach that verges on the formulaic in the way that it deals with the ethical difficulties of narrative journalism. Passages such as the epilogue above can read as too

[1] The concept of multi-dimensional, multi-scalar 'wicked problems', originally formulated in social planning during the 1970s and subsequently extended to other areas (for example, climate change policy) is worth holding in mind: particularly in the sense that such problems have no stopping rule, that each case is unique (a 'one-shot operation') and that 'solutions' cannot be seen as true-or-false, but only better or worse (see Rittel and Webber, 'Dilemmas', 155–69).

practised in their suspicion, even slightly glib in their caveats. By contrast, the earlier works tend to be more obsessive and idiosyncratic reading experiences, books riddled with odd digressions and detours, less in control of the details and insights they amass. Showing Steinberg in the process of working out his non-fictional modus operandi through trial and error, they are more vulnerable in their confidences and (possibly) the confidence tricks played on or by their subjects.

'A good liar always admits to one lie', one of my students remarked when seeking to voice her disquiet with these complex non-fictions, but finding it (as Jacob did) hard to put her finger on. What then are the less visible, inadmissible 'lies' threaded through the books? If this strain of non-fiction is so reliable in flagging its unreliability – its known unknowns – then what of the unknown unknowns: the zones of unreliably unreliable narration that cannot fully be acknowledged or brought into view? The rest of this chapter sketches three possible genealogies for this ambitious and problem-riddled strain of literary journalism in South Africa, signalled via three opening paragraphs: one famous, one less famous than it might have been, one infamous but now largely forgotten. In doing so, it considers the *The Number* and the South African prison, while the following chapter spends more time immersed in the rural worlds of *Midlands* and *Three-Letter Plague*. Along the way I touch on other writers – Adam Ashforth, Dugmore Boetie, Breyten Breytenbach, Liz McGregor, Charles van Onselen – whose creative treatments of actuality open similarly difficult questions about what the 'literary' in literary journalism might mean: its privileges, liberties and limits.

## An overreliable narrator

### The power and privilege of the literary journalist

'Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible'. Looking back on her famous opening lines to *The Journalist and the Murderer* (1990), a book now assigned to journalism students around the world, Janet Malcolm remarks that today her critique 'seems obvious, even banal. No one argues with it, and [...] it has degenerated – as critiques do – into a sort of lame excuse' (Roiphe, online). Appearing so frank in articulating the inevitable betrayals of the journalistic encounter, but carrying on nonetheless: one can sense the tonal affinities between Malcolm's voice and that of Steinberg, particularly in the austere pleasure her writing takes in its own unflinchingness. The journalist, Malcolm goes on, is 'a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse' (3). The South African writer recalls discovering her work while struggling with the unlikeable subject of his first book and finding it 'enormously empowering';

she became 'by far and away' his most important stylistic influence (Lehman, 'Counting the Costs' 32).

Here then is one of the main currents that feeds the kind of non-fiction practised by Steinberg and those influenced by him: part of the robust tradition that is, for all its variety, generally recognised and discussed as 'literary journalism' in the United States. Its historians trace its emergence from nineteenth-century reportage, via the digressive and intimate portraiture of Joseph Mitchell and the early *New Yorker* writers, while also having to reckon with the large claims made by Tom Wolfe in his introduction to the 1973 anthology *The New Journalism.* Infused by energies of the counter-culture, this was a manifesto which claimed the right, as did Truman Capote and Norman Mailer in their 'non-fiction novels', to annex the fictional techniques of scenic construction, divergent narrative perspective and dialogue for the evocation of 'real' subjects. Granting itself 'every device known to prose' (34) to engage the social spectacle of America, the new non-fiction (according to Wolfe) had dethroned the novel as the sacred vessel of literary esteem in the West – or rather, harnessed the energies of an earlier, more glorious moment in its evolution. In his potted literary history, the post-war American novel – having abandoned the close link with reportage that distinguished the monuments of nineteenth-century realism by Balzac, Dickens, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy – directs itself inwards, towards 'neo-fabulism' and self-indulgent wordplay, leaving the 'hulking carnival' of 1960s New York and California entirely to the attentions of writers like Joan Didion, Gay Talese, Hunter S. Thompson and (most importantly) himself (47).

Rereading Wolfe's famous set-piece today, and from South Africa, it is hard to accept his blithe self-confidence in assuming that the New Journalists can have the best of both novelistic and non-fictional worlds: the ability to move exuberantly between viewpoints and different streams of consciousness, all the while banking on 'an advantage so obvious, so built-in, one almost forgets what a power it has: the simple fact that the reader knows all this actually happened' (*The New Journalism* 49).

If writers like Rian Malan, Bongani Madondo and Richard Poplak carry some of the more expressionist, 'Gonzo'-like reflexes of literary journalism in modern South African writing, Steinberg embodies its more analytic and stylistically spare incarnation: a long reaction formation to the access-all-areas pass that Wolfe insisted on; a scrupulousness about demarcating the relation between what can and cannot be known; a rejection of its overweening confidence and autobiographical impositions. While still partaking of the agility and reflective power that this strain of non-fictional investigation permits the central narrator – a figure who is able to intervene, address the reader, 'honestly' admit the challenges of the project at hand, write him- or herself into the unfolding narrative, work out implicit covenants with the reader regarding

accuracy and candour – Steinberg's is, like Malcolm's, a poetics of great intellectual caution, and one which relies on a theoretical separation between the journalistic and the autobiographical 'I'.

The character called 'I' is unlike all the journalist's other characters, writes Malcolm in the afterword to *The Journalist and the Murderer*, 'in that he forms the exception to the rule that nothing may be invented':

> The 'I' character in journalism is almost pure invention. Unlike, the 'I' of autobiography, who is meant to be seen as a representation of the writer, the 'I' of journalism is connected to the writer only in a tenuous way […] The journalistic 'I' is an overreliable narrator, a functionary to whom crucial tasks of narration and argument and tone have been entrusted, an ad hoc creation, like the chorus of Greek tragedy. He is an emblematic figure, an embodiment of the idea of the dispassionate observer of life. (159–60)

It is a paradoxically mixed idea of invention and limit at the heart of the journalistic process. Her division between the journalistic and autobiographical first person is perhaps too absolute; but the passage does, I think, hint at the problems that Steinberg's work is perhaps not able to admit or entirely reckon with. As we will see, at certain crux points in his books, he blends the privileges of journalistic and autobiographical first person – respectively, an analytic (overreliable) rhetorical device and an actual, fallible (semi-reliable) protagonist. It is this that might account for the uneasiness that some readers feel with a commanding, 'at-times overwhelming narrative presence', one that comes to occupy all available intellectual space within the non-fictional text (Mulgrew, 'Tracing' 15).

Malcolm reappears in the epilogue to *Little Liberia* as Steinberg seeks to model a distinction between non-fiction and the novel much less porous than that of Wolfe (or of David Shields in *Reality Hunger*, a more recent attempt to scramble such categories):

> 'The writer of fiction', one of America's most thoughtful journalists has mused, 'is the master of his own house and may do what he likes with it; he may even tear it down if he is so inclined. But the writer of non-fiction is only the renter, who must abide by the conditions of the lease'. (quoted 264)

Along with a prose style orchestrated by the scrupulously analytic 'I', it is this contractual imaginary that Steinberg carries over from Malcolm: a metaphor of leases and legal agreements where clauses forbid any gratuitous or presumptuous invention. In this sense, she remarks, the writer of fiction 'is entitled to more privilege' (quoted in *Little Liberia* 153); whereas what a non-fiction writer *cannot* do, Steinberg remarks, 'the one twist he cannot accomplish – is pretend to know what is happening in a character's head' (Lehman, 'Counting the Costs' 32).

And yet, for the writer working in an extremely unequal and linguistically balkanised society, the 'privilege' (both technical and social) of the novelist might translate into its own kind of limit. With the diagnostic social sweep of nineteenth-century realist, or twentieth-century 'Great American novel' simply unavailable to a privileged, English-medium South African writer, it is then non-fiction's project of fraught cultural investigation and translation that might provide the most suitable (or least unsuitable) literary equipment for social understanding. And here Steinberg is not above some Wolfe-like provocation of his own, in reanimating a rivalry between fictive and non-fictive modes. Most South African writers, he remarks, 'simply don't know this country well enough to write fiction about it'.[2]

## 'Without ever wishing to deceive'

### 'History from below' and its discontents

That is one beginning, and one possible genealogy; here is another:

> This is a biography of a man who, if one went by the official record alone, never was. It is the story of a family who have no documentary existence, of farming folk who lived out their lives in a part of South Africa that few people loved, in a century that the country will always want to forget. The State Archives, supposedly the mainspring of the nation's memory, has but one line referring to Kas Maine. (3)

The opening of Charles van Onselen's *The Seed is Mine* (1997) – a 700-page account of the life of the farmer, sharecropper and patriarch named here – confidently enlists an idea that is threaded though diverse twentieth-century practices of social history: that of restoring an unofficial, undocumented existence to historical visibility, and of using interviews, oral narrative and memory work to do so. The one line referring to Kas Maine is a record of him being fined five shillings by the Periodical Criminal Court at Makwassie on 8 September 1931 for being unable to produce a dog licence. 'Other than that, we know nothing of the man', writes Van Onselen, and then goes on:

> Life transcends bureaucratic notation and legal formulations, however. Words – no matter how precisely chosen – mislead, phrases obscure, and sentences deceive. The man's name was Ramabonela Maine. But depending on when and where you met him in a life that spanned ninety-one years, he was – without ever wishing to deceive – also Kasianyane Maine, Phillip Maine, Kas Deeu, Kas Teeu, Kas Teu or just 'Old Kas'. (3)

[2] Steinberg made the remark in conversation with Duncan Brown and Antjie Krog at an event held by the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, on 1 March 2011. See Brown and Krog, 'Creative Non-Fiction'.

'The seed is mine. The ploughshares are mine. The span of oxen is mine. Everything is mine. Only the land is theirs' – a line spoken by Kas Maine provides the epigraph to the work, which is then framed as an enormous exercise in 'history from below', to use the well-worn phrase of the Marxist historian E. P. Thompson. In the preface to *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), Thompson wrote famously of his intention 'to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" hand-loom weaver, the "utopian" artisan [...] from the enormous condescension of posterity' (12). The working class, he argued, 'made itself as much as it was made'; it 'did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making' (8), and the task of the historian was then to reconstruct this process from sources beyond the written archive.

Thompson's work formed an influential strand of left-wing historiography in the post-war British universities where many (white) South African academics finished their training. Such ideas then underlay the establishment of the History Workshop at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1977. In the decade following the Soweto Uprising, the work of historians like Phil Bonner, Belinda Bozzoli, Tim Couzens, Isabel Hofmeyr, Bill Nasson, Noor Nieftagodien, Jeff Peires and van Onselen formed a research culture that sought to fuse political engagement and scholarship, and to evolve a lucid and public intellectual voice that departed from the more mandarin and theoretically laden languages of the left. Their books took on different subjects and theoretical approaches; but linking them was a commitment to an accessible written style that largely avoided the abstruse vocabularies of Marxist structuralism and Louis Althusser (Thompson's great adversary) as well as the doctrinaire, Soviet-aligned jargons of the South African Communist Party.

The impact of this strain of social history on Steinberg (who was a student at Wits at the height of its influence) is unmistakeable. The historians above are threaded through his bibliographies, their unadorned prose and strongly narrative methods providing an array of usable literary models for his own textured, analytically poised scene-painting. Van Onselen's life of outlaw and bandit king 'Nongoloza' Mathebula, *The Small Matter of a Horse* (1984) is taken up at length in *The Number*.[3] Yet as early as *Midlands,* Steinberg quotes a paragraph from *The Seed is Mine* that is drawn to another key motif in this tradition of social historiography – the awkward and often unacknowledged intimacies produced by South African history:

> 'What analysts sometimes fail to understand', the historian Charles van Onselen wrote recently, 'is that without prior compassion, dignity, love or a feeling

[3] In writing a foreword to a 2008 reissue of *The Small Matter of a Horse*, Steinberg recalls hearing it as Van Onselen's inaugural lecture while a student at Wits University.

of trust – no matter how small, poorly or unevenly developed – there could have been no anger, betrayal, hatred and humiliation.' (quoted in *Midlands* 63)

The lines suggest the buried utopian dimension to this strain of scholarship: that the institutionalised racial stratifications of apartheid were not an inevitable consequence of the South African past, and should not be crudely projected back onto it. That it had in fact taken an enormous amount of ideological and political work to wrench the apartheid vision onto a social scene vastly more complex, nuanced and unpredictable in its cross-racial interactions and co-dependencies.

