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## Reading for hope: a conversation about texts and method

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### Abstract

In a conversation about their shared interests, the authors discuss methodology, reading strategies, and comparative historiographies relating to the recuperation of residues of hope that linger in the wake of failed revolutionary projects. The conversation draws connections between people power (*poder popular*) in Chile during the Allende era and ideals of participatory democracy circulating in South Africa concurrently (during the so-called Durban moment), discusses in detail the work of Nadine Gordimer, considers the politics of contemporary South African activism, and weighs the usefulness of the insights of thinkers from Karl Marx and Walter Benjamin to David Scott and Achille Mbembe.

Julia Willén and Andrew van der Vlies delivered papers at the “Cultural Solidarities: Colonial Modernity, Anti-Apartheid and World-Making Networks” workshop held at the Wits Institute of Social and Economic Research (WISER), University of the Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg in April 2017. This conversation, conducted between November 2017 and March 2018, arises out of their shared interest in the subject and method of hope in apartheid- and postapartheid-era literature.

**Andrew van der Vlies (AV):** Julia, your paper and mine seemed to share an interest in methods of reading for the residues of hope that linger in the wake of failed revolutionary projects. I was struck by your presentation on similarities between Chile and South Africa in the early 1970s. You made links between the argument for the necessity for utopian thinking advanced in Rick Turner’s *The Eye of the Needle* (1972), in his case an argument for a collective reorientation away from racism and in favour of a common-sense thinking for and about the future, and, across the southern Atlantic and around the Straits of Magellan, the future-oriented philosophy of the land liberation movement in Salvador Allende’s Chile. Turner was assassinated; the communitarian experiment ended in Chile with Pinochet’s coup. What, you asked, might we learn from the ways in which these bodies of thought imagined a future beyond or in spite of imagined failure.

This struck me very forcefully because I was trying to reflect in my own paper on the ways in which we might read as repositories of hope for the future narratives of the failure of the future imagined for South Africa by the anti-apartheid movement in the 1970s and 1980s. This is very much the driving force behind the book whose proofs I had just corrected before coming to Johannesburg, *Present Imperfect: Contemporary South African Writing* (published July

2017), a desire to ask—by looking at a range of contemporary South African writers (chiefly novelists) in both English and Afrikaans—how we might meditate on what has come *after* the after-struggle. With what tools might we theorize our present condition and its cultural manifestations in order to revivify future-focused hopes in our past, which we find imperfectly realized in this present? What paths lead back to those world-making solidarities that framed anti-apartheid activism?

**Julia Willén (JW):** What I presented at the workshop was my contribution to a project I was conducting together with a Chilean artist, Claudia del Fierro, and a Swedish artist, Hans Carlsson. In her video work, del Fierro has, for a couple of years, been tracing the remnants of a radical forestry experiment which took place in the early 1970s in the south of Chile, as well as the remains of the guerrilla movement which had its base at the very same place between 1978 and 1980. In late 1970, a group of workers at the forestry estate of Carranco took over—or liberated—the land of the estate from the local *patrones*. This event marked the beginning of twelve liberated estates in the area, together forming the Panguipulli forestry complex: El Complejo, which employed 3,600 workers and made a community of 20,000 inhabitants. El Complejo became a realization of the democratic principle known as *poder popular*, “people power,” in Chile during the Allende era. This came to an end on 11 September 1973, when Pinochet’s army massacred or imprisoned the workers, the forestry complex was confiscated, and severe repression followed. Thus, the future in the making was canceled.

At the very same time, across the Atlantic, the academic and anti-apartheid activist Rick Turner was insisting on the necessity for utopian thinking, that is he was asking what kind of society South Africa could be after the struggle, addressing issues beyond and across race, without tempering that conflict but intersecting it with class, gender, and environmental conflicts.

The concurrences and connections between the idea of people power (*poder popular*) in Chile and Turner’s concept of participatory democracy as envisioned in his famous *The Eye of the Needle* (1972) reflect a larger shared context. Both projects of outlining a path toward people’s power had in common not only an emerging consciousness of the South in the wake of Bandung, but also a global political context during the Cold War and parallel—yet different—settler colonial pasts that resurfaced in the issue of land rights. The US (including CIA) interventions in both South Africa and Chile are well documented, and the consequences of the West’s Cold War against communism are a concurrent and devastating experience these countries share. Paulo Freire spent five years in Chile (1964–69) working with a literacy program, and during this time wrote *Education as the Practice of Freedom* and, drawing from his experiences in the south of the country, his much more radical *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The latter came to be circulated in South Africa in the early 1970s, with Turner as one of its most engaged readers and practitioners.

Turner’s ideas on worker-controlled enterprises and modes of production have conspicuous semblance to the social enterprises (*empresas sociales*) in Allende’s Chile, among which El Complejo was the largest. In my presentation, I was seeking to connect these two streams of utopianisms: one presented during the days of grand apartheid in South Africa, the other being realized in the liberated forests of southern Chile at around the same period. With El

Complejo as a point of departure I proposed that we might, with the historian Sanjay S Subhamanyam's idea of "connected histories"—in contrast to comparative histories—in mind, open ourselves to a decentered history that destabilizes Europe as the panoptic space of history writing, that turns its gaze not to the "Old World", but to other Souths.<sup>1</sup>

Now the question that propelled my paper was how we, in a present that seems unable to imagine *any* future, might re-activate—or, in a Benjaminian sense that you also raised in your presentation, actualize these past utopian projects in our contemporary moment. What is so compelling in Turner's utopianism and in *poder popular* taking place at el Complejo— two cases I presented as lost futures past—is their interventionism, that is their ability to seize the possible promise in what Benjamin called now-time (*Jetztzeit*), the revolutionary moment, to go beyond a given horizon of expectation and the linearity of time. So, on the one hand we have the Durban "moment,"<sup>2</sup> the milieu in which *The Eye of the Needle* was written, which, despite the increased repression from the apartheid state, helped to generate an environment of hope, political mobilization and thought, and on the other we have the workers in Chile, who, in their remembrance of the past, speak of a time of transcendence, and the reflection of a new time.<sup>3</sup>

