

Introduction

Reckoning with Apartheid

The Conundrum of Working through the Past

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This themed section of *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, titled “Reckoning with Apartheid: The Conundrum of Working through the Past,” comes at a very particular moment in South Africa’s “long walk to freedom.”¹ Only recently, South Africans celebrated two decades of democracy. This was an enormous achievement, following almost four hundred years of colonial rule that reshaped everything from understandings of land ownership to national sovereignty, race, and the very definition of what it means to be human. Yet South Africa’s transition to democracy appears increasingly marked by significant failure—and by this I mean a failure to fully transcend history—even as some are willing to claim that the past is indeed the past. Or, as Sarah Nuttall has proposed, that the value of symptomatic reading has been eclipsed by a newer focus on “surfaces” and “edges.”² That the past, certainly in the interpretive practice of reading that Nuttall proposes, might be superseded by a certain flatness of historical dimension has significant implications for the meaning of the “post” in “postapartheid.” For Nuttall the symptomatic reading is assumed to be Freudian or Marxian. Here, I am less concerned with the psychoanalytic dimension and more so with Marx’s historicism. True, the “surfaces” of contemporary South African life are easily accessed. Yet their legibility, in the sense of how they might be interpreted—in other words, what they refer to—is often less evident. The referent very often is buried under layer upon layer of historical accretions that the discipline and method of history might more properly reveal.

In 1994, to be “post” was to celebrate the demise of a history that nevertheless still held the promise of being remembered. Yet, in the strange and troubling time of the now, in the time of Zuma, in the time of a slowing economy, in the time of increasing political disruption, the unfinished work of the so-called transition appears in ever more symptomatic form. Indeed, the allying of student and worker protests across South Africa in the last few weeks and months has brought into sharp focus a body politic still ailing for its refusal to fully address a tortuous past and a history of violence and racism that now haunts South Africa’s present. It would seem that surfaces and edges are one thing, deep history another.³

1. I am inspired by Adorno’s treatment of the question of working “through” the past, specifically in the aftermath of German National Socialism, as a problem of denial rather than an actual working “upon” the past to finally resolve or reckon with it.

2. See Nuttall, “The Rise of the Surface.”

3. See, for example, Msimang, “South Africa Has No Patience.”

The #RhodesMustFall hash tag, for one—a movement that began in March 2015 with efforts to remove a statue of Cecil Rhodes on the University of Cape Town campus—went on to interrogate the purpose of postapartheid higher education, looking both to the stalled efforts at genuine transformation of South African universities and the much more philosophical question of how both faculty and students, but centrally students, would move to liberate knowledge itself. Such “decolonial” politics declare the past something that must be transcended through “epistemic disobedience”⁴ and through a resistance to forms of colonial knowledge making in order to lay the conditions for a properly decolonial social order or, in South African terms, a properly *postapartheid* order. As is well known, measures of inequality in South Africa rank as some of the highest globally. These measures in turn speak back to a whole history of constitutionally mandated racial discriminations that produced the very inequality that is now so hotly contested and that the state, if only rhetorically, already made gestures toward remedying twenty years ago but could not or would not adequately address.

Notably, the university, as one among a host of institutions still in need of transformation, presents a very particular urgency. Why this should be the case surely relates to the role of tertiary education in serving as a unique bridge to upward mobility and the promise of access to opportunity in postapartheid South Africa. Yet, twenty-two years after South Africa’s democratization the country’s universities, tied as they are to a crisis of funding in which more students are educated at the university level but at much lower rates per capita than ever before, reinscribe tertiary education as *the* critical site of postcolonial malaise. Jonny Steinberg, a South African journalist and writer, has recently argued: “Universities have thus become theatres of the most intolerable of SA’s inequalities. Students juggling between staying well fed and paying their fees share classrooms with the gilded children of the top 1%.”⁵

And so “a new cultural temperament is

gradually engulfing post-apartheid urban South Africa. For the time being, it goes by the name ‘decolonization’—in truth *a psychic state* more than a political project in the strict sense of the term.”⁶ For some, including political theorist, historian, and now public intellectual Achille Mbembe, the current moment marks, too, a shift to a “politics of impatience” fueled by students’ reading of Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, and others in the black politico-philosophical tradition, even when the “colony” of which Fanon wrote in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) is not so easily analogized to present-day South Africa.⁷

The #RhodesMustFall protests signaled a critical attention to the symbolics of apartheid, colonial, and imperial oppressions and the ways in which these spoke to other more fundamental lapses in the effort at full transformation. Renewed anger over failed service delivery and the vocal protests of various social movements have also been at the core of a definitive sea change in protest politics since 1994. If there was considerable praise for the focus on the ballot box (as an acquiescence to nonviolence, perhaps) the peculiarity of the transition from apartheid was surely that in highlighting the fact of South Africa’s *democratization*, the fact of South Africa’s *liberation* was denied⁸—what Adorno elsewhere and with a rather distinct aim has described as “mitigating expressions and euphemistic circumlocutions.”⁹ And yet, the past from which South Africa was delivered was a past of intense struggle against the forces of colonialism and white supremacy. Since 1994, growing frustration with the slow pace of land redistribution (see Robin Turner, this section), housing and service delivery, the yawning inequality gap (one of the world’s largest), and the deep precarities and uncertainties of daily existence suffered by a majority of South Africans has made the question of how to mitigate the injuries of the past most pressing.