In showing how Jacob Dlamini's work has also been under-written by such ideas, Jonathan Hyslop remarks that this view 'challenged not only the state's racial ideology, but also the essentialist arguments of some African nationalists'; hence the 'mix of wariness and sympathy' towards the exiled ANC that ran through the scholarship (the History Workshop tended to be more aligned with the 'inzile' anti-apartheid forces of emerging black trade unions and community-based organisations) ('E. P. Thompson' 104, 99). Here one sees another genealogy of transitional South Africa's narrative non-fiction as a civil society endeavour: a 'non-governmental' intellectual project intent on monitoring the emergent state – with all the difficulties of erstwhile political allies of the African National Congress now becoming its auditors. (This will come strongly to the fore in *Three-Letter Plague* as Steinberg traces the efforts of organisations like *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF), the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and other NGOs to effect the roll-out of antiretroviral medicine in the Eastern Cape.)

If all this evokes the progressive or enabling legacies of Wits social history, one also needs to consider the critiques levelled at it. Its stylistic plainness and assumption of a 'theoretical commonsense' could lead to a kind of conceptual closure or parochialism: currents of postcolonial or poststructuralist thought in the late 1990s were not taken up in the way of, for example, the Indian Subaltern Studies group, which went on to have such wide international influence (Posel, 'Social History' 34). Sometimes suffused with a romanticisation of resistance, the History Workshop's activist imaginary was drawn more to modes of opposition rather than complicity and accommodation.[4] For other critics, its materialist insistence on the agency and rational, explicable choices of 'ordinary' people and the working classes might have led to an avoidance of apparently opaque, ambiguous or 'irrational' domains of existence – religious

[4] Posel traces its notable gaps as the quiescent 1960s, the Bantustan administrations and the question of collaboration – all of these being areas that the post-TRC non-fictions in previous chapters have been drawn to. She goes on to remark that an ethnography or thick description of elite institutions like the Broederbond or the Anglo American mining conglomerate would have been unthinkable ('Social History').

belief, superstition, the occult – which might in any case, as Hyslop suggests, have their own rationality ('E. P. Thompson' 105). Some have even argued that its initial wariness of cultural nationalism within the exiled liberation movements could become hard to distinguish, in certain cases, from a coded or even reactionary alarmism towards a de-centering of white intellectual authority.[5]

Perhaps the most sustained objections to the ascendancy of social history emerged from scholars based at the University of the Western Cape. In tracing the institutional production of history and the making of public pasts, Ciraj Rassool wondered if Van Onselen's project of restoring Kas Maine to the historical record might paradoxically have led to 'a deepening of his subordinate status' ('Power, Knowledge' 83). This was because of an unreconstructed empiricist methodology that regarded oral history as a 'supplementary source' or 'data bank of experience' that could be mined for verifiable facts, and was less concerned with 'how those instances of orality as life history told their own story of remembrance, forgetting and narrativity' (83). Because of its epic promotion of narrative over theory, a work like *The Seed is Mine* then risked a shallow engagement with long-running debates about knowledge production: how it is gained, how it is translated into new contexts or (to continue the mining metaphor) 'beneficiated' in sites far removed from its point of origin.

Often glossing over the question of the (mostly white) authors' proficiency in African languages and the difficulties of engaging socially distant vernaculars, the late twentieth-century heyday of radical social history in South Africa could risk reproducing, in Rob Nixon's words, a 'structural and tonal paternalism' whereby 'in filling in one type of silence such scholars risked generating silences of a different type' ('Non-fiction' 41). 'Van Onselen's history', writes Rita Barnard, 'is haunted by the powerful words of the old peasant recorded in its epigraph'; but 'the very power of this verbatim quotation of Kas Maine's words alerts the reader to how few such quotations the work actually contains' ('Coetzee's Country Ways' 392). And as one reviewer of *The Seed is Mine* noted,

[5] In his collection of profiles, *Portraits of Power,* Mark Gevisser suggests that Van Onselen's much-publicised feud with the then Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Wits University, Malegapuru Makgoba, may well have overshadowed the reception of his magnum opus. Hence my suggestion that *The Seed is Mine* is less famous than it might have been, a text often referred to but not, I suspect, often read. To pick up on arguments made in a previous chapter, I would suggest that Van Onselen's massive work might in fact be classed with *The Dream Deferred* as a limit text, in marking the high tide of a certain, culturally confident strain of left-liberal biography in South Africa. For one reviewer of *The Seed is Mine*, author and subject 'collapse' by the end of the work: 'Biography becomes sublimated autobiography' and one is 'left feeling that Van Onselen is writing autobiographically, indeed confessionally' about a different kind of patriarch: 'a white and embattled academic living in a democratising South Africa, whose once iron control has begun to falter' (Crais 1002).

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the 14-year labours of Thomas Nkadimeng, research assistant, interviewer and translator on the project, are confined to a mere ten lines of text (Crais 1002). 'The sociology of their production', writes Rassool of such racially inflected histories from below, 'the politics of the research process, and the multiple layers of narration involved were questions that were overlooked' ('Power, Knowledge' 83).

It is just such difficult realms of experience – a series of spectres haunting radical history – that the literary (or literary journalistic) element of Steinberg's texts is able to restore to view, that it is drawn to and fascinated by. These are the kind of problems that Jacob Massaquoi takes up with his author: unequal power relations; recessed and multiply layered narratives; obscure or opaque motivations; racially coded or 'neo-colonial' responses; the work of memory as an act of creation rather than simply retrieval.

As I will explore more carefully in the next chapter, there is an intriguing double-move at work as socially textured literary journalism in South Africa transposes scholarly modes into a more public genre of trade non-fiction. On the one hand the dense information load of academic historiography might be abbreviated and, in some measure, simplified, with larger social conclusions put on hold or left implicit. On the other hand, the agility of the literary journalistic 'I' allows a much more complex portrait of the difficult narrative scene at the heart of social or oral history, with its subtle interfaces between spoken and written, and the challenges of cultural translation. It attempts to keep in play all the impurities and anxieties that more disciplined forms might ignore, or else consign to the separate section of 'methodology'.

*The Seed is Mine* may unfold in the magisterial, third-person voice established in its opening lines – a commanding, almost Tolstoyan narrator who raises the matter of deception only to dismiss it – but Van Onselen does reflect on his methods in another forum (as Rassool and Minkley admit elsewhere).[6] In a 1993 article for *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, the author writes in candid ways on the linguistic mediations between Sesotho, Afrikaans and English that underlay the work, credits the immense labour of Thomas Nkadimeng as interviewer, and wonders whether the analyst can ever 'uncouple the processes of data-generation and interpretation' ('Reconstruction' 513).

There is also a glancing, anecdotal admission of the story behind the story: as a 'financially comfortable, car owning, urban based white man', the grand historian recalls, he was soon under considerable pressure from his subject to be 'not only interviewer, taxi driver and banker' (508). It requires little imagination, he goes on, to work out how Kas Maine, 'an exceptionally intelligent man, schooled in the arts of survival in the harsh South African Highveld,

[6] Minkley and Rassool, 'Orality, Memory, and Social History in South Africa', in Coetzee and Nuttall eds., *Negotiating the Past*, 89–99.

could put such ambiguities to use, in the course of a friendship' (508). It is just such 'ambiguities' – a rather coy word – that point to the final genealogy that I want to sketch: less obvious or easy to capture, but one which goes a good deal further in puzzling out the slippery author-subject relations at play as social history becomes literary non-fiction.

## A literary con

### Collaboration, confidence men and the 'non-political' prison book

'This book was meant to be the first volume of the autobiography of Dugmore Boetie. Now I don't know what it is' – In an afterword to *Familiarity is the Kingdom of the Lost* (1969), its editor and amanuensis Barney Simon strikes a complex note of fondness, confusion and exasperation (184). Giving an account of working with (and financially supporting) 'Duggie' in the last two years of his life, the piece is a frank and unflinching account of narrative collaboration across the 'colour bar', one in which theatre maker Simon pays tribute to Boetie as both irrepressible raconteur and friend, but also as inveterate liar and scam artist: 'Duggie was essentially a con man, so that attempts I have made to establish the facts of his life have led only to chaos and contradiction' (184).

Their relationship emerged from a non-racial theatre improvisation group that Simon was running in 1960s Johannesburg, one that 'attempted to investigate, through improvisation and monologues, the everyday encounters between us. Not the dramatic ones; the seemingly simple ones, where the convolutions were as complex, the poisons as insidious' (*Familiarity* 184). Boetie was a 'vital and voluble' member of the workshops – 'His stream of anecdotes was endless' – though journalist Nat Nakasa (who had published some of his writing in *The Classic*) warned Simon (and other enthralled, white members of the group) that such stories were 'merely apocrypha of the townships', rejigged by Dugmore to place himself in a starring role (Simon, 'My Years' 77). 'Nor did Dugmore take himself seriously', wrote Es'kia Mphahlele about this dubious autofiction in *The African Image* (1974): 'He establishes in one's mind a "Dugmorean" way of life', 'as if he were at the helm of things'.[7]

Even while half suspecting that he was being taken in, Simon worked with Boetie for the next two years, supporting him financially and slowly drawing out of him enough material for a book. It appeared only after its protagonist had succumbed to lung cancer – an ordeal that Simon becomes deeply and sometimes uncomfortably involved in. During his visits to Boetie in hospital, it

[7] Quoted in *Familiarity*, no page number. Stephen Gray's 2007 Penguin Modern Classics edition helpfully collects a range of (often bemused) reviews of the work from the late 1960s, as well as later critical responses, within the front matter.

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slowly emerges that the latter has fabricated all the most important plot points of his life: among them the death of a tyrannical mother in the infamous opening lines of the book (she eventually appears at Duggie's deathbed), and also the loss of his leg (which happened when he was a child, not when fighting Rommel in North Africa). Simon's deeply felt essay registers both the intimacy and contempt bred by *Familiarity* – a text which could be described as both an act of sincere and deeply felt narrative collaboration but also a project of mutual, long-term duplicity with many flash points:

> Now I knew the score. The lies. The cons. Those hospital trips to the 'loner'. Even the money for the old woman hadn't reached her. But he was there. On my back. For the rest of his life at least. I hated him. He hated me. I just wanted to walk out, to be left alone. (193)

Boetie's work was widely read and reviewed internationally when first published, its scrambled codes of autobiography, pulp fiction and gangster thriller allowing it to circulate within South Africa when so many other autobiographies of the time were banned. But today it is largely forgotten, or regarded as something like the joker in the pack of Sophiatown-era life writing.[8] Rather than providing the kind of usable testimony expected of apartheid autobiography, it instead enacted 'a literary con' (as one reviewer put it) in multiple senses.[9] It is firstly the picaresque account of Boetie's life as thief, confidence trickster and convict: a rollicking and often very funny narrative of its one-legged subject's adventures as scam artist in Johannesburg , Cape Town and Durban. The narrator talks the reader through an encyclopaedic catalogue of rip-offs, swindles and hoaxes, often pandering to the prejudices of white South Africans in order to dupe them, or else matching the absurdities of apartheid bureaucracy with the narrator's own surreal gambits. 'The white man of South Africa suffers from a defect which can be easily termed limited intelligence', Boetie writes, 'I say this because no man, no matter how dense, will allow himself to be taken in twice by the same trick. […] Call him "Baas" and he'll break an arm to help you. He takes advantage of his white skin, we take advantage of his crownless kingdom' (58).

