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## THE MARK GEVISSER REVIEW

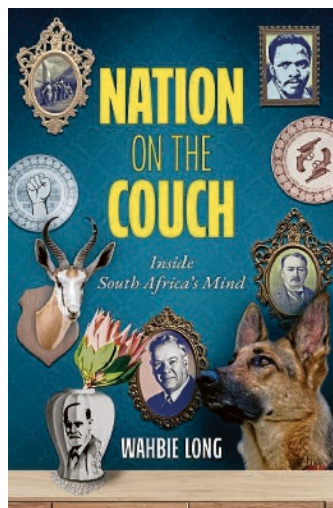
## Shame and envy on Wahbie Long's couch

● The UCT psychologist takes on the 'monsters of the deep' in an attempt to understand our violent society



MARK GEVISSER

*Nation on the Couch: Inside South Africa's Mind, Wahbie Long (Melinda Ferguson Books)*



Author Wahbie Long, /Melinda Ferguson Publishers

Last week, while I had my nose in Wahbie Long's new book, reading about "the brokenness at the heart of the nation", community vigilantes in Zandspruit abducted nine young men accused of home invasions and necklaced them on a soccer pitch. One victim had his arms hacked off when he refused to kneel, eight died.

When Msindisi Fengu of City Press visited two days later (the piece would run on page six, way behind accounts of Jacob Zuma and Ace Magashule's lawfare), children were playing soccer "joyfully" on the massacre site while locals went about their business at the surrounding spazas.

That children are playing football on the site of a fresh massacre – it must be called that – is a sign of life's irrepressibility. But what does this insouciance say about their future? This is the type of question Wahbie Long sets out to answer in his book. A psychology professor – his lodestars are both Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx – he insists on grappling with the internal as well as external conditions that lead to the "alienation" of our society. "NO ONE IS TALKING" is the headline of the City Press article.

Against this, Long offers Freud's "talking cure" and the wisdom of James Baldwin: "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced."

Freud wrote, famously, of the "return of the repressed": the way that repressed emotions tend to emerge as "repetition compulsions" we cannot control. Long uses this concept to analyse the psychic ways that poverty, inequality and racism generate the violence of our society. He develops his analysis through three psychoanalytic concepts, which he describes as "the dominant emotional tones of life in SA": "shame", "envy" and an existential paralysis he calls "impasse".

In our unequal society, "the battle among the underclasses is all about respect," he writes. "In an attempt to shore up a crumbling sense of self, the shame of living in relative poverty is projected outwards onto other marginalised groups – women, children, refugees – while the power establishment itself remains intact."

Long uses the US psychiatrist James Gilligan's "germ theory of violence", developed through decades of work with prisoners: "shame is as necessary for violence as the tubercle bacillus is for tuberculosis.

Violence is the great equaliser that forces other people to 'offer' their respect (and, if not respect, then fear will do)."

Most of us live, nonviolently, with our shame. But Gilligan found that shame provoked violence in people who had not yet developed the capacity for emotions such as love, empathy and guilt, or who lacked, as Long puts it, "other means of earning respect", such as education, employment or community status.

But in a country such as SA, "one does not need to have been shamed as a child – whether the medium was physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse or neglect", to become violent. The inequality "can be sufficiently shaming all by itself for the affected individual to act out in horrific ways".

This brings to mind the most poignant quote in the City Press story: a bereaved mother recounting that her son was a diligent contributor to the family burial society. If he was, indeed, one of the gangsters terrorising Zandspruit, it would have been, in part, to play the role of good son. Zandspruit is a 30-minute taxi ride to Sandton City.

Long plots the way "shame" mutates, via "resentment", to "envy", particularly in a liberal capitalist society driven by comparison. He paraphrases Marx: "The injustice of inequality is not that one lives in a shack, but that the shack sits in the shadow of a palace."

