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INTRODUCTION



## Introduction: comparative thinking in an age of corruption

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In his introduction to Barack Obama's 2018 Nelson Mandela Lecture in Johannesburg, the South African writer Njabulo Ndebele commented on the dire political situation on both sides of the Atlantic: "What we came to see in South Africa as state capture," he declared, "seem[s] mirrored in the United States and other parts of the world by what we could call more accurately a 'capture of democracy.'"<sup>1</sup> Ordinary South Africans, too, saw parallels: quite a few wryly remarked to me that the 2016 election brought Americans the joys of a white Zuma. The laughable aspects of this comparison had in fact already been noted during Trump's campaign by the (South African-born, US-based) comedian Trevor Noah, who joked that the vulgar mogul was obviously presidential – but presidential for Africa, where he would be a fine companion to posturing strongmen like Muammar Gaddafi, Robert Mugabe, Idi Amin, and, yes, Jacob Zuma.

Such observations return us, sobered, to the foundational premise for *Safundi*, namely that South Africa and the US can generate comparative insights, even though the mirror – the familiar image that Ndebele redeploys – is often a distorted one. Comparative projects always negotiate tensions between sameness and difference, generalities and particularities; they proceed despite fundamental incommensurabilities and "develop within histories of hierarchical relation" – as contributors to this collection do not fail to point out.<sup>2</sup> Still, the scholarly project of thinking about the US and South Africa together, initiated by George M. Fredrickson's *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study of American and South African History* (1981), continues to generate compelling work.<sup>3</sup> Recent contributions include monographs (like Erica Still's *Prophetic Remembrance: Black Subjectivity in African American and South African Trauma Narratives*, Stéphane Robolin's *Grounds of Engagement: Apartheid-Era African American and South African Writing*, and Peter Cole's *Dockworker Power: Race and Activism in Durban and the San Francisco Bay Area*), editorial projects (like Shane Graham and John Walters's edition of Langston Hughes's correspondence with the *Drum* magazine writers), and even transnational works of fiction (like Zakes Mda's *Cion* and *The Zulus of New York* or Jaco van Schalkwyk's *The Alibi Club*). And, of course, the entire run of this journal, which clearly testifies to the vitality of the enterprise. Even though individual *Safundi* contributions

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.thejournalist.org.za/spotlight/professor-njabulo-ndebeles-full-speech-at-the-16th-nelson-mandela-annual-lecture/>.

<sup>2</sup>Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman, "Introduction," 1.

<sup>3</sup>The originary status of Fredrickson's work is, of course, somewhat overstated here, though its abiding influence is not. William Wilson wrote of the US and South Africa together in *Power, Racism, and Privileges* (1976), as did Kenneth P. Vickery in "Herrenvolk Democracy and Egalitarianism in South Africa and the U.S. South" (1974).

over the years may have leaned one way or the other – toward South Africa or the US – the journal has always striven for content that resonates transnationally. In recent years the thematic foci for comparison have seemed richer and more varied as cultural exchanges, travels, and borrowings have accelerated; approaches have also been flexible: tending to move away to some extent from analogical studies like Fredrickson’s toward the more transactional ones like Robolin’s (which tracks not so much similarities and general resonances, but actual personal connections between American and South African writers). But perhaps these changes are not altogether new: the grounds for comparison have always shifted and transformed – and inevitably so. Comparative projects, as Joseph Slaughter observes, are contingent and contextual, “made at particular historical moments, under particular historical conditions, with particular historical motivations under particular historical constraints from particular locations.”<sup>4</sup>

This is certainly true of the present collection of essays. All the contributors were not only beset with the usual anxieties of comparison (this issue, as a result, offers a collective meditation on method), but also with a keen sense that current events were impinging on our efforts, so much so that our writing seemed perpetually in danger of being rendered obsolete by the time of publication. But with the anxiety also came a sense that our collective work was timely and significant – and generalizable beyond the individuals whose names are in this issue’s title – in ways that were not completely visible when we started out. The global pandemic that hit both countries hard became an unavoidable reality: readers will therefore see how the idea of the mask (already evoked in Ndebele’s speech, where he imagines that a corrupt ANC official might suddenly doff his mask and confess) accrued a whole new freight of meaning.<sup>5</sup> Our reflections were also profoundly affected by the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the US, which resurrected memories of the Civil Rights struggle and its South African precedents – the anti-apartheid struggle as well as the more recent Rhodes-Must-Fall and Zuma-Must-Fall protests. These events reanimated the shared utopian dream of a history that somehow arcs toward justice: one of the abiding motivations, after all, for US-South African comparisons over the years. These were also times in the US when the unprecedented and impossible seemed to happen. Democracy itself seemed to be endangered by a president who staged spectacular nationalist rallies, fueled division, and sent federal forces into cities to teargas protesters, leading some of us to ask whether the defeat not just of apartheid but of fascism was ever fully accomplished.