In a story first published by Nakasa in 1963, 'The Last Leg' (subsequently chapter 14 of the 'autobiography'), the hero is sent to prison and demands to check in his prosthetic limb as a personal effect, so as not to have it worn out

[8] Writing in *Staffrider* in 1992, Mark Beittel comments: 'Three reasons, I suspect, have concurred to silence Dugmore Boetie: doubts about authorship, discomfort with its form and suspicions about its politics' (quoted in *Familiarity* front matter).

[9] The phrase is from Joseph Lelyveld in *The New York Times* book review (3 May 1970): 'A racy, picaresque novel presented as a memoir; more accurately, a literary con' (quoted in *Familiarity* front matter).

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during his time in prison. It has, he insists, been given to him by well-meaning social workers, is far above the standard of government-issue (wooden) legs for black patients, and so should be preserved in storage until the end of his sentence. It is a request that wreaks comic havoc with the bureaucratic order of the prison, and joins several other *Drum*-era writers in sending up the absurd legalism of apartheid thinking. Like many of Dugmore's hoaxes, it plays within the dynamics of mutual self-deception, ironic accommodation and (in Homi Bhabha's phrase) 'sly civility' that pass between black and white. Such are the dynamics recorded with lacerating frankness in the different tonality of Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History* – a work that appeared in the same year, but one trapped in a cul-de-sac of doomed liberal humanism and confessive but corrosive 'honesty' that Boetie's narrator has gleefully exited.[10]

As a yarning ex-convict whose narratives are fuelled by the lexicons of criminal subculture, Boetie is then also a 'literary con' in another sense, and one that led some critics to compare his work to the ironic voice of Herman Charles Bosman. In *Cold Stone Jug* (1949), Bosman's 'Unimpassioned Record of a Somewhat Lengthy Stay' in Pretoria Central (as the subtitle wryly puts it), he smuggles some of the techniques of an unreliable narrator – so finely honed in his Oom Schalk stories – into the genre of a prison memoir. This translocation of a deliberately or knowingly 'limited' narrator (a longstanding fictional device) into a work posing as non-fiction threatens to dissolve the sincerities of the autobiographical pact, creating an opaque narrative mood that strikes a dissonant note in South Africa's large sub-tradition of prison autobiography. Bosman takes great pleasure in recording the stories 'spoken out of the side of the mouth' by convicts engaged in a continual verbal battle with warders, where the act of 'swinging a lead' is part of a time-honoured practice of gulling, entrapping or humiliating authority. Ultimately, it extends to implicate the unsuspecting reader who is taken in by Bosman's account of sharing a death row cell with a man, Stoffel, who seems never to have existed, but becomes

[10] Here I have in mind Tlhalo Raditlhalo's reading of Modisane's 'situation' (via Homi Bhabha) as involving 'a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once' ('Autobiographical Beginnings' 37) and also Thengani Ngwenya's account of the vexed 'symbolic self-translation' in *Blame Me on History*. He traces how the narrator-protagonist attempts to 'untangle the conundrum resulting from what is presented as an unbridgeable chasm between the kind of person he could have become in a country devoid of racial oppression and what he was forced to become in the racially segregated South Africa of the twentieth century' ('Symbolic Self-translation' 34). As Rob Nixon writes, Modisane's life writings, together with those of Can Themba, 'serve as the clearest statements of the historical need for Biko and Black Consciousness', that 1970s moment which 'helped release into politics that blocked anger' of the Sophiatown memoir (*Homelands* 39).

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instead a vehicle for the author's gallows humour: a fictive creation whose fictionality we are only partly or slyly warned about.[11]

Here then is the still larger, meta-textual con: an elaborately rigged trick at the expense of the socially concerned, *bien pensant* reader looking for an indictment of prison conditions or other social ills. Boetie's *Familiarity* and Bosman's *Cold Stone Jug* then form a strand of autobiography that also takes in another unstable and anti-realist work of non-fiction, Breyten Breytenbach's *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1984). As a famous poet who was permitted to write while in prison 'for the sake of Afrikaans literature' (106), Breytenbach reflects sardonically on what it means to be interpolated as 'the writer' in such a community, where inmates are continually petitioning him for help, asking for assistance with legal documents, showing him their poems or stories, desperate to affirm and record their experiences via texts that are deeply felt but often derivative or fantastic exercises in wish fulfilment:

> I wrote requests for parole, for release, for transfer, for interviews. You name it. I am the writer. I wrote the personal histories that they had to submit to social workers. A prisoner would come and say: well, you know, just write that I'm OK, you know what to put in, I'm sure you know better. In fact, they were quite convinced that whatever life I could invent for them would be better than the one they had. (*True Confessions 166)*

As with Bosman, who devotes an entire chapter to the argot of dagga-smoking, Breytenbach's work is deeply immersed in the linguistic energies of prison slang;[12] it also represents an early attempt to set down in words the oral

[11] See Stephen Gray's 2005 biography of Bosman, *Life Sentence*, which checks the Nominal Roll of Pretoria Central for those dates and does not find the name 'Stoffel'. Gray also points out Bosman's debt to Fyodor Dostoevsky's prison narrative *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1860), 'as supplied to him by the Orange Free State library service, to the extent of taking over his character Petrov (as Pym, the hardened recalcitrant on indeterminate sentence who pursues this guileless Fyodor, pestering him with love-letters and endless gifts of twists of sugar, a spoonful of jam)' (129). In Bosman's half-joking, half-menacing figure of Pym, the question of sexual assault, which lurks always below the surface of *Cold Stone Jug*, is then refracted via the Russian novelist most associated with unreliable, in the sense of unreliably unreliable, narrators.

[12] Breytenbach's *True Confessions* warns about the dangers of becoming *tydmal* (time-mad, calendar-crazy), labels the horrors of introspection and metal breakdown *kopvriet* (literally head-eating) and transcribes the rich lingo for different types of inmate with great relish. Beyond the primary opposition of *bandiete* vs. *boere* there are the *lallapype* – the 'pipe-sleepers' so poor that they would be sleeping under culverts on the outside – the *vlamslukkers* or *bloutreinryers* – 'flame-swallowers' or 'blue-train riders' who drink blue-tinted methylated spirits; the *trassies* (transvestites) and *rokers* (dagga smokers), the *boop millionaires*, who have amassed internal prison fortunes worth nothing on the outside, the *boop puddings* made from left-over bread, hoarded jam and peanut butter by those desperate to settle their gambling debts.

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mythology of the Number gangs that Steinberg will take up in such detail. These mock-serious, tonally unstable 'confessions' experiment compulsively with their own mode of address, styled as monologues delivered to a Mr Interrogator – a 'Mr Eye' or a 'Mr I' – who is simultaneously the apartheid warder, an implied reader and also a dialogical counter-voice emerging from the authorial self within a radically dismantled, over-spilling memoir. The result is less a documentation of prison life than a tangled skein of dubious narrative practices.

'Touch a man like that anywhere, and a story would flow from him like blood from a wound' – Steinberg quotes Bosman's resonant line about long-term prisoners in the opening sections of *The Number*; on the same page he references the mixture of sensory deprivation and imaginative abundance in Breytenbach's memoir, going on to remark that:

> Pollsmoor is a journalist's paradise; it is an interminable labyrinth of pure story. You walk down a corridor, a journalist clutching a notebook, and you are assailed by a thousand groping hands. Everyone wants to stop you, to own you, to unload his tales into your notebook. (17)

Bosman, Boetie, Breytenbach, Steinberg – this genealogy of the literary con is one acutely aware of the narrative labyrinth, of how stories circulate and calibrate social power within subcultures, whether these are rural communities or carceral institutions. Drawn to the arcane narratives of 'non-political' (i.e. common-law) prisoners, these works are experimental outliers within the corpus of the South African prison book. They form a counterpoint to the many anti-apartheid autobiographies that seek to build needful solidarity and an archive of testimonial data. They also trouble the divide between criminality and political resistance within an unjust society – a zone of constant ambiguity and ideological anxiety within many Struggle memoirs. How, for example, were the 'politicals' to imagine the common-law prisoners that they found themselves incarcerated alongside during the Struggle? Were the latter victims of an unjust system and possible converts to the liberation movements? Or were they gang members and likely informers, upholders of a rival, conservative and profoundly anti-social order who carried the threat of physical and sexual assault?

Such questions, which go to the heart of what the political might be in the modern nation-state, fall curiously into abeyance post-1994. The prison as major locus for South African writing (and for the country's larger imagination of itself) ebbs dramatically; and the prison narrative, 'once a central pillar of South African autobiographical writing', moves abruptly 'to an almost-invisible periphery after the demise of apartheid' (Roux, 'Inside/Outside' 247). The country's large prison population is soon demonised in populist discourses, consigned to the pathological and 'non-political'; horrifying post-apartheid

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exposés of prison conditions have less purchase on a national imagination transfixed by the spectre of violent crime.

It is just such lingering questions that Steinberg reactivates in *The Number*, which is essentially a reading of the South African transition from the perspective of the prison, and one which blurs the line drawn in 1994 (and reinscribed by the TRC) between the prison as 'political' and 'criminal' space. His book is drawn, Steinberg remarks, to those social phenomena that 'will never find a place in the lexicons of political orthodoxy; movements both politically articulate and chillingly anti-social' (11). These are domains of experience that hover ambivalently 'between an aspiration to social equality and anti-social violence, between a disdain for the current order and disdain for social order in general' (8). As such, *The Number* must navigate a complex narrative tissue of irony, veiled language, symbolism, disclosure and denial – a world where the vocabularies of political struggle can be conscripted and instrumentalised for multiple and often cynical ends.

On the one hand, the complex mythology of The Number is a vexed attempt to position the gangs as political actors or 'freedom fighters' engaged in a century-old battle with racist colonial and apartheid prison authorities. Hence the sense of betrayal that the book records as the coming of democracy does not yield the kinds of blanket amnesties and pardons expected by prisoners who remain incarcerated (while members of apartheid death squads walk free). On the other hand, the gang world is one of rampant exploitation of the weak, and one now capitalising on a burgeoning drug trade as South Africa opens up to global markets. It is also a cryptic and coded means for a masculinist and deeply homophobic subculture to countenance sex between men – a prison reality that is simultaneously all-pervading and shrouded in denial via a canon of intricate, Talmudic myths and legends.

Like each of the 'non-political' (but highly politicised) prison books above, *The Number* is suffused with a mood that oscillates between a desire for sincere disclosure and intimations of an incorrigibly suspect narrative performance. To respond to such works is to be aware of the complex and labyrinthine play of storied lives under duress, as well as the moments of self-conscious performance and even deliberate duplicity of voluble subjects who want their wisdom affirmed but are nonetheless wary of releasing too much of the information that their community holds in trust, or spending their narrative capital too quickly. 'Van Onselen is fucking with something very fucking important', Magadien Wentzel insists when Steinberg reveals that the great Nongoloza, venerated by prison gang mythology as a fiercely anti-colonial rebel, had in fact collaborated with prison warders and reformers later in his life (thus providing an uneasy echo of Magadien's own trajectory): 'This is history people believe. It is like a power. People are prepared to die for their stories' (238).

