

# Farewell to the Rainbow Nation?

Oscar Hemer, Bronwyn Law-Viljoen, Masande Ntshanga & Ivan Vladislavić

More than a quarter of a century since Nelson Mandela became the country's first democratically elected president, the racial categories of apartheid live on in South Africa. The proud vision of the "Rainbow Nation" is now being challenged by various forms of populism, with racial thinking as the common denominator. How can one advocate for non-racism and cosmopolitanism—in South Africa and the world—without being perceived as a defender of the privileges of the white minority? Oscar Hemer, Professor of the Arts at Malmö University, considers these questions in discussion with South African author colleagues Masande Ntshanga, Ivan Vladislavić and Bronwyn Law-Viljoen.

A conversation between Oscar Hemer, Bronwyn Law-Viljoen, Masande Ntshanga and Ivan Vladislavić

**Oscar Hemer (OH):** The British historian Eric Hobsbawm called the twentieth century “the short century”. It supposedly spanned some 85 years, from the beginning of World War I to the end of the Cold War. If the twenty-first century symbolically started with the fall of the Berlin Wall, one might argue that it ended only a decade later with the tumbling towers of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. This interregnum of transition was the 1990s. There is some understandable nostalgia attached to that period now. We can agree that it was a time of openness and opportunity, but it was also a turbulent and not all together peaceful decade. We saw the war in former Yugoslavia, which tends to be forgotten in the shadow of the current war in Ukraine, and we saw the genocide of Rwanda, with its unimaginable atrocities. Yet I claim that the most significant event of the 1990s was South Africa’s transition from the racist apartheid state to a democratic one, because it could perhaps not have happened in any other time than this short interregnum between the Cold War and the War on Terrorism.

You may remember that Margaret Thatcher branded Nelson Mandela a terrorist. The compelling idea of the new South Africa as a “rainbow nation” was the opposite of the apartheid state. It was a notion of a non-racial society that affirmed its ethnic and cultural diversity, while at the same time forcefully opposing the preservation of racial boundaries that were still dividing the country. More than a quarter of a century after Nelson Mandela’s installation as the first democratic president, the rainbow nation is mostly a scorned concept. Excuse my language, but “Fuck the rainbow nation!” was a common slogan in the countrywide student protests a few years ago. To me, it has actually been a shocking revelation during the many visits I have made to South Africa in recent years that the apartheid race categories are still in full use. Currently they are partially a means of redress and compensation for previous injustices, but racial divides are thereby nevertheless preserved rather than bridged. Before letting the panel in, you may ask why I chose to invite three literary writers to discuss these matters. Why not social scientists or investigative journalists? My answer is that, contrary to what people usually think, literature played a very important role in the transition. On the one hand it disclosed prevailing myths, also of the liberation struggle, and on the other it tried to forge a new national understanding by exploring hitherto unknown or suppressed parts of South African history.

**Ivan Vladislavić (IV)** is one of today’s most internationally renowned South African writers, former editor of the legendary journal *Staffrider* in the 1980s, author of some thirteen novels and short story collections as well as a number of works in the category “creative non-fiction”. He has a special interest in art and architecture. One of his novels, *Double Negative* (2010), was originally a collaboration with the famous photographer David Goldblatt.

**Bronwyn Law-Viljoen (BLV)** made a mature debut as a novelist in 2016 with *The Printmaker*. Her second novel, *Notes on Falling*, has just come off the press. She shares Ivan’s interest in art, which is a recurrent theme in her writing, and prior to and alongside the novels, she has written essays about artist William Kentridge, among others. Ivan and Bronwyn are also colleagues at Wits University in Johannesburg, where Bronwyn heads the department of Creative Writing.