I know that you have specifically worked with Benjamin's concept of *Jetztzeit* in relation to Nadine Gordimer, in ways that engage with some of the themes I have sketched out above. **AV**: Indeed, writing my book and thinking through some of the questions it raised in preparation for the Johannesburg event, I found especially helpful the possibilities that emerge from engaging with Walter Benjamin's idea of *Jetztzeit*, a period of suspension from which the energies of past revolutionary potential might be reviewed and rekindled, and also reading Ernst Bloch's idiosyncratic blend of idealism and materialism, which held that studying quotidian practices and their residues might reveal the surplus of past utopian aspirations that remained in the present.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps it's worth laying out a little more clearly what Benjamin says about *now-time* or *Jetztzeit*, which we have both invoked. The way the historian who produces a causal narrative thinks about the present, Benjamin suggests, is as empty ("homogeneous empty time"), time ironically outside of the causal flow (this historian exempts him or herself from a genealogy that might explain *why* they write the history they do!), empty too because not yet shaped by the narrative they are about to produce. By contrast, for the kind of historian Benjamin thinks might rescue past utopian energies (the kind proposed in "On the Concept" and modeled in *The Arcades Project*), the present is "time filled up by now-time,"<sup>5</sup> which here means not

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<sup>1</sup> Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia."

<sup>2</sup> The years between 1970 and 1974 in Durban constitute what Tony Morphet in retrospect would name "the Durban moment"; the period saw Turner's writing of *The Eye of the Needle*, Steve Biko's formulation of Black Consciousness, Dunbar Moodie's investigation of Afrikaner power, and Mike Kirkwood's reinterpretation of South African literature, together with the unexpected and "revelatory" 1973 Durban strikes. Morphet, "Brushing history against the grain," 209 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Del Fierro, *El Complejo: Territorio liberado*; José Bravo quoted in Baca, *Liberating Forestry*, 85.

<sup>4</sup> See Plaice, "Translators' Introduction," xxvii.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin, "On the Concept," 395. In Zohn's 1968 translation, "time filled by the presence of the now" (Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 252–53). The translations credited to Zohn in *Illuminations* ("Theses") and in the authoritative *Selected Writings* ("On the Concept") differ in a number of respects.

simply *the present*, but rather a time not imagined in relation to a narrative in which past is accounted for as a “sequence of events like the beads of a rosary.”<sup>6</sup> The rosary metaphor here implicitly invokes Christian eschatology—the idea that the Messiah has been and will come again. Benjamin’s historian, rather, is an implicitly Jewish one (the Messiah has *not come yet*), and the messianism is expressly “weak” because it is not and cannot be reliant on external, divine, intervention; it is for humans to figure out.<sup>7</sup> So the now-time that interests Benjamin is *no* time like the present of universal history; it is instead a point in the present that is structured by disappointment, from which we must reach (or *leap*) into the past to bring it into “constellation” with the present.<sup>8</sup> Benjamin here uses imagery from spectrum analysis and crystallography—“thinking is crystallized as a monad” in the moment of constellation.<sup>9</sup> This speculative methodology arrests thought in “a configuration” that results in what Benjamin calls “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.”<sup>10</sup><sup>10</sup> (It’s worth noting that Bloch also engages with Benjamin’s language of constellations between present and past.<sup>11</sup>)

Let’s come back to the politics of invoking Benjamin in relation to thinking from and about the South (you have invoked Subrahmanyam) a little later, and turn to your question about Gordimer. I think we see something of the potential revealed by both Benjamin and Bloch’s respective approaches in Gordimer’s last published novel, *No Time Like the Present* (2012), which I discuss in the introduction to *Present Imperfect*. Gordimer’s novel’s title itself hints at how fantastically useful it is for our thinking.

We all know, of course, what an outspoken critic of the apartheid government Gordimer had been, and how her novels of the high and late apartheid periods explore with great subtlety and urgency the crises of conscience of white characters not unlike herself, novels that often ended without resolution, that opened to the future by stopping short of imagining quite what it might look like precisely because this was really unimaginable: I am thinking of Liz van den Sandt lying awake at the end of *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966), hearing the beating of her heart as she contemplates lending active support to the Struggle, or Maureen Smales running to the sound of a helicopter whose occupants are not specified in the famously unclear ending of *July’s People* (1981). Gordimer’s work after 1994 continued to hold open the ending, which is to say the imagined future: here I am thinking of Duncan Lindgard in *The House Gun* (1998) as that novel’s representative of uncertainty, of a refusal of roles ascribed by society (old or new): he is repeatedly figured as a figure in a labyrinth, at a loose end. Duncan seems to embody the ways in which the traumas of the old order continued to surface in unexpected forms through the supposedly placid surface of the Mandela years’ trumpeting of reconciliation and rainbow nationhood.

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<sup>6</sup> Benjamin, “On the Concept,” 397.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 389, 390.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 395, 396; see also “Paralipomena,” 403.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, “On the Concept,” 402, 396.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, “Theses,” 254; Benjamin, “On the Concept,” 396.

<sup>11</sup> Bloch, “On the Present in Literature,” 130.

