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Writing Dead Ends

Notes on Breyten Breytenbach's Open Letters to Nelson Mandela

Abstract – This article discusses open letters written by Breyten Breytenbach to Nelson Mandela after Mandela's release from prison in 1991, following his inauguration as president of South Africa in 1994, as well as a 2008 letter in which Breytenbach reflects on his ideas regarding the supposed 'failed revolution' in South Africa. In comparison with Italo Calvino's masterpiece *Invisible Cities* (1972), and specifically Marco Polo's account to Kublai Khan regarding the changing nature of the city of Fedora (Calvino 1997: 28), these letters combine disparate images of South Africa, thereby creating imaginings and identifying challenges embodied in the country. Through his admiration of Nelson Mandela, Breytenbach is able to imagine different 'South Africas'. The focal point of this article is the production of meaning through analysing the intertwined nature of the dead ends of violence found in the texts, and how Breytenbach uses these to rewrite and understand the South African landscape.

1 Introduction

This paper discusses three open letters written by Breyten Breytenbach to Nelson Mandela after Mandela's release from prison in 1991, following his inauguration as president of South Africa in 1994, as well as a 2008 letter in which Breytenbach reflects on his ideas regarding the supposed 'failed revolution' in South Africa. Breytenbach's public letters addressed to Nelson Mandela provide a view of the challenges and imaginings of South Africa between 1991 and 2008, and can be compared with Marco Polo's telling to Kublai Khan regarding the changing nature of the city of Fedora in Italo Calvino's renowned *Invisible Cities* (1972):

In the centre of Fedora, that grey stone metropolis, stands a metal building with a crystal globe in every room. Looking into each globe, you see a blue city, the model of a different Fedora. These are the forms the city could have taken if, for one reason or another, it had not become what we see today. In every age someone, looking at Fedora as it was, imagined a way of making it the ideal city, but while he constructed his miniature model, Fedora was already no longer the same as before, and what had until yesterday a possible future became only a toy in a glass globe (Calvino 1997: 28).

This paper investigates the many 'Fedoras' created in Breytenbach's open letters, and requires the reader to analyse what Breytenbach imagines in terms of South Africa over the past twenty years. Breytenbach sees Nelson Mandela as a comrade and a father figure, which may be part of the reason he writes to him. Through his admiration of Mandela, he is able to see and imagine 'different South Africas'. But these South Africas all seem to have one common thread: a landscape of violence. This paper explores the landscapes of violence presented by Breytenbach, and seeks to analyse how these can shape our understanding of the country today.

2 Political Imprisonment

The name Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, and the clan-name Madiba, is well-known across the world, associated with both freedom and imprisonment. Mandela was the world's longest-suffering political prisoner, and his release in 1990 was a global achievement. Mandela's story of struggle, imprisonment, and liberty, is well-documented and has become a 'nation's story', a type of modern South African myth (Boehmer 2008: 5). As a member of the ANC (African National Congress) since 1944, Mandela was found guilty of sabotage during the Rivonia trials, and sentenced to life imprisonment (Boehmer 2008: 55). He spent 27 years in prison, from 1962 to 1990, serving most of his sentence on Robben Island and in Pollsmoor. Mandela was released nine days after the unbanning of the ANC by the Apartheid government, became the president of the ANC in 1991, and the first democratically elected president of South Africa in 1994 (Boehmer 2008: 76).

The theme of imprisonment in South Africa under the laws of the Apartheid regime also plays an important role in the history of Breyten Breytenbach. After living in Europe for a few years, he married his 'non-white' girlfriend from Vietnamese descent, Huang Lien (Yolande) (Galloway 1990: 1). He planned to take her on a visit to his home country, but her application for a visa was refused, and although the government did not provide an official reason for this refusal, newspapers clearly referred to the Law on the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages and the Immorality Act (Galloway 1990: 59). This refusal gave rise to Breytenbach's 'enforced absence' from South Africa, and had a major influence on his career as a political writer. After visiting South Africa again for the first time in 1973, Breyten began with the establishment of the secret organisation, Atlas/Okhela (Galloway 1990: 19). In June 1975, he entered South Africa with a falsified passport to recruit support for the organisation, but he was arrested and sentenced in accordance with the Law on Terrorism to nine years imprisonment, of which he served seven (Galloway 1991: 20). During his imprisonment, Breytenbach wrote five volumes of poetry and two prose texts. The books were only published after his release, and he also wrote and published a prison memoir then, entitled *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (Viljoen 2009: 58).

