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To cite this article: Daniel Roux (2009) Jonny Steinberg's *The Number* and prison life writing in post-apartheid South Africa, Social Dynamics, 35:2, 231-243, DOI: 10.1080/02533950903076154

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02533950903076154

Published online: 03 Aug 2009.

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Jonny Steinberg’s *The Number* and prison life writing in post-apartheid South Africa

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Under apartheid, the prison autobiography enjoyed a privileged status, with the prison playing the role of the apartheid state in miniature: the penitentiary was one of the most coercive material manifestations of a racist and brutal regime. With the demise of apartheid, however, the prison autobiography has become a marginalised and depoliticised genre. The loss of status of the prison autobiography is paralleled by the endemic neglect of the penitentiary system, despite its important role in South African history. A close reading of the tropes and rhetoric of apartheid-era prison writing can provide some explanation for the abrupt marginalisation of the penitentiary as a socially important space after 1994: in particular, the line that is drawn between criminal convicts and political prisoners in apartheid-era prison autobiographies anticipates the neglect of the penitentiary under democracy. One exceptional post-apartheid reflection on life in prison, Jonny Steinberg’s *The Number*, stands out both for asking subtle questions about the ideological boundary between the political and the criminal prisoner and for the way it perpetuates the tradition, forged under apartheid, of using the prison as a site for radical social analysis and criticism.

**Keywords:** prison writing; post-apartheid life writing; South African prison conditions

The prison autobiography emerged as an influential genre in South Africa under apartheid. The reasons for this are obvious: between 1920 and 1986, when pass books were abolished, most black South Africans – that is, more than 20 million people – spent some time in jail. When the first democratic government was announced in 1994, nine of its 30 members had served lengthy prison sentences, including, of course, the president. Writers, intellectuals, political activists and leaders were routinely harassed by the security police. Those who did not flee to live under difficult conditions in exile resigned themselves to the probability of imprisonment and torture. The prison enjoined an encounter between the life narrative of the individual and the more collective voicing of dissent against an oppressive regime: incarceration was simultaneously an individual experience and a synecdochal marker of communal suffering. In fact, the prison started to play the role of a nation in miniature: a claustrophobic, tightly controlled, racist and brutal regime encountered in one of its most coercive material manifestations.

Works such as Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* (1996), Breyten Breytenbach’s *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1994), Moses Dlamini’s *Hell Hole, Robben Island* (1984), Ruth First’s *117 Days* (1965), Emma Mashinini’s *Strikes Have
Followed Me All My Life (1989) and Albie Sachs’s Jail Diary (1990) have all become established not only as important autobiographical works, but also as significant moments in the development of a characteristically South African literary sensibility borne out of the exigencies of political struggle and personal suffering. It is worth pointing out that while these autobiographies share a historical context, they are not similar in either style or objective: Mandela’s autobiography, for instance, incessantly performs the subordination of the individual voice to the more abstract idea of the aspirations of the South African people, while Breytenbach’s memoir establishes a much more provisional and fractious link between his personal ordeal and the plight of the oppressed masses. Mashinini’s memoir is, properly speaking, more confessional than Dlamini’s, which is overtly cast as a contribution to militant activism, and so on. Nonetheless, despite these differences, prison writing was a particularly influential form of autobiography in South Africa under apartheid.

A self-evident question to ask, when confronted with the significance of the prison memoir as a South African literary institution, is what happened to prison literature after apartheid? Astonishingly, the answer is that it all but disappeared, literally in the space of a year. Of course, many people published their retrospective memoirs describing their imprisonment under the apartheid regime. New writing, however, was thin, and comprised mostly of collaboratively written collections of prisoners’ stories that emerged from creative writing workshops. Heather Parker Lewis’s The Prison Speaks: Men’s Voices/South African Jails (2003), Julia Landau’s Journey to Myself: Writings by Women from Prison in South Africa (2004) and Margie Orford’s recent Fifteen Men: Images and Words from Behind Bars (2008) are exemplary in this regard.

Post-apartheid prison books tend to straddle the line between biography and autobiography, and represent the experience of prison in a frame loosely defined by the Social Sciences: located somewhere between confessional narratives and biographical investigations, they use prisoners’ stories in the service of therapy, to disclose something about the hardship of life in prison and to reflect on the social conditions that have governed the lives of prisoners. For all their reformative zeal, they sometimes come perilously close to fulfilling a function identified with the penitentiary apparatus: the production of biographical, individualising knowledge about prisoners, to borrow Michel Foucault’s well-known argument from Discipline and Punish:

The introduction of ‘biographical’ is important in the history of penalty. Because it establishes the ‘criminal’ as existing before the crime and even outside it. And, for this reason, a psychological causality, duplicating the juridical attribution of responsibility, confuses its effects. At this point one enters the ‘criminological’ labyrinth from which we have certainly not emerged: any determining cause, because it reduces responsibility, marks the author of the offence with a criminality all the more formidable and demands penitentiary measures that are all the more strict (1991, p. 252).

