

Black lives, black crimes, and Black Consciousness in Gomolemo Mokae's *The Secret in my Bosom*: A new vision of the police detective and democracy in South Africa

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Abstract

Crime fiction and the police procedural subgenre have come under media scrutiny in the Global North, particularly in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Questions have been raised about the genre in relation to police brutality and whether the representation of police violence in the procedural might serve to normalize such action. Academic critics have also pondered the procedural, with some categorizing it as part of the ideological state apparatus, where the police force eradicate the threat of social disruption, thus reinforcing the status quo. The emergence of crime fiction and the procedural in several African countries has been concomitant with a shift from political repression to democratic reform. South Africa is a prime example as crime fiction rose to prominence following the end of apartheid in 1994. There are now recognizable local variations and crime fiction is widely seen as the new form of the political novel in South Africa. *The Secret in my Bosom* (1996) by Gomolemo Mokae, published shortly after the transition to democracy, is a groundbreaking, hybrid — and overlooked — detective novel, the first by a black writer after apartheid. While it draws on the police procedural frame, it also subverts the subgenre in significant ways. This hybridization of genre is used, I argue, to produce a bold new version of African crime fiction: with a black detective, and a vision of a new black police force and the country's future — all in line with Black Consciousness thought in South Africa.

Keywords

Black Consciousness, crime fiction, Gomolemo Mokae, police procedural, South African fiction

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Crime fiction has become one of the definitive genres of post-apartheid South Africa. The major academic literature on the subject links this emergence and proliferation to South Africa's political transition to democracy in 1994 and its aftermath. The criticism highlights the innovative nature of South African crime writing and the way the various subgenres have been utilized to engage with the country's shifting political landscape. One of the most influential claims is that "crime thrillers may have come to stand in for what used to be seen as political or engaged fiction", replacing the literary novel, which played this role under apartheid (de Kock, 2016: 34). The novels of Afrikaans writer Deon Meyer, one of the pioneers of the post-apartheid crime genre, are often viewed as presenting a negotiation of the country's various social and political transformations (Naidu and le Roux, 2014; de Kock, 2016; Guldimann, 2020). The representation of gender is another dominant theme; critics examine the innovative way in which crime writers including Margie Orford engage with the country's gender-based violence crisis and rewrite the genre's tendency to stereotype the female victim (Binder, 2020). Recently, critics have identified a link between post-apartheid political corruption, state capture, and ecological violence (Guldimann, 2023). These critical perspectives read crime fiction as a reaction to the political transition of 1994 and, more particularly, to its aftermath in the 2000s, which is when crime fiction began to proliferate and also when circumstances gave rise to a particular version of disillusionment. Leon de Kock (2016) views the predominance of all forms of crime writing in South Africa as a response to the political transition: the initial celebration and mythology of the "rainbow nation", which was followed by a "gradual and deepening sense of plot loss" as the state abandoned the values of the anti-apartheid struggle on which democracy was founded (2016: 3). This disillusionment is "rooted in a social imaginary that continues to hold dear the founding tenets of the 'new' democracy" (de Kock, 2016: 4).

The novel discussed here, *The Secret in my Bosom* by Gomolemo Mokae, medical doctor and political activist, was one of the first crime novels published post-apartheid, and certainly the first by a black writer. Renowned African writer Zakes Mda claims in a blurb on the rear cover that the novel is "introducing a new genre in black South African literature: the detective story". It was published in 1996, just two years after the country's first democratic elections in 1994, during the much-celebrated honeymoon period of Nelson Mandela's presidency, before the post-transition disillusionment had set in. This article sets out to make sense of the novel, and its neglect, within the context of critical debates about South African and global crime fiction.¹ The reason for this neglect, I argue, is that *The Secret in my Bosom* is, uniquely, a police procedural that engages directly with Black Consciousness and presents a vision of the police from the perspective of Black Consciousness. The procedural, with its focus on police methods, should be a genre that is antithetical to Black Consciousness thought which, as I will demonstrate, had nothing but political condemnation for any black person who served in the force in any capacity. Mokae fills the frame of the procedural with Black Consciousness thought and attempts to make this apparently mutually exclusive form and content work together. The result is a procedural that bears little resemblance to its counterparts in the Global North, or even in South Africa, yet one that raises pertinent questions about the relationship between the police, race, and democracy.