South African and US mirrorings, in sum, were flickering back and forth insistently. Yet many contributors also turned their gaze to other locations of significance – to Russia and India, Brazil and the Philippines, Turkey and the UK – and in ways that question the imagined exceptionalism of both South Africa and the US. The same goes for the exceptional status of Trump and Zuma: men who go deliberately unnamed in one essay (Adam Sitze’s contribution) and whose names are resolutely displaced in another (Graham’s contribution) by the names of women who said “no” in the face of their sexist outrages.<sup>6</sup> While many of the essays here do lay out similarities between the two men, the

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<sup>4</sup>Slaughter, “Locations of Comparison,” 216.

<sup>5</sup>Ndebele, <https://www.thejournalist.org.za/spotlight/professor-njabulo-ndebeles-full-speech-at-the-16th-nelson-mandela-annual-lecture/>.

<sup>6</sup>On Trump’s misogyny, see the comprehensive legal documentation presented in Robson, “The Sexual Misconduct of Donald J. Trump,” 81–148. Sources on Zuma’s practices abound, but for a thoughtful account, see Robins, “The Zuma Rape Trial,” 524–530.

collection as a whole proposes that the kind of thinking required to yoke them is not so much analogical as “archipelagic,” or even “geological,” as Sitze puts it. The important thing to understand, in other words, is not so much the spectacle of these individuals’ performances, but the underlying tectonics of the global economic and political configurations that made their power and corruption possible. The phenomena of “Trump” and “Zuma,” in other words, emerge here not as important in and of themselves, but as an urgent summons to risk an account of what Anne-Maria Makhulu, in the concluding essay, boldly and beautifully calls “the truth of the world.”

Before sketching out the contents of this collection further, I want to return briefly to Slaughter’s point about the historicity of comparison. In the process of composing this introduction, I revisited a piece that I wrote back in 2004 for the journal *American Literary History* about the pitfalls and possibilities of US-South African comparison. While much of the essay still seemed to hold, I was rather shocked to encounter in it the all-too-easy observation that racial discrimination was more covert in the US than in South Africa.<sup>7</sup> The appalling visibility of George Floyd’s execution in broad daylight has surely rendered any such a claim untenable today. But at the time of my essay, ten years after the election of Mandela and almost as long after the publication of Fredrickson’s *Black Liberation* (1997), it did appear that comparisons focused on race were receding and others were drifting into view. The “Americanization of South Africa,” or so James Campbell felt then, was yielding new areas of inquiry, including the ideologies and histories of consumption, the impact of the automobile, the organization of urban space, the environmental impact of settler colonialism, and reactions to epidemic diseases (prophetic, that one).<sup>8</sup> I was also interested in the view put forward by Courtney Jung in a 1999 review of three recent comparative studies that the South African transition would gradually mute the interest in racial discrimination as the single most obvious point of comparison. She foresaw in the “new” South Africa a future when race “no longer distinguish[ed] rich from poor, those with power from those without power, as it continues to do in the United States.” Once this occurred, she predicted, the correspondences between the US and South Africa would diminish, and more appropriate South-South pairings would be found – more appropriate especially in view of the obvious power differential between the US as the dynamo of neoliberal economic forces and South Africa as a new and vulnerable regional democracy.<sup>9</sup>

Though several contributors to this special issue acknowledge that differential (Roger Southall, for example, describes the US as a successful settler state and South Africa as a failed one), it is nevertheless clear that race is still an absolutely crucial concern. The deracialization of poverty in South Africa has failed to occur – a fact that was rendered more acutely visible than ever by drone shots of the miles-long queues of hungry people lining up for food packages during the COVID lockdown. The very title of a recent essay by Kelebogile Motswatswa in *New Africa* magazine reaffirms, tragically and scandalously, the ongoing relevance of comparative projects based on racial oppression: “Why do Black Lives still not Matter in South Africa?” And in the US, the Black Lives Matter protests did not only bring to mind Selma, Birmingham, nor the March on Washington. They also

<sup>7</sup>See Barnard, “Of Riots and Rainbows,” 400. I am in this passage referring to the views of Alison Bernstein and Jacklyn Cock in *Melting Pots and Rainbow Nations*, 24.

