7. After the Excess: Race, Racism and Reconciliation in Contemporary South Africa

Today, ten years after apartheid began to be politically dismantled, South African society is facing glaring discrepancies between a new hegemonic non-racial political and discursive order and a continued reproduction of a deeply unequal social order in which racial prejudice and anxieties still pervade institutions, spatial practices, practices of the body and everyday mythologies. Since the ‘South African miracle’ produced its first truly democratic government in 1994, a whole range of new public languages have been produced and adopted – such as new rules of naming, new rhetorical rules in the public sphere, new official lingos and advanced and far-sighted policy papers. But somehow these new languages appear feeble and somewhat ineffective in the transformation of a society whose rules and practices have been governed by racial divisions and racial hierarchies for several centuries.

In the following I will briefly discuss the nature of apartheid, the legacy of the struggle against apartheid, and assess some difficulties in overcoming and changing the racialised social order in the country.

Racism is an ideological construction of a hierarchy of races and cultures that draws sustenance from now discredited scientific paradigms and well-established popular mythologies and stereotypes. In South Africa, race became central to a complex discursive formation of knowledge and governmental rationalities that after 1948 gave birth to the large, quasi-totalitarian apartheid state. Most of this discursive formation has vanished from active and public use today but the effects of the racialised social order it constructed remain compelling and totalising because it anchored the social in the body, and in collective bodies of racial groups. Anyone who has been to South Africa, or who lives there, will know that one of the most disturbing experiences that the country forces upon you is that it does not leave a place outside its racial order. Whether you are black, coloured, Indian or white – the place inscribes you in its spatial grid, in its complex symbolic economy of risk, danger and appropriateness. ‘There is no way out, you are imprisoned in your body’, as a friend of mine recently characterised the continuing predicament of race in South Africa.
Race is constructed as a set of ineradicable, inescapable bodily marks and essences. Racist ideology holds that the body is the site of both biological and historical truth and destiny. You can speak many languages, change your religion, your nationality, your habits, and you can imagine yourself into a new community, but you cannot change your race. This is what racial ideology will hold – that race is positive, embodied, objective, genetic – the ultimate fixation of identity. Yet, as we know, schemes of racial classification were always haunted by the impossible fixation of pure types and the worries about miscegenation and its outcomes – the creole, the métis, the quadroon, etc. Ideologues and administrators of racial orders, from the infamous French author Gobineau to colonial officials, doctors and scientists and the more contemporary guardians of public morality in the apartheid state, were always obsessed with sexuality, desire and the forbidden dangers of racial mixture, often in deeply ambiguous ways, as authors like Ann Stoler (1995) and Robert Young (1995) have shown so well.

The colonial order that was institutionalised in the entire region of Southern Africa throughout the last two centuries had many different rationales – economic, military, political and cultural. As in other parts of the world, notions of race cut across and more or less subtly informed all of these rationales and justifications. What set South Africa apart from other historical experiences was the systematic and explicit elaboration of racism into a paternalist and encompassing doctrine of government, the institutionalisation of a social order based on racial exclusion and racial hierarchy that found its culmination in the practices of apartheid between the early 1950s and the early 1990s.

The excesses of apartheid in the name of separate government of race groups, and the international condemnation of apartheid as 'a crime against humanity' created what in the social sciences has been termed 'South African exceptionalism', i.e. the notion that South Africa represented a unique type of capitalism, state and social structure that in a sense incarnated the very antithesis to the post-war international order and the ethos of the UN. Three decades ago apartheid emerged in international political discourse as a metaphor for evil and human cruelty. Today, that position is occupied by the term 'ethnic cleansing', used for instance by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in his motivation for the call for the world conference against racism in South Africa in 2001.