The main protagonist, Lentswe Makena, is a black detective in the old apartheid South African Police (SAP).² The figure of Makena lies at the core of Mokae's deviations from the "realism that is central" to the police procedural (Scaggs, 2005: 91). The procedural, which emerged as a distinct subgenre in the second half of the twentieth century, is a type of fiction in which the "actual methods and procedures of police work are central to the structure, themes and action" (Scaggs, 2005: 91). Makena is very much a singular heroic figure of ratiocination and there is little in the way of George Dove's criteria for the police novel: a mystery that must be solved by "policemen using normal police routines" (Dove, qtd. in Scaggs, 2005: 91). Mokae's choice of creating a police protagonist as a hero, and of projecting him back into the apartheid past, is unusual and the novel has a complex relationship with verisimilitude. While it deviates from many of the realist conventions of the procedural, it is faithful to a historically informed representation of apartheid, the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1970s and 1980s, and the origins of the Black Consciousness Movement. The novel presents a good black policeman under apartheid and inserts this figure into the context of the emergent Black Consciousness Movement: these two, as I will demonstrate, should be mutually exclusive, yet in a move against the historical record, the novel makes them compatible. It is this incongruity that I will explore. *The Secret in my Bosom* presents a very specific example of Andrew Pepper and David Schmid's point that the globalization of crime fiction is something of a *fait accompli* and "indigenous crime cultures are now emerging from, and speaking to, their own sites of production" (Pepper and Schmid, 2016: 1). What is unique about the text is that it is emerging from a Black Consciousness context and speaking to, and about, Black Consciousness values in a newly democratic South Africa.

The novel is set between 1992 and 1993, an interim period, between the official end of apartheid and the first democratic election, when the country was working towards a new dispensation. In a watershed speech in 1990, President F. W. de Klerk of the ruling National Party announced the release of Nelson Mandela from prison, and the unbanning of the African National Congress and other proscribed organizations. This paved the way for the dismantling of apartheid legislation and the multi-party negotiations that culminated in South Africa's first democratic election in 1994. This interim period is significant to my argument. The narrative, however, shifts back and forth between the 1990s and South Africa's turbulent 1970s and 1980s, representing anti-apartheid resistance largely through the development of the Black Consciousness Movement. The novel opens at Johannesburg's "Jan Smuts" airport in 1992 where a variety of South African exiles are returning, along with members of various "fact-finding missions", who have come to see "if indeed the leopard is in the process of changing its spots", the leopard being South African President F. W. de Klerk (Mokae, 1996: 1).³ Makena, a police colonel at this point, and his assistant, Sergeant Konyana, are awaiting the return of Maxwell Lesejane, who left the country to go into exile in 1985. A summary of the plot will provide the necessary background and give an indication of the extent of verisimilitude within the narrative.

Narrative flashbacks provide the background to Lesejane's story. Originally a devout Christian and student at "Turfloop" University in the early 1970s, he was converted to political activism at the graduation speech given by Abraham Onkgopotse Ramothibi Tiro on 29 April 1972.⁴ Tiro was a prominent figure, alongside Steve Biko, in the

development of Black Consciousness. Historically accurate circumstances leading up to the speech, the university's response, Tiro's expulsion, and students' reaction are all built into the narrative. Lesejane becomes an activist in the anti-apartheid struggle and, like many, is arrested by the Security Branch of the SAP in 1977 and tortured. Anikie, his wife, approaches Makena to enquire into the condition of her husband and this is how Makena becomes involved in the life of Lesejane. By the mid-1980s Lesejane has become a leading figure in the anti-apartheid movement and his lifestyle has changed considerably. This includes numerous affairs and Anikie's convenient death in a road accident. Makena suspects Lesejane of her murder and yet all his investigative efforts are foiled and Lesejane walks free. Lesejane subsequently marries Mumsy, a well-known model, and is soon suspected of having appropriated funds from anti-apartheid donor organizations abroad to support Mumsy's extravagant lifestyle. Despite an international scandal Lesejane evades prosecution. At this point he leaves the liberation movement to join the reviled community councils, puppet organizations that created the illusion of black representation in local government. Shortly afterwards, Lesejane goes into exile after comrades attack his house, resulting in the apparent death of Mumsy by necklacing. Seven years later, having privately kept up the investigation, Makena is waiting to arrest Lesejane as he has evidence that he faked Mumsy's death and fraudulently claimed her life insurance.