**Masande Ntshanga (MN)** is of a younger generation and a different background. He was born in the Eastern Cape, in East London, and spent most of his childhood in what was then, in the late 1980s, one of apartheid South Africa's so-called *homelands*, Ciskei. This ambiguous anomaly, the quasi-independent Xhosa state of Ciskei, is a recurrent point of reference in his two novels to date and the third book of poetry and prose just coming off the press, titled *Native Life in the Third Millennium*. Another important element in his work, especially in the second novel *Triangulum* (2019) is science fiction, projecting some tendencies of the present into a near future. I should also mention that Masande is the first black editor of the prestigious literary magazine *New Contrast*.

I will first give the word to you, Ivan. You wrote some of the crucial works on the transition, *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) and *The Exploded View* (2004)—both of which have been translated to Swedish—and *Portrait with Keys* (2006). These three books in different genres are literally writing the transformation of Johannesburg in the 1990s and early 2000s. How do you regard that transformation and your own relation to it today?

**IV:** I'm glad you introduced us as writers rather than sociologists. I'm going to start by saying a few things about the books you've mentioned. They arose from different moments in the transformation or transition. *The Restless Supermarket* was started in the mid-1990s and deals with the transformation of Hillbrow, an inner-city suburb of Johannesburg. The central character is a conservative and pedantic old proofreader and the novel charts his futile efforts to resist change. Of all my books, this is the one that arises most clearly from the transition and reflects the excitement of those years after the negotiations and the first elections, when there was a sense of incredible promise and possibility in South Africa. I would say that the book has the atmosphere of a carnival. The other books you mentioned, *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys*, were written in a slightly later period, in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Both of them reflect a certain disenchantment. They deal with questions of crime, urban neglect, poverty, concerns that would become more and more prominent in South Africa with time. One of the chapters in *The Exploded View* features corrupt officials of the kind we have become very familiar with. In the space of a decade, we passed from a period of enormous possibility and excitement to disappointment and even despair. The terms we use, like transformation, are perhaps part of the problem. Transformation suggests a new and better society, and a fairly clean break from the past, but societies don't change like that—there was some wishful thinking involved. Perhaps another term for reluctant, difficult, problematic social change would have been better? Rather than a transformation, what happened in South Africa was a kind of mutation, in which many elements from the past are still present, albeit twisted a bit. The point is that we bring the past with us into the present, we don't leave it behind. Of course, a social and political environment of this kind is both challenging and fascinating for writers to deal with.

**OH:** Bronwyn, Johannesburg and its spatial politics is also a theme in your work, sometimes juxtaposed with New York, especially in your new novel *Notes on Falling*, which is mostly set there. I know you have said that the New York setting is an oblique commentary on Johannesburg, can you elaborate on that?

**BLV:** It's interesting to have this particular group of writers on this panel, because we stand in quite different positions from one another. Ivan is describing his writing through that period that you called a mutation, which I think is a good term to use, whereas I only started writing fiction much more recently, and was writing non-fiction during the "transition". Right in the middle of the 1990s I left South Africa for a period and went to New York, so I had the strange experience of leaving one country and coming back to another country nine years later. That first decade—I imagine this is true for any place where the kind of political change happens as it did in South Africa—was momentous, and leaving one country and coming back to another nearly a decade later has affected my view of things and the way I write about that moment and Johannesburg in particular. The connecting of Johannesburg and New York in my writing is because of my relationship with these two cities, but also because while Johannesburg and New York are very different, architecturally and in other ways they have interesting similarities. You can, for instance, go to downtown Johannesburg and walk beside those large bank buildings and for a moment imagine that you are on the Upper West Side—the style of some of the architecture hails from a similar period. So there are those interesting aesthetic parallels between the two cities. I remember once, after I had come back to South Africa, taking an American visitor around Johannesburg, driving through New Town and parts of Braamfontein and him saying, "This place feels like New York in the 1970s", which stuck with me. The New York I encountered in the 1990s was a very sanitised New York. It was the period of Giuliani, and the city was being scrubbed clean. It was in some respects a safe city to be in—there were advantages to that—but there were many closures of important places, a loss of something. When I was doing research for *Notes on Falling* and decided that part of the novel would be set in New York in the 1970s, it was not difficult to see how someone from the United States could say about Johannesburg that it felt like New York in that period: the rough dirty edges of Johannesburg hold many echoes from that American city.

