Criminal Obsessions, after Foucault: Postcoloniality, Policing, and the Metaphysics of Disorder

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Jean and John Comaroff

"Perhaps it's because our lives are so chaotic, so filled with unsolved mysteries, incomplete stories, uncaught murderers that crime fiction is so popular. I believe that's why South Africans are so hooked on American TV crime series . . . because somewhere, somehow, someone is solving crimes. At least in fiction justice is served." Michael Williams, *The Eighth Man*[1]

People across the planet have, in recent years, been uncommonly preoccupied with public order, crime, and policing. From Britain to Brazil, Nigeria to the Netherlands, Slovakia to South Africa,[2] the specter of illegality appears to be captivating popular imaginations. In much of the world, to be sure, this preoccupation is far from groundless. True, accurate crime statistics may be impossibly difficult to arrive at;[3] such actuarial artifacts depend, after all, on what is seen to constitute a felony in the first place, on what counts as evidence, on how much is conceded to the truth-claims of aggregate numbers. True, too, the *perceived* threat of criminal assault is often incommensurate with the real risk to persons and property; as it happens, that risk remains more unevenly distributed in South Africa than it is in

1. Michael Williams, *The Eighth Man* (Oxford, 2002), p. 163. Williams is also the general manager of the Cape Town Opera at the Artscape Theater, one of Cape Town's premier cultural centers. His detective novels, one of which has been dramatized for local schools, are published in the Oxford University Press Southern African Fiction series.

2. In our forthcoming study, *Policing the Postcolony: Crime, the State, and the Metaphysics of Disorder* (esp. chaps. 1 and 5), we interrogate patterns of crime and their representation in South Africa, past and present—and annotate, in detail, both primary and secondary data on the topic. Given constraints of space in this context, we are compelled to offer a relatively sketchy set of references in support of our statements here and below. For further relevant evidentiary materials, and materials on evidence, see the *Nedbank ISS Crime Index* and the monographs published by the Institute of Security Studies; these are to be found on the web at www.iss.org.za

3. The general point has been made often, of course; it is part of the more general question of the nature of quantitative evidence: how it is constructed, by what processes of abstraction it takes on meaning, how it circulates, and how it is attributed meaning. More mundanely, however, for just one example that relates specifically to South African crime figures—as everywhere, a highly controversial question—see Rob Marsh, *With Criminal Intent: The Changing Face of Crime in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1999), pp. 176–86.

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most places.[4] All this notwithstanding, the incidence of violent crime here, and its effects on the lives of ordinary citizens, are *not* to be trivialized. They are perfectly real. As criminologists have come to recognize, the burgeoning violence endured by segregated black communities under apartheid has, especially since the late 1980s, spilled over into once tranquil, tightly policed, "white" cities and suburbs.[5] This is an integral part of our story.

And yet, at the same time, there seems to be more to the public obsession with criminality and disorder than the mere *fact* of its reality. South Africans of all stripes are also captivated by *images* of crime and policing, whether it be in the form of avid rumor or homegrown *telenovelas,* Hollywood horror or high theater, earnest documentaries or trashy melodramas. Whatever dangers they may dodge on the streets by day, at night, behind carefully secured doors, a high proportion of them indulge in vicarious experiences of extravagant lawlessness by way of the media, both imported and local. Why should this be so?

The South African preoccupation with law and order—or, rather, with its mediated representation—is neither new nor unique. "Even though crime exists . . . in what the public chooses to think of as epidemic proportions," wrote Stuart Scheingold of the U.S. two decades ago, "we still feel

4. See, for example, Mark Shaw and Peter Gastrow, "Stealing the Show? Crime and Its Impact in Post-apartheid South Africa," *Daedelus* 130, no. 1 (2001): 243, and Martin Schönteich, "Sleeping Soundly, Feelings of Safety: Based on Perceptions or Reality?" *Nedbank ISS Crime Index* 5 (Mar.–Apr. 2001): 1–6.

5. See, for example, Tony Emmett, "Addressing the Underlying Causes of Crime and Violence in South Africa," in *Behind the Mask: Getting to Grips with Crime and Violence in South Africa,* ed. Emmett and Alex Butchart (Pretoria, 2000), p. 290; John Matshikiza, introduction to *The "Drum" Decade: Stories from the 1950s,* ed. Michael Chapman (Pietermaritzburg, 1989), p. xi; and Mungo Soggot, "When Orange Farm Meets Sodwana Bay," in *From Jo'burg to Jozi: Stories about Africa's Infamous City,* ed. Heidi Holland and Adam Roberts (London, 2002), p. 227.

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compelled to invent it."[6] For over a century, in fact, fictional cops and robbers have provided a compelling topos for popular mythmaking all over the world; clearly, they offer pliant allegorical terms for exploring the nature and limits of social being almost everywhere. This taste for crime fiction is not restricted to those who consume it as mass entertainment. Nor is it of interest only to those who contemplate order in the abstract. On the contrary, theater and fantasy appear integral to the workaday routines of policing itself. As if to make the point, Scotland Yard recently hired a professional magician, using "illusions as a metaphor for real life situations" to "boost [the] confidence and . . . leadership skills" of its superintendents.[7] In like vein, as we shall see, the strained South African Police Services (SAPS), whose cadres include some successful diviner-detectives,[8] devote considerable effort to staging illusory victories over the dark forces of violence and disorder. But why all the drama? Why would august officers of the law—the very embodiment of the state at its most rational, legitimate, and forceful—feel a need to play around, to act out, in this manner? Has Foucault not convinced us that it is the panopticon, rather than the theater, that holds the key to power in its modernist form?

The Uses of Horror

Crime looms large in the post–cold war age. Increasingly flexible in its modes of operation, it often mimics corporate business,[9] constituting an uncivil society that flourishes most energetically where the state withdraws. Hence the implosion of ever more virtual, more vertiginous forms of fiscal fraud, ever more supple, border-busting markets in illegal substances, armaments, and mercenary violence—all facilitated by the liberalization of trade, by new kinds of financial instruments, and by cutting-edge communications media. Hence, also, the role of organized crime: of the mafia and of business-oriented "gangs" in posttotalitarian polities that, for a fee,

6. Stuart A. Scheingold, *The Politics of Law and Order: Street Crime and Public Policy* (New York, 1984), p. 68.

7. Jamie Wilson, "War on Crime Is Just an Illusion," *The Guardian,* 28 Apr. 2001, p. 11. Said one skeptic in the force: "Perhaps he could make several thousand more police officers appear on the streets of the capital to help combat the number of burglaries and robberies and help us to protect the public" (ibid.).

8. Some of these diviner-detectives have drawn the attention of the national media; see Sam Kiley, "SAPS Man Aims to Kill in His Role as Sangoma," *The Star,* 7 Aug. 1997, p. 2. See also *Search for Common Ground,* a widely watched television documentary first broadcast by SABC3 on 17 July 1997. Others, like Sgt. Moshupa of the SAPS at Itsoseng in the North West Province, with whom we worked in 1999–2000, were known locally for bringing visionary powers to bear on their police work.