Makena is presented as a detective in the CID (Criminal Investigation Division) working in the black township of Soweto between 1977 and 1993, the historical period of the narrative. The novel projects his history in the force even further into the past, to Sophiatown in the 1950s, and his character thus becomes historically aligned with the history of apartheid. To have a black police protagonist as a hero, during the apartheid period, is a curious choice as the South African Police (SAP) was traditionally cast as the "arch-villain" in the struggle for freedom against apartheid (Cawthra, 1993: 1). The National Party could only execute its policy of apartheid with the assistance of the SAP and the police functioned largely as an organ of the state. This is demonstrated by the fact that, under apartheid, only one in every ten members of the force was actually engaged in traditional crime detection and investigation, while the other nine were engaged in policing the apartheid system (Shaw, 2002: 1). This explains why the police procedural with its required demonstration of "normal police routines" is a challenging choice when it comes to representing the force during the apartheid period. It also goes some way towards explaining why crime fiction was a less popular choice for writers in South Africa prior to 1994. Apartheid's plethora of legislation — determining racial classification, controlling movement, residence, employment, sexual relations — also effectively criminalized black South Africans producing a "virtual foreclosure of the law-abiding life", making the police a force feared and hated by the majority of the population (Nixon, 1994: 31). One way in which black South Africans responded to the "imposed illegality" was to embrace the image of outlaw and, from the 1950s onwards, a tradition of celebrating the outlaw over the law-abiding citizen developed within black culture (Nixon, 1994: 31). This enhanced a particular sense of resentment towards black police who enforced the white government's apartheid law.

To have a black police protagonist under apartheid is a challenging choice, but to further situate this protagonist within the context of the Black Consciousness Movement

takes the challenge to an entirely new level. Black Consciousness was formulated by Steve Biko in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The emergence of Black Consciousness in the early 1970s revived the anti-apartheid struggle after the devastation caused by the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 and the subsequent banning of all anti-apartheid organizations, including the ANC and the PAC. In his seminal 1971 paper, “The Definition of Black Consciousness”, Biko provided a redefinition of the term “black” juxtaposed with the apartheid term “non-white”: “being black is not a matter of pigmentation — being black is a reflection of mental attitude” (Biko, 1971/1987: 48). In an attempt to unite all communities oppressed by apartheid and counter apartheid’s ethnically based racial classification, Biko defined real black people as those who reject the dominant idea of white superiority and refuse to show submission to white authority: “If one’s aspiration is whiteness but his pigmentation makes attainment of this impossible, then that person is a non-white” (Biko, 1971/1987: 48). Biko singled out all people who served in the police force or Security Branch as non-white:

Any man who calls a white man “Baas”, any man who serves in the police force or Security Branch is *ipso facto* a non-white. Black people — real black people — are those who can manage to hold their heads high in defiance. (Biko, 1971/1987: 48–49)

In an article published under the pseudonym “Frank Talk”, Biko was even more vehement about black policemen:

one may point out that there are black policemen and black special branch agents. To take the last point first, I must state categorically that there is no such thing as a black policeman. Any black man who props the system up actively has lost the right to being considered part of the black world: he has sold his soul for 30 pieces of silver [...] These are colourless white lackeys who live in a marginal world of unhappiness. They are the extensions of the enemy into our ranks. (Biko, 1971/1987: 78)

Thus, for Biko and subsequent adopters of Black Consciousness any black police officers were non-white traitors and automatically excluded from the black community.

The novel provides one classic example of the non-white cop, Colonel April Milandzi, who “had grovelled his way to the top in the force, calling every white officer — irrespective of rank — *baas*; master” (Mokae, 1996: 73). This figure is a historically accurate representation of the kind of behaviour required from black policemen to be accepted under apartheid and the character of Milandzi serves several purposes: he demonstrates the negative stereotype of the black policeman as well as the psychic toll that sell-out “non-white” behaviour had on the black individual and the community. He thus serves as a foil to Makena who, even as a policeman, upholds the values of Black Consciousness, as I will demonstrate. Tellingly, Makena expresses hatred towards Milandzi because “whenever he was angered by his white colleagues” he projected “his rage on his black juniors” (73). This representation of black people, particularly men, expressing their pent-up anger against their own black community, due to the humiliations of apartheid, is a typical theme in Black Consciousness literature and another indication of how Mokae is engaging with the texts of Black Consciousness. It is no coincidence that it is Milandzi

who attempts to thwart Makena's investigation into Lesejane after the apparent death of Mumsy in 1984. Mokae's choice of making Makena a black police detective is even more curious given his political background. Mokae, described as an "activist" on the rear cover of the novel, has held several leadership positions in political parties with close affiliation to the Black Conscious Movement: he has been secretary-general and vice-president of AZAPO, the Azanian People's Organization, which presents itself as the "Leader and Custodian of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM)" in South Africa (AZAPO.org.za, n.d.: n.p.). He was also a founding member of the Socialist Party of Azania (SOPA), which also claimed to be a Black Consciousness political party. Given Mokae's position within the Black Consciousness community, and Biko's designation of black policemen (under apartheid) as "non-white", one has to question why he would make his main protagonist a black policeman.

