Silk and Horsehair and Barbed Wire and Roots

Rajeev Patel

Finding Mr Madini
directed by Jonathan Morgan and other great African Spider Writers,
Ink, 1999, 278 p. ill, R115, ISBN 0-86486-446-9.

I have never been one to miss a birthday. I could not get enough of them as a youngster. I enjoyed them so much that, until I was caught, I had one every week, depending on the teacher and the need for exoneration from failure to complete some assignment or other. Consider it an introduction to the birthday as a time of amnesty and overlooking.

So, ten years after the democratic dispensation, who are we overlooking in South Africa? And who is going to catch us? There is not a journal, magazine, newspaper or party organ that has not celebrated 1994, and performed a more or less sophisticated calculus of future appraisal. Yet the signature of 1994 doesn't certify everyone's memory. Here is a comparative example from India's 1994: 1947.

> 'I can't say what my age was in 1947 —even now I don't know my age— but I was quite small. In my village there were a few poor Muslims and they were very frightened. They thought that people were coming to kill them so they ran away. But there was no rioting or killing, so things were back to normal. The poor Muslims never came back though. And then one day someone gave us flags and we waved them around.' Harpiyari, a washerwoman in Aligarh, remembers Indian Independence Day (1947) from *Granta 57: India! The Golden Jubilee*.

Amid the nostalgia and fond tales, Harpiyari reminds us that, for some, the truth of Independence was a moment when someone connected to the state, to the new nation, gave us flags. It's sobering to think that the Rainbow Nation's tenth birthday might mean as little for many in South Africa today.

Finding Mr Madini is not a book about 1994 and its aftermath. It is not a book about the liberation struggle, or about ten years of anything at all. (It was published in 1999.) But it is a book of the Rainbow Nation par excellence, full of dislocations, discoveries and, above all, truths.

It began life as a novel that Jonathan Morgan wanted to write about the Johannesburg underworld. The book was not going well. The excerpt we read of the work-in-progress is plodding and contrived, a scene where an "Enjoy Coke" sign hangs over someone cooking crack. Morgan is an excellent writer, to be sure – the book's opening paragraph holds in its small hand an entire childhood universe. But when it comes to a novel about drug crime, Morgan's skill is spinning in the snow, and he knows it. A homeless character introduced to the book will only sound real if he does some research. This begins a chain of events through which he contacts the Johannesburg based *Homeless Talk* magazine, finds himself running a writing workshop for homeless writers and, soon, directing a book project involving eleven homeless writers telling their truths.

Truth telling is a narrative mode that the South African national project has taken to new heights. This has been effected not only at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or the Commission on Restitution of Land Rights, but through various kinds of historical recoveries played on the South African Broadcasting Corporation, in concert halls, in poetry, in cinemas and in journals. This is biography as a national art form, a way of fighting against the apartheid amnesia promoted by apartheid. But, just as South Africa's long amnesia was a political project, the subsequent recovery of self, and its rituals of truth-telling are never innocent, or context-free. In her *Country of My Skull*, Antjie Krog notes of the testimony at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that

> …there is also the invisible audience —the imagined audience on the horizon somewhere— the narrator's family, colleagues, the new Government. And every listener decodes the story in terms of truth. Telling is … never neutral, and the selection and ordering try to determine the interpretation [p. 85].

The fantasy of an unmediated story is always going to remain exactly that. But what if the audience is not the New Government? And what if the selection and ordering is not carried out by a court, or by an anthropologist, or by a novelist? In *Finding Mr Madini*, Morgan asks the writers to bring their own "windows", glimpses, mediated openings into their lives, for others to share. These windows run from a moment of origin, an early childhood story, a rite of passage, "life before hitting the road and becoming homeless, hitting the road, homeless living, and signing off". This is the mode of selection and ordering in the book, and looking through these windows, the government is a bit-player. In fact, government and the national project have only two cameos, both comic. The government first appears when Pinky Siphamele revisits for the writing group an article she penned for *Homeless Talk* in 1998:

> Cornelius House, a derelict warehouse in Albert Street, with the generous assistance of the Johannesburg Trust for the Homeless, and the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, has been converted into a living space for two hundred people. The project targets those who we think will improve their earning potential within six months. Residents must have a minimum income of R250 per month and a maximum of R1250. Rentals range from R60 per month to R180. There are communal cooking facilities and ablutions which are always locked.