9. See Johannes Leithäuser, "Crime Groups Become an Increasing Security Threat, Officials Assert," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (English Edition), 22 May 2001, p. 2.

perform services that governments no longer provide.[10] Such criminal "phantom-States," notes Derrida,[11] are a fact of our times. Often embedded in complex transnational relations, often relying on highly sophisticated technologies, they shade into the networks of terror that are rapidly replacing conventional threats to national security.[12] Indeed, received distinctions between crime and terror, always inchoate, are being revised as we speak, each term being deployed, ideologically, to make sense of, and to fight, the other. Thus it is that we have *the* war on terror, on drugs, on gangs, on illegal aliens, on corporate corruption, and so on. Note, in this respect, that Egged, the Israeli bus company, is reported to be suing Yasser Arafat for damages incurred in suicide bombings and that bereaved Americans have filed a $100 trillion claim against Islamic charities, the Sudanese state, Saudi Arabian banks, and others for their support of Osama bin Laden—actions that would reduce the *intifada* and World Trade Center attacks to common illegalities actionable by recourse to tort law.[13] Under these conditions, crime and terror merge in the epistemic murk of a new global system that both reproduces and eclipses its old international predecessor. The upshot is that social order appears ever more impossible to apprehend, violence appears ever more endemic, excessive, and transgressive, and police come, in the public imagination, to embody a nervous state under pressure. Officers of the Los Angeles Police Department, hardly known for their civility, recently described themselves as "the outer membrane of civilization" in a disorderly world.[14] Similarly, the policeman protagonist in a stunning piece of postcolonial South African theater, Neil McCarthy's *The Great Outdoors,* observes that the "line between order and chaos" is like "one strand of a spider's web."[15]

10. On Russia, see Nancy Ries, "Mafia as a Symbol of Power and Redemption in Post–Soviet Russia," paper read to a workshop on "Transparency and Conspiracy: Power Revealed and Concealed in the Global Village," London School of Economics, May 1999, ms. In Cape Town, South Africa, a daily newspaper, *The Cape Argus,* published a series (4–11 Aug. 2003) of headline feature articles under the title "Gang Land (Pty) Ltd." (Note that "(Pty) Ltd." designates a limited company in South Africa.) The series—and especially Michael Morris, "Gangsterism Provides . . . But It Takes Away More," 11 Aug. 2003, p. 14—makes exactly this point.

11. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International,* trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York, 1994), p. 83.

12. The director of the European police agency, Europol, recently noted that transnational crime posed a growing threat to domestic security in European countries and that governments should "examine whether the resources that had previously been spent on military defense would be better invested . . . in domestic security" (Leithäuser, "Crime Groups Become an Increasing Security Threat, Officials Assert," p. 2).

13. These legal actions were reported all over the world. In South Africa, they were noted in the press in mid to late August 2002. See, for example, "Israel to Begin Pulling out of Gaza, Bethlehem" and "Saudis Cry Foul over U.S. Lawsuit," *Cape Times,* 19 Aug. 2002, p. 2.

14. Peter J. Boyer, "Bad Cops," *The New Yorker,* 21 May 2001, p. 60.

15. Neil McCarthy, *The Great Outdoors,* unpublished playscript, p. 23. The play was premiered on 30 June 2000 at the Standard Bank National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, South Africa.

The obsession with crime and lawlessness is not merely a commentary—at least, in South Africa—on social order, *sui generis*. It is also a reflection on the state of the nation. Take mass advertising, a genre that seeks, among other things, to transform nightmare into desire. In April 2001, the *Guardian,* perhaps the most seriously critical newspaper in the country, observed that "bolted doors, patrolling dogs defending gated communities and dark figures cocking guns in the shadows appear even in ads for toilet paper and popcorn."[16] At the time, a music radio station in Johannesburg was promoting itself, on huge billboards, by means of just two words: MORE POLICE. And, even more wryly: YOU CAN TAKE THE CAR. JUST LEAVE THE RADIO. 98.7 FM. Hardly subtle, this counterpoint between panacea and panic, pop and the politics of enforcement, ardent consumerism and Hobbesian anarchy. Texts like these are haunted by the specter of immanent attack, above all, attack by unruly black youths. Violent crime, here as in the U.S., has become the lightning rod for an escalating range of everyday anxieties—anxieties fed by the insecurity of the privileged as they witness the anger and impatience of those excluded from the Promised Land. In the banal theatrics of the mass media, crime becomes racialized and race criminalized. And both, if we may be forgiven the term, are "youthenized."

Regarded in this light, South Africa appears to evince what Mark Seltzer has termed a "pathological public sphere";[17] increasingly, contemporary publics are constituted, he argues, at the scene of the crime. But there is more at stake in the popular obsession with scenes of violent disorder in this particular postcolony. South Africa, after all, was, until not long ago, a racist police state; its transition from the ancien regime, moreover, was husbanded by a celebrated Truth and Reconciliation Commission whose deliberations were based on a model of justice that sought to address past atrocities without resort to punishment. Consequently, beyond constituting a public, the scene of the crime in South Africa, broadly conceived, is also the source of a passionate politics on the part of government, a politics aimed at making manifest both the shape of the nation *and* a form of institutional power capable of underwriting its ordered existence. What we have here, in other words, is an *inversion* of the history laid out by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish,* according to which, famously, the theatricality of premodern power gives way to ever more implicit, internalized, capillary kinds of discipline.[18] Indeed, it is precisely this telos—which presumes the expanding capacity of the state to regulate everyday existence and routinely

16. Jacques Peretti, "Selling the Same Old Story," *The Guardian,* 30 Apr. 2001, p. 8.

17. See Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York, 1998).

18. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1995).

to enforce punishment—that is in question in South Africa. To wit, the drama that is so integral to policing the postcolony is evidence of a desire to condense dispersed power in order to make it visible, tangible, accountable, effective.[19]

These theatrics, we shall see, are anything but hidden or half-hearted. More often than not they assume the overdrawn shape of melodrama, a genre, according to Peter Brooks, that polarizes conflicting forces in such a way as to "make evident, legible, and operative" values that lack the transcendent authority of a religion, a dominant ideology, or whatever.[20] So it is with the spectacle of policing, the staging of which strives to make actual, both to its subjects and to itself, the authorized face, and force, of the state—of a state, that is, whose legitimacy is far from unequivocal. Nor is this true only in postcolonies. Wrote Malcolm Young, an ethnographer of British law enforcement: "police culture possesses a dramaturgical or melodramatic inflection." It mobilizes "illusion, praxis, and imagery" in "well-directed social productions," deploying "mythical archetypes . . . in exaggerated games of 'cops' and 'robbers.'"[21] Melodrama in blue, so to speak. Young should know. He was himself a career police officer. His testimony returns us to one of our opening questions, now phrased more specifically: In what ways have illusion and fantasy been implicated in the work of law enforcement in recent South African history? And what might changes in the nature of police performance, in all senses of that term, tell us about the postcolonial—post-Foucaultian?—state, about its powers and its differences from its precursor?

In answering these questions, a great deal hangs on the way in which we grasp the connection between modernist state power and popular fantasies of law and order. Gramsci, for instance, observed that judicial apparatuses are "always in discredit" with the public, a corollary of which is the enduring appeal of private and amateur sleuths.[22] Especially pertinent to our story, in this respect, is the reflection of C. L. R. James on detective fiction in America after the Great Depression.[23] There has, of course, been a long-

19. Here, and in general, we acknowledge with gratitude the extraordinarily insightful reading given to this argument by the editors of *Critical Inquiry* and, in particular, by Bill Brown.

20. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (1976; New Haven, Conn., 1995), p. viii.