Gordimer had long been a chronicler of the experience of life in a country whose public discourse was riven with competing narratives of history. One of her most widely cited essays from the 1980s, “Living in the Interregnum,” famously cast the crisis as a temporal one: the past had begun to “drop out of sight,” she said, “even for those who would have liked to go on living in it” (i.e., white people).<sup>12</sup> She also always had a sense that the narrative of progress implicit in the plot of liberation would—indeed could inevitably only—end in unforeseeable futures, in no time like that imagined during the struggle. (There are similarities with what C. L. R. James and David Scott have to say about revolution; we will, I’m sure, turn to these thinkers in due course, too.)

This is of course precisely what is described so wonderfully in *No Time Like the Present*, the present of the characters that is *no time* like that which they imagined. I think the novel is a masterful late work in all the classic senses. Its protagonists are a couple, a black woman (Jabu) and white man (Steve) in an interracial marriage, who witness the xenophobic violence of 2008, Zuma’s rape trial, and so on. Both were active in the Struggle, but they come to find their expectations of the new order thoroughly disappointed and we leave them in 2009 as they contemplate emigration (though not actually leaving—here then a final open-ended Gordimer fiction). If they hoped that the transition might usher in a “different time,” what they find—these are lines from the novel and read like a summary of Gordimer’s works’ summary lesson—is that “[t]here is only one time, all time, for principles you live by,” in other words that the struggle for what one believes in will invariably always be an ongoing one.<sup>13</sup> Yet the formulation also plays on the idea that the present, our *now*-time if you will, is the only time in which we can be present; it is from *this* time that we both remember the past and hope for the future.

There is thus *no time* that is *not* present, and also no time that is ever that which is thought *from* the present; the past is never remembered exactly as it was, nor will the future unspool precisely as imagined. As I say in my book’s introduction, Gordimer’s characters “find themselves in a present also somehow outside of time, caught in a temporality that is *no-time*—but more than in the sense that the present is not able to be understood (yet) as past.”<sup>14</sup> This is to say that they experience instead “utopian promise devolved to impasse.”<sup>15</sup> We might recall that when the ANC came to power in 1994, it adopted as policy a formal suspension of what it had called the National Democratic Revolution.<sup>16</sup> It’s worth noting that a supplement (“Paralipomena”) to Benjamin’s famous “Theses” “On the Concept of History” offers a diagnosis that chimes unsurprisingly well with Gordimer’s understanding of the disappointments of this suspended national-democratic revolution. Benjamin wrote that “[o]nce the classless society has been defined as an infinite task,” one in other words that could be pursued through other means (NEPAD, increasingly neoliberal policies, etc.), the time in which we might imagine the revivification of past hopes becomes instead “an anteroom, so to speak, in which one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with

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<sup>12</sup> Gordimer, “Living in the Interregnum,” 262.

<sup>13</sup> Gordimer, *No Time Like the Present*, 72.

<sup>14</sup> Van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect*, 5–6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> See Nzimande, “What is the National Democratic Revolution?”

more or less equanimity.”<sup>17</sup> The ANC government has been very good at hoping for a populace prepared to wait with equanimity, told to be patient, that economic upliftment will come, even if it has not done so yet.

South Africa’s peculiar now-time, then, including that limbed in Gordimer’s last fiction, is also an ongoing imperfect present from which South Africans need to find ways of overcoming stasis. Here, our papers’ concerns align: how might past utopian projects be reactivated? An additional question is whether the literary is a reservoir for such projects. How do we turn representations of stasis into prompts to hopeful praxis? This is a question that animated Benjamin and Bloch’s work, too, though perhaps Bloch is more useful for suggesting how literature (as well as ephemera, daydreams, habit) might serve as record of utopian surplus. He offers a reading of Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* that includes remarks about its treatment of time that could apply equally well, I think, to many of Gordimer’s novels when compared with more obviously social-realist protest. Bloch argued that Mann was always conscious of “the reader coming later” and was consequently always attentive “to how much it takes to advance to understand expressions of the now-time.”<sup>18</sup>

I know that you have thought extensively about Gordimer’s career and about the changing ways in which she imagined the future.

**JW:** Yes, part of the argument that I am making in the doctoral dissertation I am currently completing is how Gordimer’s view on white “Africanity” is reshaped over the years in relation to her expectations of the near future. Coming personally to the field of literature from a different background, intellectual history and migration studies, I find Reinhart Koselleck’s methodology of conceptual history both fruitful and at the same time limiting. When it comes to the exploration of a certain idea, in this case whiteness in an African historical context, a so-called traditional conceptual history that focuses on canonized works and encyclopedias will inevitably reproduce itself. This is also why I find David Scott’s (anthropological) contribution to the field of conceptual history so enriching, and I hope we will return to him later. The early novels of Gordimer, together with her personal and political essays and speeches, are an extremely rich source material in terms of intellectual historical content on the subject at hand.

In 1959, Gordimer not only expected that the anachronistic apartheid state was coming to an end—she viewed it against the backdrop of the newly liberated Ghana and the formation of the Pan-Africanist Congress of Azania—she also foresaw a future in which whites would have to accommodate to this new Africa, if “they want[ed] to stay on.” This expected new, liberated Africa is something she both desires and (covertly) dreads. The loss of privilege was one thing, but another was the “emotional rebuff” of not being “welcomed” or accepted in a new state, preceded by a society where the acceptance from the black majority mattered little. During this period, she imagines what the loss of this right to belong—something that up until then had been taken for granted—might cause.

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<sup>17</sup> Benjamin, “Paralipomena,” 402.

<sup>18</sup> Bloch, “On the Present in Literature,” 133. I should note here that although few South African scholars of the literary have, to my knowledge, engaged with Bloch, the exceptions are Russell Samolsky in *Apocalyptic Futures*, and Jennifer Wenzel in *Bulletproof*.

