



Safundi

The Journal of South African and American Studies

ISSN: 1753-3171 (Print) 1543-1304 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsaf20>

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To cite this article: Ronit Frenkel & Andrea Spain (2017) South African representations of “America”, *Safundi*, 18:3, 193-204, DOI: [10.1080/17533171.2017.1329179](https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2017.1329179)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2017.1329179>



Published online: 26 Jun 2017.



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INTRODUCTION



South African representations of “America”

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ABSTRACT

This special issue considers literature that has recourse to the ambivalent agency of a “national” condition outside of its place of production. In particular, it explores American-themed South African literature, with a particular focus on changing cultural patterns within a context of transnational flows. This special issue highlights conduits between South Africa and the United States that circulate cultural and political influence across and through places, forms, categorizations, and texts. Each article examines how literature can open circuits between affective alignments, histories, infrastructures, economies and importantly, political imaginaries of lived spaces in different time periods. This issue does not argue for a theory of replication between South Africa and America but rather works to develop analytical tools to highlight the transnational connections that create layers of resonant meaning while at the same time circulating “untranslatable” sense between South Africa and the United States. Each of the texts under discussion in this issue offers a rich meditation on transnational histories of raciology, global popular cultural flows, the destabilization of the specificities of place, and the resonant aspirations of the ordinary. The writers under discussion include Richard Rive, Langston Hughes, Maurice Evans, CA Davids, Patrick Flanery, Zakes Mda, Jaco van Schalkwyk, and Lauren Beukes. Each inhabits a global space where local history and cosmopolitan configurations combine seamlessly at times, while at other moments, reveal the paradoxes of what might be called global capital’s “parochialism of the authentic” as defined through official discourses of national or even cosmopolitan belonging.

KEYWORDS

South African literature; World Literature; postcolonial modernity; cosmopolitanism; transnational circuits; post-liberation consciousness; Richard Rive; CA Davids; Patrick Flanery; Lauren Beukes; Jaco van Schalkwyk; Zakes Mda

The geo-political order is changing. Old inequalities persist and new varieties of unfreedom emerge. The racialised structuring of our world which was established during the nineteenth century is evolving too. The north Atlantic no longer lies at the center.

The situation requires new analytical tools and conceptual adjustments. The scale on which analysis operated previously has to be altered in order to take emergent patterns into account. The teleological sequence that made the overdeveloped countries into the future and their formerly colonized territories into the past is being left behind.¹

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¹Gilroy, *Darker than Blue*, 4.

Several recent works of South African fiction have engaged in one way or another with the United States. While this phenomenon might be read as a marker of the condition of the global Anglophone text in an age of American cultural hegemony, or perhaps herald a cosmopolitan outlook, it also raises the question of what makes a text South African or “American,” blurring the lines between postcolonial modernities and those of the Global North. What new analytical tools might we develop to take into account emergent patterns gestured toward in the words of Paul Gilroy quoted above? The category description “World Literature” has problematized national categories, suggesting itself as a cosmopolitan alternative to national (or even continental) categories for understanding literary and cultural production, be they “American” or “African.” And yet many now consider the term to be too politically troubling to be useful. For example, scholars like Emily Apter have foregrounded how issues of untranslatability and transmission are constitutive of conceptual categories of “World Literature” (hereafter without quotations),² while others, like Pheng Cheah, have argued that the reputed transformative agency of cosmopolitanism that world literature centralizes always presumes “a recourse to the ambivalent agency of the post-colonial nation-state, and therefore to nationalism and national culture” per se.³ This special issue considers literature that has recourse to the ambivalent agency of a “national” condition outside of its place of production. In particular, it explores American-themed South African literature, with a particular focus on changing cultural patterns within a context of transnational flows.