Virginia, David and Steven laugh the loudest [p. 50].

Later, when Valentine Cascarino finds himself in Kimberly, we get a second window into the national project. The house at which Cascarino arrives has walls

> made from various materials and each one has its own picture: Mandela, Bafana Bafana, Bob Marley and Martin Luther King. … Away from the farrago of nonsense, Señor Ndiki pointing downward tells me that Sipho slept in Lusaka for one night only in early December.
>
> "What is Parliament, Lusaka and Union Buildings" I ask.
>
> "You're standing on Parliament, first floor. It is the most decent as you can see. Union is the second floor up there. It is made up of intermediate dropouts. Lusaka is that hole in the floor. It is the basement and the poorest live there," says Mr Ndiki [p174].

And 1994 features not at all.

Yet this remains a book about the Rainbow Nation, not as the state-authorised national project, but as something more organic. "The whole rainbow is inside me," begins Sipho Madini, one of the collection's most powerful writers, a journalist for *Homeless Talk*, and the book's eponymous missing person. Halfway through the book, he disappears, and the book becomes a book written by Morgan, and ten other Great African Spider Project writers, in which they write their truths and look for their missing comrade.

The co-written result is a shifting tapestry. Much of the art comes in the development of the project itself, but there's great art in the weaving of the stories together. The threads are silk and horsehair and barbed wire and roots. Morgan tells of his marriage to a Japanese woman, and his Jewish South African background. Valentine of being taught how to catch mermaids with mountain herbs. Gert of riding horses until they die. Steven of being taken out by his school teacher to shout at cars. Patrick of being beaten because he's not circumcised. Robert on the typologies of gang tattoos. Virginia of finding out she's Venda after having poured scorn on them. And, with varying degrees of commitment, these threads are tangled around a search for Sipho Madini.

In drawing its writers from the streets of Johannesburg, Finding Mr Madini deals with another classic South African theme: displacement. The book is a chorus of echoes of apartheid's enforced urbanisation and dislocation, the pre-1994 ancestors of the homelessness amplified through South Africa's towns and cities. In 2001, over a quarter of households, over one million in South Africa's major cities, lacked formal shelter: nearly 30 percent more than 1996.

South Africa's dislocations have always been transnational, and the experiences of being out-of-place, of being homeless, are refracted through the lens of citizenship. Many of the voices in the book do not belong to South African citizens at all. We learn, for instance, that in "the same week, Diouf, the Senegalese man selling leather stuff in Melville, tells me his story. And Paulo, from Angola, who paces up and down at the dam, tries to tell me his. The man I buy the mask from at Bruma flea market is from Zaire. And Ted, the editor of *Homeless Talk*, from Zimbabwe"[p50]. South Africa's Northern barbarians, those Africans, are scorned and mistreated daily, and many of the interactions in the book are stories of dislocation and conflict between citizens. To be South African, after all, is not to be Senegalese, or Zimbabwean or, heaven forbid, Nigerian.

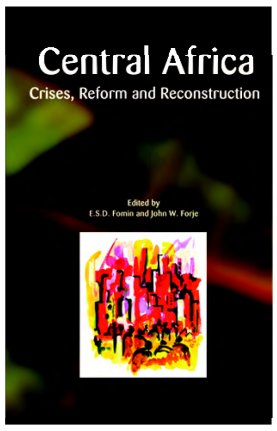
The book ends with and without closure. We do not get to find Sipho Madini, but we have found a trove of stories. Perhaps the most powerful finding is an investigative process. Morgan's reconstituted narrative therapy is a way of searching for truths that does not objectify poverty, does not roll up the windows against the poor, a process that locates the experiences of Johannesburg's homeless not in a governmental political economic context, but a literary one. As Valentine Cascarino puts it, "the power in literature rests in many angles". This literary insight is one that informs the work of qualitative social scientists in principle, but rarely in practice do the results match the achievement of *Finding Mr Madini*.

Morgan did end up producing a book about the underworld, though perhaps not the kind he had first imagined. *Finding Mr Madini* is a remedy to the many representations of the poor in which they are held silent, in a similar vein to Ashwin Desai's *We Are the Poors* (reviewed in this issue). Rich with lived metaphor about today's South Africa, its displacements, its exclusions, its dignities and histories, it has an important place in the Rainbow Nation's decennial canon. On the letters page of the September 2004 issue of *Homeless Talk* is a quote from William James' *Principles of Psychology*: "The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook". This is a book that one would be wise not to.