While asserting his identity as a detective in the CID, Makena struggles to disassociate himself from the various categories of police in a political context where, as the novel admits, "[a]ll policemen are viewed as collaborators: the functionaries who grease the white man's oppressive machinery" (Mokae, 1996: 30). Makena constantly asserts his identity as a detective, distancing himself from the apartheid function of the Security Branch, yet when a Security Branch policeman is killed in Soweto by members of the liberation movement, Makena's wife, Khumo, realizes that her husband is a "sitting duck" because "comrades can't distinguish members of the CID from the SBs", revealing that all black policemen were perceived in the same way (18). When Makena attends Anikie's funeral against Khumo's advice, as funerals commonly turned into political rallies within the anti-apartheid community, he is threatened by young activists chanting: "'A GOOD COP?' [...] 'IS A DEAD COP!'" (42–43). Most telling is Makena's own acknowledgement when Anikie first approaches him to ask for assistance for her husband who is being held by the Security Branch: Makena responds with, "I am one of them, why come to me?" (21).

In addition to the political traitors in the Security Branch, Makena also has to work against the stereotype of the stupid and uneducated black cop. After 1976 the SAP found it increasingly difficult to attract police recruits, particularly in the wake of the influence of Black Consciousness, and they resorted to various means to police the black townships. The stereotype of the uneducated and incompetent black policeman is addressed directly when Makena acknowledges his uniqueness as an intelligent black detective. When Anikie states that Makena is too brainy to be a policeman, he immediately responds to the implicit racial judgement: "When I first entered the force black policemen did not have to have brains [...] all they had to have was speed and stamina" (24). Anikie asks whether the criteria have changed, implying that they haven't.

The black police force under apartheid was "not a monolith, but a complicated filigree of people" (Steinberg, 2008: 70). Black Consciousness writer Mtutuzeli Matshoba, speaking to Johnny Steinberg, recalls several categories of black police officers including the Municipal Police "who received only cursory training" (Steinberg, 2008: 70). Introduced in 1986 with the recruitment of 3,000 black constables, the *kitskonstabels* ("instant constables" in Afrikaans) were a force for deployment in unrest-ridden townships. This strategy, "born at the height of the State of Emergency, has appropriately been dubbed 'black-on-black policing'" (Rauch, 1991: 18–19). Known as "blackjacks" and

“raiders”, they were the ones who would pound on the door at two in the morning to check passbooks (Steinberg, 2008: 70).

Education was not a prerequisite for recruits and even literacy was not a necessary requirement (Marks, 2008: 647). The *kitskonstabels* were trained in six weeks, with all training done orally because most of the candidates were illiterate, and then deployed in black townships to suppress any anti-apartheid activity. The *kitskonstabels* were differentiated from the rest of the South African police force, especially the white members of the force: “they were not allowed to wear the same uniform as white officers, they could not give any order to a white officer, and they could not deal with cases that involved white suspects” (Pruitt, 2010: 118). Any serious offence was transferred to the dominant system which was controlled and staffed by whites (Pruitt, 2010: 118). The last resort, when influx control began to crack, were the police reservists: “anyone who was prepared to do it could do it. No knowledge of policing was required” (Steinberg, 2008: 72).

In the SAP, racial hierarchy superseded rank, as black police could not arrest white citizens and a white policeman or woman of *any* rank had automatic authority over a black officer (Cawthra, 1993: 79). In 1991, blacks made up 60 per cent of the South African police force, yet the bulk of these were serving in “inferior auxiliary formations” (Cawthra, 1992: 21; 1993: 3). As late as 1993, whites occupied 93 per cent of the highest-ranking positions in the SAP (Scharf and Cochrane, qtd. in Marks, 2008: 647). True policing was thus done largely by white police officers and only whites got real police services (Pruitt, 2010: 119). This lack of real policing in the black community is acknowledged by Makena and cited as his motivation for becoming a detective. His twin brother was abducted and murdered and the crime was never solved due to lack of brain power and a flawed investigation. The case is left unsolved until 30 years later, when Makena does so himself: “I made up my mind to join the force [...] despite strong objections from my family, who felt the police force was not for someone with my brains” (Mokae, 1996: 24–25). Makena asserts that without intelligence, police brutality will ensue: “What a good policeman needs is a good brain to out-wit criminals. With a good brain you don’t have to beat the truth out of a criminal” (Mokae, 1996: 24).