A number of studies that have charted changing literary representations in the USA post-9/11, from ghost stories to dystopian post-apocalyptic fictional worlds, the occurrence of dominant hyper-masculine heroes, and depictions of violence as “justified,” preemptive, or retaliatory. Yet, as Catherine Morley has argued, much post 9/11 writing is also “steeped in the domestic, [and involves] inward-looking dramas.”⁴ Recent South African literature has been termed post-transitional insofar as the strictures of the apartheid past have given way to a cultural landscape that is both parochial *and* cosmopolitan, often outward looking while still retaining its locality, in which past, present, and future form a helix of intertwined temporalities and stylistic conventions. Writers discussed in this special edition – including Richard Rive, CA Davids, Patrick Flanery, Lauren Beukes, Jaco van Schalkwyk, and Zakes Mda – have published novels that reveal strong connections between South African and American literary traditions or patterns as they augment or replace South African settings (conversations and tropes) with ones that bear the mark of the United States in ways that put both locations into conversation in new ways. Connections between place, space, and cultural formations are inscribed with and draw attention to the connections between oppressions that cut across nations and continents to reveal the connections between global issues. This issue of *Safundi* asks: what are South African writers doing in their representations of “America”? How do these texts problematize our conceptual systems of understanding in their challenging of boundaries?

A significant trend in current literary studies is one in which the limitations posed by ideas of discrete national canons are contested by scholars around the globe, who often propose replacing them with constellations of texts bound together instead by ideas of

²See Apter, *Against World Literature*, particularly Chapter 1, “The Untranslatables: A World-System” and Chapter 5, “Keywords 5: Monde”.

³Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*, 94.

⁴Morley, “End of Innocence,” 84.

cosmopolitanism and transnationalism. The notion of a field of World Literature, however, in its most dominant formulations – by, *inter alia*, Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, and David Damrosch – are open to accusations that they replicate the Eurocentric bias that gave rise to much area studies scholarship with its reliance on world-systems theory and the privileging of Euro-American forms to which others should aspire. In her excellent critique of literary systems of categorization like World Literature and their impact on African literatures, Sara Marzagora reminds us of the historical context of African studies-based scholarship: “In the case of Africa, these assimilationist practices, based on allegedly universal theories, uncannily resonate with imperialist narratives,” which, she argues, are “narratives against which African thinkers persistently fought from the early colonial period to the present day.”⁵ The rise of discussions of World Literature has arguably not effected sufficient epistemological shifts in global terms, but has certainly opened the space for challenging questions to be asked about the ways in which globalization has entered the classroom. Earlier postcolonial-studies center-periphery models have also often obscured as much as they have revealed enduring epistemological shifts. Damrosch’s reformulation of World Literature as *all* literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin is arguably more nuanced, but it also relegates much indigenous-language literatures outside of notions of the global. This has implications for African Studies, for instance, with its political imperative to make visible on its own terms that which has been marginalized, while still interacting with global networks and embracing new scholarly practices and insights.

There is a relationship here between the political imperative of much African Studies scholarship and Emily Apter’s notion of the problematic of untranslatability in world literatures. Apter argues that World Literature (as discipline) assumes language as effable or translatable despite obvious instances of incommensurability among languages, written forms, or cultural and historical contexts.⁶ Apter argues that World Literature paradigms trace how literatures travel *without* examining that which remains obscured through translation (whether linguistic or cultural), leading to a flattening. She argues instead for nuanced readings of “untranslatables” within transmission – “sex,” “gender,” “peace,” “*monde*” – as marks of dissemination and disclosure in transnational literary studies.⁷ Apter’s position resonates with many African Studies critiques of western scholarship that fail to understand the context of African formations, languages, and histories.

Theories of cosmopolitanism, following Martha Nussbaum, similarly imagine a sort of morality where humanism is more pertinent than nationalism, but these remain reliant on categories of national literature and culture within ideas of the global and transversal. While Kantian-inspired cosmopolitanism aspires to a sociability precipitated by the humanities’ ability to “cultivate our mental powers by instilling in us ‘the universal feeling of sympathy, and the ability to engage universally in very intimate communication,’”⁸ it becomes, as Habermas suggests (albeit in a very different context), a “normative philosophy for carrying the universalistic norms of discourse ethics beyond the confines of the nation state.”⁹ The postcolonial cosmopolitanism of thinkers like James Clifford and Homi K. Bhabha, by contrast, grew out of the critique of universal morality that “disproved Kant’s benign

⁵Marzagora, “African-language Literatures and the ‘transnational turn,’” 44.