21. Malcolm Young, *An Inside Job: Policing and Police Culture in Britain* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 4, 3.

22. Antonio Gramsci, "The Detective Novel," *Selections from Cultural Writings,* trans. William Boelhower, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), p. 369.

23. See C. L. R. James, *American Civilization,* ed. Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart (Cambridge, 1993), p. 118. On the relevance of James to the current South African scene, see Leola Johnson, "The Social Bandit after Apartheid," *Macalester International* 9 (Autumn 2000): 260.

standing infatuation with extralegal enforcement in U.S. history; it has expressed itself not just in the popularity of such things as the dime western but also in the horror of public lynchings. James's exploration of the salience of the genre in the 1930s is to be read against this backdrop. Popular film, comics, and radio at the time, he recalls, were finely tuned to mass desire and frustration, giving allegorical shape to apprehensions about the meaning of freedom, prosperity, and nationhood in the midst of epic crisis. It was a moment of reckoning, too, for the liberal state and its moral economy; its failure to nurture a capitalist commonwealth had driven many ordinary people to desperation. Yet the avidly consumed crime drama of the period seldom spoke of economic collapse, labor struggles, or fear of war. This, James insists, was less a matter of deliberate sabotage than of a silent, "armed neutrality . . . between the classes."[24] In the space vacated by politics, dyspeptic private eyes sallied forth in the name of the law, sharing some of the hoodlum chic of gangsters themselves: above all, a "*scorn for the police as the representative of official society.*"[25] As ruling institutions lost legitimacy, gumshoes—men of iron, men of irony—became purveyors of a cynical justice that acknowledged anger, appetite, fallibility, and power. In so doing, they made it possible to imagine a social order wrought by heroic action in the cause of a greater moral good.

The detective fiction of post-Depression America bears some kinship with popular imaginings of law and order in South Africa after apartheid: its reference to rapidly changing social and economic conditions; to the shock effect of mass joblessness and the unfulfilled promise of a new age of prosperity; to a perceived failure of the regulatory state; to a view of the police as inefficient and easily corruptible; to the bipolarization of crime into, on the one hand, petty felonies committed by drab *miserables* driven by necessity and, on the other, the flamboyant larceny of defiant antiheroes. If the U.S. crisis yielded the New Deal, it remains to be seen what kind of deal the "new" South Africa fashions for itself. In the meantime, criminality has come to be represented, as it was in America during the 1920s and 1930s, and would be again in the late twentieth-century inner city, as a means of production—or, rather, of productive redistribution—for those alienated by new forms of exclusion. At the same time, there is more at work in contemporary South Africa than simple deprivation. As Jonny Steinberg points out, and mass-mediated drama affirms, the local underworld is not the sole preserve of the poor; it is peopled, as well, by "the well-heeled and the well-educated."[26] For an ever more visible sector of the population—most of all,

24. James, *American Civilization,* p. 123.
25. Ibid., p. 124.
26. Jonny Steinberg, "Introduction: Behind the Crime Wave," in *Crime Wave: The South African Underworld and Its Foes,* ed. Steinberg (Johannesburg, 2001), p. 4.

young black men—gangster lifestyles have a seductive appeal. It also suggests, after C. L. R. James and many popular movies and musics since his day, that the outlaw embodies, often in deeply racialized guise, a displaced discourse about desire and impossibility, one as characteristic of the neoliberal moment in South Africa as it was of the Depression-era U.S. Here, too, the state is regarded with ambivalence, roughly in proportion to its alleged failure to secure the well-being of its citizens. Here, too, violence speaks elegaically of a very general angst about the anomic implosion of the established order of things.

The sheer fecundity of crime-as-*imaginaire* is no mystery. Thoroughly grounded in the experience of the real, it gives voice to a fundamental conundrum of social being in the secular liberal state, a conundrum of unsettling relevance in the U.S. since 9/11: How much freedom ought to be delegated, in the cause of security, to any regulatory regime, especially one whose legitimacy is open to question? This is a tension that dramas of law and order tend everywhere to resolve, in Durkheimian fashion, by making the obligatory appear desirable.[27] But fantasy is never reducible to pure functionality. Crime fiction also provides readily available tropes for addressing ironies, for ventilating desires, and, above all, for conjuring a moral commonweal, especially when radical transformation unseats existing norms and robs political language of its meaning. In these circumstances, the felon personifies an existence beyond the law, an existence at once awesome, awful, and sublime. Mogamat Benjamin, high ranking member of a deadly gang in Cape Town's notorious Pollsmoor Maximum Security Prison, recently told a TV team: "'I am powerful; I am partly God.'"[28] He was referring to his capacity to determine the lives and deaths of other inmates, even warders. Brusque iconoclasm of this kind opens a space of possibility, a space in which order is up for grabs, a space in which new modes of being are forged in the heat of unspeakably transgressive violence as the state withdraws or is rendered irrelevant. Benjamin and his brethren run a complex organization in the dark interstices of the jail by means that elude its administration—means that spill back onto the tough terrain on which their gang does its usual business.[29] Shades here of another revered Benjamin, Walter Benjamin, for whom violence in its archetypal, mythic form was a "manifestation of the gods."[30] It is awesome, he argued, *because* it

27. Compare Victor W. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1967).

28. Allan Little, "Miracles in Maximum Security," *The Guardian,* 28 Apr. 2001, p. 3.

29. Compare Kelly Gillespie, "Bloodied Inscriptions: Institutionality, Productivity, and the Question of Authorship" (master's thesis, University of Chicago, 2002).

30. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings,* trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York, 1978), p. 294. Compare Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (London, 1992), p. 116.

threatens state monopoly over the law; note how "'great' criminal[s]," even when their ends are repellant, arouse the "secret admiration of the public."[31] But why do these figures, large and small, take on such intense significance in the here-and-now? Is this a result of the unique predicament of the postcolony? Or did it exist before?

Some clues from elsewhere may be helpful. James Siegel, for example, shows how, in an Indonesia facing political and economic dissolution, the body of the criminal has become the alibi against which the integrity of the nation and the law is asserted.[32] The "'dangerous classes'" serve a similar symbolic end in an ever more polarized, postindustrial Britain, says Young; police invoke them to authorize "warfare"—again, that term—on behalf of the social order against whatever is seen to imperil it.[33] The same happens with banditry in parts of the Mediterranean and Latin America, where outlaws are cast as a fearsome anachronism over which modernist states must exercise authority in order to sustain the viability of the polity and its sovereign space.[34] In sum, the figure of archfelon, albeit culturally transposed, seems to be doing similar work in many places, serving as the ground on which a metaphysics of order, of the nation as a moral community guaranteed by the state, may be entertained, argued for, even demanded.

The question, then, is plainly this: To the extent that discourses of crime and enforcement, as *popular* national fantasy, are endemic to the imaginary of modern state power, how might current changes in the nature and sovereignty of states—especially postcolonial states—be tied to the criminal obsessions sweeping so many parts of the world? Why do outlaws, as mythic figures, evoke fascination in proportion to their penchant for ever more graphic, excessive, unpredictable violence? In South Africa today, Rob Marsh points out, it is *white*-collar crime that is most likely to "bring the country to its knees."[35] But it is the red-blooded assault on persons and property that is of most public concern. Violence, in short, is immensely productive, sometimes horrifyingly so; quite apart from its capacity to redirect the flow of wealth, it usurps representation, reveals the limits of order, and justifies state monopolies over the means of coercion.