The narrative thus positions Makena as a true detective figure serving the black community, a function beyond the evils of the security branch or the incompetent black officer, both policing apartheid. This identity and separation from other police functions is asserted throughout the novel, even in the face of resistance from the community, as mentioned above. Makena suggests that this is a distinction that *intelligent* people should recognize. When talking to Anikie about Lesejane, a discussion set in 1977, he says:

“Your husband is obviously a sophisticated man, is he not? A journalist?” He asks rhetorically. “So he would know that I’m in the CID, not the Security Branch, would he not? He might even know about my battles with the SBs [...] He’d know that I’m a friend, not the enemy.” (Mokae, 1996: 23)

Makena, the friend of political activists, is thus differentiated from the rest of the police force, both black and white; the rest of the force are enemies.

While the black CID detective was a reality, the idea that he was a “friend” to the anti-apartheid community goes against the historical account. Steinberg documents that while the police who enforced pass laws were always hated, there was a time “when other

categories of black police were figures of some authority in their neighbourhoods” (2012: 488). In the 1950s, the apartheid government began recruiting thousands of black men into the police, including into the detective service. According to Steinberg, these black detectives were figures of “some ambiguity”: on the one hand, they worked with violence on behalf of the apartheid state causing fear and distrust. On the other hand, “that they were educated, worked with pen and paper and earned decent salaries gave them prestige” (2012: 489). This is clearly the group that Makena is associated with as he began his career in Sophiatown, a racially mixed residential area that was demolished by the apartheid government in the late 1950s to make way for a white suburb. Yet when Makena’s career persists through the 1970s and 1980s in Soweto, the novel’s narrative departs from the historical record. Whatever authority was vested in some black detectives was destroyed entirely in June 1976 when an uprising of Soweto high school students, informed by Black Consciousness, resulted in police officers being forced to leave Soweto (Steinberg, 2012: 489). Township policemen were no longer safe in their homes and were forced to move out. The days of the black police detective as informal township authority were over in Soweto (Steinberg, 2012: 489). Less than a decade later, what had happened to police officers in Soweto in 1976, happened around the country as insurrections against apartheid engulfed much of urban South Africa (Steinberg, 2012: 489). The figure of Makena, the CID man living in Soweto between 1977 and 1993, who is also a “friend” of the struggle thus presents a historical contradiction. Here Mokae is using a tactic similar to other African crime writers, who have created intentionally “fictional” or “hypothetical” detectives to make a point about the inadequacy of the police service and its critical role in democratic reforms (see Guldimann, 2021).⁵

This might explain why, although the novel presents two investigations conducted by Makena into Lesejane, both digress from the conventions of the procedural. The first is set in 1984 when Makena attempts to convict Lesejane of Anikie’s murder, and the second is his dramatic revelation set in 1992. Neither of these presents an investigation or an investigative team that could be considered typical of the police procedural. The first investigation is conducted by Makena as the solitary investigator, with the assistance of his wife, Khumo (who is a social worker, not a member of the police force). Makena gathers sufficient evidence but a crucial witness disappears, Lesejane’s lawyers discredit the only witness Makena has left, and Lesejane walks free. The second is the Holmesian revelation at the climax of the novel. Makena, the figure of ratiocination, unveils the details of Lesejane’s crime through his sole, and solitary, deductive power. Breaking the conventions of the procedural, routine police procedure and the team are replaced, in the final scene, by Makena’s dramatic revelation to everyone, including Sergeant Konyana, of how he has single-handedly pursued the case for seven years in order to provide the evidence to convict Lesejane for fraud. Even the trusty Konyana is amongst the audience amazed by Makena’s revelation. The novel begins with an epigraph from Sherlock Holmes and here Makena clearly embodies the fictional detective. While this is curious in a police procedural, I suggest two reasons for Mokae’s use of Holmes. He uses the popular and well-known character as a template to create an image of an exceptional black detective for the new South Africa. I will return to this point. The Holmesian method also allows for the circumvention of the normal police procedures required by the procedural, convenient in the apartheid context where both a great black detective

and the police team are more fictional than realistic. Mokae makes Makena a singular historical exception.