⁶See Apter, *Against World Literature*.

⁷*Ibid.*, 9.

⁸Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*, 23.

⁹See Benhabib, *Another Cosmopolitanism*, 18.

view of the unifying power of international commerce and discredited the moral-civilizing claims of cosmopolitan culture.”¹⁰ At the same time, however, the postcolonial recasting of cosmopolitanism focusing on hybridity, fluidity, and the dissolution of national culture signals aspirations to be unbound by the nation or other presumably unified imagined communities. Theorists like Bhabha and Clifford might be understood, on the one hand, as trying to develop “a critical or emancipatory project”¹¹ of cosmopolitan agency (either through the positing of the hybrid subject, or the dissolution of national cultures). On the other hand, however, in both critical trends and creative work, the anxieties and ambivalence that are understood to accompany the “splitting” of the presumed unified subject (and/or the dissolution of cultural imaginaries) are, more often than not, presented as symptoms of “the nervous conditions” of the colonized,¹² cast as “mimic men” or those otherwise understood as on the margins of Anglo-European subjectivity. Whether evoking universal moralism (such as Kant, Nussbaum, or Habermas) or the ontological “universal contingency” of subject¹³ and/or cultural formation (such as Clifford or Bhabha), each of these forms of cosmopolitanism ironically takes the nation, postcolonial or otherwise, as its ground for departure.

In contrast to universal concepts of the cosmopolitical, whether a universal humanism or a universal ontology of the hybrid or split subject, Neil Lazarus looks at cosmopolitanism as something that is constructed, something we are not born into but rather make, where all versions of cosmopolitanism are local cosmopolitanisms.¹⁴ This is due to the unfolding of “a particular way of registering selfhood in a particular time and place.”¹⁵ As a construct, this form of cosmopolitanism can reconcile contradictions among ideas of the universal, local, or national, when we are at home in the world. Lazarus writes: “cosmopolitanism describes ideals for communities in which outward orientation among citizens is emphasized, and where strangers and cultural differences are accommodated by the group.”¹⁶ In similar vein, Stephanie Newell reminds us that,

[a]s Arif Dirlik suggests, “the local” will always be “very contemporary... serv[ing] as a site for the working out of the most fundamental contradictions of the age.” Such present-ness makes “local cosmopolitanism” a useful historical concept, giving us an entry point to categories, ideas, styles, recreations and reactions from periods and locales that have informed, but are no longer necessarily relevant to, contemporary theories of cosmopolitanism.¹⁷

Local cosmopolitanism is a useful concept for reading South African representations of the United States. The relationship between cosmopolitanism, locality, and its impact on literary studies, is nicely framed by Pier Paolo Frassinelli, Ronit Frenkel, and David Watson as follows:

¹⁰Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*, 24.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 84.

¹²We are thinking here of Tsitsi Dangarembga’s postcolonial title (*Nervous Conditions* 1988) more than Fanon’s original phrase in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). For a contemporary counterpoint to these types of archetypal characterizations, see Jacob Dlamini’s *Native Nostalgia* (Jacana Media, 2010).

¹³For psychoanalytic understanding of “universal contingency” of subject formation, see also Rose’s seminal, “On the ‘Universality’ of madness.”

¹⁴Lazarus, “Cosmopolitanism and the Specificity of the Local,” 120.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 120. To see an earlier consideration of this discussion, see Frenkel, “Chinua Achebe’s *The Education of a British-Protected Child*,” 41–8.

¹⁷Newell, “Local Cosmopolitans in Colonial West Africa,” 115.