The launch of Orford’s Fifteen Men at the Franschhoek Literary Festival in South Africa in 2008 seemed to confirm the sense that much of the new prison writing exists as an uneasy cultural extension of the penitentiary apparatus. At the event, prison officials and pastors made moving speeches. The writers of the book, however, were not allowed to read from it because they were all still inmates at the local Drakenstein Prison and, in the absence of the national and regional commissioners of prisons, the event did not enjoy ‘official’ status. The authors, in other words, were present but silenced at an event that seemed to belong altogether to the publisher and correctional
service officials. The ‘words from behind bars’ essentially remained behind bars at the book launch, the precise moment where a book symbolically enters the public domain. The presence of the correctional service bureaucrats, the language of healing and reform and the authority of the prison to confer ‘official’ or ‘unofficial’ status on the event evidence the very real sense in which the book exists almost as a spontaneous realisation of the purported goal of the penitentiary to effect the ‘rehabilitation’ of offenders and their ‘reintegration’ into society.

What has gone missing in new life writing from and about prison is any real sense of the prison as a mirror of social life, or as a space that provokes radical questions about the nature of our society and our relationships with one another. These more recent autobiographies effectively mark the depoliticisation of imprisonment after apartheid, or at least the strategic relegation of the political to the globally marketable realm of personal suffering and survival. It is interesting to note that in Kenya, in contrast, prison memoirs remained an influential genre even after the demise of colonialism and the Kenyatta regime: John Kiriamiti’s *My Life in Crime* (1989) and *My Life in Prison* (2004), Benjamin Garth Bundeh’s *Birds of Kamiti* (1991), Charles Githae’s *Comrade Inmates* (1994), Kiggia Kimani’s *Prison is not a Holiday Camp* (1994), and so on, sustain a focus on the experience of imprisonment – and specifically on Kenya’s notorious Kamiti prison, which maintains its role, in most of these texts, as a barometer of the state of the nation. There is, in other words, no necessary causal relationship between the fall of an oppressive regime and the demise of its prison literature.

In tandem with what can only be described as an abrupt genre shift, the new South African government seemed content, initially at least, to abandon the prison system to a loose confluence of corrupt interest parties: renegade warders, prison gangs and criminal networks. When Justice Thabani Jali was tasked with investigating prison conditions in South Africa in 2001, he uncovered one of the most corrupt and abusive prison systems in the world. The 2005 Jali report is a horrifying document, cataloguing the systematic abuse of prisoners on a scale few people had imagined possible in a democratic society. The report outlines a calamitous situation in the Department of Correctional Services, with widespread corruption, maladministration and routine infractions of prisoners’ constitutional rights. Prisons are overcrowded and inmates are ‘subjected to torture and other treatment that would be deplorable in any democratic or civilised society’ (Republic of South Africa 2005, p. 333). Solitary confinement remains widespread as a form of punishment (Republic of South Africa 2005, p. 336). The C-Max Prison in Pretoria, constructed under the new democratic government, is characterised by the report as an institution designed to ‘punish and even torture’ its inmates (Republic of South Africa 2005, p. 365). Prison rapes are common and warders either turn a blind eye to sexual assault or actively participate in the sexual exploitation and rape of prisoners (Republic of South Africa 2005, pp. 390–462). More recently, the Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons noted in its 2006/2007 annual report that while there have been some improvements in Correctional Services (Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons 2007, p. 5), there are still systemic problems, ‘such as a lack of staff, poor infrastructure, prison overcrowding, lack of rehabilitation programmes, lack of vocational and recreation facilities and inadequate healthcare’ (Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons 2007, p. 7). Unsentenced children are kept in adult cells, where they are ‘extremely vulnerable to acts of intimidation, violence and rape’ (Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons 2007, p. 28). In some cases, overcrowding is so bad that prisoners have ‘less than 1.2m, the size of an average
office table, in which they must sleep, eat and spend 23 hours per day’ (Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons 2007, p. 16). In effect, the promotion of the apartheid prison as the birthplace of a democratic nation is paralleled by a scandalous neglect of deteriorating conditions in existing prisons – a situation that is exacerbated by a public outcry about spiraling crime rates in South Africa and the consequent demonisation of criminal offenders.