**OH:** Masande you have recently moved to Johannesburg, and you have lived there before. You've been writing about Johannesburg but also Cape Town and, not least, the cities and towns of the Eastern Cape. I find the inside stories of Ciskei especially intriguing; the history of the homelands that were dismantled with the transition. I guess it is very difficult to write about as it is laden with shame and guilt somehow. In your novel *Triangulum* the parents of the main character were working for the homeland government and, hence, "collaborators". Would you like to comment on that?

**MN:** Yes it is true that it is largely underwritten, and part of my preoccupation as a writer is to use writing as a way of understanding myself and understanding my environment. As I proceeded in my practice I have come to the realisation that, yes, the Bantustan system was underwritten and of course there was a conspiracy, a silence around it; not only because of shame, but also because it ended in tragedy with the Bisho massacre.<sup>[2]</sup> That still reverberates in the community. For a long time it was on my conscience but it was difficult to approach, it was difficult to find the texture and to find the intrigue into the material. As I was working on *Triangulum* I wasn't at first aware that this was the material I was going to deal with. I wanted to write a novel that speculated on the presence of late capitalism in a society that is vastly

unequal, and think about the possibilities of where we are headed as a country. But the more I ruminated on that, the more the past started to call to me.

For a while I didn't understand what the link was: I began to understand these concepts of collaboration are still kind of present, to occupy a particular class in the society that is so unequal, and in a way to be in service to systems that perpetuate that inequality is something that reflected my origins in a way. Like you say, the Bantusan system was reported to be an independent state but actually it was a decoy. It was a place of labour reserves, of black exploitation. The more I began to think about those parallels I began to think about the internal lives people had to lead under that system. That kind of enabled me to explore what that means in the present and speculate about what it could mean in the future. It wasn't an easy process, which is perhaps why I chose the device of science fiction, which is something I found joy in as a youngster. The more I explored that device the more I realised that science fiction is so rich with these tropes that I actually speak about inequality by using metaphors of futuristic cities with an underclass. That is how it came together. Of course there are various reasons: it is a difficult topic to approach, but also systemically, it would have been difficult, given the education system, to actually provide a large amount of literature, because it is something that the state also stifled. I think of South African history as a continuum, and exploring that you are also exploring the present.

**OH:** To come back to the notion of the rainbow nation, a common objection to the non-racial vision of the rainbow nation is its alleged "colour blindness", which supposedly glosses over the inequalities that prevail in South Africa and, even worse, serves as a pretext for white privilege. In South Africa, race is not the elephant in the room; on the contrary, it is talked about all the time, it is something you can't escape. But it is not a pertinent theme in the work of any one of you. Am I right?

**MN:** Are you asking me?

**OH:** This is a question for everybody.

**IV:** Well, I think race is very much a theme in my work, in the work of all of us. You can't write about inequality or poverty or urban decay or any of these issues without it having a racial dimension. My last novel is about a schoolboy growing up in Pretoria in the 1970s who develops an obsession with Muhammad Ali. I chose that story precisely because it allowed for a reflection on race, one that is mediated and distanced. So the book is concerned with these questions, hopefully treated in an unusual way.

**BLV:** I suppose what your question implies, Oscar, is that the three of us don't overtly analyse and talk about race in our writing. But, as Ivan is saying, it is not possible to write in South Africa without thinking through these questions that make us who we are; agonising over them, trying to situate ourselves in relation to them, and making characters who interact with each other against the backdrop of our history. These are questions that I have with my students, because young writers in particular—both white and black writers—are often paralysed by their inability to write through race, or to write about race in a way that doesn't feel stifled by self-censorship or

the censorship of perceived readers. It is a very difficult thing, given the history of racism, of inequality and oppression that we inherit, for all South African writers to work through, to find a way to write through it. To seek something other than the categories that we have all grown up with.