In the same 1959 essay, she writes that she wants to be “freed both from the privileges and guilt of the white sins of our fathers,” thus invoking two temporalities: the privileges in the present upheld by white supremacy; and the white “sins” in the past, which produced the apartheid state. This freedom is something she deems an impossibility, thus her advice to her fellow (dissident) whites was to consider themselves individually “as an immigrant to a new country; somewhere he has never lived before, but to whose life he has committed himself.”<sup>19</sup>

Yet, with the years of high apartheid and the political repression that followed the seminal year of 1960 (the year of the Sharpeville massacre), in the context of a heated Cold War that affected neighboring countries Angola and Mozambique, and with the 1963 Rivonia trial, the future she finds herself able to envisage becomes a dramatically different one. Not only were her expectations of a liberated South Africa by the late 1950s dashed, but Gordimer shifted her attention and focus for critique from the nationalists to the “conformists.” As a writer who is acutely aware of temporality, and in her thinking-through-writing during the apartheid years, I argue that she is occupied with this downside of the revolution: the white conformism that helps in upholding this state of suspension (a perfect illustration, it seems, of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony). Already in her first novel, *The Lying Days* (1953), this theme runs through the text. The possibility of withdrawing from the political is a privilege for those on whose personal lives political change has no immediate impact:

if your job is the same, your freedom of movement is the same, the outward appearance of your surroundings is the same, the heaviness lies upon the extension of yourself which belongs to the world of abstract ideas, which, although it influences them through practical expression of moral convictions, loses, again and again, to the overwhelming tug of the warm and instinctual.<sup>20</sup>

It is no coincidence that the title of this novel engages with one of Gordimer’s central concerns: the *mauvaise foi* of white South Africans, that which she would name “the great South African lie.”<sup>21</sup><sup>21</sup> Over the years, her analysis would become more refined, as her own (self-declared) stance shifted from liberal to radical.<sup>22</sup> In her 1963 novel, *Occasion for Loving*, the white conformism accompanied by liberal colorblindness in a society permeated by race is described as a “failure, in danger of humbug.”<sup>23</sup>

Yet in her imagination of a “chronic state of emergency,” Gordimer also seems to be out of step with the radical activities that were taking place in the early 1970s.<sup>24</sup> In an address given at the University of Natal in the midst of the so-called Durban moment, she is continuously occupied with the state of stasis and thus blind to the optimism, utopianism, and interventions

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<sup>19</sup> Gordimer, “Where Do Whites,” 34.

<sup>20</sup> Gordimer, *The Lying Days*, 258.

<sup>21</sup> For instance, in Gordimer, “What Being a South African Means to Me,” 227.

<sup>22</sup> In an interview, Gordimer states: “I used to regard myself as a liberal, but now I regard myself as a radical.” Cassere, “Diamonds Are Polished—So Is Nadine,” 55.

<sup>23</sup> Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving*, 321.

<sup>24</sup> Gordimer, “Speak out: the Necessity for Protest,” 97.

that were taking place *right there*. Instead of humbling herself in relation to the emerging Black Consciousness movement and its proponents in a way similar to what she did in relation to the Pan-Africanist challenge in 1959, she dismisses it as being, true to the rumors, a confirmation of the ideology of separate development. Unfaithful to—or perhaps ambivalent about—her own position as radical, she now subscribes to a European, liberal tradition of protest as “reformative.”

Yet, as a latecomer (possibly too late) to the thoughts of Black Consciousness, Gordimer supersedes her 1971 position in a 1977 address at the University of Cape Town (given, once again, to an audience of students). This time, she is speaking against a remarkably different horizon of expectation. If Benjamin pointed out that the past is divided between master and enslaved, this recognition also produces quite different futurities. In 1959, Gordimer did not exclude the possibility of a race-universal future, where at least oppositional whites would be included. In 1977, drawing on experiences, readings, and conversations with black South Africans, Gordimer concludes that difference in political shades of whiteness no longer matters. The future now is not one of hope but one of the trials that must come for *all* whites in an apartheid-society: “When our Nuremberg comes—and the trials go on in private, inside us, already—no one will be able to deny that the ‘legality’ of our government consists in its being legal in our country for a parliament representing only a white minority to make the laws.”<sup>25</sup> As I argue, Gordimer’s position is different in relation to her 1959 text because the problem is different (then there was *hope* in the new Africa, also for whites, judging from the existing radical press of its time). In this case, there is no hope, but there is a certain necessity of learning to live with the past that makes her, belatedly catching a straw, consider white consciousness worth a try.

History writing has this possibility of resisting the temptation for causal explanations, and, as Benjamin suggests, blasts open the continuum of history. The writing of futures past, which has been my approach to my analysis of Gordimer’s different textual interventions on white South Africans from the late 1950s to the late 1970s, can do precisely this, I argue. It is a history of futures canceled, lost, or unfulfilled, and it is in relation to these horizons of expectation (and her space of experience which in turn informs these imagined futures) that Gordimer must be read.

Again, in relation to the utopianisms of Turner and the Chilean workers, there is a potential in Benjamin’s temporality of a present in which a certain past may or may not be actualized. In his essay on Eduard Fuchs, Benjamin describes this dialectic as a woof, in which the past is always present (or rather, time is always out of joint) as lost threads.<sup>26</sup> The danger, as Benjamin phrases it in “On the Concept,” is that it is only under certain conditions

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<sup>25</sup> Gordimer “What Being a South African Means to Me,” 279. By superseding her position, I mean in a purely dialectical (as *Aufhebung*) manner: her position in 1959 is fused and informed by her later stance in 1971, making her return to seemingly similar conclusions as in 1959, yet with another, altered problem at hand.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian,” 37.



that this actualization of the past will become a “tiger’s leap.”<sup>27</sup> Under conditions of a (white) ruling elite, upheld by the indifferent conformism among the white middle classes, this leap is impotent.