One has to ask the naïve question: how is this possible? The same people who are now in influential government positions wrote passionately about prison conditions and prison reform when they were in prison. In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela talks about the prison as a microcosm of society in general (1996, p. 464), and repeats the maxim (coined by Fyodor Dostoevsky) that a society can be judged by its treatment of prisoners: ‘A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones – and South Africa treated its imprisoned African citizens like animals’ (1996, p. 233). Moses Dlamini, in his autobiography *Hell Hole, Robben Island*, refers to the ‘national tragedy’ of criminals that ‘had been hardened by years of imprisonment’ (1984, p. 165) and sketches his plan for a utopian post-apartheid penitentiary apparatus:

we held a number of discussions, symposiums and debates on how to rehabilitate such a large number of hardened criminals in our society (the highest figure in the world per population) after getting our freedom and independence. We would need the assistance of some of the world’s best psychiatrists and special rehabilitation camps would have to be created to try and cure our fellow brothers who have been victims of a vicious system (1984, pp. 165–166).

Yet in a few months after the first democratic election, the prison became a place beyond the political and the social: a repository of abjection, more invisible than it ever was under successive colonial and apartheid regimes, and at least comparable in the brutality that it inflicts on its inmates.

Here I believe that a close reading of the tropes and rhetoric of apartheid-era prison writing can provide some illuminating answers. In the apartheid prison, a difficult line was drawn between political prisoners and criminal prisoners. In many ways, prison autobiographies under apartheid have this as one of their main performative functions: ensuring an intractable division between the political prisoner and the criminal and, by extension, between the domain of the ‘political’ and its Other, a social space located beyond politics. This is not, of course, to deny the real differences between political and common-law prisoners – differences that even the apartheid government tacitly acknowledged through its differential treatment of political inmates. Prisoners were also themselves strongly aware of the differences between those who were incarcerated for their political convictions and those who were incarcerated for ‘ordinary’ crimes. Nonetheless, the very fact that this difference required such careful maintenance, and was repeated so often, perhaps divulges a sense of anxiety about the exact location of the boundary, even as it articulates the urgent necessity of some dividing line.

For Mandela, the criminal prisoners who were incarcerated on Robben Island together with the political prisoners until 1965 occupy a tenebrous position on the very periphery of his sense of communal identity. He describes his intermittent contact with criminal convicts near the lime quarry:

Although our work at the quarry was meant to show us that we were no different from the other prisoners, the authorities still treated us like the lepers who once populated the
island. Sometimes we would see a group of common-law prisoners working by the side of the road, and their warders would order them into the bushes so they would not see us as we marched past. It was as if the mere sight of us might somehow affect their discipline. Sometimes out of the corner of an eye we could see a prisoner raise his fist in the ANC salute (Mandela 1996, p. 480).

Here Mandela outlines the equivocal way in which the prison locates political prisoners: on the one hand, they are ostensibly mere criminals, indistinguishable from the common-law prisoners on the island; on the other, they are anxiously separated from the criminal convicts and accorded a special status. For Mandela, who is suspicious of all the prison’s attempts to divide and classify, the criminal convicts’ ANC salute betokens the possibility of solidarity, a sense of a community that transcends the prison’s (and, by extension, the apartheid state’s) categories. Nonetheless, in this extract and throughout *Long Walk to Freedom*, the criminal prisoners remain a ‘them’: the very metaphor that seeks to include them also sets them apart under the somewhat dehumanising rubric of ‘raw material to be converted’ (Mandela 1996, p. 484), always potentially in collaboration with prison officials. He takes care, for instance, to recount how he tried to help a convict called Bogart who had been assaulted by a warder at the quarry. However, Bogart was bribed – by implication, always a possibility where criminal convicts are involved – and denied that the assault ever took place, humiliating Mandela in front of the commanding officer (Mandela 1996, pp. 485–486).