**MN:** It might seem that way, the discourse around race in South Africa is pervasive. Your duty, or what I take as my duty, is to find ways to write about subjects such as race that make it more immediate. You speak about the rainbow nation, the rainbow nation is just one of South Africa's narratives. We are a country that has a lot of national stories, as a result, writing about race in a way that is more direct or more explicit might fall into a trap of regurgitating narratives that readers already anticipate. So writing is a kind of task of finding ways that are inventive, which at first may seem oblique, but the intention is to bring this thing closer, to reimagine it and make it more immediate. So in my two novels that was the preoccupation; in my last book it is a more direct approach and that was deliberate, but it is an experimental book as well, so there is enough there to provoke someone to think about it.

**IV:** Can I pick up on that? For me this connects with what Bronwyn said earlier about being writers of different generations. I grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, and began writing seriously in the 1980s, when we had very particular ideas about what it meant to resist apartheid in fiction. I published my first book just when the ANC and other political organisations were unbanned, and then carried on writing through the early years of democracy. My own trajectory as a writer bridges the transition and the new possibilities it opened up for writers. This is obviously very different to Masande, who lived through the transition at a younger age and began writing and publishing in the democratic era. The history we bring with us presents writers with different materials and possibilities. Inevitably the cultural politics supporting or constraining the work we want to do will also be different for writers of different generations.

**OH:** Certainly, generational, but also experiences of black and white are quite different and remain quite different. What I meant by suggesting that race is not a pertinent theme in your work was that somehow you all share an ethos of non-racialism that you perhaps don't need to make explicit, but that is an ethos that is more and more questioned now.

**BLV:** I suppose when people object to the idea of non-racialism or moving beyond race, what they are objecting to is a forgetting; the effects of our past are very present with us and will continue to be for a very long time. So the question is how do we *not* forget, how do we write with that burden of the past? It's like a stream that is finding its way through a rock: you have to find a crack in the rock to make your way through. When I decided, perhaps stupidly, that I would write a novel that was partly set in New York, I chose a place that is part of collective culture and imagination, that has been in hundreds of novels and films. The process is somewhat similar in that you have to take something that is talked about, shaped, mythologised and you have to find a way to do something different. The only way to do this is to write through the perspective of the character, the life experience of the character. If you try something else you will be lost. The same is true for writing about race: you have to find the small path through the big problem.

**OH:** In your novel *Notes on Falling* (2022) the main character makes an observation about South Africa in passing: “we can’t make films about our history yet, our new one, I mean it happened yesterday.” Masande, in an earlier seminar here at the fair you said that post-post-apartheid is a misnomer, we are still in the continuum of transition. Which raises another question for the three of you: do you see yourselves as writers of this continuing transition? And, to refer back to the headline of the seminar: has the notion of the rainbow nation, or *any* notion of a new national imaginary had any significance for your writing?

**MN:** Inevitably, I don’t think the rejection of non-racialism is a rejection of the concept of non-racialism, it is about the discrepancy of non-racialism and South Africa’s social reality. Writing is a human endeavour, and it is something that values the human being, it is in service of humankind. But of course, notions such as non-racialism will be undermined by our vast inequality, and that rejection aims to draw attention to that. Part of being a writer in this continuum is to document the gap between the reality and the ideal, and how we deal with it as artists and as members of the population.

**BLV:** That quotation that you read is spoken by one of the characters. She is a photographer in the mid-1990s and she is explaining she can’t make pictures of something that happened “yesterday”. Another character she interviews later reprimands her, saying that the problem with the archive is that we lump things together, we look back at history—at New York in the 1970s for example—and think that everything belongs together. But we know that that is not true, that we have to do our homework to discover the fractures, to see the things that looked like they belonged together but don’t actually belong together. So your question, I suppose, is about history, chronology, the way time moves. As writer you can reject the notion of history, you don’t want to write a continuum, you want to fracture the past, find the places where it doesn’t cohere into the pictures we know now. Dominant histories, written by whomever has the cultural upper hand, create the zeitgeist, and that shifts as the reins change hands. History changes according to who is writing the dominant discourse.