Cosmopolitan perspectives have restructured the field of literary studies, transforming the way scholars imagine their object and method of study, and have brought to the fore such (renewed) frameworks for literary studies as world literatures, or the transnational, the global, and the planetary.¹⁸

Yet competing notions of cosmopolitanism, coupled with changes in the political economy of the globe and increasing “global securitocracy,” have given the nation renewed prominence too.¹⁹ Scholarship that is cosmopolitan in orientation is often precariously placed in this context. Frassinelli and Watson call this a cosmopolitanism in crisis, or a precarious mode of cosmopolitanism, which entails “a dual task: to [...] narrate an ongoing fidelity to the possibilities enabled by certain modes of cosmopolitanism and [to] think through the precarity of these potentialities.”²⁰ This is not to say that other imaginaries, where people do not participate in cosmopolitan flows for different reasons, are not also circulating simultaneously. South African representations of the US can then be seen as being both transnational and cosmopolitan, while reinventing ideas of place within a frame of global cultural flows, transnational histories, and local cosmopolitan configurations.

Frassinelli, Frenkel, and Watson define transnationalism as being suggestive of the cosmopolitan movements and cultural circulations that flow across the globe in this way. Its “focus on circulations and crossings among different spaces” on “different scales – subnational, national, outernational, and global” as well as “different temporalities,” they argue, “does not occur for its own sake, but enables the critical interrogation of these spatio-temporal coordinates, for which the transnational serves as a substitute.”²¹ The “coordinates” that we focus on in this special edition are located in a circuit between South Africa and the US, revealing how the history of one relates to the cultural geography of the other within an entangled helix that moves us beyond monadic constructions of the global, toward others that are rather of a helix, of cultural circuitry. Conceptual entanglements do not make distinctions irrelevant, but rather graft one layer of meaning on top of another that is better able to speak to the overlays of the present.

Our world is indeed changing. Global political turbulence seems everywhere embodied in the rise of authoritarian politicians channeling waves of populism that challenge understandings of Left and Right that have been more or less stable for the last century: witness leaders like the Philippines’ Duterte, Turkey’s Erdogan, or indeed the US’s Donald Trump and South Africa’s Jacob Zuma, with their divisive populist discourse and polarizing policies. Fanaticism and intolerance wear the guise of religiosity or the state in many parts of the world, while ethnic nationalisms have resurfaced within a transnational age of tightened border controls and “freer” trade. Although the political contexts that made area studies a necessity have changed, the need to examine the scholarship that emerges across established disciplinary boundaries has become even more important for an understanding of the present, where transnationalism and cosmopolitanism are ascendant even as increasingly narrow ideas of authenticity and belonging emerge globally. These contradictory imaginaries share a global stage with local particularities. It is at this juncture that many South African representations of the US become crucial signifiers of changing patterns within transnational global flows of culture, both in terms of the content and in the global influence of this work.

¹⁸Frassinelli and Watson, “Precarious Cosmopolitanism,” 2.

¹⁹Gilroy, *Darker than Blue*, 4.

²⁰Frassinelli and Watson “Precarious Cosmopolitanism,” 2.

²¹Frassinelli, Frenkel, and Watson, *Traversing Transnationalism*, 3.

The writers under discussion in this special issue inhabit a global space where local history and cosmopolitan configurations combine, at times seamlessly, at other moments revealing the paradoxes of what might be called global capital's "parochialism of the authentic" as defined through official discourses of national or even cosmopolitan belonging. Even as each text points to paradoxes of power and the exclusionary tendencies of orchestrated desire and aspirations, this literature also points to moments where – to quote Kwame Anthony Appiah describing his father – one can exist "between being part of the place you were and a part of a broader human community."²² The special issue begins with South Africa and the United States' "long conversation about race"²³ in which writers adjudicate just such questions of authenticity, belonging, or unbelonging in complexly varied experiences of rigid racial categories.

Shane Graham's essay traces Langston Hughes's influence on Richard Rive, highlighting how Hughes's desire to write the experience of the "ordinary Negro" working in and struggling against Jim Crow racism inspired Rive's provisional "claims to a unifying blackness."²⁴ Graham deftly thinks through the sometimes complementary but often competing terms of blackness in Rive's work, demonstrating the shifting ground of his attempt to draw on a valorized conception of blackness even as he remained committed to non-racialism working to discredit apartheid discourses of race in South Africa. This dialogue demonstrates how transnational exchange also works to forge for Rive what it meant to write a national literature. Graham writes:

the valorization of blackness and of African cultures and traditions, which was the driving force behind Langston Hughes's entire corpus of writing, continued to appeal to Rive and have value for him as a countermeasure to the dehumanizing racial ideologies and policies of apartheid. At the same time, Rive ultimately insisted that the goal of writing as a coloured South African was to create a national literature divorced from "ethnic labels, when the only criteria will be writing well and writing South African."²⁵