Self-evidently, violence is never just a matter of the circulation of images. Its exercise, legitimate or otherwise, tends to have decidedly tangible objectives. And effects. Indeed, it was the raw clarity of physical force that

31. Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," p. 281; compare Gramsci, "The Detective Novel," pp. 69–70.

32. See James T. Siegel, *A New Criminal Type in Jakarta: Counter-Revolution Today* (Durham, N.C., 1998).

33. Young, *Inside Job,* p. 3.

34. See Paul Sant Cassia, "'Better Occasional Murders Than Frequent Adulteries': Banditry, Violence, and Sacrifice in the Mediterranean," *History and Anthropology* 12, no. 1 (2000): 66.

35. Marsh, *With Criminal Intent,* p. 178.

persuaded Fanon of its potential for liberating colonized bodies and minds.[36] Its means and meanings, however, always exceed its immediate ends precisely because they rely on poetic techniques to inflate their impact. Could this be why brute coercion everywhere is inherently theatrical, its perpetrators upping the emotional ante via a host of self-dramatizing techniques—before, during, and after the fact? Begoña Aretxaga, following Zulaika and Douglass, notes that brutality sets those who wield it in a "'play-like'" frame, one in which extraordinary feats seem achievable, in which all pretense of distinguishing fact from fabrication disappears.[37] Those who wish to command must constantly invoke violence, if not directly, then in displaced or mimetic form. It is this invocation—above all, by those entrusted with the *impossibility* of enforcing the law—with which we are concerned here: its rough play, its predilection for criminal fantasy, its response to the vicissitudes of state power. The police become visible, argues Agamben, citing Benjamin, where the legal dominion of the state runs out; their "embarrassing" proximity to authority is manifested in perpetual displays of force, even in peaceful public places.[38] As we shall see, where governance is seriously compromised law enforcement may provide a privileged site for staging efforts—the double entendre is crucial here—to summon the active presence of the state into being, to render it perceptible to the public eye, to produce both rulers and subjects who recognize its legitimacy. Herein, we shall argue, lie the affinities among policing, drama, and illusion. Herein, too, lies the source of popular preoccupations with the representation of law and order. Those, recall, were the two issues with which we began.

Let us move, then, onto the shifting planes of recent South African history. Scene 1 opens in the late 1980s during the last days of the dying apartheid regime.

Capers with Coppers: The Closed Museum and the Spectral State

We begin with an anomaly: a public museum closed to the public, perhaps indefinitely. If this is an oxymoron, it is one that indexes the contradictory implications of radical democratization for the construction of a

36. See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* trans. Constance Farrington (New York, 1968), p. 86.

37. Begoña Aretxaga, "A Fictional Reality: Paramilitary Death Squads and the Construction of State Terror in Spain," in *The Ethnography of Political Violence: The Anthropology of State Terror,* ed. Jeffrey A. Sluka (Philadelphia, 2000), p. 64. See Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass, *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism* (New York, 1996), p. 135.

38. Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics,* trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis, 2000), p. 104. See Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," p. 287.

nation of free citizens on the vestigial ruins of a police state, the ruins of a polity founded on racial exclusion.

In 1999, when we first visited the South African police museum, housed in a shabby, elegant Victorian building in Pretoria, the executive capital of the country, it was shut for "renovation." The edifice, which had been the national police headquarters in the 1930s was, we were told, in dangerous disrepair. This was visibly so, although it soon became clear that the wear and tear was not merely architectural. For the public exhibition space had coexisted, in the apartheid era, with something else, something clandestine, something now abhorrent: the epicenter, and an interrogation facility, of the infamous national security service. The bizarre coexistence of the two within the same walls—the museum below, the secret police above—appeared to be beyond coincidence. But more of that in a moment. It was not only the lurking traces of state terror that compromised the building. The content of the exhibits, once very popular with patrons, had themselves become inappropriate. State museums, of course, are more or less blatant statements, conjuring up the national populations, subjects, and interests for which, and to which, they speak. In times of historical change, they offer glaring indictments of denatured ideologies, of a slippage between state and nation, signifiers and signifieds. Not surprisingly, they have become prime objects of argument about the politics of representation in the "new" South Africa. Behind closed doors, in the late 1990s, the staff of the Police Museum pondered how to make their displays relevant to the postapartheid era.

We had been drawn to the place by an interest in the changing public sense of police work brought by the advent of majority rule.[39] The indefinitely closed museum called forth a historical speculation, a hypothesis if you will: reforming the image of the old South African Police Force, jackboot of the state, into that of the South African Police *Services,* a gentler, human-rights oriented, community-friendly agency, could well turn out to be an impossibility. By the late apartheid years, when it became increasingly difficult to contain the contradictions of the racial state, the SAP operated, for the most part, as a paramilitary force. Its security branch existed above the law, torture and deadly force were routine in the treatment of political dissidents, and a dense network of informers extended its capillaries into every sphere of existence. Against this background, the state portrayed the police as heroic defenders of order against terror, treason, and savage insurrection.

The Police Museum spoke unchallenged from the heart of that state. It

39. We thank Hillel Braude, Claudia Braude, and Mark Gevisser, whose accounts of visits to the museum in the early 1990s are reflected in our description here.

began life in 1968 as a haphazard collection of relics—murder weapons, graphic photographs of "ritual" mutilations, the personal effects of a famous female poisoner—from landmark cases of the more or less distant past; many of these were used, early on, in the training of cadets. With the recruitment in 1982 of a museologist, Tilda Smal, herself a police officer, the collection was developed in an altogether more ambitious direction, combining edification with entertainment, high melodrama with low-tech installations. Central to its design was a series of tableaux that, together, composed a specifically South African history of crime and punishment. They also served as the setting for what would become the best known feature of the institution, its Night Tours, during which staff of the museum and the Police Education Unit brought epic felonies to life by impersonating famous "criminals."

There could hardly be more literal or vivid evidence of the dramaturgy, the melodrama, of police work. But what did it all mean? What prompted otherwise austere officers of a police state to inhabit the personae of their archenemies, indeed, to make public exhibitions of themselves in order to delight and terrify ordinary patrons and their children? What might their play have had to do with the more sinister rituals that took place backstage in this extraordinary venue?

We take up the story with the help of the curator. The Museum, said Sgt. Smal, was allowed to display artifacts only from cases that had ended in convictions.[40] It catalogued the triumph of law and order over enemies of the state. In the 1980s, the range of exhibits—a mixture of dioramas, documents, and objects—covered two key domains of police work. One was the apprehension of spectacular criminals, the other, the protection of "national security" against the threat of "terrorism" and, later in the decade, "dangers on the borders." Installations of the first kind featured the likes of Daisy de Melker, perhaps South Africa's most notorious serial killer; indicted for poisoning two husbands and one of her children, de Melker was a horrific inversion of the national stereotype of the genteel white female entrusted with reproducing the moral essence of her race.[41] Such emblems of aberration *within* the nation were set off from the peril to its existence posed by those alienated from it: by Poqo, the armed wing of the radical

40. Tilda Smal, interview with the authors, South African Police Museum, Pretoria, 10 Aug. 2000.

41. Daisy de Melker was hanged in 1932 for the murder of her son, Rhodes. The court also believed that she had killed her two husbands—in order to inherit their money—but could not establish conclusive evidence to this effect. De Melker was widely rumored to have put five of her other children to death as well, but was never charged with these homicides. See, for example, Marsh, *Famous South African Crimes* (Cape Town, 1991), chap. 6.