Makena's superiors are seldom mentioned, presumably because they would have, historically, been white and Makena cannot be seen to be an obsequious "non-white", like Milandzi. White policemen are mentioned only twice, and in both instances Makena is very much in control of the situation. One is when Makena approaches the Security Branch for assistance to convict Lesejane for the murder of his first wife and "Knuip-tang de Wet" willingly assists him, even though Makena is viewed as the "sworn enemy" of the Security Branch (Mokae, 1996: 45). The other is when Colonel Makena receives a phone call from a Captain Grobelaar who is heading the hunt for a serial killer. Grobelaar requests Makena's assistance and asks him to "go over his theory about the identity of the killer [...] [f]or the hundredth time" (31). Grobelaar's name (and rank) suggests that he is a white Afrikaner and Makena's thoughts invert the perception of race and intelligence: "'No wonder some people have such a low opinion of us policemen', Makena thinks inwardly, reflecting on the best way to make Grobelaar understand" (31).

I have already asked why Mokae creates a black detective and I would like to pose a second question: why does this black detective pursue a black criminal so doggedly? This is at odds with the historical context. In 1996 South Africa had commenced with the formal investigation of crimes committed in the name of apartheid by setting up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Yet Makena pursues a black criminal for crimes against the black community that were not motivated by apartheid. At first glance, the novel provides an almost textbook example of Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen's much cited formulation of the "postcolonial postmortem". The authors postulate that the literal "postmortem" of the crime text — "the investigation of the victim's remains" — is, in postcolonial literature, extended to an exploration of the "body of the individual text and its context" and an examination "which uses elements of crime fiction for 'social' rather than 'criminal' detection" (2006: 8). Commonly, the crime acts as a springboard for an examination into "colonial situations" and how these have been "re-created and re-investigated from the perspective of the colonized" (2006: 8).

Yet the novel moves beyond this concept of the "postcolonial postmortem". The colonial situation, apartheid, is present but is not the focus of the investigation. Makena's attention to the postmortem of the body, apparently belonging to Lesejane's second wife, leads to his discovery of the criminal act. Mumsy had breast implants while the victim's body did not (he has it exhumed), thus revealing that Lesejane staged the attack by the comrades and the necklacing of his wife as a pretext to leave South Africa with his stolen funds. He has now returned, assuming that he is safe from his crimes of the past, to reap the benefits of the new nation. In the police station Lesejane insists that he has been "guaranteed" indemnity, referring to amnesty from prosecution granted (but by no means guaranteed) by the TRC (Mokae, 1996: 61). In terms of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act (No. 34 of 1995), the TRC could grant formal amnesty based on two requirements: that the crime committed constituted an act associated with a political objective and that the applicant give full disclosure of all the relevant facts. Lesejane meets neither of these criteria and Makena states, pointedly, that "indemnity is only for political offences" (Mokae, 1996: 62). Lesejane is a common criminal, having organized the murder of his first wife, faked the death of his second wife, and claimed the insurance

in order to escape the country, as well as a political traitor to the Black Consciousness community, having used the movement for his self-advancement. Here Mokae interprets the realist requirement for the procedural to demonstrate crimes that happen to “ordinary people” in a Black Consciousness mode (Scaggs, 2005: 97). The significance of the setting, South Africa’s interim period, is now clear. Makena roots out Lesejane prior to the birth of the new nation in 1994, indicating the necessity for a political litmus test, a political purging, and thus a reassertion of Black Consciousness values for the future country. In keeping with the tenets of Black Consciousness, Mokae’s focus is not on white society or even its colonial crimes but on the black community and the continuation of Biko’s programme of Black Consciousness, “attracting to it only committed people” for the required “solid black unity” and thus expelling “non-whites”, traitors at the dawn of the new nation (Biko, 1987: 52, 51). Mokae’s engagement is with black texts and contexts and there is little engagement with the past texts of empire and apartheid. Mokae shifts the focus beyond the postcolonial postmortem to a radical Black Consciousness revision.

It is thus Makena, the black detective in the SAP, who becomes the true agent of Black Consciousness rather than the former activist, Lesejane. Initially, before his betrayal of Black Consciousness values and the black community, Makena expresses his admiration for Lesejane. He tells Anikie that he’s “read some of [Lesejane’s] writings and [he’s] been most impressed”, adding that he thinks “it’s a waste of talent that the likes of him should be in detention (Mokae, 1996: 21). The incongruity of this statement coming from a policeman is expressed by Makena’s wife in phrases like: “watch it, *rrabo*” and “[s]oon you might be joining him there” (21).