<sup>8</sup>Campbell, “The Americanization of South Africa,” 34.

<sup>9</sup>Jung, “Race Matters,” 60.

generated an alertness to structural racism: to the long history of exploitation extending from conquest, to plantation slavery, to Jim Crow, up to our very own day with economic inequality, geographical and environment deprivation, police brutality, and mass incarceration. There is clearly a renewed perception that symbolic forms of diversity and inclusion (what the philosopher Nancy Fraser has called “the politics of recognition”) did not override – and, indeed, acted to mask – the failure of a “politics of distribution.”<sup>10</sup> This is why term “white supremacy,” which in better or less nakedly awful days had come to seem slightly archaic, has decisively reentered public discourse in the US, both on the left and (with utter shamelessness) also on the right. And what do you know? George Fredrickson’s comparative histories have gained popular currency. As I worked on this issue, I discovered a four-part podcast on *White Supremacy* produced by two young activists from Oklahoma, Allisa Austin and Wren Loman, who started the website *Vanguard at Dawn* in the wake of George Floyd’s death. Their careful attention to Fredrickson’s work reveals one of the great benefits that comparison yields: the new revolutionaries clearly felt a need to step away from what they experienced up close (the knee on the neck, the insulting tweet, the abusive word) toward a more systematic understanding. Comparison, as Adam Sitze observes in his essay here, “uproots and depersonalizes”; it yields understanding – or so we hope – of how we can still imagine transformation.

In sum: for comparison at this time, race matters. This is why it has seemed important to conclude the volume with Anne-Maria Makhulu’s stirring essay on anti-black racism, which meditates precisely on the *longue durée* of racial capitalism that forms the geological substrate, to return to Sitze’s term, of our colloquy.

This all said, however, I do think that the Trump-Zuma parallels do more than confirm the continuities of those world-historically linked forms of oppression described by Makhulu. The evident similarities between two authoritarian, pseudo-traditionalist presidents widely regarded as both misogynist and corrupt, also reveal a new global situation in which comparison yields different thematic strands.<sup>11</sup> The original call for papers for this issue included the following questions: What do Trump and Zuma teach us about new transnational forms of xenophobia and ethnocentric nostalgia – certainly not confined to the US and South Africa? What are we to make of the fact that (for very different reasons) Trump and Zuma are leaders who do not read? Does this strange incapacity potentially lead us to an understanding of the contemporary mediascape and its attendant epistemological problems? (Think of Trump’s perpetual gaslighting, his projective clamor against hoaxes and “fake news,” the mendacious influence of social media, and the deliberate interventions by the British public relations firm Bell Pottinger in South African political discourse.) And what about the outright misogyny of both presidents and the charges of rape leveled at both of them? Do these matters tell us something about a troubling global reconfiguration of gender relations? Is it at all useful to bring psychological perspectives to bear: the affective politics or public feelings of shame and shamelessness (part and parcel of the twisted dynamics of narcissism), for

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<sup>10</sup>Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot be Born*, 26ff.

<sup>11</sup>See again, Robson’s comprehensive legal report and also Lyn Snodgrass, “Trump and Zuma: worlds apart but bound by patriarchy and sexism.” Though Zuma has not yet been sentenced, the scale of corruption during his presidency has already been laid bare by Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture. See also the fascinating interactive chart, “Mapping Corruption: An Interactive Exhibit.” *American Prospect*.

example?<sup>12</sup> And is the peculiar Indian angle of South Africa's state capture significant – especially in the age of Modi – when vicious forms of anti-Islamic discourse seem to be receiving increasing international currency and state support? And what about the pervasive criminalization of the state? Are we witnessing what the anthropologist Nancy Ries, whose thought-provoking work is included here, has called a new international “thugocracy” with its own peculiar sets of behaviors and modus operandi? What is the meaning of wealth, whether newly acquired or dynastic, in a context of grotesque global inequality? And what are we to make of transnational agents like the Guptas, Putin, and the Russian oligarchs? Are we perhaps now in an era where US-South African relations are no longer just matters of significant constellations or analogies, but of actual transactions on the part of Kremlin insiders who have had dealings with both Trumpworld and Zumaworld?<sup>13</sup> Was the nuclear power plant with which South Africa was threatened just another mechanism for international money laundering, like high-end real estate and casinos? In sum, are we to imagine a whole new map or new vocabulary for transnationalism in an era where corrupt wealth has come to inhabit that new nationless zone called “Moneyland”?<sup>14</sup>