Pan-African Congress, for instance, which in the early 1960s had made a particular target of the police,[42] and by the "Rivonia conspiracy," uncovered with the arrest, in 1962, of several top ANC leaders, most notably Nelson Mandela, who were alleged to be plotting treason. Dioramas dealing with defensive action on the borders depicted a hostile alliance of others bent on bringing down the ruling regime: exiled "terrorists," sympathetic frontline African states, and international communism. As this installation underlined, the dividing line between the military and the police was conspicuously fuzzy in the late years of minority rule.

Night Tours, in which the tableaux were animated, were started in 1990 as a once-off experiment to entertain a group of "VIPs" from the International Police Association. Word spread. Besieged by inquiries from an interested public, the staff decided to offer the tours on request. Soon the demand became overwhelming; at one stage, there were three a week, all year, each for forty visitors. Performances continued until the building closed in April 1999. Initially, most visitors, both night and day, were white Afrikaans-speaking South Africans. Later, Africans, especially school groups, began to patronize the place. By that time, efforts had been made to revise the exhibits (see below). The Police Museum, in which everything was free of charge, seems to have been popular above all with the superpatriotic and the very poor. Toward the end, the Night Tours attracted some cultured critics of the regime for whom this dark, if not wholly intended, parody—its freak chic—became an excursion into the comic underside of the police state.

The staff look back on the tours with great fondness. These were occasions of carnivalesque camaraderie, occasions that gave license for various sorts of play, some of it decidedly ambiguous. As visitors entered the building, they came upon cops in anachronistic uniforms on antique bicycles—a somewhat heavy-handed signal, this, that they had departed real time for the domain of history-as-theater, of docudramaturgy. As we intimated earlier, the vaudeville itself turned on the willingness of the officer-players to inhabit the identities of public enemies. This willingness, almost a caricature of the mix of outrage and enjoyment that Lacan calls *jouissance,* may be read, following Aretxaga, as an appropriation by state functionaries of the "seductive and fearful power" of their adversaries.[43] But there is more at

42. Poqo—which, in Xhosa, means "for ourselves alone"—patterned itself on the Kenyan Mau Mau liberation movement. Its cadres staged attacks on police and other whites in the Cape Province, often using pangas. In 1963, acting on a tip from the authorities in Basutoland, where the organization's leadership was in exile, the South African Police arrested some 2,000 suspected members; see, for example, Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945* (London, 1983), p. 247.

43. Aretxaga, "A Fictional Reality," p. 64.

work here. The performance also recalls the repetitive enactment of paradox characteristic of African rituals under colonial conditions.[44] The Night Tours replayed the Hegelian enslavement of white rulers to the terror of the *swart gevaar,* a "black danger" largely of their own making. In the play, the pragmatics of melodrama permitted the separation of the civil from the savage, enabling the law to appear to act decisively upon forces of darkness, as if to redress the contradictions endlessly reproduced by colonial rule. The curator acknowledged that her staff presumed that patrons would be fascinated by sensational crime. And eager for vicarious terror. Consequently, they sought to provoke first horror and then deliverance; such "vicarious adventures in the illicit and the brutal," Scheingold notes, are a "prelude" to the gratification, to the "discharges of anger" promised by "society's act of retribution."[45] In dramatizing the difficulties of defending an enlightened order against uncouth odds, the police-players elevated their audience into metonymic citizens of the nation as moral community—and, also, into a public in need of state protection from a vast mass of unruly others.

Visitors remember the tours vividly. One critical observer described the performance to us as a "homegrown chamber of horrors": part amateur theater, part fairground haunted house. Thus Daisy de Melker walked the halls dressed in period costume, offering visitors coffee from her poison flask. The real thing, that is, *not* a facsimile. Setting the scene was a cast of characters who embodied less alarming threats to everyday order: a few policewomen garbed as prostitutes, a couple who postured as addicts in front of a light show that simulated a bad trip; a group of "authentic" *sangomas,* traditional healers, who enacted a trance to dramatize the dangers of "black magic." Also brought to life was Panga Man, a notorious black criminal who attacked courting white couples while they were parked in a leafy spot in Pretoria, not far from the museum. Bearing a panga, a large scythe, he would assault the men and rape the women—to whom, it was said, he then gave bus fare home. There could hardly have been a more intense figuration of the dark, insouciant menace that stalked the cities in the white imagination, threatening civility and its social reproduction. This nightmare gained fantastic irony when the attacker turned out to be a mild-mannered "tea boy" at police headquarters.[46] Epitomizing the standard co-

44. See Max Gluckman, "Rites of Rebellion in South-East Africa," *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa: Collected Essays* (London, 1963); Turner, *The Forest of Symbols;* and Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago, 1985).

45. Scheingold, *The Politics of Street Crime: Criminal Process and Cultural Obsession* (Philadelphia, 1991), p. 175.

46. Inside knowledge enabled the culprit to evade the police for four years. Eventually convicted on multiple counts of rape, he was sentenced to death and hung.

lonial terrors of rapacious black sexuality and subaltern betrayal, Panga Man featured centrally in a regular museum display. It depicted a car sawn in half to reveal a couple looking up in petrified expectation of an immanent strike. During Night Tours, a door would burst open in the wall behind, and an African officer would leap out, brandishing the eponymous weapon. "We thought of having him shout something as he did so," the curator told us. "But the first time we tried it everybody screamed so loudly, he could hardly be heard. People nearly fainted."

By the mid-1990s, with the dawn of the postcolony, efforts were made to add fresh exhibits to the museum, acknowledging the possibility of different readings of history and the presence of new sorts of citizen-consumers. The aim, said Smal, was to document the role of the police in the apartheid years in such a way as to capture black viewpoints on that history. This took it on faith that it was possible, *within* the same signifying economy, to pluralize existing displays, their ideological scaffolding, and the kind of nation they presumed. Thus installations on terrorism were revised to explain the rationale of the liberation movements. And tableaux were included to document the insidious indignities of the Pass System and the Sharpeville Uprising of 1960, in which scores of nonviolent African protestors were shot to death by police. Popular with the public, itself now changing in social composition, was a depiction of the sabre-rattling antics of the white-right Afrikaner Weerstand Beweging (Afrikaner Resistance Movement), whose assertive racist posturing was the very essence of neofascist melodrama. These changes produced some paradoxical moments—like one in which Nelson Mandela, played by a SAPS look-alike, stood inside a replica of his Robben Island cell and answered polite questions from curious visitors.

Nor were they uncontroversial, particularly among older white police officers. The museum, now under the jurisdiction of an ANC-administered Ministry of Safety and Security, had entered an era of postcolonial contestation, becoming a space of argument as never before. Whatever the *contingent* causes, its closure suggests that it collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions—wrought by thoroughgoing changes in the racial composition and status of the police, in the ideology of enforcement, and, most of all, in the relation of citizenry to government. But the question of what should be exhibited, how and why, pointed to something more than a shift in the way in which the nation narrates its past and future. It signaled a transformation in the social imaginary of the state itself—and the ways in which it deploys horror to make itself visible. About which more in a moment. In the meantime, the museum staff, undaunted, continue to plan future displays: on, for example, the more sensational abuses revealed by

the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,[47] on the "evils" of the "witch doctor's art," and on such spectacular murderers as the so-called Norwood serial killer, who, as it happens, had been a regular police sergeant. But, as these museologists are coming to realize, it is difficult to capture, in tableau, the realities of policing the postcolony. Not, at least, without rethinking the regime of representation required by the present moment. To be sure, in the final years, the Night Tours themselves ran up against this difficulty, finding that the line they presumed between fact and fantasy, order and chaos, safety and violence, was dissolving. In one instance, a harbinger of things to come, the police actors staged a robbery involving hostages and a fake intervention on the part of the Flying Squad, firing blank bullets. By this stage, however, violent crime had become a pervasive preoccupation, above all in the inner city, where the museum was located. As the shots went off, panic ensued. In the midst of the mayhem, it was unclear whether or not the performance had been overtaken by a real attack from the streets outside.