Two other memoirs, Dlamini’s *Hell Hole, Robben Island* (1984) and D.M. Zwelonke’s *Robben Island* (1989), are less circumspect about condemning the criminal convicts. *Hell Hole, Robben Island* was first published in 1984 while Dlamini was living in exile in Tanzania. Dlamini was imprisoned on Robben Island from 1963 to 1966 for furthering the aims of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). In his *Robben Island Dossier*, Neville Alexander identifies the years from 1962 to 1966 as particularly brutal and dehumanising (1994, pp. 11–12). He observes that ‘[f]rom 1962 to 1964 assaults, very often brutal and mass assaults, of political prisoners was a weekly, often a daily, occurrence’ (Alexander 1994, p. 20). The hardship of life on Robben Island during this time was compounded by the use of criminal prisoners to demoralise and intimidate the political prisoners. Dlamini’s memoir, then, reflects on a remarkably violent and ruthless chapter of Robben Island’s history, and does so from a perspective informed by the politics of the PAC, whose members substantially outnumbered supporters of the ANC on the Island during 1963–1965. Dlamini published his memoir in 1984, at the inception of the most successful and wide-ranging mass mobilisation against the apartheid state in South Africa under the auspices of the United Democratic Front. In this sense, the memoir is not just reflecting on life under apartheid in the 1960s, but is fully engaged in the turbulent politics of resistance that characterised the early 1980s. Zwelonke’s *Robben Island*, a semi-fictional narrative based on his incarceration on the Island, is, if anything, even bleaker and more cynical than Dlamini’s memoir. While Zwelonke notes that prisoners who, like the narrator, arrived late in 1964 had an easier time than their predecessors (1984, p. 14), the semi-fictionalised autobiography – which revolves around the life of Bekimpi, a leader of Poqo (the armed wing of the PAC) – is an unremittingly grim catalogue of tortures. It ends with a graphic description of Bekimpi’s dead, mutilated body. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this memoir is its strong personal voice and its focus on interiority: on dreams, fantasies, anxieties and the general process of remembering. Zwelonke’s prison is characterised by descriptions of the weather, the
gait of the warders, the expression on people’s faces: his narrative is textured by the minutiae of personal observation.

In *Robben Island*, Zwelonke describes the criminal convicts on Robben Island as ‘servile, ignorant, selling each other for favours, full of fear, every man for himself’ (1989, p. 68). As David Schalkwyk points out, his descriptions naturalise their criminality through relentless reference to physiognomy (1998, pp. 81–95). Zwelonke’s description of one particular convict is especially startling for the way it invokes the figure of the nineteenth century physician, Cesare Lombroso, who insisted that criminals shared an ‘atavistic’, ‘degenerate’ physical appearance:

He had drawn features which told of his long years in prison, and thuggery was spelt out glaringly on his face, so that you might be inclined to agree with that Italian professor who said that incorrigible criminals are distinguishable by their features. His feet were crippled; they had permanently assumed, perhaps from childhood, the shape of a woman’s high-heeled shoe (1989, p. 61).

Dlamini, in *Hell Hole, Robben Island*, characterises the criminal convicts as the servile agents of the warders, willing to relinquish all dignity and integrity for the sake of self-interest. His original sympathy for their predicament as ‘products of apartheid justice’ (Dlamini 1984, p. 23) is eroded throughout the memoir. He describes the constant fear of sexual assault on Robben Island (an aspect that is entirely overlooked in *Long Walk to Freedom*), and conjoins homosexuality to criminality. When he discovers that two PAC members are having what appears to be a consensual homosexual relationship – one which, in fact, stems from before their imprisonment – he comments that political comrades ‘are prepared to die rather than be made homosexuals’ (Dlamini 1984, p. 132), and conducts some ‘research’ into their background, which reveals that they had been arrested for criminal offenses on an earlier occasion. He suggests that they joined the PAC in 1963 because ‘[t]hey had hoped that… there was going to be countrywide looting and burglaries and they had hoped to join the gang of looters and burglars, or possibly to lead them’ (Dlamini 1984, p. 133). The two men are severely beaten and ostracised by the other political prisoners.

In this way, the division between political prisoners and common-law convicts is incessantly reasserted and policed. The political prisoners enforce a remarkably repressive and conservative notion of criminal delinquency, reinforced by physiognomical categories and beliefs about sexual orientation that are entirely consonant with apartheid criminology. The recoil from homosexuality, of course, also highlights the sense in which heterosexual masculinity is upheld as an implicit (and, certainly in prison, very idealised) norm both for the political prisoner and, by extension, the political activist. In fact, Dlamini’s memoir is of interest precisely because he occasionally renders explicit the more general unspoken understanding that tends to universalise heterosexual masculinity. In this sense, he reflects on and participates in the assumptions and exclusions that govern the construction of political identities under apartheid as essentially masculine and heterosexual. It is necessary to add that this tendency to conflate criminality and homosexuality is, of course, also grounded in the reality of life in prison, where, as almost all prison autobiographies point out, criminal gangs were used to intimidate and demoralise other prisoners. This intimidation extended to forced sodomisation. To a certain extent, Mandela and other leaders escaped this fate because they were relatively isolated from other prisoners. In addition, common-law convicts were increasingly separated from political prisoners on Robben Island until their complete removal from the prison in 1965 (Dlamini 1984, p. 164).
While Mandela seems to accept that criminal convicts become comrades when they become politicised, Dlamini never allows for the possibility of such a conversion. He refers to criminal prisoners who join the PAC in prison as ‘Poqo-criminals’ (Dlamini 1984, p. 128), maintaining them as a separate category through hyphenation. He describes one such ‘Poqo-criminal’, Dum-Dum (the same criminal that Zwelonke describes above), at some length:

He appeared to me to be an imbecile. At school, he had been unable to catch up with other children in the grades and had early become a drop-out. Life as a thief had proved more attractive, since little intelligence was required there… He had not mastered the rudiments of speech. He lisped his words and was always incoherent. We did not understand what he said and I doubt whether the warders did… His physical shape was repugnant. Take a child suffering from kwashiorkor and turn it into an adult and you have a good picture of Dum-dum. He had tiny legs, a big extended belly, protruding but unequal buttocks; he had a big head with an ugly-shaped forehead, tiny lurking eyes, a small flat nose, with nostrils just big enough to inhale and exhale air. That was the complete outfit of the human phenomenon Dum-dum (Dlamini 1984, pp. 128–129).

What is conspicuous about this description is the complete absence of any sympathy, understanding or social analysis: Dum-dum embodies the grotesque condition of the hybrid. He is excluded by his lack of intelligence and lack of speech from any kind of belonging, and serves to mark, through his monstrous nature, precisely the impossibility of being both criminal and comrade.

The constant insistence on the line between political and criminal prisoners in these memoirs betrays, perhaps, an uneasiness about the legitimacy and elasticity of the boundary. Despite its use of stereotypes, Dlamini’s *Hell-Hole, Robben Island* is characterised by an astute analysis of the origins of criminality and delinquency under apartheid. Dlamini’s father’s contention that ‘all the gangsters here in Jabavu… are… the products of the present system’ (1984, p. 90) is echoed throughout the memoir. In Dlamini’s father’s account, the desire to join a political movement and the proliferation of crime in the township respond to the same root cause: the economic inequalities enforced by apartheid. While Dlamini chooses to join the ANC Youth League, his cousin Abel responds to his hatred of apartheid injustice by turning to crime. He frames his life as a gang leader as a form of action against oppression, in contrast to the apparent ‘passivity’ of Dlamini’s political involvement (1984, pp. 94–95). When the criminals leave Robben Island, Dlamini uncharacteristically refers to them as ‘our fellow brothers’ (1984, p. 166) and recalls his cousin. He comments: ‘I was never to be totally free of him. He would not be a thing of the past which would no longer gnaw at my thoughts’ (p. 166).

In Zwelonke’s fictionalised autobiography, *Robben Island*, one of the characters, Bekimpi, explains to the protagonist how criminals are made by the system:

If you are not a sissy, if you are a toughy, that is, on a criminal offence, don’t hope you will get out when your term expires. So be happy that you are in for a political offence… That is the plight of the common African prisoner… A jailbird might start in on you, and if you turn to bash his jaws you invite a further charge. A raw criminal wants to compel you to a homosexual act. You lift your hand in desperation and commit murder. You’ll never see the outside again (1989, p. 46).

In this account, the harsh conditions of the prison under apartheid produce criminality: being a political prisoner is in fact a *defense* against a process of criminalisation that would otherwise seem almost inevitable. Read in this way, the differences between
political and criminal prisoners are not quite as straightforward as they might appear at first. Dlamini transcribes the words of one of the prison songs sung by criminal convicts:

It is I who is the rogue – because I was born Black. I’m White society’s scourge – condemned to live under harsh prison conditions. And prison is the only place for me where every day in the morning our only consolation is to sing about parole – to yearn for parole – and to wait for the guerillas to release us from Robben Island Security Prison… (1984, p. 56).

If being black is a crime, then all the prisoners on Robben Island are in fact ‘criminal’ convicts.

Dlamini’s *Hell-Hole, Robben Island* is extraordinary also for the way in which it intimates a kind of internalisation of this racist construction of ‘criminality’:

Last night I had a bad dream. It was so bad that I woke up at night and sat up, wondering about its meaning. It was the dominee again preaching… He was the only holy man and we were all rogues… The dominee was right. I’ll have to turn my black heart to the White God. That is the only way in which I and those of my ilk can be saved. And the dominee will help us to repent (1984, p. 104).

What Dlamini discloses here is the sense in which his demonisation and rejection of the criminal convicts attend on an uncomfortable unconscious identification with the criminals, on a recoil not so much from the apartheid prison’s attempts to criminalise political prisoners as from the possibility of his own acquiescence to this interpellation. Michael Dingake alludes to the same process of criminalisation in his 1987 autobiography, *My Fight Against Apartheid*:

Blacks are always in one prison or other. They cannot escape imprisonment for one moment. Blacks also know the prison of fear. They fear the whites. They fear the terrorist laws, the laws that terrorise them, brutalise them and turn them either into common-law criminals, political rebels or cringers and fatalists… All blacks are criminals, the interned and the uninterned (1987, p. 123).