All of these questions ended up being probed in this issue, which is organized as a set of four paired essays followed by Makhulu's conclusion. The first pair, by Roger Southall and Adam Sitze, meditates on Trump and Zuma as buffoons or, in Sitze's term “crowned anarchists,” who present new and disturbing modes of exercising power and appealing to the electorate. Their conclusions are almost opposite: Southall sees in the current pandemic the unmasking of Trump, while Sitze posits the end of such theatrical metaphors in an age of radical transparency where the distance between performer and spectator has been abolished. Both however articulate the paradoxes of a situation in which lying may appear as authenticity and an obsession with elections hide antidemocratic impulses. Sitze's intricate meditations are particularly troubling in their implications for a return to the rule of law. The difficulty with the buffoon is that he dismantles critique through his very shamelessness. Therefore, such events as the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture in South Africa and the possible post-Trump inquiries that are already being imagined in the press could generate just another spectacle, one whose revelations make no impact in the mediated cacophony of our contemporary mediascape. And while corruption – which I will define for now as the violation of public goods, though the definitions offered here are richer – is readily denounced (Sitze even lists several well-established lines of objection to it), it is really part and parcel of neoliberalism's drive to leave nothing untouched, sacred, or uncommodified. Certainly not the fiscus, which centuries-old meta-legal proprieties have invested with something akin to the *dignitas* of the sovereign. Dignity: the quality *par excellence* that the crowned anarchist dispenses with.

The second pair of essays, by Lucy Valerie Graham and Neville Hoad, approaches Trump and Zuma through the lens of gender and sexuality, viewing them as “men of the people” whose appeal can only be understood if we grasp the contexts and codes of

<sup>12</sup>See here, for example, Adam Haslett's thought-provoking essay, “Donald Trump, Shamer in Chief.”

<sup>13</sup>A good source here is the report by Weis and Rumer, “Nuclear Enrichment.” See also Ries's well-documented essay in this issue.

<sup>14</sup>The term is Oliver Bullough's. See his fascinating book, *Moneyland: Why Thieves and Crooks Now Rule the World and How to Take it Back*.

patriarchal power in which they both operate. These enabling environments are strikingly different, but they have nevertheless functioned similarly enough to ensure that both men – though credibly accused of serious sexual offenses – went on to win election to high office. To understand these operations, each essay offers a psychological or loosely psychoanalytic approach (Graham’s also drawing on fictional and poetic imaginings). But while they delve into the details of each man’s behavior and attitudes toward women and sexual minorities, the focus in these essays is ultimately not on the individuals as such, but on the social dreamwork that they perform for their supporters. When Hoad notes that Trump and Zuma are “jokes” (a connection here with Southall and Sitze), it is with the understanding that the joke is a gateway to the unconscious, as Freud would have it: caricatures of masculine leadership and wealth may be excessive and risible, but they reveal powerful desires, fantasized identities, disturbingly illiberal imaginings of the good life and, as Graham poignantly reminds us, disturbing visions of women and their bodies.

The next pair of essays, by Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra and Jonathan Hyslop, registers the limits of comparison even more strenuously than other essays in this issue. Armillas-Tiseyra turns her attention to Trevor Noah’s enjoyable – but problematic – comparison of Trump with African dictators, which I mentioned above. (Joke work, again – revealing and discomfiting.) She concludes that, however tempting it may be to deploy, the “dictator” figure is simultaneously too homogenizing and too unstable – and too loaded with demeaning third-world associations – to serve as an appropriate heuristic. Yet careful reflection on such a (mis)naming may yield useful insights on comparative methodologies. Thus Armillas-Tiseyra proposes that instead of pinning down stable analogies, we deploy a looser modality of “resonance” – productive similarities recognized as fleeting – as we approach the task of transnational comparison in an uneven world. Hyslop likewise registers an extreme discomfort at the task of comparison: Zuma arises, after all, from an anti-racist liberation struggle and Trump out of racism, transgenerational money-grubbing, and mass-mediated vanity.<sup>15</sup> Yet the antidemocratic tendencies they both demonstrate – as do other contemporary figures – suggest that contemporary authoritarian populism arises from very different points of origin. Hyslop addresses this phenomenon by reminding us that the broadly “geological” ground for our comparative effort has a history – one that he traces out by showing the different guises in which a fascist potentiality has survived since World War II, culminating in the contemporary repackaging of many of the mobilizing stratagems from the 1920s and 1930s. One might say then that “fascism” is for Hyslop as troubled and compelling a heuristic as the “dictator” is for Armillas-Tiseyras – but also a real threat that will not readily retreat, even though possibilities of resistance are also visible.