Drawing on Rive's short story "Middle Passage" and its 1971 radio adaptation, *Make Like Slaves*, Graham demonstrates that Rive deploys a kind of strategic essentialism to "writ[e] well and writ[e] South African" by "embracing blackness as a pragmatic political necessity to forge unity among the oppressed, while still insistently conveying the unique, creolized culture of the Cape colored population."²⁶ Graham argues that through their exchange, personal resonances and disagreements Hughes and Rive demonstrate the uneasy cultural production of heterogeneous identities, whether "black transnationalism" or local, national ones. At the same time, Graham argues that Rive resisted easy analogies between the US and South Africa and dramatizes how reification of racial categories "all too easily devolves into the commodification of ethnicity, and the reduction of both African and American cultural artifacts to flattened stereotypes and stock images."²⁷

Kirk B. Sides similarly takes up transatlantic dialogues on race but focuses on the technologies of segregation and apartheid, the specificity of racial governance and the boundaries of national belonging. Arguing against the "aura of exceptionalism"²⁸ of either racial governance or its supposed overcoming, Sides provides an historicized understanding of how

²²Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, xviii.

²³Sides, "Precedence and Warning," this volume, 221.

²⁴Graham, "This Curious Thing," this volume, 207.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 208.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 208–9.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 209.

²⁸Sides, "Precedence and Warning," this volume, 224.

“Apartheid and segregation have become world organizing systems, their logics extended to the planet through economies of outsourcing and offshoring, and within ideologies of privatization and neoliberalism.”²⁹ Charting early twentieth-century conversations between white supremacists in South Africa and the US, Sides demonstrates how US attitudes and designs for racial segregation couched as liberal sociological commentary became templates for what would become apartheid. Drawing on Maurice Evans’s *Black and White in the Southern States* and writing by Howard J. Pim, J.E. Holloway, Hendrik Verwoerd, and other prominent South African architects of apartheid, Sides demonstrates how South African segregationists pointed to US history as model – unfortunately admiring American Indian reservations and “tribal policy” – and underscored the “horrors” of reconstruction and processes of “Negro assimilation,” thinking they should serve as cautionary tales. Sides argues that these racial ideologies, policies and implementation of segregation precipitated a crisis of racism on global, rather than (only) specifically national, scale. He argues that this continues to haunt each country in the present as new political movements in both locales such as the Black Lives Matter and Rhodes and Fees Must Fall campaigns continue to battle the coloniality undergirding contemporary institutional racisms.

Both Graham and Sides make arguments that underscore Ursula Heise’s claim that one of the most conspicuous events in American studies over the last fifteen years is the transnational turn that has marked scholarship – the increasing interest in approaching the study of American culture from within a transnational framework rather than a national one.³⁰ This is a shift where localisms are centered within a transnational paradigm and are held together by a shift in the conceptualization of the cultural subject:

While some scholars aim to reconceptualize American studies hemispherically by linking explorations of Anglo-American and Latin-American literatures and cultures, others focus on transpacific connections around the “Pacific Rim,” both orientations following a combined geographical and cultural logic. Other theorists...focus on diasporic communities – such as the African or Jewish diaspora – for whom the US is one among several, often geographically remote, anchoring points. Finally, approaches that seek to internationalize American studies through greater attention to the work of Americanists from outside the US ultimately aim not so much to reconfigure the object of study itself as to bring a different range of institutional, disciplinary, and cultural perspectives to bear on it.³¹

The remaining three articles in this special issue take up writers that might be thought of as reconfiguring “America” just as Heise suggests. Each of these articles analyzes how literary texts by CA Davids, Zakes Mda, Jaco van Schalkwyk, and Lauren Beukes, open up and index circuits of racialized histories, crimes committed, constructed landscapes, and individual and national betrayals. Yet they also circulate, as Ronit Frenkel argues, an “afterlife of liberatory affect in South African modernities that reveals new spaces and forms of political articulation that bring a post-liberation consciousness to global circuits that resonate with similar inequalities.”³² In other words, these writers’ recent works open a circuit of ideas and imaginaries generative of local cosmopolitanisms, with their ghostliness and their potentiality, in what Frenkel calls their “restlessness.” As she argues, these texts

...ask important questions around trauma and examine how crimes committed in one place haunt others across distant locales, leading to deeply local and historically specific versions of

²⁹Ibid., 225.