It was not the first time that theater and brute reality had been confounded in this house of horrors. As we sat in the closed museum, talking to the curator about its past and its (im)probable future, Tilda Smal gestured toward the ceiling and recalled how, in the old days, the Pretoria branch of the Security Police had been housed above. "A lot of famous people were interrogated here." she said, "Almost the whole current government." The edifice had been home, then, to another, more sadistic form of theater: the surreal techniques of information gathering, of violence and terror, that were the stock-in-trade of "special policing" under apartheid. Since 1994, several prominent figures have revisited the site of their incarceration and torture;[48] the upper reaches of the building have, for former enemies of the state, become a space for revisiting the past, a space for personal and collective remembering.

During the heyday of the museum in the 1980s, its staff and visitors used an entrance on the east side of the building. The security police used the west side. When political prisoners were brought in, the clanking of their handcuffs and leg irons was audible in the exhibition space below. Sgt. Smal said that she had found it hard to believe what she had heard and seen at the time. But, she noted, for patrons it all seemed "part of the show." In this

47. Plans center on such sites as Vlakplaas, a notorious site for the training of terror troops to counter "enemies" of the apartheid state.

48. According to Sgt. Smal, Tokyo Sexwale, former premier of Gauteng province—which includes Pretoria—recalled, on a recent visit, the last time he had been inside the building. It was when he was brought there "at 4 AM on a cold morning in July, directly from prison"; he was detained for several days of interrogation (Smal, interview with authors).

way, the museum was the facade for state terror, and state terror the mise-en-scène for the museum.

We are confronted here with the strangeness of the real,[49] the unnerving interpenetration of force and fantasy, of policing and performance, of the interiors and exteriors of the state-as-violence. There was no simple line, in this house with two entrances, between backstage and frontstage, between actors and audience, between the producers and consumers of a phantasmagoric reality. Ordinary citizens unwittingly played along in the fabrication and reproduction of precisely the sense of apocalypse—the terrifying threats to order—that legitimized the deadly exercise of coercion in the name of governance. For despite the distinction between public display and secret interrogation, each represented an aspect of the melodrama, of manufacturing truth by evoking terror, that appears essential to enforcement everywhere. This takes especially cavalier and destructive forms in totalitarian states where a continuing sense of emergency exonerates the most savage of disciplinary practices. In South Africa, in the present era of "human rights" policing, these practices have been radically transformed. But, as we shall see shortly, the reliance of the law on melodrama has not disappeared. In answer to one of our opening questions, there is both continuity—because it is in the nature of enforcement—*and* change—because of shifts in the political culture of its context.

Old horrors leave their traces. While the future of the Janus-faced edifice hangs in the balance, its uncanny past haunts those who were part of it, those who seek now to reconfigure its purpose in the present. Toward the end of our conversation, the curator remarked: "We have a few resident ghosts in the building." One, she confided, likes to play—note that verb again—with the security system when people work after hours—a phantom, perhaps, with a particularly poignant sense of irony. What is more, museum personnel attest to strange nocturnal experiences. South Africans of all races have always been actively engaged with the supernatural, although an obsession with the occult has been especially noticeable during this time of transition.[50] One Sunday evening, when Sgt. Smal was alone in the building, the alarm began to sound furiously. Unable to switch it off, she sat resignedly for two hours, waiting, as she put it, "for the spirit to play herself out." On another occasion, she reports having shouted: "Daisy," de

49. See E. J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762–1800* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 174.

50. See Jean and John L. Comaroff, "Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony," *American Ethnologist* 26, no. 3 (1999): 279–301 and "Alien-nation: Zombies, Immigrants, and Millennial Capitalism," *Codesria Bulletin* 3–4 (1999): 17–28; rpt. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101 (Fall 2002): 779–805.

Melker, that is, "leave the intercom alone!" The mechanism, she said, "went wild."

But other, unnamed forces also spook this building, struggling to find voice in the great revisioning of the past occasioned by the birth of the postcolony. It is as if the specters of bygone events are unable to find embodiment—or a means of representation—in the present, notwithstanding laudable efforts to foster new cultures of recollection; farce and tragedy, humor and horror, it seems, must confront each other before an awful history can become a habitable present. Those who spend time on the upper floors during the small hours speak of an unquiet presence along the corridors. Some say that it is because many prisoners had committed suicide here, *suicide* being a sometime secret police euphemism for killed in custody. More recently, a security guard shot himself on the premises. Another person came off the street to take his own life in the courtyard. Black South Africans, in particular, disliked working in the place. Many still do. Here we get to the nub of the issue. The lower floors of the building may be frequented by the ghosts of playful lady poisoners and other random spirits, but the upstairs has an altogether more sinister aura. Museum staff told us that, in the former security police stronghold, "there is a really strange feeling." People hear the footsteps of those long departed. No one feels comfortable in the place. This is hardly surprising; only perpetrators and victims know what unspeakable acts and agonies those walls have witnessed. Thus it is that history shadows the reluctant consciousness of those—above all, those responsible for justice, law, and order—who must find ways to reconcile their activities in the past, a past that truly *was* another country, with the radically altered moral regime of the present.

No wonder the Police Museum remains shut. It does so not only because its cabinet of horrors requires drastic revision in the postcolony but because it must find new modes of melodrama, new forms of conjuring order from terror; this is all the more so now because the public preoccupation with violent crime, fed by avid electronic and print media, has made reality seem much scarier than fiction. In the event, the now multiracial staff of the SAPS Education Unit has, over the past few years, begun experimenting with other genres of self-representation—among them, video shows, popular puppetry, and street theater—to dramatize a contemporary clutch of nightmares: domestic assault, rape, gun-related violence, drug abuse.[51] As befits the ethos of a liberalizing state, they take their shows on the road to the

51. To date, the Education Unit has not dealt with witch killings and other occult activities, largely because officers of the Occult Related Crime Unit have suggested that, in doing so, it might draw the wrath of Satanists. Museum staff told us that "satanic graffiti" has, in fact, been painted in the vicinity of building.

various provinces of the postcolony. We follow them to one such provincial outpost, there to explore the nature of police drama after apartheid.

And so on to scene 2.

Play Accidents, Choreographed Crimes, or Performing the State

In November 1999, we read in the national press that Mafikeng-Mmabatho—[52] capital of the North West Province, where we were living and working at the time—was to host an exhibit on violence against women.[53] This was to be part of a countrywide campaign, Project Harmony, that sought to draw public attention to the government's new Domestic Violence Act. Members of the North West Police Services, the papers announced, would stage educational performances at taxi ranks, those remarkable agoras of African postcolonies. Our inquiries about the event, however, drew a blank. Nobody, neither the local police nor anyone else, knew a thing about it.