In contrast, Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* does not really reflect on the origins of the criminal convicts. In general, *Long Walk to Freedom* takes pains to demonstrate an underlying commonality between all people – a commonality that implicitly extends to the common-law prisoners. However, the realisation of sameness is frequently located at some future point, a utopic moment that will arrive once the differences are resolved. For writers like Dlamini and Zwelonke, the sameness is located in the past, in a common point of origin. The gesture that informs their descriptions of the common-law criminals is one of disavowal, a horrified recoil from a deeply repulsive potential similitude. For Dlamini and Zwelonke, this recoil is all the more powerful for the fact that they constantly have to negotiate a relationship with the criminal convicts, whereas in the leadership cells, where Mandela was kept, this was simply not an issue. To some extent, Mandela’s more idealised account of the relations between people is assisted by his relative isolation from the sometimes vicious politics of the general section of the prison.

Under apartheid, then, the ‘criminal convict’ became a convenient repository for everything that the political prisoners defined themselves against. One post-apartheid text, however, problematises this carefully drawn line between political prisoners and their Others, the criminal prisoners. This is Jonny Steinberg’s superb book, *The Number* (2004). By revisiting the trope of the criminal convict, Steinberg’s journalism
Social Dynamics offers a form of post-apartheid life writing that escapes from the tendency towards depoliticisation that I mention above and retains a sensitivity to the central ideological role of the prison in the post-apartheid state. Moreover, Steinberg’s book insists on the historical and ideological continuities between the apartheid prison and the post-apartheid prison.

The Number chronicles the life story of Magadien Wentzel, whom Steinberg meets on a journalistic assignment in Pollsmoor prison in 2002 and interviews extensively after his release in 2003. Wentzel is introduced to Steinberg by Johnny Jansen, the prison head, who clearly sees Wentzel as an advertisement for the post-apartheid prison’s ability to reform its inmates. In other words, Wentzel is presented by the highest authority figure in the prison as a representative subject, the product of a new national and institutional culture. As a complex intimacy is established between Steinberg (the interviewer) and Wentzel (the interviewee), Wentzel starts to exceed the frame provided by the prison. On the one hand, the idiosyncrasies of his life militate against such a representative role and, on the other, the ‘new’ culture of the prison seems inextricably bound up with traditions and rituals that extend to at least the end of the nineteenth century.

In some ways, Steinberg’s book participates in a more general post-apartheid shift away from political prison autobiographies towards a more collaborative, interview-driven memoir. (Another example is Pumla Gobodo Madikizela’s A Human Being Died that Night [2003], an account of Gobodo-Madikizela’s interviews with Eugene de Kock, the commanding officer of the apartheid death squads.) One material catalyst for the prevalence of this kind of auto/biography is perhaps the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), where the testimony of the victims and perpetrators of apartheid were assembled in a social and legal space that foregrounded the idea of personal testimony as collective endeavour. Autobiographical narratives were produced under quasi-judicial circumstances, with interlocutors posing specific questions and working towards a clearly defined goal. Moreover, the TRC reached the bulk of the South African public through the media, so that journalists essentially became the editors of and commentators on the life stories that they were recording. Steinberg, in other words, draws on a dominant post-apartheid understanding of narratives of personal suffering and transformation as a form of public dialogue. In the process, it becomes difficult to locate the subject of the narrative (rather as in Gobodo-Madikizela’s account): as much as Steinberg recounts Magadien’s life story, he is, of course, also producing an autobiographical narrative about his own encounter with Magadien and his world.

One consequence of such a collaborative approach to the construction of a life story is that the interviewer appropriates and potentially misrepresents the subject’s narrative. As Steinberg notes:

I have used the words ‘I’ and ‘me’. ‘I say to Magadien...’ ‘Magadien tells me...’ As if we are equals. We are not. The relationship between a journalist and his subject is never a relationship between equals. The ‘I’ in the pages of the book the journalist pens is not a flesh-and-blood being with a soul to be bared and a heart to be scorched. He is a cipher, an abstraction; he is a pair of eyes that sees all. The subject, on the other hand, the ‘Magadien’, he is the one with the bared soul and scorched heart. The ‘I’ is capable of doing him violence (2004, p. 240).