In these acts of fraught cultural translation, some of the power of Malcolm's 'confidence man' has shifted from writer to subject. In *The Number*, Steinberg knows from the outset that he is dealing with some of the Western Cape's 'master bullshit artists' and worries about tying himself to a subject who might be nothing more than a 'sophisticated trickster' (26). In one throwaway scene, we are led to see a commitment to duplicity – and the protection of subcultural lore – that extends to even financial disadvantage. The author has employed a young gang member on the Cape Flats to do a piece of research work, and 'he agreed on condition that I pay a third of his fee in advance':

> A week later, I phoned him to ask how the work was going. 'I'm not going to do it,' he replied. 'I'm a 26. My work is to con you out of your money.' 'You're a fool,' I said. 'It wasn't much work and if you'd done it you would have earned a whole lot more.' He laughed patronisingly. 'You don't understand. I'm a 26. That's my ethos.' (*The Number* 280)

Steinberg's books are full of such failures and dead ends: moments when the journalistic transaction cannot escape a meeting of pre-determined cultural types, with credulous researcher and narrative con artist locked in a self-fulfilling embrace. Some of these are explicitly named and identified; but even within the long-term stories that he entrusts years of research to, there are vertiginous moments when the reader might feel that the non-fictional contract (or the rug) has been pulled from underneath them. As we will see in turning to the rural worlds of *Midlands* and *Three-Letter Plague,* certain revelations released late into the works continue to detonate through what has been taken on trust, placing into real question the confidences that we have been taken into.

# 8 Unknowable communities
## Necessary fictions and broken contracts in the heart of the country

> The Mitchell property lies on the slopes of one of the most beautiful valleys I have ever seen. It is in the heart of the southern midlands of KwaZulu-Natal, Alan Paton country, and it is true that '… from here, if there is no mist, you look down on one of the fairest scenes of Africa'. Later I will tell you more about that landscape, and how it changed during the course of my investigation; a spectacular backdrop of giant shapes and colours when I first saw it, a myriad dramas of human anger and violence when I left. (3)

So reads the opening of chapter one in Jonny Steinberg's *Midlands*, a book that will chart the author's immersion in a southern KwaZulu-Natal farming community as he tries to understand the circumstances that led to the murder of a 28-year-old man, Peter Mitchell. It begins with the grieving but resolute father, Arthur Mitchell, proprietor of the farm Normandale, a man determined to stay on the land even while convinced that his labour tenants are harbouring the perpetrator. In one sense this establishing shot announces the beginning of the book's primary journalistic narrative, its 'story': 'I arrived at the Mitchells' front gate at mid-morning on an unforgivingly hot day in the summer of 2000' (3). But as this temporally split and self-consciously literary opening suggests, *Midlands* is a work haunted by all manner of other, possibly unknowable or untellable stories, stories that precede, interrupt, divert and perhaps even fatally undermine what seems at first to be a work of investigative journalism or true crime.

The book achieved immediate visibility in South Africa for addressing what have come to be called 'farm murders': a contested and controversial term, since (amid very high rates of largely black homicide victims in rural areas), it principally connotes the killings of white farmers. A new phenomenon within the post-apartheid dispensation, such murders have come to occupy 'a strange and ambiguous space' in the national imaginary, writes Steinberg, in that 'they tamper with the boundary between acquisitive crime and racial hatred' (*Midlands* vii). Peter Mitchell, we read early on, 'was killed, not just figuratively, but quite literally, on the southern midlands' racial frontier, the dust road on which he died a boundary between the white-owned commercial farmlands to the west and the derelict common land of a dying black peasantry to the

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east' (viii–ix). Whether *Midlands* works to unpick this racialised physical and political topography or simply reinforces it; whether the work is able to register the continued mythic charge of 'the racial frontier' without becoming complicit in its symbolic tropes – these remain, as we will see, open questions.

Steinberg worked as a journalist in Johannesburg during the 1990s and recalls how, even as South Africa's cities were suffused with Mandela-era optimism and 'a sense of common humanity that had been absent for centuries', the news from the countryside seemed to reflect 'a host of unsettled scores', bringing 'a grim portent of life after the honeymoon' (viii). Rural towns, he remarks, tended to be represented as inscrutable, fantastical or irredeemably strange by the news media. Yet *Midlands* begins from the premise that perhaps 'the countryside was way ahead of us', that such 'dispatches from farming districts appeared to be telling us something all too real' (viii). In 1994, some two million labour tenants were living under the proprietorship of 50,000 or so white farmers. 'What was to become of their relationship now that apartheid was over?', he writes in a subsequent essay for *Granta*, looking back at his debut work from a distance of 15 years ('The Defeated' 27).

In the decades to follow, ostensibly progressive new legislation to safeguard tenure for farm labourers (for example, the 1997 Extension of Security of Tenure Act) would in many cases come to have an effect opposite to that intended. The post-1994 lawmakers, Steinberg writes, 'jumped into this complicated world and tried to make it simple' (*Midlands* 67). Thousands of black South Africans were driven off farmland by white owners unwilling to shoulder extra social and financial responsibility, or anxious about 'strangers' arriving from urban areas to make land claims. As a member of the local Farm Watch explains to Steinberg as they tour broken-down, abandoned and destroyed buildings in the area, landowners increasingly opted to abandon the vexed filigree of relations that constituted racialised rural paternalism (the world of *The Seed is Mine*) for late capitalist, neo-liberal and contractual modes of employment, with workers sourced from the labour pools of growing urban townships: 'They established rules of occupation that made their tenants' lives unliveable and they watched like hawks until a tenant committed a crime. Then they would go and evict' ('The Defeated', 33). This is the larger social narrative within which *Midlands* unfolds, one in which an incoming farmer's attempts to formulate a set rules for tenants who have lived there for generations are interpreted by those tenants as a coded and arrogant attempt to drive them off the land. 'The Mitchells were new', Steinberg writes, 'but they had stepped into the drama of an endgame' ('The Defeated', 27)

As such, even though the author duly references the famous opening of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) in setting his scene, Steinberg's work complicates the trajectory that underlies this and so many other South African novels of literary liberalism the twentieth century, from R. R. R.

Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy* (1928) onwards, with their migrations from an often idealised pastoral world to a corrupting metropolis. In both *Midlands* and *Three-Letter Plague* – the non-urban non-fictions that I read in this chapter – the narrative apparatus moves to the countryside, yet one every bit as complex and contested as the post-apartheid city. In the process it subjects the urbane assumptions and self-assured reflexes of left-liberal social thought to close-knit and conservative communities invested in very different kinds of language and symbolic exchange. 'It has been so long since I have spent time with a person who thinks this way that I have forgotten that his kind exists' – this is the narrator's response when Arthur Mitchell maintains that 'My story is a simple one' and that 'As long as you tell the truth, I can't possibly have a problem' (93). But of course, this story – and the question of who has the credibility and authority to tell it – are anything but simple. In this sense, the non-fictional rules of engagement – the pact, the contract, the lease – which one sees Steinberg tentatively working out with regard to his often unlikeable or inscrutable subjects in *Midlands* become enmeshed within a wider set of signals sent back and forth across the landscape of the racial frontier: a 'whole gamut of wordless games' by which farmers and tenants test the limits of the rules governing their lives (177).

*

In effecting this narrative migration – from urban to rural, and from constitutional or national imaginaries to customary and intensely local ones – *Midlands* can hardly escape being read alongside an influential novel of the same period. Lauded on the Vintage paperback edition as being 'on the frontier of world literature', J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) begins as a kind of urbane campus novel but modulates into something very different – perhaps a deconstructed farm novel, an anti-pastoral or even post-pastoral – as its protagonist David Lurie moves from the city to a smallholding in the Eastern Cape (another historical and metaphorical frontier) to join his daughter.[1]

In an earlier chapter, I noted how Steinberg rather surprisingly invokes the character of Lucy Lurie in a debate about HIV/AIDS denialism. Reviewing Didier Fassin's *When Bodies Remember*, he suggested that those who devoted too much intellectual effort and sympathy to understanding President Mbeki's position on the epidemic – who undertook overly 'generous anthropologies of

[1] See Rita Barnard, 'Coetzee's Country Ways', for an account of 'the curious generic form of *Disgrace*: half academic novel and half anti-pastoral' (393). She offers a revealing contrapuntal reading across generic boundaries, placing Coetzee's work in dialogue with Van Onselen's *The Seed is Mine*, and suggesting how the self-aware forms of the novel are able to avoid falling into the 'unconscious autobiography' which, as we saw in the previous chapter, some critics detected in Van Onselen's treatment of Kas Maine.

African mistakes' – risked reproducing her low expectations of post-apartheid South Africa: 'Trying desperately to understand her attacker, she condemns him' (*Notes* 274). Perhaps Coetzee's novel was read in these stark, unforgiving terms by some in South Africa; yet it is surprising to see such an interpretation cited as cultural orthodoxy, as 'fact', by such a formidably intelligent writer. A nuanced and carefully historicised reading of the politics of HIV/AIDS dissidence, in other words, yields to a surprisingly cursory account of a novel, glossing over the subtlety and indeterminacy built into the narrative mechanism of Coetzee's fiction.

Ever since *Disgrace* was cited in a 2000 submission by the African National Congress about racist stereotypes in the media (whether as symptom or diagnosis was never quite clear), its defenders have argued that this is not a language event that can be taken at face value; that all its events reach us through the narrative filter of a protagonist for whom we feel a disquieting mixture of complicity and repugnance. If anyone is the fatalist (this argument goes) it is David Lurie, the unreconstructed male presence who filters the narrative and sees events in abstract terms that are of no help to his daughter: 'It was history speaking through them, a history of wrong' (156). Able to deploy the fictional technique of free indirect style, the narrative voice of *Disgrace* weaves between a grammatically distant or 'omniscient' third person and a 'close' third person: at points the reader becomes a secret sharer of Lurie's thoughts as the language of the novel seems to bend around his sensibility and inhabit the same vocabulary as its protagonist. Lurie is in this sense a twenty-first-century descendant of the unreliable narrator, or perhaps the more disquieting case of an unreliably unreliable narrator, given that (as in some of the literary confidence tricks we considered in the previous chapter) *Disgrace* does not easily or reliably flag how to read the limits of its main character's awareness. Filtered through the unquantifiable distortions of this narrative prism, Lucy's decision to remain on the land is surely something more opaque and open-ended than Steinberg's paraphrase suggests.

When *Disgrace* does explicitly articulate its limitations, what it is asked for is, ironically, something very much like what *Midlands* attempts to offer: 'The real truth', Lurie suspects, 'is something far more – he casts around for the word – *anthropological*, something it would take months to get to the bottom of, months of patient, unhurried conversation with dozens of people, and the offices of an interpreter' (118). And in fact, Steinberg's wider account of rural South Africa's predicament provides a revealing gloss on the troubled world evoked by Coetzee. In *Notes from a Fractured Country*, a collection of his journalism, he describes the 'drifters, not yet properly urban, no longer properly rural' who 'journey […] back to their ancestral homes incessantly during the course of their failed adult lives' (327). The pastoral binaries of tradition and modernity have been scrambled into a far more complex and opportunistic

pattern of switchbacks and crossings between country and city. Here then is a wider sociological accounting of why Lucy sees the perpetrators still hanging around the district after her ordeal, young men whom her neighbour (or *bywoner*) Petrus seems to have no choice but to support. Steinberg writes:

> The old patriarchs scan the horizon in the hope that one day soon they will no longer be greeted by the sight of their sons and daughters, returning empty-handed. The longer the city falters, the heavier the countryside's burden becomes. It has not the strength to survive as the dumping ground of the unwanted. (*Notes* 327)

Contra to his paraphrase of *Disgrace*, Steinberg's work then becomes an intertext which might go some way to dispel the morbidity and apparent irrationality of Lucy's decision to remain on the land in a situation which Lurie (and many other readers) see as irredeemable: 'ridiculous, worse than ridiculous, sinister' (200).

To read these respectively fictional and non-fictional stories of an African farm in counterpoint is revealing of the possibilities and limits of each mode. On the one hand, the novel evolves immensely supple narrative techniques that are structurally unavailable to the writer of non-fiction who must abide by the documentary pact. On the other hand, *Disgrace* emerges into a situation – South Africa's scene of unresolved difference; the reality hunger of the twenty-first century – in which the intricate narrative focalisations of this 'high' strain of literary fiction struggle to signify in their full sense. They always risk being translated (as in some of the reviews of Dlamini's *Native Nostalgia*) back into a flatter, more paraphrastic kind of language which must mean what it says, and which can be pressed into service as 'evidence' in the public sphere.