Although their lives were vastly different, Breytenbach seems to regard Mandela as a father figure: 'I wish to express my deep affection for you', he writes in his open letter in 2008, 'You are in so many ways like my late father – stubborn to the point of obstinacy, proud, upright, authoritarian, straight, but with deep resources of love and intense loyalty and probably with a sense of the absurd comedy of life as well' (Breytenbach 2008: 40). And later in the same letter: 'Again, my respect and affection for you can only be expressed in telling what I see and understand of this country. You could be my father; you were always a mentor and a reference; you are also a *comrade*' (Breytenbach 2008: 40). It is as a comrade that Breytenbach feels himself comfortable in expressing his concerns to Mandela; comrades in birthplace, comrades in struggle, and comrades in looking toward the future.

3 Breyten Breytenbach's Open Letters to Nelson Mandela

In his letters to Nelson Mandela, Breyten Breytenbach sketches divergent images of the South African landscape.¹ The letters are artworks, but also offer political commentary.² Through these letters it becomes apparent that Mandela is a living icon to many, but also a means to an end for some. As a leader, Nelson Mandela opened a door to new possibilities for South Africa. Breytenbach writes that Mandela attempted to build a new nation based on the concept of reconciliation (Breytenbach 2008a), and it is important to bear in mind that Mandela saved South Africa from a civil war: 'Already we know you saved us from civil war. This should be remembered as your single most important legacy, and we must never forget how lucky we were' (Breytenbach 2008: 40).

3.1 *In admiration of Madiba*

Included in Breytenbach's collection of essays *The Memory of Birds in Times of Revolution* (1996) is a piece written about Mandela's release on 11 February 1991, entitled 'Nelson Mandela is free!' (Breytenbach 1996: 20-23). A variety of tales are enveloped in the story of Nelson Mandela's release – from the 'young comrades running [in] the streets with the black, gold and green banner', to the 'young boys [who] will take the shade under a thorn tree to tell tall tales, each in turn [being] a proud Mandela', to the prisoners in 'the hell-holes of humiliation' such as Robben Island and Pollsmoor who '[bang with their] tin plates and chant: "Man-de-la! Man-de-la!"' The credo of the majority of people oppressed by the Apartheid regime who hope for a new South Africa is repeated in almost every paragraph of this essay: 'Nelson Mandela is free!' or 'Nelson Mandela has been released', or 'We have liberated Mandela'. In the final sentence of the essay 'Nelson Mandela is opening a door', not only in terms of his own prospects, but also those of an entire country, an entire continent. Some years before Mandela's release, Jacques Derrida (1986) likewise commented on this mesmerising power of people who demonstrate in Mandela's name:

The voice of Nelson Mandela – what does it recall to us, ask of us, to what does it enjoin us? What might it have to do with the gaze, reflection, admiration? I mean the energy of

1 It should be noted that before writing his first open letter to Nelson Mandela, Breytenbach wrote a poem entitled 'Brief uit die vreemde aan 'n slagter. Vir Balthazar' (Letter from faraway to a butcher. To Balthazar) addressed to former prime minister and state president of South Africa, B.J. Vorster, who was the successor of H.F. Verwoerd (the architect of Apartheid). Breytenbach was also not the only prominent Afrikaans author to address open letters to presidents of South Africa. In 1986, André P. Brink wrote an open letter to former state president, P.W. Botha, which is similar in tone to Breytenbach's poem to Vorster. In his letter, Brink protests the state of emergency proclaimed by the president, and says that, like the political atrocities faced and overcome in Argentina in the 1970s, certain historical patterns recur, 'not only the darkneses, but the light as well. Nuremberg may come around again'. While it does not fall within the scope of this article, a further avenue for exploration could include a look at other prominent authors' open letters to South African presidents and the various imaginings of the country embedded in these.

2 While it falls beyond the scope of this article, a study of the epistolary mode in Breytenbach's oeuvre could be an interesting avenue for further exploration.

this voice, but also of the one that chants in its name (listen to the clamour of his people when they demonstrate in his name: Man-de-la!) (Derrida 2014: 11).