Thus October 6, 2015, a day dedicated to demonstrations against outsourcing and wage depression on the University of the Witwatersrand

4. See Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 9.

5. Steinberg, “Why the ANC Underfunds the Universities.”

6. Mbembe, “Achille Mbembe on the State of South African Political Life.”

7. Also see Gibson, “What Happened to the Promised Land?”

8. See Makhulu, “The ‘Dialectics of Toil.’”

9. Adorno, “The Meaning of Working through the Past,” 90.

campuses, set the stage for student protests against threatened increases in university fees. In the matter of a week or so, what began as a campus shut-down became the radical face of a much broader, national protest by students across both historically white and private universities and those universities that had long catered to black student bodies, not least among them the University of Fort Hare, a bastion of African National Congress intellectualism in the heyday of the antiapartheid struggles. Those on the frontlines of the protests—students, with some faculty allies—insisted that the visibility afforded those protestors at institutions like the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town belied a much more enduring politics of dissent on the part of students at historically black institutions who had waged long-standing struggles, struggles that were routinely quashed by police and university administrations outside the purview of national and international media.

What quickly emerged as the #WitsFeesMust Fall and then simply #FeesMustFall campaigns insightfully harnessed the rights of so-called born frees—young people born after 1994—and their entitlements to education in a free South Africa to those rights of workers who had been systematically disenfranchised through outsourcing and other corporatist strategies of contingent and precarious employment. Fighting then on two fronts—one for secure contracts for previously outsourced labor and the other for the right to free education—students translated #FeesMust-Fall into a mutual politics through which a fully decolonial institution might come into being sans colonial signs and symbols, sans labor exploitation, sans the threat of student indebtedness: in sum, with a view to a recognition of the full humanity of all. That there is tremendous disillusionment with the broken promises of the posttransition moment is clear; that that disillusionment should play out newly in tertiary education is surely the more critical observation. What is the university, after all? For Thando Njovane campus-based protests embody multidimensional, layered, differentiated, and multiple motivations, disappointments, and

complex determinations played out from a range of class positions suggesting that yes, the burning political question is not only about race, but about class, and the possibilities for black social mobility after apartheid.¹⁰

By contrast, Mbembe opines that the new politics, though, as yet, ill-defined theoretically, signal a shift in the general class positioning of protest. “What we are hearing,” he argues, “is that there have not been enough meaningful, decisive, radical change [*sic*], not only in terms of the life chances of the black poor, but—and this is the novelty—in terms of the future prospects of the black middle class.”¹¹ But perhaps a prior question demands to be asked: what and who is middle class in South Africa, whether by self-definition or by a strict econometrics? Is the question not more properly posed in terms of the prospects of a *future* black middle class rather than the established black middle class’s potential prospects?

The investments in black prosperity and professionalism are several: for some the emergence of an African bourgeoisie presumes its facilitation of a “(re)turn” to political and social stability in the face of the current chaos of the posttransition moment, and even, as former President Mbeki once proposed, laying the groundwork for nonracialism. Indeed, the idea of black wealth remains a powerful organizing fiction in South African society, driving aspiration and emulation on one hand and resentment on the other, while the continuity between such public feelings and long-standing histories of racialized dispossession are routinely effaced. And so I wonder about the “interpretive procedure” that might serve to expose not only the falsity of the new “freedom”—the decolonization so eagerly pursued in the discourse of the #Rhodes MustFall movement and by those who imagine the unleashing of black economic potential. Too I wonder, following Slavoj Žižek, how such an “interpretive procedure,” a symptomatic reading in other words, might go so far as to expose not only the limitations of the new freedoms, but also their falsity. Inasmuch as the “new” South Africa has undergone a transition to democracy, it is neither

10. See Njovane, “On Achille Mbembe’s ‘The State of South African Political Life.’” Cf. Seekings and Natrass, *Class, Race, and Inequality in South Africa*.

11. Mbembe, “Achille Mbembe on the State of South African Political Life.”

decolonial nor a site of genuine political freedom. Rather, it is a site of new constraints dictated precisely by the liberalized market. Further, while proclaiming the old racist logics of apartheid long dead, South Africans persist in continually resurrecting the specter of difference.