It was only after we traveled to the Secretariat for Public Safety and Liaison at its provincial headquarters, ten kilometers north of town, that we learned the whereabouts of the exhibit: the foyer of the North West provincial legislature. The secretariat, it should be noted, is a regional division of the national Department of Safety and Security, under whose aegis falls the newly reorganized South African Police Service;[54] at the time, however, relations between the two bodies were rather ill-defined. The new National Crime Prevention Strategy, adopted in 1996, promulgated a dispersed but "integrative" approach, provincial governments being charged with "coordinating a range of . . . functions . . . to achieve more effective crime prevention."[55] But precisely how this was to be done remained opaque even to those entrusted with the urgent task of promoting "community security."

52. Mafikeng-Mmabatho designates a composite town with a complex history. Mafikeng, the Place of Stones, was, from the late nineteenth century, the capital of the Tshidi-Rolong, a large Tswana chiefdom. With the coming of European settlers and colonial overrule, a segregated white town, (mis)named Mafeking—made famous by the siege of 1899–1900, during the South African War—grew up across the railway line from the African village. When the ethnic "homeland" of Bophuthatswana was created by the apartheid regime in the 1970s, its center, Mmabatho, was built alongside Mafikeng/Mafeking. Thus it was that the conurbation came to be referred to, rather awkwardly, as Mafikeng-Mmabatho. The old Mafeking, as exclusive white enclave and as a spelling for the place, has disappeared since 1994. We refer to either Mafikeng or Mmabatho below, depending on where in the town the events in question occurred.

53. See *The Citizen,* 20 Nov. 1999, p. 6.

54. The national Secretariat for Safety and Security was established by the Police Service Act of 1995, which emphasized three key policy areas: democratic control, police accountability, and community participation in issues of safety and security. See Department of Safety and Security, Republic of South Africa, *In Service of Safety: White Paper on Safety and Security, 1999–2004* (Pretoria, 1998).

55. Ibid., p. 31.

Here, patently, was local government faced with the demand to invent itself.

This is where Project Harmony came in. The directive from the state that provincial governments should raise public awareness of the then imminent Domestic Violence Bill implied a clear line of action. Hence the announcement of the exhibit that proved so strangely elusive. But why, we wondered, *had* it been so hard to find? And why was it being staged in the provincial parliament? This is hardly a *public* space; security was so tight that only members of government, their staff, and accredited visitors were admitted. Inside, in the grand lobby, two rather flamboyant members of the Police Education Unit fussed, with professional flourish, over a single tableau. The display was small but striking. A *very* still life, its centerpiece was a bed with disheveled sheets. Across them lay a life-size model of a female, race indeterminate, clad in the shredded remnants of upmarket underwear. Her body was bruised and bloody, her throat cut. A knife lay close to her face. Yellow tape cordoned this off as a crime scene, which was framed by posters and works of art, all depicting violence against women, all urging the public—in English and Afrikaans, but *not* Setswana, the local language—to "speak out against abuse."

What are we to make of this grisly spectacle whose artful detail seemed so to exceed its function? Why, again, was a diorama ostensibly intended to educate the public placed so securely beyond its gaze? The actions and anxieties of the police artistes offered a clue. The display had to be ready for viewing by the parliamentarians, political and civic dignitaries, and press people who had been invited to attend a ceremonial session marking the passage of the Domestic Violence Act. *They* were the target audience. It was they who were meant to witness that, notwithstanding mounting skepticism, local police and local government could cooperate effectively to fight crime. But the investment of those responsible for the exhibit, and the emotional power packed into it, implied that it was also a site of *self*-construction. Its authors, in the name of the SAPS, seemed intent on configuring a collective sense of moral purpose in the face of a daunting world in which violence was thought to have become endemic, ubiquitous, even unpoliceable.

What we were witnessing, in short, was the state performing for itself, performing itself. The state making statements. And drawing its charge from a violated female body that, in a shift from the older signifying economy, had come to stand for the moral citizen victimized by the new arch-enemies of the people. For the significance of the meticulous melodrama played out in this political setting was that it was a simulacrum of *governance*—a rite staged to make actual and authoritative, at least in the eyes of an executive bureaucracy, the activity of those responsible for law and or-

der—and, by extension, an enactment of the very possibility of *government.* For the battle against crime, epitomized in sexualized attacks on women, has come to measure the efficacy of the postcolonial regime at a time when the nation's foes—its rapists and murderers, its gangsters and gunmen, its carjackers and drug dealers—are, for the most part, also its own recently liberated subjects; this, recall, is one of the contradictions faced by the Police Museum in its efforts to revamp its signifying economy. In showing visible attentiveness to the sanctity of the female body, to the specter of violence against it, and to policing those who would desecrate it, the state objectified itself—to itself.

But the institutional face of government also insists that it be recognized by its subject-citizens. Which takes us to the other face of police performance, its *public* enactment. One such enactment came *at* us two months later. At 8:30 AM on a Tuesday morning in downtown Mafikeng, as children rushed to school and businesses opened their doors, we heard an oncoming cacophony of horns and sirens. Obviously a motorcade. Down the street hurried a motley array of conveyances: a few lumbering Public Order Police trucks (aptly named hippos in the bad old days), a number of patrol cars, and several civilian saloon cars; about twenty vehicles in all. Each contained a few uniformed officers of different ranks and races who waved energetically to those gathered in bewilderment on the sidewalks. On the doors and hoods of these vehicles were scrawled English signs. One condemned the abuse of women. The other proclaimed: "Give them toys, not guns," invoking a growing concern about violent acts perpetrated by children. This, self-evidently, was yet a further nod toward crime prevention. But it was also an effort to establish a palpable police presence on the streets by playing on the nightmare of a nation consumed by brutality, a nation in which violated mothers were producing a generation of infant felons.

People along the roadside, having discerned that the motorcade was "put on by the police," paid it little heed. The once ubiquitous, menacing presence of the law has been drastically reduced here as elsewhere in the "new" South Africa. By contrast, police *performances,* especially under the sign of mass education and public relations, have become much more common. "The streets are full of *tsotsis* (gangsters)," one old man complained to us, "and all the police can do is play." The choice of this last word will not go unnoticed.

The observation itself has some ground. Local law enforcement officers, sensitive to the ambivalence with which they are regarded, have devised various homegrown techniques through which to enact their visibility, efficacy, resolve, and responsibility before a population fearful to inhabit pub-

lic space. One of their performances—a fake traffic pileup, staged without warning at a busy intersection in Mafikeng during the morning rush hour—was so authentic that it caused pandemonium. And one, all too real, accident. Ironically, the aim of the exercise had been to draw attention to a campaign for safe driving; carnage on the roads, much of it caused by alcohol and criminal negligence, is another evil besetting the province. So rapid has been the rising death toll that it seems less accidental than an index of new dangers lurking in the unrestrained pursuit of freedom, not least the freedom to consume, that has come with the end of apartheid—and with the expansive, and expensive, ethos of neoliberalism.