³⁰Heise, “Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn,” 381.

³¹Ibid., 381–2.

³²Frenkel, “The Afterlives of a Successful Revolution,” this volume, 289.

globalized difference and sameness, thereby recalibrating the relationship between culture as restless circulation and representation as a restless position of enunciation.³³

Simon van Schalkwyk's "Heterotopia and Heterotopology in CA Davids' *The Blacks of Cape Town*," for example, takes up lived experiences of the palimpsests of temporal, textual, and spatial simultaneity of "the near and far ... the dispersed"³⁴ of global racialized modernities and their attendant "ghostly cosmopolitanism."³⁵ Focusing on heterotopological sites of prisons, gardens, libraries, and graveyards, Van Schalkwyk reads Davids' protagonist, Zara, as an "unsettled cosmopolitan subject," a transplant to the Garden State of New Jersey, living a kind of fugitive life "from her own existence" as she meditates on questions of exile.³⁶ The twined imagery of garden and grave are set in relief to those of the carceral and the library in Van Schalkwyk's nuanced close readings that suggest that these local spaces – even when imbibed with inhospitable pasts – might still enable a cultivation of global imaginaries of places. According to Van Schalkwyk, the disciplinary surveillance of post-9/11 New Jersey stages "a distinctively carceral geopolitical imaginary."³⁷ These mechanisms of surveillance become "intimately connected to the insistent demands attending Zara's commitments to an agonizingly clandestine and potentially shameful South African past, [and] her current life as transient in the 'foreign place' of New Jersey" is coupled with "a future overshadowed by the prospects of her father's betrayals."³⁸ Spaces such as the garden-as-library "signal the curious promise... that there may be spatial and temporal sites that stand apart from"³⁹ personal, political, national and increasingly global "ambiguities of skin and betrayal."⁴⁰ As Van Schalkwyk shows, these ghostly cosmopolitanisms highlight both "transnational and trans-historical suffering, [...] that tests the limits of cosmopolitan idealism."⁴¹

Similarly, but in a much different vein, Andrea Spain argues that Lauren Beukes' recent novels set in the US index the reemergence of a harrowing cultural-global unconscious: that of white male resentment, of the ostensibly "forgotten men" who face a perceived threat to their masculine and racial power, which they entirely take for granted in a complex representation of white male privilege. Reading Beukes' works as reconstructing "the urban materiality of precarious lives," Spain adds to existing scholarship by arguing that Beukes' characters "emerge as ... infrastructure of the city in Abdoumalig Simone's sense and as critique of social oppression in both South Africa and more globally."⁴² Herein lies the global appeal of Beukes' texts: that is, her ability to allegorize the present as the return of the repressed – the past – or, in Achille Mbembe's terms, "a manifestation of traumatic amnesia, and in some cases, nostalgia or even mourning,"⁴³ even as they assemble emergent forms of bodily, technological, "animaled," gender-queer and female protagonists. Spain sustains her argument through an analysis of two characters, Clayton Broom in *Broken Monsters* and Harper in *The Shining Girls*, and reads the historically specific chronotopes

³³Ibid., 285.

³⁴Foucault, "Spaces" quoted in Van Schalkwyk, "Heterotopia and Heterotopology," this volume, 240.

³⁵Van Schalkwyk, "Heterotopia and Heterotopology," this volume, 241.

³⁶Ibid., 242.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Jones qtd. in Van Schalkwyk, "Heterotopia and Heterotopology," this volume, 244.

⁴¹Van Schalkwyk, "Heterotopia and Heterotopology," this volume, 255.