Most of the critique of apartheid revolved around how 'a racist minority regime', as it was termed in countless UN resolutions, was 'perpetuating inhuman and criminal oppression' and preventing the peoples of the region from enjoying self-determination and access to land and natural resources (cf. e.g. United Nations' Security Council 1972, or United Nation's General Assembly 1980). Apartheid was widely regarded as an anomaly in the modern world, perpetuated by a strangely anachronistic tribe of Afrikaner nationalists clinging on to outdated ideas of völkisch nationalism and the civilisational burden of the white race. International isolation only reinforced this sense of abnormality and being 'out of sync' with the rest of the world. It is in this light
understandable that one of the most compelling and widely endorsed arguments South African politics today is the need to normalise the country, its institutions, its politics, its culture and its place in the world. While there indeed is much to be said for this type of critique of apartheid, will, nonetheless, try to go the other way around the issue. That is, to ask that if South Africa was not merely an exception, but an experience which on the scale and the systematicity of its governance through racial categories may teach us broader lessons regarding how racial identities are constructed and maintained, and maybe also how such identities can be dismantled, diluted and transformed through new discursive and bodily practices.

The benefit of hindsight affords us today, firstly, the opportunity to assess apartheid not only as a system of sinister oppression but also as based on durable institutional and mental structures - many of them predating apartheid by decades - that still govern social and spatial practices in South Africa. Now, ten years after the fall of apartheid, we must ask, secondly, to what extent the non-racialism that today has become the dominant political discourse in the country has been able to analyse the phenomenon of racism and thus facilitate the dismantling of the structures reproducing the racial order. Thirdly, it is necessary to ask how and in what forms racism and the racial order today reappear in South Africa's public spheres - how they are addressed and debated.

THE COLONIAL EXCESS

In spite of all the knowledge which has been circulating in newspapers, in classrooms and in political debates, the nature and complexity of apartheid still remains ill-understood. Let me briefly reiterate three of its key features.

Firstly, most of the economic and legal structures that underpinned apartheid were not exceptional. They were refinements of the fundamental structures of colonial capitalism and colonial rule - the appropriation of native land, the system of migrant labour around the mining industry, the creation of racially separated residential areas, the concern with influx control in the cities, etc; in brief, the regulation and conceptualisation of native bodies as essentially productive bodies (Mamdani 1996: 218–85). Hence, the systematic concern with physical health among workers in mines and factories, the charting and classification of physical abilities and psychological propensities and family patterns of different tribes and ethnic groups in order to support an optimisation of labour. In these and other senses South Africa only demonstrated how racism was universalised and folded into every piece of governance recommended for colonial people.

Secondly, apartheid was not any coherent ideological doctrine. It came into existence in a piecemeal fashion in the decade after 1948 as a series of new laws that extended or systematised existing legislation, for instance regarding separate residential areas. The specificity of apartheid was, however, that it
devised a new ambitious attempt to stabilise and institutionalise all racial and ethnic identities in the country. As Norval points out, the discourse of race was vague and incoherent in the early decades of the twentieth century. There was a clear distinction between whites and natives, but also Afrikaaners and British were conceptualised as discrete racial groups. The aim of apartheid was not least to stabilise the identity of the Afrikaaners (a mix of Dutch, Germans and French) vis-à-vis the English, to invent and extract the language of Afrikaans from its low and pidginised status and to prevent miscegenation and mixing of whites with Africans and coloureds, especially among lower class Afrikaaners (Norval 1996: 57–100). The project was, in other words, to create purity where there was hybridity, morality where there was hedonism, and to lift the white working class out of the slums and into green suburbs. Apartheid was instrumental in creating a protected labour market for whites and was one of the grandest and most protracted schemes of affirmative action ever implemented. As apartheid’s central doctrine of separate development matured in the 1960s, came policies promoting separate homelands, institutions and ethnicities for all the peoples in the country in order for each people to develop their own ‘race spirit’ and self-determination. Apartheid in a sense harboured an early, sinister and essentialist form of multiculturalism.