In the same way that the prison head attempts to use Magadien to make a point about his prison, Steinberg uses Magadien in the service of his own narrative about
South African culture and identity. The point is not, of course, that this erodes the spontaneity and authenticity of the narrative: even the most confessional autobiographies are shaped by the public roles that they play. Rather, the point is that different uses of the same life narrative become entangled with one another. Magadien is interested in a kind of therapeutic retrieval of memory, while Steinberg is interested in writing a popular analysis of South African society at a particular historical juncture. One could say that post-apartheid auto/biographies are marked by a kind of fracturing of purpose, an uncertainty about the frame and utility of self-narration. Steinberg is perhaps unusual in foregrounding this anxiety, but the interweaving of voices in any collaborative autobiography necessarily highlights the fact that self-construction is governed by socially located relations of power and undermines some of the traditional autobiography’s claim to artless transparency.

Where Steinberg departs from some of the conventions that are emerging around post-apartheid prison life narratives is in his refusal to draw a well-defined demarcation between political imprisonment and other forms of incarceration. In this sense, Steinberg rejects the idea of a clear line that marks off post-apartheid criminal ‘confessions’ from the valorised autobiographical narrative space of political prisoners under apartheid – a line that is absolutely essential to emerging myths about South African nationhood.

First of all, he notes that Wentzel is initially imprisoned in the late 1970s for his involvement in anti-apartheid politics. During his spell in Victor Verster prison, he is recruited into the 28s, one of the three Numbers gangs (the others are the 26es and the 27s). The movement from fighting against apartheid to becoming a criminal gangster seems almost seamless in Wentzel’s account: in his reconstruction of events, the struggle against the white government and his embrace of gang culture are nearly synonymous. As Steinberg points out, a material contributory factor to this slide from political to criminal activity had to do with prison conditions. Unlike activist leaders, rank-and-file demonstrators were thrown into overcrowded open cells with the Number gangs (Steinberg 2004, p. 141). For someone like Wentzel, who had grown up on the periphery of gang culture, the shift from political activism to gangsterism was not really extraordinary:

The truth is that, culturally and socially, Magadien was far closer to the prisoners on the other side of the divide than to his fellow political detainees. They were from neighbourhoods like his; they had broken into the homes and factories of the Cape Flats, just as he had (Steinberg 2004, p. 142).

In other words, Steinberg insists on recognising the complex interstitial, itinerant nature of the identities of people disenfranchised by apartheid, and resists Magadien’s attempts to glamorise himself as either a gangster or a political activist by pointing out the moments of dissonance and fissure in his self-construction. After Steinberg records Magadien’s version of crowd violence during the post-1976 protest marches, he comments:

When Magadien describes the scenes, you can make out the complex strands of his identity; the activist, celebrating the memory of white retreat, the haunted soul remembering the fallen figures who were once merged into a crowd, and the gangster who watches with glee as the world was turned upside down (2004, pp. 140–141).

In this way, Steinberg’s book constructs a subjectivity that is increasingly fractured precisely in its subject’s attempts to create a coherent, integrated identity: the dialogic
way in which Wentzel’s story is presented interweaves the activity of self-representation with deconstructive critical reflections on the nature and uses of autobiography and confession.

One of Steinberg’s most penetrating insights relates to the way Wentzel appeals to the language of myth in his bildung – his narrative of development. Thus he points out that Wentzel’s claim that he was imprisoned for the first time in 1976 is unlikely, but remarks:

That he fiddled with his own formative moment, placing it in June 1976, one of the most formative moments in recent South African history, is poignant and telling. For he is doing with his personal history exactly what a nation does with its own; it freezes a moment in time, paints it in bold and gaudy brush strokes, and uses it as a device to explain where it has come from and why it has turned out the way it has (Steinberg 2004, p. 137).

Here Steinberg picks up on an entanglement between personal history and the construction of a national identity that is, in fact, typical of many of the apartheid-era political prison memoirs. However, instead of enlarging his own life story in order to produce a kind of national history, in the way Nelson Mandela does in Long Walk to Freedom, Wentzel uses South African history as a way to provide coordinates and significance to his personal memories. To put it differently, the political is used in service of the personal, rather than the personal in service of the political. The significance of 1976 as an important turning point in South African history becomes articulated with Wentzel’s recollection of a private crossroads. This is perhaps indicative of a larger shift in the prison memoir, and in South African autobiographies in general: as the urgency of political change diminishes, the tropes and myths of national history start to function as indices in the construction of individual lives. Concomitantly, communal history becomes reduced to a somewhat disjointed collection of mythologised events.