In this sense, both *Disgrace* and *Midlands* remain unsettled, divisive, vulnerable books. They take the risk of simply reproducing (or being seen to reproduce) overwrought tropes of the white imagination – inter-racial rape, the colonial frontier, farm murders – even as they might seek to deconstruct and disarm them. 'It is an intriguing, if exasperating read', wrote Cherryl Walker in a dissenting review of *Midlands*, suspecting that the book's enthusiastic public reception 'resides largely (perversely) in the way in which the author reinforces rather than shifts existing sensitivities and confirms widely held stereotypes and fears' ('Review' 96) – the same suspicions, one might add, that have surrounded Coetzee's fictional story of an African farm. Leon de Kock's reading differs: while admitting that 'one bumps unceremoniously into the oldest trope in the South African book: the frontier' in *Midlands* ('Freedom' 75), he sees this compulsive return as a necessary one, the index of a refusal to move on too quickly or glibly from the impress of the past. Moreover, it is embedded in a project conducted via renovated methods that seeks 'to discriminate between orders of information folded into stories' (*Losing the*

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*Plot* 21): to hold in mind both the mythic (fictive) and evidentiary (non-fictive) valences of the stories we live by.

These divergent responses sketch something of the tension between the archetypal and the emergent that runs through Steinberg's work: for one reader a series of over-worked tropes; for another an innovative and taxing form of literary fieldwork that is constantly 'sifting, writing and reckoning with one's own relation to the intelligence gathered' (De Kock, 'Freedom' 74). While largely agreeing with the latter's argument, I would suggest that it does not go quite far enough in considering the taintedness of the intelligence with which Steinberg is forced to work. An unreliable narrator – a deliberately or knowingly unreliable 'I', that is, as central focaliser – would seem to be a nonsensical or impossible idea within a non-fictional text; and yet *Midlands* carries something of this fictional aura, or stain, within its increasingly complex and tangled ways of telling.

## 'A defeat of sorts'
### Narrative postponement, composite identities and suspect intelligence

In developing his establishing shot, Steinberg introduces a device that will run throughout the work: the disjuncture between the region's beauty, as registered by an outsider, and an insider's knowledge of its long-standing historical tensions: 'a spectacular backdrop of giant shapes and colours when I first saw it, a myriad dramas of human anger and violence when I left' (3). The strategy is a risky one from the start, for even as it seeks to dismantle a politically innocent aesthetic response, the conflation of topography and history risks reconfirming one of the silent implications of the colonial pastoral: that the division of black worker and white owner on the land is inevitable or 'natural', 'a primordial fact of South African life' (Smith, 'Beloved Countries' 378).[2]

Not that this is something not registered by the narrative discourse: it repeatedly and retrospectively self-corrects, adjusts, revises itself: 'I read over what I have written', we read after Steinberg has described the dirt track and thick bush where Peter Mitchell was killed, 'and the scenery is ominous in a kitsch and obvious way, as if this place was designed for a murder' (7). This mixture of prolepsis ('Later I will tell you'), recursion ('I read over what I have written') and fastidious signposting is a reflex that runs throughout the work. As a narrative tic this 'stage-managing' (Walker 98) becomes so insistent that

[2] In another example of contrapuntal, cross-genre reading, Smith places the 'intimate spatial ecology' of *Midlands* alongside *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) and Lauretta Ngcobo's novel of rural KwaZulu, *And They Didn't Die* (1990), arguing that despite its self-awareness, *Midlands* is not quite able to escape the generic pull of the South African pastoral.

it can only suggest a deep anxiety about how best to order and release the information it has garnered, and to what extent it can be left 'unsupervised'. These continual kinks in the tense of the narrative discourse are symptoms of an uneven book that must work with or between very different orders of information and intelligence. Before reaching the beginning of the journalistic story in chapter one, the reader has undergone a complex briefing about a number of aesthetic decisions underlying the narrative presentation, and been comprehensively warned about its semi-fictional status and ethical workarounds. Indeed, there can be few literary careers that have begun with as many caveats as that of Jonny Steinberg; but such, he remarks, are 'the consequences of writing about an unsolved murder' (ix).

In the preface we are told that the name of the farms and villages in question have been changed; so too have the names of the living and dead individuals in the book. The name 'Arthur Mitchell' is a pseudonym, and the same goes for all the principal characters. Such decisions, he admits, amount to a loss of authority and of 'a defeat of sorts' (ix); but they seemed to be the only option given the fact that many of those interviewed only consented to have their words reproduced if their names were removed from the record: 'My choice', Steinberg remarks, 'was either to write a book that divided the names of people and places into the real and the fictitious, or to change all names' (x). As the preface goes on, we see how the need to change the most proximate details also required the modification of other, more contextual elements in the book: episodes from the past that threatened to reveal a location; historical figures, events and dates; the clan names of the Zulu families who make up the Normandale tenants. As such, there is a disconcerting ripple effect that spreads through the fabric of the text: a densely local story must at the same time be meticulously untethered from its regional setting, and its larger, tell-tale historical coordinates. Already then, there is a strange fictive or imaginative susurration within the book: within its social depth of field, both foreground and background are known to have been tampered with, but in ways that cannot easily be calibrated by the reader.[3]

[3] A clue to this strange puzzle lies in the ellipsis (…) within Steinberg's quotation of Paton, with which I began this chapter. The famous opening lines of *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) name the actual region in which the events described in *Midlands* took place: 'There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills. These hills are grass-covered and rolling, and they are lovely beyond any singing of it' (7). To add another meta-texual layer: Steinberg is actually quoting not the opening lines proper, but the 1948 author's note, in which Paton quotes himself in the course of specifying what is actual and what invented within the world of his novel: 'It is true that there is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills. It is true that it runs to Carisbrooke, and that from there, if there is no mist, you look down on one of the fairest scenes of Africa, the valley of the Umzimkulu. But there is no Ndotsheni there, and no farm called High Place' (1). In other

At a further remove, one could add that this careful labour of renaming, disguising and subtly reimagining has itself become consigned to history. *Midlands* appears at a moment just prior to the Google-dominated era in which the actual details of the case can now be brought up within a few keystrokes: its laborious process of concealment, in other words, now reads as strangely anachronistic.[4] The contemporary reader is torn between immersion in the text as presented – an insulated, self-consistent world whose parameters have been carefully set, as in the 'knowable community' of a realist novel or *roman à clef* – and researching the 'real' backstory of the murder and its aftermath online.

All of the above might still be regarded as falling within the increasingly elastic boundaries of journalistic practice within the twenty-first century – and such workarounds have, after all, been admitted to. Yet as Steinberg goes on to discuss a figure in the text named 'Elias Sithole', the book's still more risky and strained moves begin to show. Here the preface reveals that two people who helped the author in his research did so on condition that 'they remain not just anonymous but invisible', a particular dilemma given that '[m]y conversations with them had constituted one of the most formative aspects of my research'. So, he goes on, 'we struck a compromise':

> I took a fairly innocuous character in the book, whom I have called Elias Sithole; I altered his personal history to the extent that he became unidentifiable. And then I filled him up with the discourse of two people who refused to appear in this book. So the words exchanged between Elias and me at the dinner in Izita and in the Pietermaritzburg pub are real enough: they are verbatim transcripts of my discussions with the two men who demanded they remain invisible. All that has changed is that I have disguised the identities of those who have uttered them. (xi–xii)

It is a jolting to turn back to this disclaimer once finishing the work, for the scenes with 'Sithole' (which I will come back to) do constitute some of the crucial moments in the work, scenes on which its entire viability pivots as it attempts to redress the fundamental asymmetry that dogs the investigation.

The deep structural problem that *Midlands* must contend with is that while part one records the author's all too easy adoption by Arthur Mitchell and the white farming community (who assumed, through an unconscious idea of racial solidarity, that his account would be sympathetic to their position), the

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words, the literary key to the code of *Midlands* is offered even as it is elided; and so even the syntax of the opening paragraph is emblematic of the text's play of disclosure and/in concealment.

[4] For the 'real' details of the murders at the centre of *Midlands*, see the Human Rights Watch report: Manby et al., *Unequal Protection* 219–21.

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later sections record a process of stonewalling, silence and evasion when the book turns to the tenants' side of the story. Indeed, there is no other 'side', even in the most basic sense, since in the village that Steinberg calls Langeni, it is in almost nobody's interest to have the murder looked into by a white outsider. The result is a book with a broken-backed structure, in which the processes of gathering intelligence – and the nature of information itself – are markedly different in each half.

'Later I was to learn that none of the white farmers in the district had thought not to trust me', we read on page 14, another proleptic 'kink' in the temporal surface of the narrative. Later still he became *persona non grata* in this community: when the book received the Alan Paton award, farmers from the region published a letter in the press suggesting that it should rather have been awarded the Lenin Prize ('The Defeated'). But for 'now' – i.e. throughout the leisurely, novelistic opening movements of the book – the narrator is welcomed into the interior worlds of the white farming community. Quite literally, given the amount of descriptive energy expended on households and domestic arrangements. 'It was more an emblem of a middle-class home than the particular home of a particular family', Steinberg writes of the Mitchell residence, noting the absence of any pictures of Peter:

> Its decorator appeared to have had no particular taste, but had chosen the furniture only for the trappings of bourgeois respectability it signalled. For a strange moment, I imagined I was in a museum rather than a home, a distilled exhibition of a white middle-class lifestyle. Mitchell was its curator, ushering me through its silent rooms. (4)

It is indeed a strange moment: there is a hard-to-describe dynamic in such scenes, as the narrator forensically anatomises the codes of a conservative South African whiteness while also trading on them for access. Even while taking on Janet Malcolm's dictum that every journalist hurts the person s/he writes about, and even while conceding that the unaffiliated non-fiction writer will always be 'a kind of confidence man' or treasonous double agent, there is something corrosive to the larger epistemic architecture here in the narrator's asides about those who have never thought not to trust him, especially since it is a trust that he simultaneously disdains in the narrative present.

Another way of putting this is that in *Midlands* the Steinberg narrator exploits all the privileges of the autobiographical 'I' – in this case, his whiteness as passport into this world – while also deploying the full, caustic scepticism of Malcolm's journalistic 'I'. The result, perhaps, is a confidence trick that extends beyond what is acceptable for preserving a workable degree of trust in the book's narrative operations (more baldly, one could say that it is Steinberg having his cake and eating it). In this scene it only concerns minor domestic details, but the dynamic takes on a more serious dimension when

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a 'staggeringly naïve policeman' hands the author a file of secret affidavits, signed by the inhabitants of Langeni who have given statements against the men, 'Mduduzi Cube' and 'Ngwane Mabida', who are initially arrested for Peter Mitchell's murder:

> These were secret affidavits; the prosecutor would only give them to the accused on pain of being thrown in jail. Those who signed their names had taken their lives in their hands by doing so. And here I was, a stranger pawing through pages of other people's fates. That I was white was enough for Sullivan to trust me implicitly with the lives of black witnesses. I was tempted to remind him that I was a journalist, and that we were only meeting at all because I was publishing a book. But I held my tongue. (195)

The project does acknowledge or flag its ethical quandaries, in other words, but these are never allowed to derail the larger narrative momentum: 'But I held my tongue'. Nor, perhaps, can these admissions fully absorb or neutralise the consequences they raise. The result is that such dissonant notes keep echoing and gathering within the orchestration of the work, which modulates from being a work of investigative journalism (as presented by its publisher) into something other.

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A central crux in the backstory, and one that the book returns to from various angles, is the scene when Mitchell as new farm owner goes to brief his tenants about his 'rules'. Chief among them is that he must be given names and identity numbers of all people living on the farm. In the farmer's rendition, he is civil and respectful, someone with much experience of negotiating with trade unions in the corporate world – 'I do not lose my temper. I do not confront. I listen, then withdraw' (21) – only to be met with provocative hostility from one of the long-term tenants. A man named Mhila Mashabana 'got up and started shouting': 'He said blacks do not give their names and identity numbers to *umlungu* – the white man – because *umlungu* cannot be trusted with such information. He will keep it innocently for a while and then turn it against you' (20).