Thirdly, apartheid was first and foremost a practical project of social engineering implemented with a great deal of determination. Unsophisticated but robust forms of governance of health, morality, education and social interaction aimed at regulating the reproductive body. The racial order was crystallised and stabilised in space, in separate amenities such as shopping areas, beaches, sports clubs and even separate forms of sports. Throughout, the emphasis was on the separation of bodies. The core concern was, of course, to keep males of colour away from white women, whereas non-white women, as in any colonial order, were seen as unthreatening and indispensable as cheap labour at the heart of white family practices.

While bodies could not mix and interracial marriage and relationships were outlawed, it was considered more permissible to mix in spiritual matters of the church and in language communities such as that of Afrikaans, which included millions of coloured. It was held that education should be encouraged as a civilisational project as long as it was imparting proper European habits and languages. However, as apartheid matured, the emphasis shifted towards imparting specific, if substandard, Bantu education to blacks in an attempt to ‘ethnicise’ non-white communities in the country. This separation and governance of reproductive bodies and the systematic ‘education of desire’ turned out to be astonishingly effective. There are very few interracial marriages in contemporary South Africa, social mixing across racial boundaries remains limited and shrouded in anxieties and sexual myths. As a seventeen-year-old girl told me recently in an interview at a school in Durban: ‘It is not that I have anything against other race groups, I simply don’t find people from other race groups physically attractive’.
NON-RACIALISM AND ITS LIMITS

The new South African constitution guarantees a wide range of rights and freedoms for individuals, as well as for linguistic and religious communities. One finds very little of the revolutionary rhetoric that was so prominent during the decades of armed struggle against the apartheid regime and caused so much anxiety in white business circles as the South African transition commenced in 1990. The document and most of the policies adopted and pursued by the ANC since 1994 are, rather, strongly universalist in their spirit and inspired by the Freedom Charter that the African National Congress (ANC) adopted as official policy in 1955. The Freedom Charter has for forty years provided a common ground for a strong non-racial critique of apartheid based on universalist principles of freedom, rights and democracy (Congress of the People 1990 [1955]). The charter states that ‘South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white’, and that ‘our people have been robbed of their birthrights to land, liberty and peace’ (ibid: 1). The document demands voting rights and equal citizenship for everybody irrespective of race and demands that, all ‘national groups shall have equal rights ... and shall be protected by law against insults to their race and national pride’, and further that ‘the preaching of race or colour discrimination and contempt shall be a punishable offence’ (ibid: 2).

According to this very influential stance promoted by the ANC and many academics and intellectuals, South Africa was ruled by a white minority regime that used the ideology of racism in order to maintain a systematic exploitation of African labour and the natural resources in the country in order to retain and consolidate their own privileges. Racism, separate development and the construction of a hierarchy of cultures was inextricably linked to the legitimising efforts of minority rule, according to this line of reasoning. In a discussion I had recently on relationships between Indians and Africans in the country, Fatima Meer, a lifelong political activist, scholar and close aide of Nelson Mandela, put this point across with much clarity:

Indians are not racists. They may have prejudice and anxieties, but they are not racists. In South Africa racism is an ideology of white superiority that sustains systematic economic exploitation ... Whites who oppose the changes in our country uphold racism. For other problems and conflicts we may use other terms, ethnicity for example.

(Meer 1999)

Marxist scholars pushed these arguments further and have argued that the racial conflicts in South Africa primarily had their roots in the peculiar formation of a highly monopolised yet structurally backward 'racialised capitalism' combined with a century-long battle over land rights. According to this point of view, racial legislation, construction of reserves and homelands for Africans and the creation of separate institutions for blacks and other people of colour all originated in the struggles over access to labour and land – the fundamentals in the affluence of the region. This view of racism as originating in class
prejudice could also find support in the peculiar class structure of the colonial world, where men from humble origins in Europe suddenly found themselves in the role of powerful elites. Southern Africa was indeed the scene of rather opulent imitations of the lifestyle of the European ‘haute bourgeoisie’, and the ideology of racism was instrumental in keeping alive this illusory ‘tropical Gothic’, as Benedict Anderson calls it (Anderson 1991: 151).