⁴²Spain, "Shining Girls and Forgotten Men," this volume, 259.

⁴³Mbembe, qtd. in Spain, "Shining Girls and Forgotten Men," this volume, 260.

of the urban centers through which they are constituted. Spain argues that as new claims to urban space – by women of color, working-class white women, and immigrant men and women – begin to assert themselves more firmly, so, too, the old certainties of masculinity and race assert themselves to counter a perceived “invasion and contamination.”⁴⁴ For example, Spain argues that Beukes’ setting of 1930s Chicago and the Detroit of the early 2000s each illustrates that the US urban “promise of working-class reproductive futurity ends with a series of crashes, creating an unresolved subjective experience of an intolerable reality within global capital,”⁴⁵ prompting “the brutal violence [that is always] the enacting of a certain symbolic deadlock.”⁴⁶ At its most provocative moment, the article concludes that the novels might, on the one hand, be an literary enactment of a new form of collective ritual of symbolic violence, challenging US audiences and readers to think about their desires to witness and consume narratives of misogynistic and racialized fantasies of violence. On the other hand, Spain argues that Beukes’ novels might work to both reimagine the global histories of US cities, while also serving as a cautionary tale that points to the re-emergence of contagious, restless, paranoid fantasies of the racist and the misogynist populism so familiar to 1930s South Africa.

Ronit Frenkel’s contribution also highlights how literature can open circuits between affective alignments, histories, infrastructures, and importantly, political imaginaries of lived spaces. Frenkel’s reading of Zake’s Mda’s *Rachel’s Blue* and Jaco van Schalkwyk’s *The Alibi Club* illustrates how South African writers can alter analytical frameworks and understand US locales as equally informed and haunted by others across the globe. Through her close readings, Frenkel illustrates that as much as the transnational flows and global circuits can open conduits to racialized discourses and practices circumscribing agency, the restlessness of cultural representations can also sustain “the afterlives of a post-liberation consciousness” that is “bound to the idea that things can be fought over and changed.”⁴⁷ This means that contemporary African literature is capable of altering analytical frameworks through which we can not only come to understand American modernity but can rigorously analyze “debates on human rights as they relate to the poor and disenfranchised,” depicting US localities as forms of “globalized difference that is familiar” across national borders.⁴⁸ Reading the enunciative positions of Mda and Van Schalkwyk as “emerging from a successful revolution that ended white minority rule in South Africa,” Frenkel argues that each writer’s understanding of American modernity – whether its urban configurations of belonging and alienation or rural poverty and gendered violence – is understood not only from a South African perspective, but from a perspective that understands American places of suffering and despair as sites of contested political terrain. Frenkel’s readings disclose US modernity as containing global commonplaces in which extreme disparities of wealth, mobility and gendered rights structure social life. From Mda’s text depicting the effects of capitalist modernities through the decimation of local industries such as coal mining, “leaving behind isolated pockets of people overrun by drugs, fundamentalism and a new version of predatory capitalism in the form of fracking,”⁴⁹ to Van Schalkwyk’s depictions of

⁴⁴Graham, qtd. in Spain, “Shining Girls and Forgotten Men,” this volume, 260.

⁴⁵Spain, “Shining Girls and Forgotten Men,” this volume, 274.

⁴⁶Zizek qtd. in Spain, “Shining Girls and Forgotten Men,” this volume, 274.

⁴⁷Frenkel, “The Afterlives of a Successful Revolution,” this volume, 281.

⁴⁸Ibid., 283.

⁴⁹Ibid., 281.