The final pair of essays, leading into Makhulu’s discussion of the *longue durée* of racial capitalism, considers corruption as a form of criminal transnationalism. Like Makhulu, who productively yokes anti-black racism in post-apartheid South Africa, the UK, and the USA, Nancy Ries and Vikrant Dadawala offer triangulations: Ries approaches Trump-Zuma connections from the vantage of Russia, and Dadawala from that of India. Or, more precisely, from the vantage of the Gupta brothers, who become in his essay exemplars of a familiar type of Indian “crony capitalist” rather than (for all their

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<sup>15</sup>An indispensable source on this formative history is Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*.

astounding venal energies) the exceptional abominations they seem to be from the South African taxpayers' perspective.

The activities of the Guptas, as Dadawala reminds us, extended not only from Saharanpur to Johannesburg to Dubai, but entangled many giant global firms: Jet Airways (India), Bell Pottinger (UK), SAP (Germany), McKinsey (USA), and KPMG (the Netherlands). He pushes us past the black-white understandings of racial capitalism (not that we should neglect this long history), asking us to consider whether such binaries are something of a US conceptual frame that might prevent us from seeing the South-South nexus of corruption, power, and influence.

Both of these essays, it seems to me, illustrate the maxim that comparison is also translation: they ask how terms like "oligarchy," "nepotism," or "money laundering" circulate (or fail to circulate). Why is "lobbying" – at least until recently – not considered in the US to be "corruption" (a word that, like "dictator," has long seemed some kind of third-world problem). These essays, read together, ask important questions about what Ries carefully defines as the governmentality of "thugocracy" – what we might call (to import a South African term to Russia and America in illuminating ways) "state capture" for the sake of transferring public wealth into private hands and making crime itself legal.

If corruption is the funneling of public funds into private pockets (to return in conclusion to Sitze's argument), it meshes seamlessly with the sanctioned and ostensibly legitimate operations of neoliberalism, which itself today seems in danger of tilting over into a new illiberalism. To say this is to say that we have been living in some sort of cusp time – and the essays collected here are as concerned to theorize this new temporality as they are concerned to theorize new geographies of ideological and financial flows. Contributors' reflections on time certainly confirm the argument put forward by Jean and John Comaroff (in *Theory from the South*) insofar as Zuma's South Africa seems to offer a foreshadowing of things now unfolding in the US. But beyond this, I detect a pervasive sense of somewhat bewildered indeterminacy: it has not yet become clear, as Hyslop suggests, whether our historical conjunction resembles 1933 or 1945. "The moment of writing," as Hoad puts it, "feels like both a reckoning and an unraveling." A poignant explanation of this experience arises from Sitze's meditations on the effect of corruption – the most important theme, arguably, of this whole issue. Corruption, he posits, undermines the world-making power of constitutions, leaving us with an experience of time that is not just indeterminate and precarious but intervallic: we are trapped in between a world that is no more without a sense of an inhabitable world that is to come. "In this pandemic time," Sitze observes,

few readers will be unfamiliar with this growing feeling of worldlessness, this creeping sense that today something terrible is happening to the world that cannot be stopped either by our republics or (above all in the case of Trump and Bolsanaro) by our elected leaders. Perhaps this vague sense of world-loss just is the way corruption manifests itself as a structure of feeling. If so, then nothing could be more concrete or more relevant to our living present.

It is this living present that these *Safundi* contributors have tried in their various ways to articulate, affirming both the difficulties of comparative thinking, and its ethical and political potentiality.



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## Disclosure statement

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## Notes on contributor

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