Before and leading up to Mandela's release, he became 'the world's most famous political prisoner', and was revered as a man of 'extraordinary' and 'special' qualities. In a chapter entitled 'Mandela Writing/Writing Mandela', Daniel Roux observes that the 'true' Mandela is not really known. He explains that, for half a century, Xhosa praise poets have represented Mandela in myriad ways: 'as a lion, a resolute ox, a dangerous snake, a saviour in a Christian tradition, a peacemaker, a warrior, Xhosa royalty, and an internationalist' (Roux 2014: 206). In writings on Mandela, Roux has found that there is often a sense that something is amiss; he notes that to talk about Mandela 'becomes a conversation about what Mandela represents, and what Mandela represents becomes identical to his life, as if his life is always already an instrument in the service of some larger narrative' (Roux 2014: 207).

In an international tribute to Mandela before his release, Susan Sontag reflected on the symbolic power of Mandela as not only an 'exemplary' political prisoner, but also an 'exemplary human being' (1986). She too commented on Mandela's status as a symbol, explaining that

[i]t is often said that this man is a 'symbol'. But no one is inherently a symbol. Someone is made a symbol, as this man has been. [...] The practice of singling out as exemplary one person – specifically, one prisoner or victim – illustrates the way in which all affections and attachments must inevitably become institutionalised, acquire titles, engender hierarchies, in order to have historical weight; in order to be political (Sontag 1986).

This is a valid point to consider in light of Breytenbach's letters, as at times he seems to confess that Mandela is simply an 'icon' or 'hero' to many, not a known individual. Much has been said on the mythologised nature of Mandela, and in Breytenbach's letters we encounter both images that add to the broader mythology of Mandela's leadership abilities, but also an attempt to demythologise him and his legacy.

Breytenbach's first open letter to Mandela is written in 1991, and takes into account the 'complexities of the present situation', but is also admittedly 'prejudiced' (Breytenbach 1996: 74). Breytenbach underscores that 'a letter [is] a poor substitute for helping to staunch the spurting wounds of our society' (1996: 74). This letter was written a little over a year after Mandela's release, and reflects on what Breytenbach thinks should be done in South Africa, and warns of the 'consequences of state and communal violence' (1996: 74). The letter also acts as a sign of Breytenbach's loyal revolt, and he clearly states that it is the 'tightening of the heart' and a 'vision of the death-in-waiting' that gives him occasion to write to Mandela, to let his voice be heard with the voices of those 'weeping in the townships' (Breytenbach 1996: 78). The manner in which he projects his own dreams and desires becomes evident in this letter:

Somehow we must all inspire and articulate the national will: to stop the violence, to become productive and autonomous so that we may be freed from the humiliation of hand-outs, to change those economic structures which are the result and the beneficiaries of

Apartheid and thus to start narrowing the gap between the starving and the stuffed, to create the conditions for democracy, to lay the foundations for a society in which we can take pride. That, to my belief and satisfaction, is what the ANC's constitutional proposals are pointing towards (Breytenbach 1996: 77).

He confirms his loyalty to Mandela at the end of the letter: 'And to reaffirm, come what may, that your cause is mine also. If only you will lead' (Breytenbach 1996: 78).

Breytenbach writes a second public letter to Mandela with his inauguration as president in 1994. The letter begins triumphantly 'Dear Mr President' and already testifies of the victory over Apartheid. This is followed by a quotation from Mandela's inauguration speech 'The time to build is upon us' (Breytenbach 1996: 82), which became the motto for the 'new' South Africa. The equivalent of this is the Xhosa word *Masikane* which means 'building together'. It is also Breytenbach's understanding that Mandela wants everyone to 'participate in the scaffolding of a different tower of Babel' (1996: 82).

Although Breytenbach is excited by the prospect that South Africa appears less in international media because of improvements in the country, he also contends that the 'euphoria will [...] not last' (1996: 83). He comments on Mandela's choice of ministers for his cabinet, saying that it was 'superbly unimaginative', and although these people 'with blood on their hands' are still better than 'the previous bunch of liars, thieves and moral amnesiacs', Mandela could have made better choices.³ Breytenbach's imaginings of South Africa are very much linked to Mandela's role as president, and how he interprets the political situation in the country. He depicts a worrisome picture of the 'new' South Africa's cabinet, and seems rather pessimistic about the future of the newly free country. However, his letter also offers glimpses of hope; Breytenbach emphasises that while South Africans have not experienced the 'historical purge of a revolution,' this may still be accomplished if urgent social and economic problems are dealt with effectively (1996: 84).