Using the psychoanalytic concept of "envy" developed by Freud's influential student Melanie Klein, Long examines political protests in general, and the Fallist uprisings at SA universities in particular. Klein wrote of a "good breast" that nourishes the child inexhaustibly, but that turns "bad" when unavailable, triggering murderous rage in an infant. She calls this "envy": "The breast upon which the infant is so utterly dependent must be destroyed because of that dependence," as Long puts it.

**KARL MARX WRITES THAT THE INJUSTICE OF INEQUALITY IS NOT THAT ONE LIVES IN A SHACK, BUT THAT THE SHACK SITS IN THE SHADOW OF A PALACE**

Wahbie Long  
Author

And so Long equates "elite institutions" such as his own University of Cape Town (UCT) with "the nourishing breast", dispensing "precious knowledge, financial support, networking opportunities and ... the promise of a life of dignity". But because "the internal logic of the institution is 'white', they 'feel themselves deprived of the fruits they imagined a university education would confer, triggering for many the familiar feeling of deprivation. They feel persecuted by an institution experienced as massively shaming, the shame turns into resentment and the resentment becomes envy."

That protesting students actually trashed the campus with shit renders one of Melanie Klein's most provocative images literal: the raging infant makes the good breast "bad" by biting it and poisoning it "with urine and faeces". At UCT students "set fire to life-affirming artworks and shut down life-giving classes of knowledge. If we cannot enjoy this place, then no-one will, they may as well be saying."

Long is a person of colour at UCT; this chapter is written with both passion and courage. He notes that while it is necessary "to centre the lived experiences of the dispossessed in university curricula", this process "threatens also to parochialise higher education with its nativist, antihumanist and anti-universalist message", at the same time that fascist movements are doing the same "in an increasingly polarised world". He worries that middle-class students are becoming "increasingly adept at identifying ... symbolic violence, while appearing oblivious to the problem of real, concrete violence".

Most provocatively, Long

uses Franz Fanon, the Algerian psychiatrist whose work is canonical for Fallists, to describe the way a "black" identity is so often defined by an unconscious desire to be white, and how this sours into grievance: "Like Aesop's fox reaching in vain for the grapes, the black man can never be white, for that would mean being recognised" – by whites – "as human".

If black South Africans are psychologically driven by "shame" and "envy", then white South Africans are in a place of "existential impasse": now that black people are no longer submissive, Long writes, "many white people have simply batted down the hatches, retreating still further into their whiteness." He describes – accurately, I think – a "melancholic structure" and "paralytic grief" replacing what was once "a narcissistic veneer" of many white South Africans, "that familiar easy-going confidence that comes with ontological security [I know who I am]".

Perhaps, if I were a black student, I would bristle at being on Long's couch in his "envy" chapter. As a middle-class, middle-aged white man, I do not so much bristle at his "impasse" diagnosis, which I recognise, as at some of his diagnostic tools. Long writes that the "continuing discomfort" of whites around black people "reveals itself in their lasting over-the-top affection for dogs", their "retreat" into exclusive white security estates, and their flight from the country.

While the evidence of white emigration is "anecdotal", Long states the "undeniable fact" that "the white population is the demographic in the country to have shrunk" in the 20th century. Given what I have observed about emigration from my own mixed milieu, I went back and looked at Long's source – a 2019 Daily Maverick article that actually contradicts him: "There is no indication in the primary data sources that the rate of emigration is accelerating, nor is there any evidence to support the popular claim that the white population is shrinking as a result of emigration." I followed the links and read, further, that at least two emigration agencies say they have more black than white clients.