In addition to the orthodox public history that informs Wentzel’s story, he also draws on the parabolic history of the Numbers gangs, which can be traced back to the story of Nongoloza and his lieutenant Kilikijan, two bandits in Johannesburg in the early twentieth century. Steinberg takes care to distinguish between the ‘real’ history of Nongoloza and the fable-like history, ‘an odd hybrid of Homeric and Talmudic tales’ (2004, p. 43) that Numbers gang members are forced to memorise as part of their induction into the gangs:

The first is a real-historical figure who walked the actual streets of early Johannesburg. The second is the mythical Nongoloza, whose story was invented and transmitted by thousands of South African prisoners (2004, p. 35).

As much as Wentzel’s self-construction is framed by the real events of the South African transition to democracy, it is also informed by a kind of parallel, mythologised and orally transmitted prison history. By commenting on the collusions and frictions that are generated between these two different understandings of history, Steinberg both resists the homogenisation of history that is typical of many apartheid-era memoirs and demonstrates how ‘ordinary criminals’ in fact also draw on a language of identity that is eminently political. On the one hand, the secret mythical history of Nongoloza is understood as a story about black resistance to colonial law: Nongoloza’s banditry is seen as a rejection of migrant labour on the mines and as an attempt to wrest power and wealth from white exploiters. On the other hand, the Numbers gangs offer
a kind of ‘official’ account of themselves that translates gang activity into a form of communal activism. Steinberg reproduces a speech that Wentzel plans to deliver to the Minister of Correctional Services when he visits Pollsmoor prison:

I salute the 26, 27 and 28 groups for showing courage. They stood up and fought for our rights under the apartheid regime, for us to be treated in a humane way. But when democracy came to South Africa everyone forgot the blood that we shed in prison for the sake of democracy. Instead we were labelled as gangsters. Let me put the record straight: we were never gangsters. With our souls and our minds we were freedom fighters. We put our bodies and lives on the line for democracy, and we are doing it yet again for change (2004, p. 18).

The echo between Wentzel’s self-construction and the forms of self-presentation employed by many anti-apartheid campaigners is disturbing on a number of levels. First, it suggests that the language of political activism and communitarianism is eminently appropriable. If a gang member can construct his or her subjectivity using the language of self-sacrifice and the struggle for political freedom, it implies that the language lends itself to cynical abuse. Wentzel’s oratory draws attention to the discur-sive, rhetorical element that this form of language in fact needs to conceal in order to work effectively. Second, it intimates that the rigid border between political prisoners and criminal prisoners might not be as self-evident as many anti-apartheid activist autobiographies suggest. By offering even a tenuous link between gang activity and the struggle against apartheid, the self-justificatory public rhetoric of the gangs threatens to dispel the idea of a criminal Other against which the new democratic order has to define itself. In many ways, the ‘two prisons’ model is essential to the construction of a hegemonic model of citizenship through sacrifice and struggle: the idea that gangsters might be animated by notions of the public good removes the ontological premise of normative post-apartheid concepts of ‘self’ that emerge in memoirs of political imprisonment. The idea of a subject who is both a criminal and an activist is, properly speaking, grotesque, as we see in the figure of the ‘Poqo-criminals’ in Dlamini’s *Hell Hole, Robben Island*.

Through his careful recording and scrutiny of Magadien Wentzel’s life story, Steinberg creates a post-apartheid collaborative auto/biography that manages to deconstruct some of the premises of canonised anti-apartheid political memoirs. Specifically, he returns to ideas surrounding the unity of self, the construction of a homogenous public history, the unassailable dignity and integrity of struggle and the link between the story of a self and the story of a community in order to ask penetrating and unsettling questions about the assumptions that underpin these constructions. Simultaneously, he offers new possibilities for the prison memoir in the post-apartheid moment precisely by retaining many of the strengths of the apartheid prison autobiography. Instead of producing a semi-voyeuristic victim narrative, Steinberg manages to perpetuate the tradition of radical social analysis and criticism forged under apartheid. For Steinberg, the prison remains a privileged explanatory space in a society that remains deeply marked by the mass criminalisation and imprisonment of its citizens. *The Number* insists that the construction of identity in prison discloses the play of power in society in general. Nonetheless, it is attained at the expense of wrestling ownership of the story that the book recounts away from its original teller. Considering the book’s erosion of Wentzel’s autonomy and transparent self-presence, the reader remains haunted by the possibility that the text ultimately serves to represent not Wentzel’s narrative, but the more privileged voice and values of the
journalist. Even at its best, the post-apartheid prison life story seems caught between subreption and radical critique.

Steinberg’s insistence on the prison’s central role in understanding post-apartheid subjectivity and social arrangements, however, stands out in a social context where the existence and role of the prison is generally disregarded. After decades of living under a police state, South Africans seem anxious to return the prison and its apparatuses to the margins of visibility: a dangerous move, I would argue, considering the absolutely formative role that the prison played in the emergence of the idea of a South African nation.

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References