As if looking into a crystal globe, Breytenbach writes to Mandela that the event of the ANC's victory over the former National Party is an enormous one. He mentions that a woman phoned him from Amsterdam and said that she might have been too young to be touched by Kennedy's death, but that she knew this time 'she was witnessing history in the making' (1996: 82). Breytenbach writes: 'Let us not stop now. Already there's so much to be proud of' and then directly addressing Mandela: 'Do you realise the impact of your example on Africa?' (1996: 86). Through Mandela comes the creation of another Fedora of South Africa. Mandela brought the dream to the country, and it is through Mandela that another South Africa is caught in a crystal globe.

3 As the newly appointed president of the country, Mandela mostly chose members of the ANC and a few other political parties to form part of his cabinet. The reason why these choices could be viewed as 'unimaginative' is because some of the people he appointed were not necessarily experienced enough for their positions, and seemed to have been chosen for their political position within the struggle rather than their actual experience. Alfred Nzo, for example, was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, but he had very little experience in this regard and was already 70 years old. Likewise, Mandela's rival, the IFP leader Zulu Chief Buthelezi, was appointed Minister of Home Affairs (Keller 1994).

In 2008, Breytenbach writes his third and final open letter to Mandela, who is celebrating his 90th birthday. He opens the letter with reference to this celebration:

This is the year of your ninetieth birthday; the whole earth is celebrating – to excess, I am tempted to say. Why? Because we cling to you, Nelson Mandela, as a living icon, as a liberation hero who did not renege on his commitments to freedom from oppression and justice for all, as the father of the rainbow nation, as a man of nearly incomprehensible moral resilience who walked out of prison after twenty-seven years of harsh incarceration and forced labour seemingly without bitterness or a thirst for revenge, and who is still giving unstintingly of himself. And I would add: because you are a wise and a curious and caring humanist with so much humour and such a lovely smile [...] (Breytenbach 2008: 39).

Breytenbach's imaginings of the country are inextricably bound with his views on the 'father of the rainbow nation'. It is through Mandela's smile that Breytenbach 'reads' the country; he begins his account of the state of the country in 2008 by saying that he had the opportunity to spend time in South Africa and that he realised that he cannot 'instinctively' read the environment anymore: 'I've lost touch, maybe because the surface is so often slick with blood. I also realise that, like so many others, I've become conditioned by expectations of the worst' (2008: 40).

The South Africa Breytenbach imagines in 2008 is coloured by the political leader who has also become known as 'Moneydeala', as a result of the excessive amounts of money celebrities and international leaders spend to be photographed with him. It is for this reason in part that he refuses to partake in a public address of the former president, and why he says that these people treat him as 'some exotic teddy bear to slobber over' (2008: 39). The 'Madiba Magic' that has enchanted the world (Posel 2014: 71) has sickened Breytenbach. This final letter suggests that, globally, some have come to admire Mandela not as an individual, not only as a person who abides by the law, but as the mythical saviour of South Africa. Although Breytenbach seems to disagree with this evaluation by rejecting the opportunity to give a public address, he still sees it fit to write a public letter in which he addresses a number of concerns he has about South Africa, and lays these at the feet of the 'former saviour', the 'father of the nation'.

While Breytenbach's letters offer his admiration of Mandela, projecting an image of the former president as a saviour, a father, a comrade, and a symbol, it also utilises Mandela's presence as a way of reflecting on the South African landscape. Although the letters are addressed to Nelson Mandela, and the various names by which he was known, they are also 'open' letters, letters for the public to read and engage with. As a result, the letters become creative ways for Breytenbach to reflect upon the state of the country in a conversational tone. What becomes apparent from reading these letters is not only his admiration of Mandela, but also his overt focus on the violence of the South African landscape.