**AV:** Absolutely, or impossible. It is also difficult, and not really properly explained by Benjamin where precisely we might look for evidence of past, lost utopian hopes (those whose loss leads to a feeling of impasse, as after the frustration of a revolutionary endeavor— like that in Grenada about which David Scott writes in *Omens of Adversity*, so yes, it would be useful to return to his example). Or rather, it is important that we know to look through and behind those narratives that present themselves as History. Benjamin of course casts this official version, the causal-narrative version you refer to above, as history à la Ranke, which is opposed to the kind of activist historiographic work that he sees himself doing, or that he advocates. The context of Benjamin’s thinking about this operation—Europe in the later 1930s—is different from ours, to be sure (though it has also to be said perhaps less different than when I finished the manuscript of *Present Imperfect*: Brexit, Trump, and so on, have all burst onto the scene as events or ruptures since then), but his thinking about political disappointment and the revivification of aspirations imperfectly realized, his attempts to address a sense that dialectical interpretations of history had stalled, remains enormously suggestive in this historical moment, and in more places than South Africa.

However European—however northern—it might be, I think Benjamin’s speculative methodology is suggestive because it exists already as intertext (idiosyncratically invoked and variously understood) in South African letters. It designates a creative mode of engagement with the past from a position of stasis in the present—and we could go so far as to imagine the work of literature (but really any immersive artwork) itself as offering the opportunity for a constellation with the past in the present unfolding of the reader’s (or viewer’s) experience. To elaborate briefly on the first: Benjamin’s famous figure of the angel of history, evoked for him by a small Paul Klee sketch,<sup>28</sup> a figure of the hopeless witness to the pile-up of wreckage that is our past (and which the Rankian historian would re-narrate as a series of progressive moments of cause and effect), has served as useful intertext for many South African writers during the long interregnum (to invoke Gordimer’s use of the term, borrowed from Gramsci<sup>29</sup>). It is clearly and productively hovering, I think, in Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* (1990), and is directly invoked by Jeremy Cronin in poems in *More Than A Casual Contact* (2006), and by Ivan Vladislavić in *Double Negative* (2010); I make the case in my book for it being invoked elsewhere in Vladislavić’s work, too, including in his 2001 novel, *The Restless Supermarket*. To connect with the second point: in all of these works (and there are others), the angel serves partly as shorthand for helpless observation of the chaos of human

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<sup>27</sup> Benjamin, “On the Concept of History”, 395. See Comay’s Benjaminian reading of Hegel in *Mourning Sickness*. Gordimer’s notion of a “second birth” could arguably be paralleled to Hegel’s notion of the present as birth-time: “The gradual crumbling of that left unaltered the face of the whole is cut short by a sunburst which, in one flash, illuminates the features of the new world” (142).

<sup>28</sup> For his description of Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, see the ninth thesis in Benjamin, “On the Concept,” 392.

<sup>29</sup> 29“‘The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.’ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison*, 276.

action, the unknowability of its consequences, so something like the figure of the future that animates Gordimer's earlier thinking, perhaps.<sup>30</sup>

**JW:** It would perhaps be a mistake to dismiss Benjamin's thinking as "northern." Rather we might read him as a trickster, as a "stranger within" philosopher, to borrow Georg Simmel's Jewish figure. A decolonizing reading of Benjamin as an insider/outsider abstains from secularized understandings that exclude his theological elements. Indeed, as Benjamin proposes in his "New Thesis H", universal history need not be reactionary: "The structural principle [which embraces all the oppressed] of universal history allows it to be represented in partial histories."<sup>31</sup> This task has been taken up (not necessarily as a result of Benjamin) in various forms: history as *herstory*, history from below, hidden or silenced. However, instead of *supplementing* history (which is a necessity), I find Benjamin's—perhaps provocative—insistence on a *universal* history, compelling (yet trying). Such universality will, at the end of the day, be partial as long as the particularities are missing.

**AV:** Indeed, though Benjamin is not always consistent in his terminology, and the fragments, mostly unpublished during his lifetime, are not necessarily wholly synthesized (indeed, that is partly the point of a project that is attuned to fragments). But I take your point. Perhaps that universalizing, in fact, is a trace of a northern impulse to which I feel we do need to remain alert, though I endorse absolutely your sense that we should not dismiss any theory that might attract the label "northern" (which was not my intention). I believe we can and should embrace the impulse to use theories from the South with a broader sense of their intersectional allies elsewhere.

**JW:** Yes: my intention was not to lend myself to a universalizing theory, which co-opts theories-from-the-south without altering or shifting the ontology. On the contrary, I meant that a project of writing history that recognizes the entanglement of histories in the plural tilts such claims of universality. This practice comes of and from the South, and I think many northern thinkers are unaware of this shift *as already having happened*. In an essay from 1997, Sanjay Subrahmanyam suggests that we explode the temporal chronology that always-already seems to emanate from Europe. Arguing that early modernity not only represents a radical shift inside Europe, he points out that the different elements commonly set as criteria for this shift—such as European expansionism and "discoveries," the emergence of empires, and (in this case Shiite) eschatological notions of a coming millennium (millenarianism)—were present in the area which today is referred to as the Middle East and central Asia almost a century before the European temporal divide that the birth of early "Modernity" sets. What he proposes is thus a writing of histories as connected, in contrast to methodologically nationalist ones that emphasize difference by way of comparison. Aside from its methodological gains, his essay raises criticism against "mechanistic" materialist historiography that overlooks eschatology and its impact on political sovereignty and imperial expansion in that time and in that region. Again, connected historiography *tilts* universalized history.

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<sup>30</sup> On Cronin's engagement with Benjamin, see Van der Vlies, "An Interview with Jeremy Cronin," 526–27. See also Van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect*, 6–7.

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin, "Paralipomena," 404.