As *Midlands* unfolds, we realise how radically differently this event was experienced by the tenants who are angered by Mitchell's demand for names, but still more disgusted by a further stipulation that the farmer has glossed over in his account of events to Steinberg. In order to prevent 'strangers' coming onto the farm, Mitchell demands to photograph all kraals to monitor building work, and requires that tenants must seek his permission to extend their dwellings if they are expecting children. Hearing about these rules provokes visceral disgust in many of Steinberg's black interlocutors within *Midlands,* who immediately regard them as the key to the murder, evincing an

'unambivalent satisfaction' and a degree of empathy with the killers that jolts the narrator: 'The pervasive rage, the powerful identification with the killers, was awesome and shocking' (235).

As a scene that the narrative loops back to several times, it becomes emblem and conduit of a profound and unexpressed anger in the region, and one that Steinberg will place carefully within a larger historical arc. Drawing on histories of the area, he shows that the matter of taking names and policing domestic space is a one that goes back to a 1904 census conducted by British colonial authorities of Natal. This was precursor to a series of taxes – on each hut in a kraal, on each wife in a polygamous household – intended to drive members of the black peasantry into wage labour. The millennarian sense of foreboding and desperation that this created amid black farmers led in turn to what is now called the Bambatha Rebellion of 1906, a moment of resistance suppressed with immense brutality by the colony. *Midlands* accrues substantial explanatory power here, in tracing how the matter of divulging names and intimate domestic details is one that signifies through a complex network of folk memory about 'the Census', and is bound up with a complex history of carefully engineered dispossession that sought to foreclose the ability of black families to sustain themselves across generations on the land.

Just as the quotient of explanatory power and 'history from below' in *Midlands* increases, however, so the likelihood of any kind of epistemic balance within the work ebbs, since the matter of gathering information is increasingly revealed as such a vexed one. In the first sections, Steinberg reports with disdain on the intelligence operations and vigilantism of the local Farm Watch who rely on a network of informers and bought information. Such information, the narrator remarks, is impure: 'It is shaped by the desire to please the buyer, to give him what he wants. It dawned on me that the stories white men gathered about Izita might well depart very little from the stories their own imaginations had invented' (152). And yet in the latter sections of the work, Steinberg himself must come to rely on paid informants, and his account of this process forms a parodic and unsettling echo of the militarised interrogations that are going on elsewhere in the district (and which will eventually lead to a further two killings): 'I would press and press until they were so full of caffeine and nicotine, and the room so full of words and memories and forced inductions, that they would stumble out and hope never to see me again.' (109)

Inevitably the narrative discourse seeks to catch itself in this very irony before the reader does: 'There is something amusing about my adventure, is there not?' Steinberg writes, 'I smugly tell you of the white men who have gone to Izita to get information and chased their own tails. And yet I am surely one of those white men' (218). Again, one is confronted with the question of whether simply naming an ethical blind spot or technical conundrum is sufficient; or what exactly transpires within the apparent security and 'honesty'

– or the shadow – of such explicit flagging. The later sections of *Midlands* become increasingly rhetorical in this sense, and within this spiral of metatextual speculation and self-consciousness, the figure of Elias Sithole comes to have a crucial anchoring effect. He provides by far the most direct and powerful black counter-voice in the text, one that can meet the author with some degree of discursive equality.

In the scene at the Pietermaritzburg pub, late in the work, the author and Sithole engage in what the former calls 'a complicated, disturbing fight' (237). The section is particularly compelling in its dramatic, dialectical quality: as a meeting of thesis and antithesis that keeps evolving, the upper hand of authority passing back and forth as the afternoon unfolds. When Steinberg scorns Sithole's idea that Mitchell's mistake when meeting his tenants was a matter of style and tone, that he should have approached his tenants in a different way, bringing a crate of beer, 'black people's beer', with him, his interlocutor responds: 'I see we are set for a battle this afternoon. So let me begin by conceding the first round. Yes, this is not a matter that can be resolved over a crate of beer. You're right. Every inch he gave they would have taken, and then some more' (245).

And yet as Steinberg builds on this admission and rehearses Mitchell's case, the scene modulates again. The journalistic imperative to stress-test a story or challenge a source merges in and out of an unwanted but ineluctably racialised identity:

> When I rose to Mitchell's defence, I did so as a journalist. I wanted my subject to work for his prejudices. But a part of me listened to myself defending Mitchell, and as I heard my voice, I knew it was for real. I was not a journalist, but a white man, like Mitchell, and I was in his corner. I needed Elias to lose his argument because he scared me. As he dug in his heels, and spoke to me as a racist, I slipped out of this primordial whiteness, became a journalist again, listened to my subject sweep across time, was excited in the most abstract and unsatisfying of ways, as if I was observing a foreign country, and would send a dispatch home, to be read by other disinterested observers. I feel cramped and inhibited, miles away from myself. I would rather be Elias or Mitchell, a protagonist, full of fire and conviction, ready to fight to the death. (*Midlands* 249–50)

The dance of first person pronouns is a complex one here, both closely implicated in what it is describing but also able to distance itself in ways not available to those being written about. It is, one might say, moving too freely between the journalistic and autobiographical 'I', inhabiting too many zones, flitting between tenses, taking up too much space – even as it laments having to occupy the middle ground, the 'midlands', in which the book makes its meanings. Taken aback by Steinberg's defence of Mitchell, and tiring of the civility of the exchange, Sithole's arguments modulate in turn, until eventually he 'goes for the jugular': 'Yes you go to the other side with your informers and

your old friends from Cosatu. And you try to do the blacks justice. But no matter what you say, your book is still about the white man being chased off the land' (249). An account of a 'farm murder' by a white journalist, he confirms, can never hope to emerge from the epistemic lop-sidedness embedded in the project, and they part on a sour note: 'It would be better if you did not come. Just let things sort themselves out quietly. If it is the destiny of the place to become a peasant society again, then so be it. Get on with your own life in Johannesburg' (249).

The non-fictional voice of *Midlands,* we see here, is able to show up even its most intimate failings. And yet even as it does so, the lingering caveats in the preface to the book undermine the scene's power. Sithole is, recall, a composite who has been 'filled up' with the discourse of two other men; we know the scene is drawn from 'verbatim transcripts' of discussions, but we have no way of gauging the shifts effected by the scene-painting or contextualisation here, or indeed what it means for such a fully achieved character to be carrying the sensibility of two different people. The structural importance of the scene, that is, rides in tension with a degree of tampering to which the reader does not have access.

Contra the disclaimers in the preface, I would suggest that it is by no means clear that 'all that has changed' is a simple matter of identities. Indeed, one could argue that such an admission changes everything in how the book makes its meanings. The result, resonating backwards through many other scenes, is that it reads in part less as a work of investigative journalism than a polyphonic 'novel of voices' or 'documentary novel' – to borrow phrases used by the 2015 Nobel Prize committee for Svetlana Alexievich's accounts of the Russian transition (online). *Midlands* becomes a tissue of disembodied, competing discourses, a polyglossic and even experimental array of competing narrative propositions that become fundamentally destabilising to the central investigative authority of the text. Despite the narrator's rhetorical moves and agile self-consciousness, the reader might still come to see (as with a fictional narrator) certain ironies and unreliabilities and over his shoulder.

Or perhaps the problem lies in precisely the narratorial knowingness and overreliability, in the claustrophobia that it generates by depriving the reader of any interpretive purchase. One might even suggest that the work risks leaving a disconcerting, unwanted affinity between the 'rules' established by Mitchell and the overbearing contract established by narrative intelligence at the centre of the book: its tendency, as new owner of a non-fictional terrain, to occupy and police 'every inch' of analytic space. The verdict of one 'Elias Sithole' remains hanging in the air, at once quasi-fictional and all too telling: 'It would be better if you did not come' (249).

I offer this rather stringent reading of *Midlands* less as an accusation than a tribute to Steinberg's ambitions at the outset of his career, and also as a way of

marking how his feel for non-fiction narrative evolves. By the time of *Three-Letter Plague*, something different has been achieved. The counter-voices ranged around the authorial intelligence are accorded more discursive equality, privacy and power; the narrator is, in turn, forced to surface and acknowledge a more shameful and vulnerable 'I'. The sometimes overbearing sense of narrative ownership recedes and the result is a warmer, more intimate, more credible work of non-fiction – though not, of course, without its problems.

## 'The architecture of shame'
### Secrecy and disclosure in *Three-Letter Plague*

In an article of 2011, Steinberg describes the preparatory work for his book on HIV/AIDS and antiretroviral medicine in the Eastern Cape. One of the first steps was to review 'the imaginative and intimate literature' on the epidemic in South Africa, at which point he discovered, to his surprise, that 'there was almost none' ('An Eerie Silence', online). At the time (the early years of the millennium), only two memoirs by HIV-positive people had been published in the country: *AIDSafari* (2005) by Adam Levin and *Witness to AIDS* (2005) by Constitutional Court judge Edwin Cameron, joint winners of the Alan Paton award in 2006. Yet, Steinberg remarks, as accounts by gay white men in the midst of a pandemic transmitted largely between black heterosexual men and women in South Africa, neither could be said to come from the heart of the crisis.

The article does point to fiction – Niq Mhlongo's *Dog Eat Dog* (2004) and *After Tears* (2007), Siphiwo Mahala's *When a Man Cries* (2007), Thando Mgqolozana's *A Man Who is Not a Man* (2009) – for subsequent, more oblique and sometimes guarded refractions on masculinity and sexuality by black writers during the time of AIDS.[5] Yet the closest to an AIDS memoir by a black South African man at the time, the piece suggests, might have come disguised as an experimental autobiographical novel, Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), that is transposed into the second person, 'you'. Yet even this powerful and prophetic rendering of HIV as it impinges on the lives of students and young professionals in Johannesburg is suffused with a difficult silence: Mpe's own death at age 34 from an undisclosed illness.[6]

[5] In tracking the uneasy politics of representing the epidemic, Steinberg also points to Zakes Mda's anger when he was faulted by Norman Rush in the *New York Review of Books* for not mentioning the crisis in his widely read novel *The Heart of Redness* (2000): 'Why didn't he ask Coetzee why he didn't write about AIDS? [...] Nobody takes issue with him because he's white. But because I'm black, it's my issue' (quoted in Steinberg, 'An Eerie Silence').

[6] As Lizzy Attree remarks in the introduction to a posthumously published interview with Mpe collected in *Blood on the Page*, 'the ambiguity that surrounds his death is in

Against this background of politically vexed, constrained or symbolically coded articulation, *Three-Letter Plague* joined, in the words of one reviewer, 'an uneasy South African sub-genre' of life writing about the black experience of HIV/AIDS by white writers (Wilbraham 67), one which includes Adam Ashforth's *Madumo: A Man Bewitched* (2000), a biographically anchored enquiry into illness, social envy and occult belief in 1990s Soweto, and Liz McGregor's *Khabzela* (2005). The latter is a journalist's account of Fana Khaba, a much-loved radio host and DJ who became an icon by publicly disclosing his status on air and beginning antiretroviral treatment, only to abandon it and revert to quacks in an increasingly desperate and fatal search for a cure. In the tragic story of Khabzela – with its confounding mixture of frank talk and persistent secrecy, of ongoing private stigma amid apparent public openness – one can discern the kind of cultural silence amid noise that Steinberg seeks to understand and address in his work. Like the 'loveLife' prevention campaign of the time, with its sexualised billboards ('What's Your Position?') and media-savvy messaging that avoided any reference to sickness, frailty or death, Khabzela's story showed that '[i]t is possible to chatter about AIDS incessantly, and many people in South Africa do, even while plummeting down the abyss of denial'. Steinberg goes on to remark that 'a special language is reserved for AIDS, a numbed, meaningless, evasive language that speaks incessantly and abstractly of hope and togetherness and thus manages to change the subject even while raising it' ('An Eerie Silence', online).