That emphasis on pursuing black criminals who betray the black community is borne out by the fact that only a few other investigations are represented in the novel and all of these involve black criminals: Makena solving his brother’s murder, his pursuit of Lesejane, and another involving the world-famous “*Tuang-child*” [sic]. When the relic disappears from the University of the Witwatersrand, all Makena’s colleagues are stumped. The Taung child, discovered in 1924, was one of the first early human fossils to be found in Africa and was a crucial clue to the understanding of Africa as the cradle of humankind. Makena recognizes the “hallmarks of the self-titled ‘Aristocrats’ gangsters in the theft of the skull” (Mokae, 1996: 6). Makena saves the fossil, with its symbolic significance, not from white criminals, but from a black gang. The gang’s modus operandi is to break into private homes and steal priceless masterpieces and then blackmail the owners: South African artists Jacob Hendrik Pierneef and Gerard Sekoto are mentioned as examples and the gang are described as “thugs with an expensive taste in clothes, cars and women” (6). The case of the Aristocrats thus serves to illustrate another example of those who are traitors to Black Consciousness values and only interested in self-enrichment. While the recounting of the case reinforces the African origins of humanity, it also serves to illustrate that “[n]othing is beyond Makena’s ken”, a statement repeated in the novel, as he uses his knowledge of palaeontology to solve the case (Mokae, 1996: 6). Makena finds the skull in a traditional healer’s “surgery” in Venda where he, remarkably, succeeds in distinguishing it from the other bones (Mokae, 1996: 7). It serves as a further example of Makena’s solitary brilliance.

Why does Mokae create such an exceptional black detective? That democratic reform is impossible without police reform was tacitly acknowledged in a speech by President F. W. de Klerk in January 1990, when he addressed the 500 highest-ranking police officers in the country at the Police College in Pretoria. He admitted that the SAP had been required to perform two functions: the first, to handle typical crime situations, the “normal police routines” of forces all over the world. The second was “a control function connected to a specific political party and the execution of laws” and this was about to change:

This is the political arena and we want to take the police out of it. We don't want to use you any more as instruments to reach certain political goals [...] I want you to make peace with this new line. (Cawthra, *Police* 3)

It is significant that this speech was given the month prior to de Klerk's historic announcement of the release of Nelson Mandela from prison, revealing the state's understanding of the crucial link between police function and a move towards democracy.

On 1 April 1991, three years prior to the first elections, the SAP's Detective Branch was officially merged with the Security Branch to form the Crime Combating and Investigation Division. This merger “was motivated as part of de Klerk's stated intention to take the SAP out of the sphere of political activity” since the recently unbanned liberation movements and extra-parliamentary opposition groups “had been the main target of SB activity” (Rauch, 1991: 17). In 1992, South Africa's Minister of Law and Order, Hernus Kriel, acknowledged that political and ethnic criteria had underpinned promotion in the SAP, precluding black officers from higher ranks. With 13 police generals retiring, Kriel promised that positions would be filled by black officers (Cawthra, 1993: 193). Yet since 1976 and Black Consciousness, the SAP had met with resistance when recruiting black members, particularly in politicized urban townships (Cawthra, 1993: 80). In the figure of Makena, Mokae is providing a revised and updated image of the black policeman, against still prevailing stereotypes, for young black South Africans in the newly democratic country, hence the use of the Sherlock Holmes character. Furthermore, he is providing a historical revision to Biko's definition of Black Consciousness: black police should no longer be considered “non-white”. As Steinberg points out, it is appropriate that those who kicked the police out of black communities should be the ones to bring them back and, in this sense, Mokae's political allegiance to the Black Consciousness Movement is particularly significant (2008: 55).

In the epilogue of the novel *Makena*, now promoted to major, hands over a symbolically bulky file to Sergeant Konyana: “Here, I've got something for you my, boy: a baton none of my children or grand-children will accept from me” (Mokae, 1996: 95). The file contains the major cases he has investigated, the successes and the failures, because “even great detectives sometimes fail” (95). The implications are clear: crimes, past and present, should no longer go unsolved. The police file opened under apartheid will now be passed on to a new generation of detectives represented here by Makena's enthusiastic apprentice, Konyana. Makena's words make it clear that this new tradition is a break with the past police lineage: “None of my descendants will have it. The damn fools, they all think the force is only for idiots with single-digit IQ's. You have the makings of a

top-notch cop, sergeant” (98). The text is thus drawing a line between past and future: the past SAP and a new SAPS which will provide a true police function to the community. Through this revision of the figure of the black policeman, the foster son, Konyana, can now represent a new legitimate South African Police Service.