In *Refashioning Futures*, David Scott asks the pertinent question: what comes after the postcolonial critique?<sup>32</sup> The project that he deploys in that book is similar to, and concurrent with, Subrahmanyam's, in that he seeks to investigate thinkers from the south, from Sri Lanka and the English-speaking Caribbean, in a "practice of criticism that establishes both connections and disconnections."<sup>33</sup>

To these two projects—Subrahmanyam in 1997 and Scott in 1999—we could add Achille Mbembe's notion of entanglements as he presented it in *De la postcolonie* from 2000. In retrospect, one might argue that these thinkers were engaged with a *new* and different problem than were their theoretical precursors.<sup>34</sup> I had the sense from your paper in April that you write in the wake of this Southern turn?

**AV:** Yes, David Scott is, I think, an extraordinarily engaging and useful thinker of and from the South not least because he is so attuned to other such thinkers—in particular C. L. R. James. Scott builds on James's meditations on the fates of Toussaint Louverture, leader of the Haitian Revolution, as a so-called conscript of modernity, as (he suggests) all post-Enlightenment, post-imperial subjects invariably and necessarily are.

In *Omens of Adversity*, Scott's account of the aftermath of the failed Grenada Revolution of the early 1980s (ending with the American invasion of 1983), he describes what he sees as a general disjunctive temporal experience among those who live in the wake of partially or wholly failed projects of political revolution, those who inhabit what he calls the "contemporary aporia of the crisis of political time."<sup>35</sup> In brief, Scott argues that time itself seems to stand apart from history in the lived experience of such places. Where they might once have been understood as more or less interchangeable in the popular imagination, they are "no longer synchronized"; after a failed revolution, which in effect (he argues) gives the lie to a Marxist dialectic understanding of history, time (perhaps we might make links here between this and *now-time*) finds itself "*betrayed* by history."<sup>36</sup> The teleological imperative driving revolution, indeed encoded in the term, has weakened.<sup>37</sup>

Scott argues that *tragedy* is the genre to which subjects in such contexts seem most attuned, and what this entails is alertness to the hubris at the heart of progress narratives, to the complex relationships between temporality and action (or between *inaction* and *impasse*). In characterizing postcolonial temporality as most often tragic, Scott also draws from Raymond Williams's *Modern Tragedy* (1966) the suggestion that freedom—or its promise, glimpsed in revolution—invites the possibility of tragedy precisely because of the unpredictability of human behavior.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> David Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 18.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>34</sup> The concurrent emergence of the Coloniality/Modernity-collective's writing from a Latin American horizon might be seen as yet another answer to the question of what comes after postcoloniality. And perhaps, more daringly, the terrorist attack on 9/11 2001 (which in effect would obliterate the old war on terrorism, rooted in 9/11 1973 with the coup in Chile and the imposition and trial of a new neoliberal order).

<sup>35</sup> Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 5.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 2. See Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 76, 82. For more detailed engagement with Scott, see Van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect*, 15–19, 47–49.

**JW:** Scott certainly identifies a soft spot in the (left-oriented) writing of anticolonial— or, for that matter, postcolonial—histories: the conflation of hope and utopianism (in the past), with the idea of linear progress. Similarly, in his essay “African Modes of Self-Writing,” Achille Mbembe addresses and interrogates how the past experiences of slavery, colonialism and apartheid have shaped “[t]he present destiny of the continent [as] supposed to proceed not from free and autonomous choices but from the legacy of a history imposed upon Africans—burned into their flesh by rape, brutality, and all sorts of economic conditionalities.”<sup>39</sup> Although these experiences animated the struggle for independence, it would be too easy to assume that they constitute one timeless problem-space (to borrow a term from Scott). Mbembe suggests that the two main currents within African historiography, what he names “Afro-radicalism” and “nativism,” have “invented a narrative of liberation built around the dual temporality of a glorious—albeit fallen—past (tradition) and a redeemed future (nationalism)” only disrupted by three events: slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. This narrative of liberation results in history as Romance, and leaves out or silences the overlaps and entanglements of historical tragedies that cannot be explained solely with reference to colonialism.

This is what Mbembe calls “the postcolonial paradigm of victimization” and what Scott in a similar way calls the postcolonial “metaphysics of antiessentialism” that re-essentializes itself.<sup>40</sup> Yet, with the student protests in South Africa in 2015 and 2016, so much of the failed promises in the revolution resurfaced in the demands of students, not only in terms of free education and education for the black majority, but also a revival of Black Consciousness and, not least, of the stalled revolution of land restitution. What appeared on one level to treat the symbolic remnants of apartheid and its precursors, street names and monuments (civilization as barbarism), was also a very material struggle: student fees, university salaries, and land rights. From my Nordic point of view, it seemed as a struggle in which signifier and signified went together.

If Scott has been very to the point in his identification of the different questions and problems that animated the anticolonial proponents of the Bandung-era, in comparison to the problem-space in which “postcoloniality” was an answer, he too is pulled into the matrix of problem-spaces. In *Omens of Adversity*, he argues that we have moved away from the perspective of seeing the past as driven by conflicts and oppression that must be overcome. There are strong semblances between Scott’s argument of a present condition that is governed by an individualized sense of the past in the shape of personal trauma, and the ways in which John and Jean Comaroff identify the danger in memorialization and heritagization of the past. Scott writes that while “not so very long ago, the past was *social* fact; now however, it is a *pathological* one.” He continues: “The past is a wound that will not heal. What the past produces now are inward psychic harms and injuries to an individual sense of self and a collective sense of identity.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the Comaroffs argue in their chapter “History on Trial,” that if a Benjaminian mobilization of memory “is to live up to its subversive

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<sup>39</sup> Mbembe, “African Modes of Self-Writing,” 243.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 251; Scott, *Omens*, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 13.

promise” beyond populist and identitarian politics then “it has to be reunited, as subjective consciousness, with history as an account of the *collective* production of the present.”<sup>42</sup> One question is thus how the historical conscious can activate the past without falling into the trap of producing *ressentiment* in the present, a clinging on to the wounds of the past. Another is whether the perspectives that inform Scott and the Comaroffs are also the result of a given problem-space in which “identity politics” is in conflict with collective struggle. Thus, might there be a failure to recognize the current movement as a possible leap out of the circle of repetition (of farces and tragedies)?