3.2 *Landscapes of violence*

From their outset, Breytenbach's letters introduce the incongruent landscapes of South Africa. The country tortured by the Apartheid regime, with its anti-op-

pression leader finally free in 1991, does not seem to have come far enough in its revolt against oppression. The Apartheid government still rules and controls the country, although negotiations with the ANC are taking place. Breytenbach's first open letter to Nelson Mandela warns of the 'consequences of state and communal violence', and he sketches a simultaneously picturesque and violent landscape, an image of what South Africa has become in his view:

I have just returned from spending a few days in the Midlands region of Natal. I was taken for a drive through Kloof along the most expensive properties in South Africa, a veritable paradise for the white rich on the heights of Durban. [...] Then, within a stone's throw, as we dipped over the crest, we came to where the earth fell away over rolling hills clotted with the shacks of rural Kwazulu's poverty. Cattle wandered over the road, young unemployed men lolled against the wall of a rare dilapidated general store, kids were trekking back from school down the valley. The splendid isolation of colonial luxury and the desperate isolation of black holes, the First World and the raw futility of a miserable subsistence living cheek by jowl.

More: this was a war zone, the visual manifestation of the heart of violence. With the naked eye one can judge where 'Comrade land' ends and where 'Inkhata land' begins. On the one side the wasteland of roofless houses and burnt-out schools (their inhabitants now refugees elsewhere), on the other (of the same community) the maize patches and mango trees of areas where the rule of warlords holds sway (Breytenbach 1996: 75).

Upon reading this description, it is clear that Breytenbach has already distanced himself from the South African landscape; his observations are not made from the perspective of someone who is experiencing life in the country as a being in the world. Rather, Breytenbach is '*taken* for a drive through' these spaces [emphasis ours], and it is from this vantage point that he observes and critiques. He sketches the discrepancy between the 'white rich heights of Durban', with its tropical vegetation and apparent wealth on the one hand, and the dilapidated shacks and old buildings of poverty on the other. The contrast is vivid, and encapsulates the tension embedded in the 1991 South African landscape; the land as seen by Breytenbach the spectator clearly reflects the political issues at hand. Although Nelson Mandela has been released, the country has not been *transformed* politically, socially, or economically.

Moreover, the landscape also reflects 'a visual manifestation of the heart of violence'. It does not only enclose poverty and inequality, but embodies a 'wasteland of roofless houses and burnt-out schools' (1996: 75). Breytenbach attempts to understand the South African landscape not only from the perspective of a spectator, but is also aware of how violence is written on landscape in the country. This 'tuning-into' landscape gives him a perspective on the lived experiences of those who inhabit it (Wylie 2010: 54), but he remains distanced from it, experiencing the landscape as from afar. Effectively, Breytenbach reads the 'heart of violence' as one detached from it.

He further expresses his concern about the violence in the country when he says that 'many anguished voices' have warned the country of our 'cynical indifference' to death (1996: 74). In a letter Mandela himself addressed to the government, he also commented on the unacceptable violence committed against South Africans, as Breytenbach summarises: 'nothing can be solved until the killing spawned by poverty and the passion of hatred – and feeding these – is stopped' (1996: 75).

The Order Minister Vlok claims that the ‘ANC is the common denominator to all violence,’ while Breyten is made aware of ‘graphic descriptions of police collusion,’ ‘misplaced’ dockets of prisoners that lead to their murder before their trials, and that ‘only the physical presence of a few concerned whites in the townships can prevent the police from initiating, aiding and abetting the killing’ (1996: 75–76). Breytenbach’s depictions of South Africa during this time offer little hope, and suggest that the ANC is too weak to solve the problems in the country – ‘a victim of its own propaganda and the creation of myths and aspirations that could never be satisfied’ (1996: 76).

The violent landscapes of South Africa following the release and inauguration of the new president show how violence continued to hold the country in its grip after 1991. While Mandela and the NP leader F.W. de Klerk were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 following the reconciliation between the ANC and the nationalist party, the four years leading up to South Africa’s first democratic election were some of the bloodiest in South Africa’s history (Boehmer 2008: 79–80). Breytenbach’s second letter to Mandela suggests the contrary, that ‘the violence has apparently abated [...] South Africa has fallen off the front pages of the international media [...] and how wonderful it is to be wrong!’ (1996: 83). In this letter he sketches a country that has finally been liberated from inequality, and he looks to the future with expectation.