Over ten years later, the literature on the epidemic in southern Africa – its aetiology, political economy, sociology, its controversies, activists and artists – is now enormous; Kgebetli Moele's novel *The Book of the Dead* (2009) even features, as a 'character', the voice of the epidemic itself. But it is the particular cluster of ideas about discourse, disclosure and evasion above that I want to hold in mind as a way of approaching *Three-Letter Plague* (the title of which is taken from a euphemism for the epidemic: *Amamgam' amathathu* meaning 'three letters' i.e. HIV). It is a book that pays close attention to the various competing languages of HIV/AIDS at work in the Lusikisiki district; in doing so it carefully sifts and searches for a counter-voice to the numb, evasive registers of public messaging. Yet even as the text argues for and embodies the imperative not to change the subject, the analytic and narrative confidence in *Three-Letter Plague* must reckon with matters of stigma and shame that are intensely private and resistant to expression. 'Narrative gets to shame quicker than any other device', Steinberg remarked at a 2011 seminar on the ethics of narrative journalism ('Ethics'). Shame emerges as the deep subject of

keeping with the cultural mystification of AIDS that he laid bare in his fiction, always performed at least one remove from reality' (15).

*Three-Letter Plague*, and one that will eventually draw out an autobiographical persona very different from that of *Midlands*.

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In the opening pages, the narrator writes that his enquiry was spurred by a passage in Cameron's memoir, *Witness to AIDS*, which tells of how the government of neighbouring Botswana offered free antiretroviral treatment to every HIV-positive citizen in 2001. At the time, it was a dramatic and unprecedented declaration of intent in sub-Saharan Africa, underwritten by careful logistical provision and a massive public awareness campaign. And yet two years later, only 15 000 of over 100 000 affected people had come forward to be treated. Why did they not come forward to access life-saving drugs? Cameron's answer is stigma: 'In some horrifically constrained sense', he writes, 'they are "choosing" to die, rather than face the stigma of AIDS and find treatment' (quoted 1). *Three-Letter Plague* undertakes a deep exploration of this encounter between biomedical intervention and local recalcitrance, suspecting that when people die en masse within walking distance of treatment, 'there must be a mistake somewhere, a miscalibration between institutions and people. This book is a quest to discover whether I am right' (2).

In undertaking this quest, Steinberg turns to what is touted as the most progressive and successful treatment programmes in South Africa at the time: the roll-out of antiretroviral medicine in the Lusikisiki district of the Eastern Cape, where NGOs, activists and the state are working in a newly formed and fragile partnership. Contrary to the wishes of *Médecins Sans Frontières* doctor Hermann Reuter, who hopes Steinberg will write an account of the HIV-positive campaigners whose lives have been transformed by openly acknowledging their status and urging others to do the same, Steinberg's work turns, as ever, toward more opaque domains of social experience.[7] There is a more interesting story to be told, he suggests, about 'those beyond the margins of the ARV programme, those who are sceptical and unsure' (88).

As such, the narrative invests most of its energy in a young man whom Steinberg calls 'Sizwe Magadla': the owner of a successful spaza shop in a village called Ithanga, newly married and intent on building a family, yet anxious about how his peers and rivals are monitoring his modest success, and (he suspects) waiting for him to fail. When the narrator meets him, Sizwe is 'healthy

[7] Didier Fassin traces how 'biographical or autobiographical narrative' became 'a political weapon for fighting AIDS' as part of an organised collective activity that produced 'many such testimonies and traces' (*When Bodies Remember* 22–3). A prime example here would be the 2003 collection *Long Life: Positive HIV Stories* with an afterword by TAC founder Zackie Achmat, as well as the 'Memory Box' project developed by the AIDS Counselling, Care and Training Association, active in Soweto.

and strong and has never tested for HIV, which puts him in a category shared by most South African men his age' (7): 'In this narrow sense, and no more, he was an Everyman, and it was his perspective on the antiretroviral programme that I wanted to understand' (7).

Yet at the same time Sizwe is a specific kind of Everyman. As someone who has received financial help to start his business from a group of well-meaning tourists – bird-watchers who were captivated by his local knowledge and ability to translate the Latin names of species into Xhosa – he is known as a kind of cultural broker between Ithanga and the world of white people, someone who is simultaneously open to new ways of being (and of growing his business), but also wary of divulging what he calls 'black people's secrets', particularly as the HIV/AIDS crisis draws to the surface some of the most fearful and toxic legacies of the racial frontier. What opens up over the course of the work is a tension between the ethical contract of narrative non-fiction (as it tries to respect Sizwe's privacy and personhood), and the urgency of a health crisis in which treatment campaigners preach a doctrine of radical openness and transparency (as a political imperative and the most effective method of dismantling stigma).

Early in the book, Sizwe describes the day that MSF's mobile testing unit came to Ithanga in February 2005. By the end of that day, everyone knew who was HIV-positive simply by watching to see the duration of the post-test counselling: 'for some it lasts two minutes, for others, it is a long, long time', Sizwe explains, 'They don't come out for maybe half an hour, even an hour. And then you know' (31). For him, this charade of patient confidentiality is experienced as a social disaster. The 'eight or nine healthy, ordinary-looking young villagers, most of them young women' who have tested positive have been 'marked with death' and over the next months are silently separated from the village: 'They were watched. Nobody told them that they were being watched. Nobody said to their faces that their status was common knowledge. But everything about them was observed in meticulous detail' (31). These observations, Steinberg continues, 'were not generous; they issued from a gallery of silent jeerers'; and worked to place 'an invisible fence around the nine women' (31). For Sizwe, the moral of the story is clear: 'I must never test for HIV in my own village. If I test positive I would be destroyed' (33).

As in *Madumo* and *Khabzela*, the question of 'knowing your status' (or having it made known) within the community becomes densely imbricated in a micro-geography of scarcity, competitiveness and envy. The Ithanga and Soweto evoked by these works are places of ongoing and chronic poverty in which the communal imaginary forged by the anti-apartheid struggle has been corroded and fractured by unemployment, economic stasis or aggressively neo-liberal and transactional modes of social relation. *Madumo, Khabzela* and *Three-Letter Plague* join several other literary works that refract what several

critics have theorised as the unresolved and 'ugly feelings' of the post-transition: disappointment, jealousy, resentment.[8] In *Madumo* and *Three-Letter Plague,* AIDS and its metaphors come to be permeated with ideas of bewitchment: the belief that others are acting against you via secret or occult means. Beyond the matter of CD4 counts (the medical discourse that many villagers are fluent in) lurks the more amorphous elusive language of a virus laced with social toxicity: an epidemic of envy, suspicion and silence.

Shortly after their conversation about the young women, Sizwe confides to the narrator that a friend of his has tested positive elsewhere, but that they never discuss the matter of seeking out treatment. Feeling a surge of anger, Steinberg confronts his interlocutor, urging him to take action, but then immediately regrets it:

> His silence makes me feel foolish. Until now, I have studiously replicated his muteness on the question of treatment. I do not know what it is he refuses to express, and I fear that if I begin to preach, he will forever censor himself in my presence. My outburst is a mistake. I have shut off a channel of communication between us. (34)

This short chapter, 'Testing Day', is typical of the ebbs and flows of disclosure and concealment that make up the book. It seeks to render the structures of feeling of those deciding how to respond to an epidemic that is laden with social judgement. At a further remove it is bound up with the question of narrative discourse itself, with its quandaries about how to release information, and how to manage the confidences it has been taken into. Steinberg's outburst here, an instinctive humanitarian response to an individual's plight, places in jeopardy his channel for understanding a larger story, and for allowing the revealingly unsaid dimensions that reside in Sizwe's world to surface. The latter is repeatedly characterised as 'a very opaque man' (232), someone who is intensely aware and cautious in his modes of self-presentation: a master of timing, tactical deference, calculated mildness, but also someone quick to point out the errors in Steinberg's own project of watchfulness and meticulous observation when he reads drafts in progress.

Here there is a modulation in Steinberg's approach to constructing non-fiction narratives. As the work progresses, Sizwe himself also becomes a kind of detached and inscrutable observer when the author employs him as translator in exploring the region's clinics and ARV programme. Now placed in the dual role as 'interpreter-subject', Sizwe begins to draw his own conclusions on behalf of his community and family members who are ill but have not yet sought treatment. It is a process happening some way below the narrative

[8] See for example Barnard, 'Reflections' and Van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect*.

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surface, and which the reader catches only glimpses of. In this sense, there is a kind of epistemic balance, or tautness, achieved here that was absent in *Midlands*. While Steinberg is gathering information on Ithanga, Sizwe is concurrently undertaking his own muted ethnography and analysis of the MSF treatment programme, a social movement that he initially views with distaste as a kind of evangelical cult or secular church invested in a particular kind of jargon – 'the unmistakeable fervour of young people speaking a newly learned language' (98). Embarking on this 'radically experimental' journey together within the region, both 'Jonny' and 'Sizwe' have a great deal at stake; as in a tightly plotted novel, the characters are in a dialogical, co-dependent relation to each other.

This neat double act, however, does not convince the bluff Dr Reuter, whose entrance creates a triangulated narrative structure that allows a still more robust stress-testing of each conceptual position (and moves the work beyond the binary frontier metaphors of *Midlands*). When Steinberg relates Sizwe's account of the testing day, the doctor remarks that it is nothing new to him, and that those in MSF have 'a very different attitude to confidentiality compared to the health department' (88). Such disclosure, witting or unwitting, can only be regarded as a positive step: yes, a person who tests positive will form new enemies, but they will also form new alliances and relationships that will be all the more meaningful for being based on total transparency. Yet for Steinberg, the activists have seemingly forgotten the 'delicate tissue of privacy' that is essential to selfhood and dignity (317). This fundamentalist insistence of full disclosure and public confession even puts him in mind of 'the radical practice of outing', of forcing people out of the closet and into the glare of public knowledge for their own good, of healing through 'violent humiliation' (317).

This dialectic of humanist and biomedical ideas of what a life means – both of them convincing on their own terms – weaves its way throughout the book. Reuter will not be detained by any false consciousness of an inviolably private self: as a medical Marxist and materialist committed to reducing mortality, his attitude to the crisis is entirely structural. If there are clinics nearby, if they are staffed in the right way, if treatment provision is decentralised from doctors to nurses and lay health care workers who can follow up in local communities – then people will come to test, and to access drugs. From the doctor's perspective, Steinberg remarks, the book project is irrelevant: '"I am exploring the health-seeking behaviour of ordinary people. You're telling me that's worthless." "Yes", he replied. "Not to discourage you though"' (265).

Until the end of the work this doctor maintains that the decision of Jonny and 'Sizwe' to use a pseudonym (mainly to protect the identity of a relative of the latter who is HIV-positive) is an irredeemable misstep: 'I think it will ruin your book', he remarks: 'Disclosure is linked to acceptance of your reality. If your book perpetuates secrets it becomes part of that mystic kind of mentality

that is so damaging: the mentality of witchcraft' (317). The doctor's words crystallise what becomes the major intellectual challenge of the book: its attempt to run together, and give credence to, both scientific and cultural understandings of the epidemic – an ambition that drew the most pointed critiques from those commentators who felt that one or the other had been unduly privileged.

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*Three-Letter Plague* was widely reviewed when it appeared, both within South Africa and abroad. Released in the United States as *Sizwe's Test* amid substantial publicity, it marked a moment in Steinberg's career when he himself was becoming a kind of broker of local meanings to a global audience perplexed by the South African AIDS tragedy and why the epidemic had been so 'uniquely terrible' in this region (*Three-Letter Plague* 90). Amid the largely positive notices, there were two dissenting notes sounded, one by Adam Hochschild in *The New York Times*, the other by Jacob Dlamini in the South African press.