**IV:** I suppose the problem with the rainbow nation idea is that it is simplistic: if you want to understand society through metaphors you need more complicated ones. On non-racialism, I question the idea that colour blindness and non-racialism necessarily go together. For me non-racialism is a very important concept in South Africa, where it has a long and honourable tradition in political struggle, the union movement and other contexts. It is an idea worth defending, not because race doesn’t matter or is invisible, and can therefore be ignored, but because race is not the only or necessarily the most significant thing about you. This is an important idea in a fractured country with many minorities and a difficult history. I regard it as a bulwark against other kinds of prejudice or chauvinism. I understand that we are in a particular political moment with generational differences in perceptions. Nevertheless, I see non-racialism as integral to the notion of a unifying culture—rather than a national culture—which was the promise of political struggle and change, the creation of a culture where people would feel at home, would feel that they belonged.

**OH:** In terms of the question of race and non-racialism, I find Toni Morrison’s motto very useful:

to admit that race matters but not letting oneself be governed by its rules. Our time is coming to an end, but I have a final question to the three of you. There has been a lot of talk about speculative fiction during this book fair. When the time is right to write that novel about the new South Africa, what history will it tell? In a way you already do it, Masande, in *Triangulum*, which is a quite dismal vision of a near future ...

**MN:** It is definitely not optimistic, but looking at the progression of a late capitalist society that is preceded by this inequality and technology, the fact that there also is a global climate crisis that is in every sense of the word unifying humanity but is failing to do so. I just began to wonder what could possibly unify us? Perhaps an alien force? So it is difficult to tell, we can only speculate, we also write from different social realities, so the way we think about the future will differ, as the way we think about the past differs. There can never be one vision, it will always be plural, some in conflict and some in dialogue. It is part of our practice as writers to find these narratives and make them interact, perhaps somewhere in there we find a way.

**BLV:** Thinking about Masande's *Triangulum*, my sense is that it is partly about an amorphous future, but it is also very much about the place and its history. The one reverberates in the other. You think you are reading about the future but you suddenly realise you are reading about the past in the same novel. If we want to use speculative fiction as a category, then it is about trying to imagine the future; even when we write about the present, we are thinking about how we move past certain things. The best speculations are recognisable as being about what we are doing now, what we are trying to say in the present.

**IV:** I would go further and argue that some of the best speculative fiction tends to be about the past, which is after all an open field. To refer to *Triangulum* again, what strikes me is how it tries to mobilise different kinds of language and ways of framing reality. Making space for many different voices and different ways of looking at things is a sound strategy, not only for writing novels, but for organising society.

**BLV:** Technology is shifting all sorts of things, including how we think about race and each other. I see that in our children, how they absorb and understand the world through technology. We haven't really understood how people understand, absorb and orientate themselves in the world through technology, in the time of screens. That is going to be the thing to really wrestle with in the future, once we have a better understanding of it.

**MN:** I agree, and to come back to what Ivan said about speculating on the past, some of the things I discovered in composing the novel were actually coincidental. I would love to be so brilliant as to think of them from the beginning, but as I wrote for instance the parallels between how mining for gold became an incentive for colonisers to eventually construct Johannesburg, and how in the future mining for data will transform the society, is already transforming society, I realised that the same mechanism is at play, hoarding resources versus foregrounding a relationship with the natural environment and human beings.



**Footnotes**

1. The text is an edited transcript of a seminar at the Gothenburg Book Fair, 25 September 2022, arranged by the research platform Rethinking Democracy (REDEM) at Malmö University. [↑](#)
2. On 7 September 1992, 28 ANC supporters and one soldier were shot dead by the Ciskei Defence Force when they attempted to enter Bhisho (then Bisho), capital of the Xhosa “homeland” Ciskei, to demand the reincorporation of Ciskei into South Africa. [↑](#)