The novel is startlingly prescient: in its anticipation first of the problem of the re-introduction of black policing after apartheid, and second of the need for a revisioning of what a real black police force might look like. Furthermore, it anticipates the problem of corruption within the post-apartheid dispensation. In *Thin Blue* (2008), an analysis of policing in South Africa published some fourteen years after the end of apartheid, Johnny Steinberg claims that “the police were never forgiven for their role under apartheid” (2008: 23). Having been expelled from the townships in the 1970s and 1980s, they returned in the early 1990s “a disgraced and ingratiating bunch, and never recovered their dignity” (2008: 23). According to Steinberg, this “wound” to the police has never healed (2012: 490). Mokae is presenting a fictional alternative to this. Police detectives like Makena do not need to be forgiven because they have never been the agents of the state. Makena is representative of what a black police function *might* have looked like under apartheid and, far more significantly, what a true post-apartheid black police function *should* be. With the Truth and Reconciliation Commission taking place in 1996, the media was filled with images of repentant black police collaborators seeking forgiveness from their communities.⁶ Makena and his successor, Konyana, are not disgraced black police collaborators. Makena has always been a true black police detective. And they will now provide a true police function which, according to Steinberg, is what might have healed the apartheid wound.

In response to the question of how policy-makers might “have fashioned a healthier relationship between police and urban citizens at the beginning of South Africa’s democratic era” (2012: 490), Steinberg asserts that the new police authorities after 1994 “should have understood their most urgent task as that of rebuilding the detective service”, as that is, after all, precisely what had been missing from generations of township life (2008: 99). The crimes in the black community that had, for generations, “never been adequately investigated would for the first time have received police attention”, and black urban residents “would have felt like citizens for the first time” (Steinberg, 2012: 490).

I started this article citing Leon de Kock’s idea that crime writing in South Africa is a response to disillusionment with the way in which the post-apartheid government betrayed the ideals of the anti-apartheid moment. I claimed that Mokae’s novel has been neglected, in part, because it does not fit into this popular model which, in its current incarnation, addresses state capture, a form of corruption in which politicians and businesses combine to control a country’s decision-making process in order to advance their own interests (Arun, 2019). Here it can be seen how strikingly prescient Mokae’s novel is: it anticipates this betrayal before it became a problem in the country. A brand of state capture crime fiction has recently emerged from South Africa which demonstrates the struggle of good detectives to maintain their integrity in the midst of a corrupt environment, which includes members of the police and government. In order to continue their struggle against the evils of crime, these true detectives find their strength in a return to the original values of the anti-apartheid struggle, values which have been abandoned in the current society.⁷

What is unique about *The Secret in my Bosom* is that it creates a vision where the black police detective, Makena, eliminates this corruption and betrayal, thus suggesting an alternative future for South Africa where such disillusionment has no place.

While writing this article, I was shocked to learn that Gomolemo Mokae had been murdered at his home in Ga-Rankuwa, South Africa. His body was discovered on 5 March 2025, although the murder took place several days earlier. Police opened a criminal docket investigating a case of murder and robbery. No updates have been reported since early March 2025.

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Notes

1. This neglect is all the more curious given that *The Secret in my Bosom* was developed into a television series (one of three written by Mokae) which was broadcast by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) during the 1990s. Despite being in print, the book is generally not available to purchase in bookshops or online platforms.
2. The South African Police (SAP) was the name of the police force created in 1910. After the transition to democracy in 1994 the SAP was renamed the South African Police Service (SAPS).
3. The airport was renamed “Johannesburg International” in 1994 and then “O. R. Tambo International” in 2006 after the anti-apartheid politician Oliver Tambo.
4. “Turfloop” was a campus of the University of the North, one of five black Universities established by the Apartheid government according to the policy of separate ethnically based institutions. In 2005, Turfloop was incorporated into the current University of Limpopo.
5. In addition to Abdelilah Hamdouchi’s hypothetical detective in *The Final Bet* (2001) set in Morocco, this tradition goes back to the 1950s in South Africa with Arthur Maimane’s stories, published in *Drum magazine*, about a hardboiled PI under apartheid, introduced in a self-reflexively fictional fashion (see Guldimmann, 2019).
6. A poignant example of the complexity of post-apartheid responses towards the role of black police under apartheid is portrayed in one of the TRC cases, known as the Gugulethu Seven, presented in the documentary *Long Night’s Journey into Day* (2000), where black policemen confess their crimes, addressing mothers whose sons they killed, and ask for forgiveness.
7. One of the most recent examples can be found in Peter Hain’s 2020 *The Rhino Conspiracy* (see Guldimmann, 2023).

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