The highly militarised nature of the apartheid state, its manipulative quasi-totalitarian strategies of repression, its co-optation of conservative non-white élites, and the regime of terror and brutality unleashed on political opponents furthermore created a climate wherein it was plausible to see the state as the mastermind behind most phenomena in the country: from racial stereotypes to a ‘Third Force’ instigating so-called ‘black-on-black’ violence in the townships in the 1980s. On the whole, the fact that the regime employed racial discourses in even the most banal act of governance and also actively promoted conservative forms of ethnicity among all non-white groups, meant that those opposing apartheid generally refused to recognise race and ethnicity as anything but effects of political manipulation. To simplify: race was class, and class grew out of specific configurations of labour, land and capital. These were the main interests of critical scholarship on South Africa for decades. Engaging questions of race, ethnicity and culture from angles other than that of economic and political instrumentality was seen as a potential concession to concepts that bore the indelible marks of the hegemonic ideology of the state. As a result of this strategic political denial of race as an authentic sentiment, some of the finest analyses of how South African life was pervaded by notions of race were therefore to be found neither in anthropology nor psychology, but in labour history and social history – and of course – in novels and other fictional writing.

The less fortunate effect of this somewhat reductionist analysis of race in predominantly economic terms has been that the ANC, left-leaning intellectuals and the new policy makers in the government seem to have been somewhat reluctant to address the issue of race in other than general and vague terms of the need for economic redistribution to what now became known as ‘historically disadvantaged groups’.

**THE ERASURE OF RACE?**

The entire transformation period from the release of Mandela in 1990 to the second democratic election in 1999 was in many ways marked by a rather systematic and concerted silencing of the racial discourse. It was never a denial but a downplaying, in the spirit of the Freedom Charter and dictated by the political compulsions of the period, of any reference to race. Initially this was undoubtedly a line adopted to pre-empt the militant white backlash that many feared in the early 1990s. Mandela pursued this line of making conciliatory gestures, among them the famous statement ‘Let bygones be bygones’, proposing a fresh start in a new multicultural South Africa. However, after the initial
euphoria, the compulsions of economic policies in a global economy, of crime rates beyond belief, of the limited success of the grand reconstruction and development program that were to provide housing and water to slums and to the homelands that had been so neglected for decades, indicated that structural changes would indeed be slow. It was also clear that a break with the racialised social order through radical redistribution of land and assets was not on the ANC’s agenda. In the words of a leftist newspaper columnist:

ANC has settled for much less than any dismantling of what really constituted apartheid, the exploitation of cheap African labor and the separation of our worlds. ANC has got us all formal freedom and equal rights but the only change is that the economic elite now is becoming mixed up with the faces of new ‘black fat cats’. For the rest of us, little has changed.

(Desai 1998)

It is true that although many of the humiliations and gross violations of human dignity that characterised apartheid have been removed, very little has changed in terms of the distribution of wealth and privilege. Redistribution of land takes place through a laborious and careful procedure, which is moving very slowly, and the labour market and racial division of labour still remain the same as they have been for decades. The average South African is still patiently waiting for a new house and a better life. However, the transformations in the broader public culture, in the media, and in the availability of education and some hope for the younger generation have so far convinced most Africans in the country that life is improving and that they at least enjoy a minimum of respect and courtesy from whites, employers and bureaucrats they could not have dreamt of just a decade ago.