American customs and homeland security procedures that alienate immigrants, to scenes in both books underscoring how “[p]overty stretches on either side, as far as the eye can see.”⁵⁰ These South African novels demonstrate how each locality is engendered by the global. Drawing on Stephen Greenblatt’s *Cultural Modernity: a Manifesto*, Frenkel writes that both novels dramatize the “‘sensation of rootedness’ through which people experience their cultural and social lives that very much depends on the ‘powers of a culture ... to hide the mobility that is its enabling condition.’”⁵¹

The issue concludes with a conversation between the writers Carol-Ann Davids and Patrick Flanery, entitled “Reflection, Understanding, and Empathy.” In this timely exchange, Davids and Flanery reflect on these conditions of mobility and the “untranslatability” of linguistic, cultural, and historical locales that inflects and engenders their own creative processes. In the exchange, Davids and Flanery discuss, as Flanery puts it, “the trace of sensibility” that the “ghosts of location” – that is to say, their own location as writers, whether as a South African writing “America” or China, or as an American writing South Africa.⁵² Focusing on the ways in which language, tone, cultural codes, and “the tensions that exist between ... moment and epochs” affect their own creative work, Davids and Flanery highlight how “migration and transplantation” demands empathy as well as a process of understanding that involves the “layering of historical perspectives, sifting between truth and truthiness, and a fair deal of reading between lines.”⁵³ The interview considers how language, codes of decorum, institutional bureaucracy, racial dynamics, and “divi[sions] along racial and economic lines (and their intersection)”⁵⁴ redefine and impinge on writers’ language, actions, and affinities, and by extension, on those of their characters. Importantly for our time, the conversation enters into current debates about cultural appropriation and misrepresentation, while thinking through questions of both caution and risk while writing the other. When considering the violence of representation that might be done by people writing about precarious lives from positions of privilege, Davids writes unapologetically: “I would say that caution is not only necessary but perhaps a fundamental act of empathy.”⁵⁵ Caution, then, rather than a call for censorship, becomes a charge for “reflection, understanding, [and] even research,”⁵⁶ for both the novelist and critic.

For the purposes of this special issue, we seek to highlight global cultural flows that circulate across and through places, forms, categorizations, and texts. We are not arguing for a theory of replications between South Africa and America but are rather trying to highlight the transnational connections that create another layer of cultural meaning that reveals a sort of ephemeral archive,⁵⁷ to borrow Ann Cvetkovich’s term, undergirded by the idea that “America” is still visibly marked by the after effects of slavery and South Africa is still visibly marked by the after effects of apartheid. This is illustrated by Achille Mbembe’s observation that apartheid is inscribed onto the South African “social, economic and mental landscape”⁵⁸ despite the change that has taken place since 1994. Similarly, Imraan Coovadia recently said

⁵⁰Van Schalkwyk, *The Alibi Club*, qtd. in Frenkel, “The Afterlives of a Successful Revolution,” this volume, 286.

⁵¹Qtd. in Frenkel, “The Afterlives of a Successful Revolution,” this volume, 287.

⁵²Davids and Flanery, “Reflection,” this volume, 293.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 296.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*.

⁵⁸Mbembe, “Rule of Property versus Rule of the Poor,” 5.

[i]f you think about the USA, it's like 150 years since slavery was abolished and it's still one of the major structuring features of what they talk about, how they think about race. It is hard to imagine us getting rid of it any sooner.⁵⁹

Patrick Gaspard, the outgoing American ambassador to South Africa, has often emphasized a reciprocal relationship between South Africa and the US, saying that the two countries are still dealing with the lingering social trauma of slavery and apartheid. In a recent interview with Rebecca Davis, Gaspard positioned racial discourse in both locales as follows:

“In South Africa, y'all don't have gentle and polite conversations about the tensions that exist between the races,” he says. “In the United States, we come up with lots of different kinds of euphemisms for these things, and sometimes it's really hard to solve problems when you're using euphemisms. Here it is direct and blunt and there's nothing opaque about it, and I appreciate that – particularly as someone who came up from the rights movement in the US and always felt like we were talking past one another. Here, it's hard to talk past one another.” Gaspard thumps his fist into his palm. “You talk right into one another.”⁶⁰

Our interest here does not lie in theorizing comparative replications or one-to-one analogies between South Africa and the United States, but rather lies in how the texts under discussion in this collection offer a rich mediation on global popular cultural flows, transnational histories of raciology, the destabilization of the specificities of place, and how resonant aspirations of the ordinary might talk “right into one another.”

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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⁵⁹Frenkel, “Imraan Coovadia in Conversation,” 97.

⁶⁰Davis, “Politics of Performance”.

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