On so many fronts difference is being played out: on grounds of race,¹² ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality, to name but a few forms of distinction. The new “politics of impatience” is often enough directed toward foreign-born African migrants and immigrants, representing not only a “savage cosmopolitanism”¹³ (see Neville Hoad, this section) at the heart of postapartheid daily life, but also in a very complicated relationship to the South African past. For if generations of Mozambicans and Angolans, Shona and Ndebele-speaking people worked in South Africa’s mines and factories during a century or more, drawn into the orbit of industrial work through a system of migrant labor, with the advent of apartheid and the liberation struggles many South African activists sought refuge in other sub-Saharan nations at a time when Pan-Africanism was a genuine political force. Yet today, a new and strident anti-immigrant politics stresses the critical significance of national *cohesion*¹⁴—a cohesion that must necessarily disregard the fact of internal differentiations within the boundaries of the nation-state.

In the old South Africa, the system of ethnic homelands or “Bantustans” created the illusion that ethnicity was commensurate with national sovereignty—as the apartheid state worked to declare the homelands independent of the Republic of South Africa. After 1994, such white supremacist logic was replaced by hollow claims to an assimilationist “Rainbow Nation.” Yet most South Africans would concede that the very notion of an all-embracing diversity was never realized. Rather, what emerged were varied forms of ardent nationalism ranging from State President Jacob Zuma’s Zulu ethnic populism to the ethnic chauvinisms of South African nationals directed toward their foreign-born confrères.

As Lucy Graham (this section) argues, President Zuma is pivotal to the new, aggressive ethnic nationalism. Support for him relies, in part, on a singular identification with the politics of “custom”—of Zuluness and its associated patriarchal, masculinist, homophobic, and ethnically exclusionary incitements.¹⁵ Graham goes on to note in the context of the Zuma rape trial in 2006 that Zuma and his supporters came to rely on a battery of symbols to identify the president as “100% Zulu boy.” If we are to better understand what such claims might mean in reference to a near and more remote history, the homelands and labor reserves may offer critical insight. The South African countryside, while mapped as a series of ontologically distinct ethnic territories under apartheid, was already construed, beginning in the nineteenth century, as the cradle of “custom.” Mahmood Mamdani, for one, has long maintained that South Africa’s late colonial state relied on political institutions such as the chiefship that were “either selectively reconstituted as the hierarchy of local state or freshly imposed where none had existed.”¹⁶ Essential to the efficacy of colonial hegemony, chiefships sustained the legal dualism that constructed European and “native” worlds through colonial and customary law, respectively. And yet such powerful organizing logics—custom, masculinity, and patriarchy—endure, defining not only contemporary modes of rule as embodied in the presidency but those implied in the decision handed down by the judge in the 2006 Zuma rape trial.

Again, I am returned to the problem of difference, which Njovane signals so ethically, in the way that she understands present campus politics as bearing multiple motivations and determinations and in the way that she invites us to read these as political openings rather than foreclosures. The #FeesMustFall campaigns have challenged a sense of national cohesion on grounds of both class and generation and in their necessary conceptual work of defining protest-related violence, this in the face of often stern admonishments from “elders” who

12. See, for example, Salie, “Standard Bank Suspends Chris Hart.”

13. Comaroff, “Beyond Bare Life,” 198.

14. See, for example, Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*.

15. See White, “A Post-Fordist Ethnicity”; cf. Hickel, *Democracy as Death*.

16. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 17.

regard the new student activism as both an unnecessary reprise of the 1976 student uprisings and, as such, a show of disrespect for “adults.”

Sarah Goodsell, a white student activist involved in the #WitsFeesMustFall efforts, notes: “The definition of violence we work with in this country is profoundly anti-black and anti-poor. Service delivery protests are considered violent. Executive pay is not considered violent. Strikes are considered violent. Corporate fraud is not. Student protests are considered violent. Vice-chancellor’s salaries are not. The criminalisation of students is not considered violence. Nor are outsourcing and worker’s conditions on campus.”¹⁷ Goodsell might go a few steps further to highlight not only the nature of oft-ignored structural forms of violence, but to accede that the very debates shaping the student movement are centrally concerned with the question of nonviolence and whether it has a value in and of itself. Such debates are interrogating the place of violent or nonviolent methods and whether either is appropriate to achieving the many intended goals of the movement. Some also question the ways in which support for the movement is withheld most often on grounds that some among its ranks have entertained violent protest whether or not this is in fact the case. Blanket condemnations of this sort invariably redound on generational differences of opinion as concerns the appropriate methods of protest signaling “traditional” or “customary” norms as these inform the rightful role and conduct of young people in relation to elders.