The grandest and most famous attempt to come to terms with apartheid was of course the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a highly interesting institution about which much has been said. The TRC tried to perform three important tasks in the new South Africa: firstly, to perform a collective therapy whereby the nation ‘went through the trauma of apartheid’ in a series of hearings that went around the country, and the world, on television; secondly, to create a discourse of reconciliation in which the public performative aspects were crucial: the deeply moving scenes of bereaved mothers meeting and forgiving the killers of their children were suffused with Christian notions of confession, truth and forgiving; and thirdly, to create an authorised account of the cruelties of the past that — through a focus on universal human rights, a language of legality and international recognition — could form a suitable national monument around which the new Rainbow nation could be constructed. The objective was to restore dignity to ordinary South Africans who had suffered under the apartheid regime. Almost paraphrasing Hegel’s famous notion of reconciliation as ‘overcoming alienation and being at home in the world’, the Commission states: ‘In the process [of the Commission’s work] the sons and daughters of South Africa would begin to feel truly at home’ (TRC 1998: 125).
As has been noted so often, the mandate and the task facing the commission was so huge that it could only perform a symbolic catharsis in which each victim stood in as a metonymical representation of a given type of crime. The issue was what was chosen and what was excluded from this symbolic display and expunction of gross human rights violations. The most disturbing fact was that the commission omitted most of the routine degradations of apartheid, i.e. all the banalities of evil in everyday life that was the stuff apartheid was made of: pass laws, land legislation, savage exploitation of labour, random police harassment, daily abuses – and the entire edifice of racial ideology that governed institutions and suffused everyday life. None of this has been dealt with by the Commission head on, but only referred to in general sociological terms in the final report.

I do indeed find it remarkable that race has remained submerged in the entire process and that in the final report the Commission admits to focusing mainly on ‘gross violations of human rights rather than the more mundane, but nonetheless traumatizing dimensions of apartheid life that affected every single black South African’ (ibid: 132–33). In spite of the explicit mention of colour in this quotation, other parts of the report pointed not only to laws but also to their implementation ‘and the crude, cruel and unfeeling way in which officials, both black and white, put them into operation’ (ibid: 63). Elsewhere in the report race is not explicitly mentioned but is replaced by new standard political euphemisms when non-whites are referred to as ‘the overwhelming majority’ and whites are termed ‘a minority’, or at times ‘an affluent minority’.

This conscious adoption of a language that bypasses and silences race once course reflects a deeply held conviction that race per se is not the problem – inequalities, history, political repression and the specific perversions of apartheid are the causes that produced and perpetuated racism in South Africa. The TRC report is a national monument designed to identify the peak of repressive apartheid from 1960 to 1994 as the evil that now has been expunged so that a new and normalised nation can commence its life. Commitments to the tradition of non-racialism aside, the evasion of a racialised discourse and the employment of categories of majority and minority, rich and poor, in its stead of course also reflect the pragmatism at the heart of the negotiated transition in the country. The ANC and other predominantly African political actors have adopted a decidedly cautious and accommodating line towards the white minority that remains in control of all important sectors of the economy and most of the country’s skills and specialised knowledge.

**The Return of Race?**

Apartheid sought to make race into a universal principle, a condensation of culture, economy and politics – from where everything should flow. This was negated by a determined non-racialism that has sought to displace race, to make it irrelevant, and instead build a new South Africa on the basis of
universalist values. But can such an operation, such an Aufhebung of the contradiction, be performed without once again grappling with the question of race? I do not think so, and the formal rules of Hegelian dialectics will also tell us that both sides of the contradiction must reappear in the synthesis, in a higher and more refined form.

The form in which race is now reappearing seems to be that of an historical narrative of African culture that underpins a new emerging South African nationalism. This happens because the non-racial universalist discourse of citizenship and equality in itself cannot sustain a national community. The truly universal is exactly non-particularistic and encompassing and thus at home everywhere and nowhere. The universal is elevated above the cultural and the historical, it is in a sense empty and must remain so in order to remain a permanent site of critique. The idea of the nation also has several strong universalist components as evident in Johann Gottfried Herder’s organicist philosophy of the world as a garden and its peoples as different but complementary species. But this universality folded into nationalism also compels each national narrative to be unique and specific, to ground itself in a specific historical and cultural community.

National communities based on language or a shared territory are always haunted by their incomplete nature, by the absence of a final closure. Languages can be learnt and territories can be shared. The nation always needs something more, an excess or a supplement that can perform the closure and stabilise the boundary between ourselves and the other, as Etienne Balibar has argued (Balibar 1991: 98–9). Historically, both religion and race have been able to provide such fixations because they are constructions inextricable from bodily practices and thus more capable of providing certainty and historical anchorage.