Unlike the rape scene but like the motorcade, the accident inserted itself into the thick of street life. It deployed the full power of the law—the right to usurp public space and time, to conjure with truth, to evoke terror by mimicking death—all to impress upon "the community" the authoritative presence of the police, whose absence from crime scenes had been subject to much local criticism. But the smash was *also* intended, as was the Rabelaisian procession, to be a functional ritual, one that would turn popular ambivalence toward the SAPS into positive affect by dint of carefully staged emotions as transformative for the actors as for their audience. For here, again, the actors *were* the audience, the audience, actors. Their drama was at once opaque to the public, yet made that public part of the staging. The unmarked pileup, along with the illegible signs in the motorcade[56] and the hidden-away exhibit at the parliament, implies a form of reflexivity in which the performers sought, by aping epics of disorder, to interpellate themselves as legitimate agents of caring enforcement—agents whose role in grappling with a new catalogue of national nightmares would be recognized, and respected, by the populace at large. For policing in this new era presumes a high measure of consent from citizens, a consent still very much in question.

If, as Malcolm Young says, policing everywhere relies on "well-directed social productions" to maintain the mythic divide between good and evil, is it any wonder that the new SAPS, still struggling to define itself on a reconfigured moral and political landscape, should evince a strong tendency to act out? Or, as in the Police Museum, that the line between staged performances and the melodrama of everyday police work should often disappear? This was brought home to South Africans a couple of years ago by a series of ostentatiously publicized raids, led with extravagant ceremony by the national chief of police, on gentleman's clubs in Johannesburg alleged

56. It is noteworthy that, when we mentioned the procession to police at the Lomanyaneng station, one of the largest community police centers on the outskirts of Mafikeng, none of them knew anything about it.

to be trafficking in alien sex workers.[57] While it did not lead to many arraignments, the operation dramatized a recurrent terror of the reconstituted nation: the growing mass of illegal immigrants, archetypal others, whose very being-there is thought to endanger both the borders and the interiors of the postcolony. That such performances—many of which feature police showing off their mastery in melodramas of despoiled female bodies—may be tentative and dispersed, that they lack the compelling power often attributed by anthropologists to communal rituals, is precisely the point. It is through their uncertain playing out that the "new" South African polity is taking tangible shape.

Conclusion

We have argued that, in postcolonial South Africa, dramatic enactments of crime and punishment—those disseminated by the state as well as those consumed by various publics—are not merely fabrications after the event. Nor are they reflections, inflections, or refractions of a simple sociological reality. On the contrary, they are a vital part of the effort to *produce* social order and to arrive at persuasive ways of representing it, thereby to construct a minimally coherent world-in-place; even more, to do so under neoliberal conditions in which technologies of governance—including technologies of detection and enforcement—are, at the very least, changing rapidly and are, in some places, under dire threat. In these times, criminal violence is taken to be diagnostic of the fragility of civil society; concomitantly, officers of the law become the prime embodiment of a state-under-pressure. Thus, ironically, in the effort to build a posttotalitarian democracy, South Africans find themselves calling for "MORE POLICE." Their predicament appears to be decidedly post-Foucaultian; disorder, here, seems to exceed the capacity of the state to discipline and punish. It is a predicament in which both those who would wield power and their putative subjects find it necessary to resort to drama and fantasy to conjure up visible means of governance.

This story could, of course, be read *not* as post-Foucaultian, but as a historical narrative that proves the Foucaultian point; or, rather, that reinforces a Foucaultian telos by playing it in reverse to show how, when modern power runs out, primitive spectacle returns once more. We would argue otherwise: that the distinction between politics-as-theater and biopolitics underlying this telos is too simple; that it is itself the product of a modernist ideology that would separate symbolic from instrumental coercion, melo-

57. See "Brothel Raided," *Pretoria News,* 3 Mar. 2000, p. 1, and P. Molwedi, "Brothel Owner Granted Bail of R10,000," *The Star,* 7 Mar. 2000, p. 2.

drama from a politics of rationalization. Melodrama may be the medium of first resort where norms are in flux and the state is incapable of ensuring order. But the history of modern policing suggests that theater has *never* been absent from the counterpoint of ritual and routine, visibility and invisibility, that is integral to the staging of power, and of law and order, in authoritative, communicable form; recall, one last time, the testimony, in this respect, of Malcolm Young, the policeman-ethnographer. That counterpoint, in short, lies at the very heart of governance, be it metropolitan or colonial, European or African, past or present.

There is a more than arbitrary connection, then, between law enforcement, theater, and dramatic fiction.[58] Crime and punishment are especially salient to the reciprocal fantasy through which police and public construct each other across the thin blue line that makes palpable the power of the state, the thin blue line that, imaginatively, stands between anarchy and civility, the thin blue line that underscores the fragility of order and gives focus to popular preoccupations with the threat of social meltdown.[59] All the more so because, with the rise of global capitalism and the mutation of the old international system, new geographies of crime and terror, themselves ever more murkily interrelated, have rearticulated criminality inside nation-states with criminality across nation-states, making both harder to contain or comprehend. All the more so, too, because the world-historical conditions of this neoliberal age—among them, the weakening sovereignty of nations and their borders, the diminishing capacity of governments to control either the means of coercion or the commonweal, the challenge of cultural politics to the liberal rule of law and its grounding in universal human rights—have made policing in its modernist sense difficult. Perhaps even impossible.

These conditions are most visible in postcolonial, posttotalitarian contexts, where there is a paucity of civil institutions to counter the contraction of the welfare state. They are, however, as urgently felt in, say, the postindustrial north of England as in the northerly provinces of South Africa.[60] And they express themselves everywhere in the criminal obsessions of both rulers and subjects. Thus, while much current opinion, stretching from lib-

58. Echoes, here, of D. A. Miller's claim that there is a "radical *entanglement* between the nature of the novel and the practice of the police" (D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* [Berkeley, 1988], p. 2).

59. For a comparative insight into the difficulties, under contemporary conditions, of holding the thin blue line, see Boyer, "Bad Cops," p. 60. Boyer notes that the phrase *the thin blue line* was coined by William H. Parker, a revered police chief during the Eisenhower era.

60. Again, this paradox readily takes theatrical form. Recall that, in that the climactic scene of one of the most acute cinematic explorations of postindustrial Britain, *The Full Monty* (dir. Peter Cattaneo, 1997), the male strippers come on stage dressed as policemen.

ertarian to Foucaultian, might minimize the importance of the state, there is plentiful evidence in popular fantasy of a nostalgia for authoritative, even authoritarian government. This much is evident in the reflexive self-constructions of South African police who dramatically inflate both the necessity to wrest community from chaos and their capacity to do so. Their melodramas are founded on a dialectic of production and reduction—on the productive conjuring of a world saturated with violence and moral ambiguity, the threat of which they alone are able to reduce to habitable order. Thus it is that, in their *imaginaire,* a metaphysics of *disorder*—the hyperreal conviction, rooted in everyday experience, that society hovers on the brink of dissolution—comes to legitimize a physics of social order to be accomplished through effective law enforcement. Thus it is, reciprocally, that many ordinary South Africans are drawn to mass-mediated dramas in which men with badges confront, and typically overcome, the most heinous, most violent, most antisocial of felons. Thus it is, too, that, distilled in a fictional economy of representation, fantasies become facts, impossibilities become possible, and the law, as foundation of the nation-state, becomes visible once more.

"It's the oldest trick in the book. You create the illusion of terror, then you get credit for stamping it out; you get funds, you get power. And that's exactly what's going on."

—Jonathan Franzen, *The Twenty-Seventh City*[61]

61. Jonathan Franzen, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (New York, 2003), p. 172.