Using the psychoanalytic concept of counter-transfer-



**Symbolic violence:** Students cheer as the statue of Cecil John Rhodes is removed from the campus of the University of Cape Town after weeks of protest and a decision by UCT authorities and heritage officials to get rid of it. /Esa Alexander/Sunday Times

ence, I might wonder whether Long's misreading was wilful, or unconscious. But that itself would be a form of avoidance. What I find valuable and bracing about being on his "couch" is precisely that, as he cites Deborah Posel, "race is always a relational construct": I am white because you are black, and vice versa. Long carries this further: there is no self without the other. I am someone because you are someone, as ubuntu puts it. On a political level this means that my own motivations for emigrating, were I to consider it (I am not), would have to be understood in the context of how I am viewed by others: in this instance, by Dr Wahbie Long, or by black South Africans who think I am running away from them.

Let me try to illustrate this by

writing about the centrality of dogs in my life. Given this fact, and my many years in therapy, I am of course cognisant that my response to Long might be defensive. Recounting the history of how "the colonial dog" was used to police black people and protect white privilege, Long suggests that whites continue to use dogs to rehearse their need for absolute mastery, and to keep the feared black "other" at bay.

My dogs are my companions, and I have no conscious interest in their being guard dogs. But when I heard last week about an armed home invasion nearby, my first thought was, "thank God I have dogs". I cannot deny that I feel more secure knowing they will raise the alarm if there is a disturbance. Does this mean I want to keep black people at bay, or that my objective concern about violent crime covers an unconscious fear of the black man to whom my rational self will not admit?

I don't believe so, but my experience on dog walks opens up another possibility. Of course I am aware that many black passers-by flinch in a way whites do not, and I imagine this fear that has been instilled in them by their experience.

One of my dogs – a Collie cross, a rescue – can be aggressive. Even though I know that she will bark at black men and white men alike (seldom at women at all), the black man will not know that, and might read her, and me, as fearful and

passer-by as subordinate, or not to see him at all? My work – the work of white South Africans – is to overcome that, and even if I think Long has got me wrong in his "impasse" diagnosis, he is correct that we whites too often turn away from this work.

Long reaches for "hope" at the end of his book, and finds it in the empathy that is at the core of any therapeutic practice. He expands this outward to a political principle based on what he calls "the golden rule" of ethical conduct: "Do unto others as you would have done to yourself."

He sets one reparative path: to keep on walking, together, much as a therapist and patient do: "Our earnest striving for mutuality is not a promised land but a process evolving all the time." By "showing up and not retreating, by engaging and not dissociating, by searching for and not giving up on one another, we give ourselves and the generations to come the best chance of living with – instead of being lived by – our trauma. History cannot be overcome but, instead of carrying it on our backs, labouring under it, we can learn to walk beside it."

Still, he notes the limits of empathy as a "solution" in our context, noting how even if a parent, teacher or therapist succeeds in providing "optimal conditions for empathetic connection", the child, student or patient might "collapse the frame". Similarly, the shame, envy and existential impasse that exist in SA's "political unconscious" will continually threaten "to upend our best efforts at national healing".

Implicit is the possibility that the "parent, teacher or therapist" is so messed up that they have no capacity for empathy themselves, or even the ability to model good behaviour. We might add to Long's psychoanalytic diagnosis a more behaviourist reading of SA's political psychology: the total failure of those with authority to provide the boundaries – the threats or the incentives – to enable healthy growth and humane behaviour. People take the law into their own hands when there is no other authority to trust: in this way perhaps it is appropriate that we should read, on a Sunday morning, of the violence that people like Zuma and Magashule have done to our political psyches before we even get to the Zandspruit massacre.

In City Press there is a photograph of one of the victim's burnt clothes on the soccer pitch, perhaps still present during that "joyful" football match. Were those children insouciant in their game, or does their exuberance represent some kind of triumph – at a terrorising evil having been expunged from the community? And whether triumph or careless joy, what does it mean for those children's future that violent death is under their feet?

● In Part 2 of this essay, next week, Gevisser will read Wahbie Long's work alongside that of Pamela Gobodo-Madikizela, Jacqueline Rose and others.



**Massacre site:** The family of Vusi Seabe collect parts of his remains after he and several others were burnt to death in Zandspruit. /Thulani Mbele