So what supplements are on offer in contemporary South Africa with its many languages and a territory that attracts thousands of migrants each year from all over Africa? What new narratives of history and meaning can supplement the liberal account of the new multicultural South African nation? There seem to be two at the moment: the first is the narrative of reconciliation as told by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that posits the nation as a community of victims, as those who have suffered during the apartheid era, now united with the former perpetrators, morally cleansed and reformed through the process of truth telling and forgiving. The second is the modernised pan-Africanist rhetoric promoted by president Thabo Mbeki under the term ‘African Renaissance’—connoting the revival of an original pride, self-consciousness and creativity in Africa as a whole. This rhetoric posits the nation not in narrow racial terms, but in broadly cultural terms – Africa as a positive and united entity prior to the plunder and rape of colonialism. As Daniel Herwitz has remarked:

The re in renaissance and the re in reconciliation both share this myth of a return to origins which recurs through the return ... as a metaphysical state
of ethical oneness mythologized as historically actual ... [T]he fiction is that pre-colonial and modern times can converge in a Rousseau'esque moment in which black and white, coloured and non-coloured, man and woman walk all at one.

(Herwitz forthcoming)

These two narratives offer two different idealised pasts, and two different versions of the evil to overcome in order to (re-)create the nation. The narrative of reconciliation posits the excesses of apartheid from 1961 to 1990 as the evil, and thus the period before this – including the entire colonial past – as somewhat more humane and unified. The narrative of renaissance posits colonialism as the source of evil and the pre-colonial past as a more ideal and less fragmented epoch. It posits the democratic transition in South Africa as the culmination of the wider anti-colonial struggle in Africa – a struggle where South Africans suffered more than most. This special position also bequeaths a special responsibility on the new South Africa as leading the way to the resuscitation of an original African spirit that can make the 21st century the ‘African Century’ (Mbeki 1998b).

What is most interesting is that these two narratives coexist and that they seem to be addressed to two rather different audiences. In early June 1999, Mbeki spoke in parliament in Cape Town about the persistence in South Africa of ‘two nations’, one white and reluctant to give up privileges, the other black impoverished and ever more impatient to see its dream of a new South Africa realised:

... much of what is happening in our country, which pushes us away from achieving this goal [equality and redistribution], and is producing rage and anger, among millions of people. I am convinced that we are faced with the danger of a mounting rage to which we must respond seriously.

(Mbeki 1998b)

These two narratives also somehow seem to cater for these two ‘nations’ of audiences: the narrative of reconciliation affords whites and other privileged strata to see themselves as purified of past sins or complicity by the acts of forgiving performed at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It is a narrative founded on universalism, moderation, reasonableness and biblical themes of suffering and forgiving. It also bestows enormous human dignity on those who suffered and yet had the capacity to forgive. In this sense it does not necessarily challenge long-standing paternalist ideas of Africans entertained by many whites, but only adds an unusual capacity to forgive to the list of exotic qualities attributed to Africans.

The narrative of renaissance allows the black majority to celebrate itself and to own a history of unity and heroic resistance in terms that are sufficiently vague to encompass the cultural diversity in the country, if not the entire continent. At the opening of the ‘African Renaissance Institute’ in Pretoria on 11 October 1999, Mbeki said among other things:
Stretching through the mists, for a millenium, our common African history is replete with great feats of courage, demonstrated by the heroes and heroines and the heroic peoples, without whose loyal attachment to hope and the bright vision of a bright future for Africa, her people would long have perished.

(Mbeki 1999)

Such quasi-academic rhetoric of a renaissance and the many cultural performances that accompany it encompass and celebrate everything African – from traditional dance to the funky beat of the township, and it is poetic, urban and pregnant with promise. It is clearly an attempt to provide a new South African nationalism with a contemporary cultural narrative, a supplement that avoids the conservative and ‘tribalistic’ ethnicity so dreaded by the ANC, but instead is broadly cultural, distinctively African without being openly racial and accords a central and leading role to South Africa on the continent.