In his final letter to Mandela, 17 years after the first and subtitled ‘Notes on a failed revolution’,⁴ Breytenbach mentions important factors and aspects that dashed the dream of a ‘new’ South Africa: from ‘the seemingly never-ending parade of corrupt clowns in power at all levels’,⁵ to the ‘violence and cruelty with which crimes are committed, to be tortured and killed for a cell phone or a few coins’, to the violence in schools where children are playing games such as ‘rape me, rape me’ or ‘hit me, hit me’⁶ (Breytenbach 2008: 41). The South African landscape depicted in Breytenbach’s letters is violent at heart; here, violence clearly has the country in its grip. What makes these letters even more discouraging is the fact that violence is ever on the increase in the country, and it seems, to many, almost out of control. How does one explain and understand this violence, and how can we read and evaluate it to better realise the challenges faced by the country?⁷

In his writings on violence and phenomenology, James Dodd points out that ‘violence manifests itself in the space of human affairs’, and that it ‘derives its protean character from essential aspects that belong to the emergence of the new’ (Dodd 2009: 47). By this he does not suggest that violence is creative, or that it

4 The reference to the failed revolution here evokes Thabo Mbeki’s 1998 speech on ‘The African Renaissance, South Africa and the world’.

5 Following Nelson Mandela’s presidency, the country has seen a number of corrupt leaders trying to uphold the legacy of the ANC, and failing dismally.

6 In an interview about this letter Breytenbach comments: ‘The situation is that we have, on average, fifty-five murders a day, and we probably have something like 150 women being raped’, and that the people who ‘benefitted from the previous regime tend to withdraw behind gated communities, if they can afford to do so’ (Breytenbach 2008a).

7 In a recent address at the Sunday Times Literary Awards, Antjie Krog touches on this issue too; she states that ‘anger is often where important change begins’, links anger to the violence in the country, and suggests violence could be read as an expression of ‘unrelieved poverty and dashed expectations of change’ (Krog 2015).

results as an act of creation. Rather, violence can be seen as ‘a means for passing from one condition to another, from a state in which a goal is unrealised to its subsequent realisation’ (Dodd 2009: 47). In this view, violence should be assessed to determine its potential to ‘yield the effective realisation of ends’ (Dodd 2009: 47). Violence provides not only an ‘end’ to a life by destroying it, but it also contributes as ‘a means to an end’; that is, violence can give rise to the realisation of aims by emphasising issues that need to be resolved. Thus, violence can be read as destructive yet productive, albeit at a cost.

Many arguments can be made as to the purpose of this violence; when dealing with difficult situations, violence attracts people as a form of escapism, and can thus be ‘exhilarating, promising a freedom that would have seemed to be excluded’ (Dodd 2009: 152). This can be very well understood in the South African context. Post-Apartheid South Africa may have set people free, but the country still suffers from the legacy of the Apartheid regime, among other issues. The poor are still very poor, and although progress has been made, it has been slow; as Breytenbach predicted in 1994, ‘[p]eople may be patient, but patience is neither food nor shelter’ (1996: 83). To some extent, violence can be understood as a form of escapism from poverty, Aids, broken promises of the government, and so forth. But violence also repulses us as a result of its ‘stupidity and senselessness, which becomes evident once we admit the impossibility of re-inscribing the exception of violence back into the order from which it wrested itself’ (Dodd 2009: 152).

It is common that we expect either too much or too little from violence. If we expect too much of it, we think that violence can express ‘a decisiveness of purpose’ (Dodd 2009: 1), which can perhaps be another way of understanding its prevalence in South Africa. But this is not the view presented in Breytenbach’s letters. Rather, Breytenbach seems to commit the contrary, and in some ways expects too little from violence. This is not to say that the violence in the country is creative or transformative, but rather in that reading the seemingly dead end of violence can present new ways of understanding the South African landscape, which Breytenbach does not seem to be able to do.

In his final letter Breytenbach sketches the situation in which he and his wife are clearing their farmhouse in the Klein Karoo to move permanently, and mentions the ‘notes and snippets of essays’ and the ‘recurring references to barbaric criminality’, and wonders why he was not sooner able to see the picture clearly: ‘Had I become inured to the social and economic realities of the country? Could I not read the pattern?’ (Breytenbach 2008: 44), which underscores his bleak outlook on South Africa. He finds himself guilty of no longer being able to ‘read’ the landscape, possibly because he has become detached from it, because he has been looking *at* it from the perspective of an outsider. In his letter he makes a disheartening confession to Mandela:

I must tell you this terrible thing, my old and revered leader: if a young South African were to ask me whether he or she should stay or leave, my bitter advice would be to go. For the foreseeable future now, if you want to live your life to the full and with some satisfaction and usefulness, and if you can stand the loss, if you can amputate yourself – then go [...] (Breytenbach 2008: 44).