Hochschild faulted Steinberg for not condemning Thabo Mbeki's AIDS dissidence more strongly: to offer only 'a perfunctory few pages on this topic' and 'play down Mbeki's stubborn obscurantism' was a 'serious flaw' ('Death March', online). Yet this, I think, is to miss the studied way that the work refuses the predictable (and channel-closing) languages of blame and censure. In Lusikisiki, the president's opinions on the epidemic are hardly those of a lone heretic; by contrast, we hear them refracted and echoed throughout the book in more colloquial or sensationalist registers. Even as it charts a particular medical intervention, *Three-Letter Plague* also tells the larger, culturally embedded story of how ordinary South Africans must reckon with the tragic historical timing of a new democracy cursed by a disease that cut to the heart of intimacy, erotic pleasure and childbirth. What should have been be a celebratory act of bringing forth of new life within a new nation became instead a vector of death, 'a contamination that elides the boundary between the physical and the moral' (*Three-Letter Plague* 301), and a domain in which male sexuality was placed under acute question.

As in the most charged and volatile scenes in *Midlands,* the deep story here is that of black families seeking to sustain themselves – socially, economically, biologically – in a place where so much had been done to destroy this. Memories of colonial sterilisation programmes, unethical medical experimentation and the apartheid biological weapons programme hover behind many conversations. The immersion into the region's folk wisdom about HIV/AIDS reveals that Mbeki was hardly alone in discerning some kind of malign conspiracy or externally directed 'plot'. For Reuter, antiretrovirals are the most important health care intervention in fifty years; for Mbeki they are part of 'a package of racial and pharmacological poison' (91) that framed Africa as a source of pathology and promiscuity, as somewhere to be rescued from itself

via an evangelical medical crusade. Yet as in Gevisser's *The Dream Deferred* and Fassin's *When Bodies Remember* (two books that Steinberg pays tribute to in his bibliography as standing above all the rest), *Three-Letter Plague* is able to perform the important intellectual work of sketching the intimate enmity between these two divergent 'progressive' positions, a fraught partnership of state and non-state actors who have their roots in similar politics but now find themselves at odds: 'Hermann is an African-born white Marxist, Mbeki a black third-world nationalist. In another era, they would have been allies' (91).

In Ithanga and Lusikisiki, the notion of a veiled conspiracy against black aspiration takes on more sinister and lurid forms. Sizwe's interest in and watchfulness of Reuter, we gradually learn, is partly due to a rumour in the district that the doctor's needles and pills have been spreading the virus rather than combatting it, and that HIV/AIDS might be a plot to decimate black South Africa and return a white minority to power. 'The needle that penetrates African skin has never been a neutral technology', Steinberg writes, tracing an ambiguous and unsettled history of medicine and politics in rural Pondoland: 'It is an image that has always been hungry for meaning' (150). And just as Steinberg regrets some of his outbursts to Sizwe, so Sizwe regrets having shared these local suspicions about Western medicine with the author: 'I have told you a black people's secret. I am sorry I have told you that' (139).

As such, the narrative shape that seems promised when Jonny and Sizwe embark on a journey of mutual discovery can hardly emerge as one of unalloyed progress towards treatment and self-care. The pull towards this more optimistic plot is constantly frustrated by the corrosive paradox at the heart of the book. That is: any move towards the 'positive' outcome of Sizwe coming to believe in the need for testing, openness and advocacy is concurrently experienced by him as a kind of partial humiliation for his own community, its healers and its knowledge systems. Through its triangulated narrative structure, the book registers sharply divergent responses to the clinics full of emaciated and desperately ill people. For Reuter, those who seem so close to death are his 'favourite' patients because the effect of antiretrovirals will be so dramatic on them (265). The majority will be returned to health, and this will convince others of the drugs' efficacy: 'And people see that power. There is no hiding in these villages' (265). Yet for Sizwe, such scenes are simultaneously 'a cultural defeat, a belittlement of his world' (217). 'In question in these encounters', Steinberg continues, 'was the integrity of the local knowledge that had been bequeathed to him': 'The matter at stake was one of pride and humiliation. He knew that twentieth-century South Africa had gutted his world, leaving it without roads or lights or clinics, or decent jobs. Perhaps he also wondered whether it had left his world without wisdom' (216).

The forensic and unrelenting way in which the narrative treats its 'interpreter-subject' at such moments perhaps accounts for some of the unease

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voiced in Dlamini's lengthy and complex response to the work. His review recognises the book's importance but seems disquieted by the ethnographic shadow hanging over the project, even if he never seems quite able to put his finger on what exactly is the matter. He cites Jonathan Fabian's influential critique of modern anthropology as being premised on the 'denial of coevalness', a discipline in which interpreter and subject have often been constructed as occupying different temporalities – the 'here and now' of modernity versus the 'there and then' of tradition – and wonders if Steinberg is truly able to see both himself and 'Sizwe' as inhabiting the same plane of experience:

> Magadla's refusal to have his blood tested may be totally incomprehensible to Steinberg on 'scientific' grounds but it makes sense as a political gesture. […] Magadla fears a positive result would strip him of his wealth and deny his offspring (including his healthy first-born son) the legacy he is trying to build for them. This is not a man wallowing in the 'there and then' of traditional ignorance but a savvy businessman making calculations. ('False Concept' 13)

These insights, however, are hardly beyond the awareness of the text; indeed this is largely the argument that the work is making, rather than its refutation. What lurks behind Dlamini's unease, perhaps, are rather the 'unknown unknowns': the less quantifiable small cues of phrasing, scenic construction and tonality through which this unequal relationship manifests itself.

Increasingly, Sizwe figures himself as a kind of traitor to his community, as someone 'bartering his privacy', and selling cultural information that should not be for sale: problems that are duly folded back into the narrative discourse and aired in a series of uncomfortable exchanges. In one of the late scenes in the work that (like the conversation with Elias Sithole in *Midlands*) reverberates backwards through what we have read, Reuter confesses to Steinberg his deeper misgivings about 'Sizwe': 'Whenever a white person goes to that village, they come back talking about him. First it was a photographer, then an anthropologist, then you. They come back and talk about him and the stories he tells are so striking' (318).

In this counter-variation on the theme of privacy and disclosure, it is now precisely Sizwe's willingness to talk that seems problematic; since what kind of person, Reuter complains, 'pours his life out the first time he meets people': 'Do you know of this man at Ithanga who is scared of his shop being attacked? If you're really scared you wouldn't pour it out to any white person who comes past. White people are distrusted. I didn't like that. I like people when one doesn't see what bothers them on a daily basis' (318). It is a striking inversion of his own earlier insistence on disclosure and openness, one that leaves Steinberg feeling 'wounded on Sizwe's behalf. Hermann's musings were awfully close to Sizwe's most jaundiced thoughts about himself' (318). This last interview with Reuter also imbues the non-fictional text with the spectre

of (to return to the 'autobiography' of Dugmore Boetie) a large-scale literary con, one that plays in the shadows of the anthropological. Their dual journey, in other words, is less and less able to deny the 'denial of coevalness' than was initially hoped, even despite the book's self-awareness, and the bold series of modulations with which it closes.

As one narrative arc (the journey towards openness and health) undermines or unravels the other (the move towards greater intimacy and discursive equality between Jonny and Sizwe), the text is confronted with a problem of unfinishability. The latter's ongoing reluctance to test generates a crisis in the plotting of the work, and one that eventually reroutes its whole genre signature. To comprehend Sizwe's refusal, Steinberg is compelled to reach into his own history of HIV/AIDS testing, stigma and shame: an element that had been there all along, idly noted 'like the humming of an electrical appliance', but is now drawn directly into the main narrative. (288). The elements of the Euro-American AIDS memoir that had been latent within the work – the invocation of Cameron's book, the allusion to the practice of outing – finally surface explicitly as Steinberg evokes his experiences of HIV tests as a young man, first as a student at Wits University and then later at Oxford. In each, the matter of his patient confidentiality is bungled by a health care practitioner, triggering experiences of anger, self-loathing and the 'internalised opprobrium' that he comes to understand as 'the architecture of shame' (293).

In these pages of autobiography, he examines his feelings of humiliation and self-disgust when testing as a sexually adventurous young man, and articulates how such experiences effected a disabling collapse of private and public censure. At the roots of shame 'lie myriad watching, judging eyes that look at one and see a disgusting and gluttonous figure. They are the eyes of others, but one has internalised them. They are strangers' eyes whose watchfulness is nonetheless experienced in secret on the inside' (293). Expanding into a register that could even be described as autoethnography, the narrator carefully unpacks the psychic operations of stigma at a time when AIDS was spoken of as a 'gay plague': 'The meanness that had been cast at me was utterly indistinguishable from, was indeed entirely parasitic upon, the meanness I felt towards myself' (296). His and Sizwe's respective histories of anxiety, Steinberg suggests, 'might resemble each other in the way the chins and noses of relatives do': 'That the faces are related to one another is as clear as the fact that they are also very different' (288).

The result is an equivalence sketched between narrator and subject, but not one premised on any easily assumed universalism. The humanist register with which the work closes is a negatively defined one, articulated through a comparable experience of shame, routed through the commonality but also opacity of the physical body. Shame and anxiety are invoked as shared physiological experiences; but also as powerfully local and inflected with cultural data that

can never be fully articulated. The figure of 'Sizwe' (which we now learn is a pseudonym) recedes from analytic view, suspended uneasily between two different kinds of plot. The first concerns his guilt at succeeding in the zero-sum economy of a village where this success would seem to be taking away from the others, a place where testing risks opening him up to the machinations of those he lives amongst, and poisoning his future. The second is an idea of an external conspiracy directed by white power against black aspiration, and idea that he never entirely abandons, partly because, Steinberg suggests, it is psychologically less arduous to live by. 'He wants to do good with those pills', is his final verdict on the departing Reuter: 'He is not part of the plot. He doesn't even know about it' (320).

Like many of Steinberg's books, *Three-Letter Plague* ends in a kind of suspension, poised between an interminably harmful past and cautiously hopeful future. Pinioned between anachronistic and emergent languages of social understanding, his œuvre repeatedly dramatises how the transaction of narrative non-fiction in a place like South Africa may never quite be able to escape the script of pre-determined cultural types, or the epistemic damage caused by a racialised history of knowledge-making. For all its remarkable depth, detail and synthesis of research, his South African triptych remains haunted by the tableau of credulous researcher and narrative con artist locked in a self-fulfilling embrace. Or vice versa: by the image of a narrator as 'a kind of confidence man', dealing too intimately and overpoweringly in the lives of others, the latter seduced by a quality of attention and analysis that will always partly demean him. Analytic confidence, its power, its privilege and its problems; confidentiality and its limits; the games of confidence that play out between author, writer and subject in the work of ambitious non-fiction – the word continues to generate the spectrum through which these non-fictions make their meanings. Even as the topicality of their immediate subjects subsides, they remain compelling and unresolved as narrative constructions: delicately balanced structures of trust and artifice through which a restless current of intellectual energy continues to circulate.

Pulling away from the central trio who have occupied the book, the epilogue to *Three-Letter Plague* settles, rather surprisingly, on some of the most minor, peripheral characters. Sizwe does decide to test, but when he does so, it is another party that he informs: 'When he needed finally to confront the prospect of dirt in his blood, it was to the bird-watchers he turned, people whose place in his world is so unheralded and strange as to be ghostly'. (326) The 'accident of their social and physical distance', becomes an enabling factor here, and in the closing pages the narrative steps still further back from the fraught and sometimes claustrophobic intimacies that we have been party to. The final lines invoke work the benign blankness of lay health care worker Kate Marrandi, a Jehovah's Witness whose deflection of all personal questions and

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total refusal to talk about her emotional life (the narrator speculates) had been crucial to her work as a healer. MaMarrandi had 'filed away at herself until she was no longer of and in her world – no sexual history, nothing to rival, nothing to envy, nothing to reflect shame and hostility back at you' (326). At a further remove, she might also be read as the image of the ideal non-fiction narrator: an impossible image, to be sure, but one that has come to temper the sometimes overbearing self-reflexiveness of Steinberg's earlier work: 'Perhaps Kate and the bird-watchers are a model of the place the missing men might dare enter to be treated; a place sufficiently detached from the thick of the world to have become absolutely safe; a place where one might find the means to stay alive' (326).