**AV:** I think you frame these important questions in enormously productive and suggestive ways, and I can’t presume to try to answer them. The problems of *ressentiment* and identity politics are nearly intractable, it seems to me. I’m troubled by movements that set themselves up as new in ways that might in fact be new only if they made connections with past movements and moments in a more nuanced way than the times, perhaps, allow.

As you cited Mbembe and raised the student movement in South Africa in particular I am reminded of one of Mbembe’s interventions during the first turbulent months of this moment when it seemed first to have emerged in 2015, in which he says something very similar, though perhaps in a way that has laid him open to critique by those who are not attuned to the subtlety of the position. Specifically, I am thinking about how he worried that the ways in which what he called “tropes of pain and suffering” had begun to saturate “narratives of selfhood and identity” (ironically, he noted, especially among black middle-class activists) meant that a kind of identity politics that elided the collective was in the ascendancy. The result was that “autobiographical and at times self-indulgent ‘petit bourgeois’ discourse has replaced structural analysis. Personal feelings now suffice. There is no need to mount a proper argument.”<sup>43</sup> I think this chimes perfectly with the Comaroffs’ statement of the problem of engaging history as “account of the *collective* production of the present.” I depart from Mbembe’s reluctance to see the potential in viewing the personal as political, but perhaps only insofar as to refuse to do so does not allow us to take up the challenge of reading representations of personal experiences of impasse in contemporary South African writing as spur to the kind of reactivation of the utopian that we are both interested in (you and me, though I have no doubt both of us and Mbembe too!). I think I agree with his analysis of public discourse and the language of activism, and I think this is the point that you are making, too. But in relation to the literary, I concur with Pumla Gqola’s sense that “South African literature has veered away from a preoccupation with the spectacular contest between dominant and disempowered to a textured exploration of emotion, possibility and entanglement.”<sup>44</sup>

*Entanglement*, of course, is a useful term, as Sarah Nuttall has shown, and as Mbembe himself has argued in relation to the multiply overlaid temporalities of the postcolony.<sup>45</sup> I think this is another way of thinking about the location of those utopian impulses that we

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<sup>42</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Theory From the South*, 152.

<sup>43</sup> Mbembe, “Achille Mbembe on The State of South African Political Life,” online.

<sup>44</sup> Gqola, “The difficult task of normalizing freedom,” 62. See further Van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect*, 154–6.

<sup>45</sup> See Nuttall, *Entanglement*; see Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 14–15.

hope to resurrect. I discuss this in relation to some recent South African fiction that engages, *inter alia*, with the idea of *unfailure*, in the last chapter of my book, drawing there on Jennifer Wenzel's suggestive unpacking of the legacies of millenarian prophecies (like the 1856 Xhosa cattle killings). Wenzel argues at one point, for example, that that episode's "vexed temporality"—or what she calls "its entanglement of retrospection and anticipation, and the potential for haunting by its unrealized visions of liberation"—might offer postapartheid South Africa a timely model for animating the "utopian surplus" (her invocation of Bloch) that lingers amid, or on account of, such temporal entanglement, "a still dynamic remnant of undischarged anticipation that can be put to work."<sup>46</sup>

I do not want to rehearse here the readings I offer of Masande Ntshanga's *The Reactive* (2014) or Songeziwe Mahlangu's *Penumbra* (2013) in that final chapter of my book,<sup>47</sup> but want instead to say something prompted by your invocation of Marx in your final statement above, about tragedy and farce. The context for Marx's famous formulation—that history repeats first as tragedy then as farce—was his suggestion that the German regime of the 1830s and 1840s could only *pretend* to believe in its own ideology. It was not like the *ancien régime*, whose history, Marx suggested, was tragic because it was a "re-existing power" and actually believed in its own position and privilege. "As long as the *ancien régime*, as an established world order, was struggling against a world that was only just emerging, there was a world-historical error on its side but not a personal one," he argued; "[i]ts downfall was therefore tragic." By contrast, what Marx called the "modern *ancien régime*" was "rather merely the *clown* of a world order whose *real heroes* are dead."<sup>48</sup> This could be read as a chilling indictment of the failures of post-revolutionary governments, whether these are the reactionary leaders of coups or the ex-struggle accommodationists.

Žižek, offering a gloss on Marx's formulation, asks us to think about its relevance for contemporary global neo-liberalism (and it is certainly useful to think of South Africa as part of this picture). "Do today's preachers and practitioners of liberal democracy not also 'only imagine that they believe in themselves,' in their pronunciations?" Žižek asks, and continues:

In fact, it would be more appropriate to describe contemporary cynicism as representing an exact inversion of Marx's formula: today, we only imagine that we do *not* "really believe" in our ideology—in spite of this imaginary distance, we continue to practice it. We believe not less but much more than we imagine we believe. Benjamin was thus indeed prescient in his remark that "everything depends on how one believes in one's belief."<sup>49</sup>

Žižek here usefully returns us to Benjamin, but I think there is something else we might unpack more fully if we had time. The passage from Marx I quoted above ends with the observation that History is thorough and passes through many stages while bearing an ancient

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<sup>46</sup> Wenzel, *Bulletproof*, 189. See Van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect*, 170–71.