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Presently, and not a little ironically, South Africans seem to be taken up with the problem of difference—of Zuluness, of blackness, of foreignness. They are preoccupied with negotiating the borders and boundaries of gender, generation, and class in ways that echo such negotiations of difference in many societies, to be sure, yet strike this author, at least, as necessarily more urgent and more frustrated. One response to such agitations in both the

literary and ethnographic registers appears to be an interrogation of the very foundational question of what it means to be human. Indeed, arguably, it is the question of the human that so powerfully organizes the most regressive and progressive forms of politics in South Africa—from Penny Sparrow’s comments about black bodies and monkeys,¹⁸ to calls for both rights in free speech and a counter-acknowledgment of and protection from the disproportionate injuries that are so often the outcome of racist outbursts disguised as freedom of expression.

For Hoard, Lauren Beukes’s *Zoo City* operates precisely at the threshold of the human. Interrogating apartheid and its prevailing logics of racial categorization, animals in the novel become “the physical manifestation of our sin” in the moment *after* apartheid.¹⁹ In so doing, Beukes highlights the ways in which the process of collapsing such categories draws on long-standing colonial assumptions about the “native” as animal—noble or otherwise.²⁰ Creatures of animalistic appetite, particularly sexual appetite, Africans are seen as seductive and simultaneously threatening to white bodies. In contemporary South Africa, Zuma’s sexuality in particular does a certain ethno-nationalist work, too. Zuma’s “Zuluness,” as Graham aptly notes (this section), operates by conjuring traditional patriarchal and customary masculinity. Yet in the context of Zuma’s rape trial the judge’s invocation of Rudyard Kipling’s poem “If” ultimately exposes the complicity between black and white in the service of custom. Indeed, “If” inscribes sub-junctively a world ordered hierarchically by gender, generation, and race such that, as the judge admonishes, *if* Zuma were to grow from a boy to a man he would learn to control his basest urges; he would succumb, in other words, to white control of the black body. Zuma’s unbridled Zulu masculinist claims over the *female* body are permitted, however, and in keeping with the traditionalist forms of manhood that *arise* from custom, so-called.

One begins to wonder if South Africa is not only currently out of sorts but out of time, and

17. Goodsell, “#WitsFeesMustFall Op-Ed: On Violent Protests and Solidarity.”

18. See Mbembe, “The Year of the Monkey.”

19. Beukes, *Zoo City*, 18.

20. See Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*; cf. Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*.

hence an anachronism for its belated efforts at liberation and decolonization, so much so that such processes must be described as a “transition.” This condition of being out of time or out of lockstep might go some way toward explaining the continual reemergence of the past in the present—of history’s insistence in haunting the current moment for as long as that history is not fully reckoned with. Turner deftly shows the ways in which reckoning with a long past of land theft and seizure, as well as anemic efforts to redistribute land and to disentangle long-standing land claims,²¹ connects to the problem of colonial and postcolonial sovereignty and citizenship. The land question, as Turner amply demonstrates, is likely one of the most intractable of questions in postapartheid South Africa. Since its inception in 1995, land reform policy has assumed that only those dispossessed after 1913 had a right to lodge claims, excluding great numbers who were expropriated before that date. Land reforms have also assumed that restitution should go to those who could prove their dispossession, while those so thoroughly dispossessed as to be without the necessary paperwork, title deeds, or historical memory found themselves, at times, at great disadvantage in the land restitution process. Yet such arguments stand only in their insistence on an historical erasure of the ways in which black smallholders previously owned and worked and made productive land that subsequently fell into white hands. If that land is connected to belonging and citizenship, landless and dispossessed Africans consequently stand in as bodies in space without a claim, stripped of entitlements that would render them legible in the eyes of the law of contract. Here we are once again returned to the question of the human.

John Locke had already noted the continuity among labor, possession, and human life in his *Second Treatise of Government*:

And hence subduing or cultivating the earth, and having dominion, we see are joined together. The one gave title to the other. So that God, by commanding to subdue, gave authority so far to *appropriate*: and the condition of human life, which

requires labour and materials to work on, necessarily introduces private possessions.²²

From *Zoo City*, to Kipling’s “If,” to the complexities of land entitlements in Limpopo, who is human appears to be the burning question of the moment. Today, in South Africa, issues of political economy, including the land question, are necessarily coming face-to-face with a resurgent politics of difference informing long-standing histories of dispossession whose continuities with such politics of difference are frequently denied. Despite the country’s “transition” to democracy, a genuinely decolonial present has not, as yet, come into being. But from #RhodesMustFall to #FeesMustFall to the October 6, 2015, anti-outsourcing campaign there is a growing sense that the incompleteness of the transition to democracy is being contested and that the interregnum is drawing to a close as something genuinely new is trying to be born. ■■■■

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21. See Makhulu, *Making Freedom*.

22. Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 22.

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