The historical irony is, however, that the tables have turned and the narrative of African Renaissance today is roundly denounced in parts of the press as a symbol of a dreaded ‘Africanisation’, as racism returned. The universal is now occupied by liberal whites denouncing what they see as a submerged racism and African majoritarianism in the ANC that jeopardises not only the nation in making but the entire process of reconciliation in the country.

Let me conclude with a little story that illustrates this paradoxical situation but also demonstrates that the public rituals of the new democracy-in-embryo are shot through with historically embodied notions of racial separation.

It was at a panel debate organised by the International Republican Institute (IRI), a conservative institution that provided education in proper democratic behaviour for voters and activists prior to the 1999 elections. It was held in a big hall at the Durban beachfront and the (white) organisers from the Durban chapter of the IRI seemed worried as massive numbers of ANC supporters continued to arrive in mini-buses from the townships. They were all seated on one side, talking loudly, moving around, singing and waving with banners and ANC symbols. The other side of the hall was half-empty, mostly elderly whites, and some Africans and Indians dressed in suits and ties. The scene demonstrated clearer than many words that South Africa has got a new body politic, but not any new politics of the body.

On the stage were representatives of most political parties, big and small. There were seven black faces and five white. The ANC representative was the first to speak. Trained as a propagandist in East Germany in the 1980s, with a leather cap and red scarf, he got up and said, ‘Comrades, before we start I would like to tell my colleagues that we are sitting here today in this hall only because of the big hearts of you people’, pointing to the audience, ‘of the African people. Lesser people would have dealt with the past in a different way’, he smiled at the white politicians, ‘and then this table would have been half-empty’. The crowd cheered loudly, got up and began to sing. The organisers looked more nervous than ever for a few minutes, but the ANC man began his speech and the meeting proceeded in good order.
As the turn came to the Freedom Front, a right-wing and predominantly Afrikaans organisation, the retired officer who represented the party started by saying: 'Fellow South Africans, let us recognise that we all suffered during apartheid, that apartheid did terrible things to all of us, that it destroyed our capacity to relate to each other as human beings'. The ANC man leaned back, laughed, and asked sarcastically, 'Oh, I see, you really suffered, didn't you?' Nervous laughter in the hall (how far would he go?). 'Yes', the retired officer replied, looking very tense, 'it was only when we saw the TRC report that we realised the damage apartheid had done to this country'. Fully enjoying his role and his backing from the audience, the ANC man shot back: 'Well, some people are slow learners'. The audience roared with laughter.

The meeting proceeded according to plan and a couple of hours later, in his concluding remarks, the ANC man told his opponents, 'Look, we can discuss everything but you have to face one fact: ANC will rule this country for many, many years to come, and you will remain small minority parties. There is nothing you can do about it'.

CONCLUSION

Is the dream of a non-racial South Africa as outlined in the Freedom Charter in 1955 a distant ideal that can never be realised? As I have tried to indicate, notions of race and separation of bodies have been institutionalised and installed in the most intimate of relations in South Africa to an extent that makes it difficult to imagine practices or discursive forms devoid of racial connotations existing. Institutional changes, successful redistribution of land and wealth, or new racially mixed neighbourhoods are not likely to erase race from the everyday consciousness of the average South African. The challenge seems to be to analyse and properly understand the ubiquity and persistence of racial distinctions in ever new forms in daily life. Although race is a mental construction, an arbitrary scheme of classification, it is unlikely to disappear when one does not talk about it. Instead of denying race or colour any significance, the task seems to be to develop non-antagonistic, non-violent and relatively fluid distinctions that allow for a democratic multi-racialism. This will require nothing less than a profound and protracted change of the entire public culture in the country, a cultural revolution away from the conservative, deeply segmented and authoritarian forms of public conduct that still prevail in much of the country, towards more tolerant, more permissive and less anxiety-ridden forms of everyday mixing and socialising across differences of colour, culture and gender.

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