This declaration can be understood to mean the obvious, ‘my bitter advice would be to go’ if you want to live a ‘full’ life, but also that leaving South Africa is in some ways like ‘amputating’ yourself, and that you should go only if you can ‘stand the loss’. Although the overall tone of the letter is discouraging, and offers what looks like shock techniques employed by the author, Breytenbach comes to a point on the worth of art and how imagination can give or create meaning. It is at this point that he is able to read this landscape of violence with a different end in mind, not necessarily that of death and destruction, but also imagining another South Africa through meaning making. He writes: ‘We become by making’ (Breytenbach 2008: 46), and thereby suggests that through *writing* these dead ends we can find a way of imagining South Africa differently. Violence itself may not be the means to realise what the aim of the ‘new’ South Africa should be, but it can certainly be read and creatively interpreted in search of this aim.

Breytenbach rejects the opportunity to offer a final word on the matter, and instead cites Njabulo Ndebele in an interview regarding the issues in South Africa. In this interview, Ndebele reflects that the future South African will live comfortably with uncertainty

[...] because uncertainty promises opportunity, but you have to be robust about it, you have to be thoughtful about it, you have to contemplate it to get the full richness of it, and I think that is the challenge of being South African: to run away from unidimensional and definitive characterisations of ourselves [...] The capacity of the country to imagine the future ends on nurturing imaginative thinking from the beginning of a child’s life right up to the end of life. We’ve somehow given all that up along the way [...] We need to develop the ability to embrace uncertainty from a position of intelligence and imagination. The more of us who admit to our vulnerabilities, the more trusting the public space (quoted in Breytenbach 2008: 47).

By means of this quotation, Breytenbach is able to both agree and disagree with Ndebele’s sentiment, and in some ways undermines the premise of his letter. While he presented this letter to Mandela as notes on a ‘failed revolution’, he also offers Ndebele’s positive outlook of imagining a different South Africa as a final word on the matter, thereby negating his own pessimistic voice. With this letter Breytenbach not only undermines his own cynicism, but also partakes in Ndebele’s call to ‘admit to our own vulnerabilities’ as a way forward in imagining a nurturing South Africa.

4 Fedora and South Africa, a Look to the Future

Breyten Breytenbach’s open letters to Nelson Mandela evoke various depictions of South Africa, and by extent create different Fedoras in crystal balls. All of these South Africas, the country of oppression and segregation, the country of revolution and upheaval, the country of freedom and liberty, the country of violence, exist in some way or form. It is through his admiration of Mandela that Breytenbach is able to express his various imaginings of South Africa, and how he is able to read the landscapes of violence prevalent in the country.

Returning to Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, what can be made of all these disparate images? Marco Polo's tale continues:

On the map of your empire, O Great Khan, there must be room both for the big, stone Fedora and the little Fedoras in glass globes. Not because they are all equally real, but because all are only assumptions. The one contains what is accepted as necessary when it is not yet so; the others, what is imagined as possible and, a moment later, is possible no longer (Calvino 1997: 28).

In Breytenbach's letters, disparate images of South Africa are combined, creating imaginings and identifying challenges embodied in the landscape of the country. He creates a number of 'little Fedoras in glass globes' that are no more or less real than the 'big stone Fedora'; Calvino's writing suggests that the various imaginings of the country are possibilities of what it can be, and the 'actual' state of the country is only 'what is accepted as necessary when it is not yet so'. This corresponds to Breytenbach's ideas reflected in his final letter to Mandela that 'we become by making'; through the interpretation of the socio-historical critique embedded in Breytenbach's letters, it becomes possible to rewrite and re-envision the South African landscape.

Breytenbach's depictions of the violent landscape of the country seem to suggest that violence cannot be a means to an end, and cannot be productive. While it is certainly true that South Africans should not expect violence to resolve conflicts and struggles, it is also problematic to view it as only unproductive and destructive. As Breytenbach emphasises through Ndebele, 'uncertainty provides opportunity'; perhaps South Africans can work to a re-evaluation of the problematic dead end of violence and consider it in terms of its 'lived aspect – that is, in terms of the manner in which the emergence of violence holds actions and situations in its grip' (Dodd 2009: 47-48). One way of breaking free from the hold violence has on the country could be through productive re-imaginings of its purpose, but perhaps more importantly, how we interpret it.

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