[And what has happened to the GASPers five years on? I give nothing away by saying that Sipho Madini remains a writer for *Homeless Talk*, though his hopes of becoming a more widely known writer, as richly as he deserves to, have so far come to naught. Virginia Maubane toured Europe with a drama project group last year, and is trying to gain national recognition in local theatre. Steven Kannetjies took a French leave two years ago and nobody has seen or heard from him. Fresaw Feleke, an Ethiopian, has emigrated to Canada because she couldn't cope with xenophobia in South Africa and the tight employment policies biased to foreigners. David Majoka is the project coordinator with *Homeless Talk*. Cascarino Valentine is a mover and shaker in national media, but still helps with the editing and designing of *Homeless Talk*. Patrick is in the Northern Province working with a Spar shopping centre, and Pinki works for a company in Melville. Jonathan Morgan is currently working with the 10 Millions Memory Project, doing memory work with HIV/AIDS affected children and adults.]

Central Africa: Crises, Reform and Reconstruction

Edited by ESD Fomin and John W Forje



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'This book contains insightful and well-articulated analyses of key factors and issues for nation building in Cameroon and the Central African sub region in terms of the socio-economico-political variables for the enterprise of natural development'.

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'This comprehensive work covers a wide range of issues affecting the Central African sub-region and argues that though most of the problems affecting African states are traceable to colonial and the Cold-War eras, authoritarian leaderships,despotism, consolidated through ethnic hegemony, politics of exclusion, corruption and unhealthy romance with forces of neo-colonialism are equally to be blamed. ... This is no doubt a timely publication and a must read for any one interested in the politics of Africa'.

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This timely book addresses development problems and prospects in Central Africa. Drawing from individual case studies, global debates and experiences, the contributors provide a rich repertoire of reflections and insights on economic integration and activities, and on the internal and external politics of the different states in the subregion. Strikingly, all the studies point to the fact that Central African states, although possessing tremendous natural and human resources and peopled by communities thirsty for development, have for a long time remained under the spell and chaos of bad governments and bad economic policies and practices. A consequence has been endemic poverty and misery for all but an elite few. Informed both by their empirical findings and experiences as social actors, the authors of this important volume highlight not only the failure of democracy to take root in the subregion, but also how corruption, lack of transparency and accountability in governance and business have detrimentally become fashionable, making the prospects of reform an ever more extravagant dream.

E.S.D. Fomin has a Doctorate in History from the University of Yaounde. He is the author of four books, has published several scientific articles. **John W. Forje** is currently Archie Mafeje Fellow at the African Institute of South Africa, Pretoria. He was educated at the Universities of Lund, Hull and Salford. He is a Lecturer in the Department of Political Science, University of Yaounde II-Soa; and a Visiting Lecturer, University of Buea, Cameroon. He is author of a number of books and articles.

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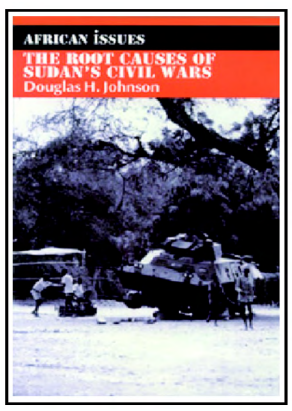

The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars

Douglas H. Johnson

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Published September 2003 ; 234 pages
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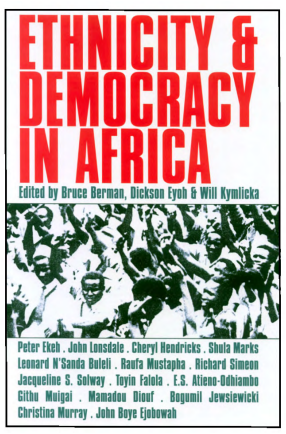

Ethnicity & Democracy in Africa

Bruce Berman, Will Kymlicka
& Dickson Eyoh

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Bruce Berman is Professor of Politics, Queen's University, Ontario; **Will Kymlicka** teaches at Queen's University Ontario, and **Dickson Eyoh** teaches at the University of Toronto.

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