<sup>47</sup> Van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect*, 151–72.

<sup>48</sup> Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," 247–48.

<sup>49</sup> Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, 3, quoting from Benjamin's *Gesammelte Briefe*, 182.

form to its grave. The last phase of a world-historical form is its *comedy*. [...] Why does history take this course? So that mankind may part *happily* with its past.<sup>50</sup>

I wonder how we might think more about what I think we could read Marx to be saying about the genres or modes through which we make sense of our present, as a way of parting with the past (or perhaps reaching back into it in different ways). But perhaps that would take us somewhere else entirely, another conversation completely.

**JW:**

This is of course a very relevant question, of the opposition between Marx's historical mode of comedy and Benjamin's open messianic time beyond Marx's historical index. In my paper I raised concern about tragedy as form, because it might lend itself to see radical projects such as El Complejo and the Durban moment as—just like you say—*failures*, while in fact we should turn to these past utopianisms in our present, as the tradition of the oppressed that Benjamin speaks of. In Durban, on 9 January 1973, 2000 workers employed at the Coronation Tile and Brick Factory went on strike, chanting *filumunti ufilusadikiza*, “man is dead but his spirit lives.” The strike was thus conducted not only about the striking workers and their families, but in the name of all the generations of oppressed black workers before them. That is to say, these strikers might have been killed, yet the spirit that preceded them and that they were furthering could not be.

Benjamin says somewhere that “[o]nly for the sake of the hopelessness we have been given hope,” which philosopher Sami Khatib interprets not as a future-oriented hope, but a hope that has been “*given* by those who lived before us,”<sup>51</sup> in other words a hope that lies in the openness of the past. Thus, it is not only the “hatred and [...] spirit of sacrifice” that is passed on from past generations, it is also the spirit of hope that lives on in the case of the striking workers. This strike was completely unexpected, and as is perhaps the case, too, with the student protests in a closer South African past, also legible as a moment of weak messianic power. As Marshall Berman noted, “[b]y the time Marx's proletarians finally appear, the world stage on which they were supposed to play their part has disintegrated and metamorphosed into something unrecognizable, surreal, a mobile construction that shifts and changes shape under the player's feet.”<sup>52</sup> Conversely, this unrecognizability also concerns the appearance of the “proletarians” themselves.

To return, finally, to the question of happiness and genre (or, perhaps, *form*), that you raise. In his analysis of Marx's approach to historical narration, Hayden White argues that, for Marx, “history had to be emplotted in two ways simultaneously: in the mode of Tragedy and in the mode of Comedy.”<sup>53</sup> Tragedy because of the history up until his time; comedy because of the historical destiny Marx envisioned for the proletariat. In wresting the dialectical method of analysis from the hands of Hegel's idealism, Marx did not abandon Hegel's idea of reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) through “man's liberation from nature,” nor “the abolition of

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<sup>50</sup> Marx, “A Contribution,” 248.

<sup>51</sup> Khatib, “The Messianic Without Messianism”, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, 91.

<sup>53</sup> White, *Metahistory*, 286.

men's estrangement from one another" through the development of the historical consciousness.<sup>54</sup>

For Benjamin—before he read Marx—"the order of the profane" was to be "erected on the idea of happiness," a profane Messianism.<sup>55</sup> In his later engagement with Marx, he comments on the passage on the "happy historical destiny" as follows: "A reconciled humanity will take leave of its past—and *one* form of reconciliation is gaiety."<sup>56</sup> A few notes later, Benjamin returns to the idea of reconciliation and restlessness in history (contrary to Hegel's healed wounds), arguing that history is not "simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance [*Eingedänken*]."<sup>57</sup> This remembrance can modify what science has established: it can "make the incomplete (happiness) into something uncompleted, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete." I read this passage—especially with the history of South Africa in mind—as a reminder that what appears as settled or reconciled with (the overcoming of the wound, the trauma) might be reactivated and set into motion as a re-engaged move towards reparation.

**AV:** Indeed, the sense of hope (a Blochian educated, even chastened, hope) as temporal and always able to be revived. I think one can also read Marx's final question-and-answer formulation—"Why does history take this course? So that mankind may part *happily* with its past"—as an insightful comment on the ways in which genre organizes affective response (as Lauren Berlant, among others, has reminded us). Comedy and tragedy, after all, are often about the relative relationship of protagonists to power and its reversal. Witnessing the powerful being reduced to figures of comedy empowers the audience; this is why satire has such an important political function. Finding ways to laugh in the face of the current post-truth politics of cynicism is perhaps another way of rescuing the utopian energies of, amongst others, the carnivalesque.

**JW:** At the very end of this correspondence, the South African National Assembly passed a motion for land restitution without compensation which forces us to return the stalled second revolution. The motion was brought by the Economic Freedom Fighters, with its leader Julius Malema opening the parliamentary debate with the words: "The time for reconciliation is over. Now is the time for justice." This may be an instance of a wryly reactivated memory that is now being used by populist identitarian politics, as per the Comaroffs' warning (fire alarm), but I believe that we (especially I) should refrain from instantly calling it that. It is too early to say if this means the opening of a new chapter in the history of South Africa, its reconciliation and redemption, or the very last passage of the previous one. Nevertheless, if reconciliation must come with reparations, it must be by means of a politics with its gaze toward that which must come, and not only toward the past.

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<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, 282.

<sup>55</sup> Benjamin, "Theologico-Political Fragment", 21. The date of this fragment is disputed, either around 1920–1921 (Scholem's view) or 1937–1938 (Adorno's view). Today, it is believed that it was written around 1920, that is, before Benjamin's engagement with Marx.

<sup>56</sup> Benjamin, "N, on the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress," [N5a,2], 467.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, [N8,1], 471.



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