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Book review

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Nicky Falkof, *Worrier State: Risk, Anxiety and Moral Panic in South Africa*. Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2022; 248 pp.: ISBN: 978-1-5261-6402-5, £80.00 (hbk).

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While reading Nicky Falkof's Worrier State: *Risk, anxiety, and moral panic in South Africa*, I couldn't help but think of the video of Nina Simone being interviewed that often floats around social media where she is asked about her idea of freedom. She answers, unequivocally: No fear! Simone's association of freedom with no fear speaks to the African American experience of everyday terrorism of racism in the United States, where black people, up to the contemporary moment, fear for their lives from white people's anti-black violence. Ironically, in South Africa, post-apartheid democracy was supposed to bring freedom, not fear, but post-apartheid South Africa, as demonstrated in *Worrier State*, is gripped by risk, anxiety and moral panic. *Worrier State* is a timely contribution to a better understanding of cultures of fear that have come to shape post-apartheid reality. South Africa is the culmination of historical events that make it the perfect place to inspect the archives for the study of cultures of fear. *Worrier State* shows how 'fears were constructed, disseminated, shared, and indulged in, and how they may impact on identity, selfhood and otherness for certain people at certain moments' (p. 25). In this book Falkof takes seriously interdisciplinarity, traversing affect studies, urban studies, critical race studies, African studies, and in the process refuses to place the book in just one of these areas of inquiry. This is important because to make sense of post-apartheid quandaries demands a multi-disciplinary approach that takes seriously history, intersecting identities and social positions, power and privilege, local myths and global flows of capital and culture in the neoliberal moment.

Worrier State is framed by four stories in four chapters – each about a different part of Johannesburg – 'each is implicated in the social, spatial, cultural, and economic patterns that structure South Africa in multiple ways' (p. 28). In this book Falkof does a discourse analysis of violence, actual or feared and narratives about violence that are often shared and spread through in-person communication or via the different types of media that we collectively imbibe. In looking at social narratives about violence, the author analyses all forms on media, including social media and newspaper articles, alongside interviews carried out for the project, and treats all of these as texts that produce knowledge and tell us something about power and social relations in 21st century South Africa. Falkof argues that collective emotion is a key part of contemporary life, and part of this in South Africa is a collective anxiety about danger. There is an overwhelming idea of danger and living under siege. The constant threat of being victimised is part of everyday conversations on radio, social media and around the braai (BBQ) fires, and then finds its material

manifestation in suburbs with high cement walls and electric fences that give an eerie static noise in the quiet of night. A noise that has become part of the suburban soundscape at night. It is through these factors that Falkof concludes that in South Africa, there is a production of fear, central to which is the creation of 'the other'. In the different chapters of *Worrier State*, you see the different ways fear is produced in different communities with varied instigators, where fact and myth become difficult to decipher. Here, then, fear is not happenstance or by accident, 'it is a practice as well as an experience' (p. 10) and the causes can be located in history.

Throughout the book, Falkof makes a point of reminding the reader that while the book is about South Africa, and its particularities, it is not divorced from world politics and processes. Indeed, the author argues that 'the culture of fear is a symptom of both modernity and globalisation' (p. 12) and so when theorising about fear and anxieties in society we have to be cognisant of history and global processes that brought us neoliberalism and the complexities playing out in the global south. The risk, the anxiety and the moral panic that is present in South Africa, like in many other global south contexts can be traced to a loss of control of local sociality, politics and economics. With neoliberalism there has been a shift from the local towards a global and multinational, making people disconnected from centres of power. This has created local and global collective experiences of fear as environmental, economic and immigratory concerns the world over have increased and caused all kinds of panic. These planetary concerns are only likely to increase as global inequality and stratification continues.

Falkof argues that collective fears and moral panics are not new. History is replete with records of group anxieties and fears, it is how we talk about them that changes. This is convincing, particularly when we think about the role of modern media and its fusion with popular culture in spreading fear, creating what Falkof calls 'a cognitive environment that emphasises danger' (p. 13). In multiple chapters of the book, the reader clearly sees the influence and the impact of new media forms on the production of fear in different communities with different issues at stake. The Red October campaign, and AfriForum, both aiming to promote 'white genocide' and marketing white South Africans, particularly white Afrikaner farmers, as victims of white massacres at the hands of black people, use websites and news outlets to spread their message. AfriForum particularly, is so well resourced that their 'white genocide' campaign landed on Fox News in the United States, where seemingly, there was sympathy for white South Africans and their supposed plight in South Africa. As Falkof points out, of course, there is no white genocide in South Africa, in fact, most white South Africans live more privileged and more secured lives than the black majority that lives in poverty and is at much higher risk of experiencing crime. The myths of white genocide propagated by white Afrikaaner groups pitching themselves as a minority rights group in South Africa frames white Afrikaaner farmers as victims, a victimhood that deliberately ignores or obscures black death. In the promotion of white victimhood there is a 'tendency to naturalise violence for black people and exceptionalise it for whites' (p. 61). Therefore, the Red October campaign and AfriForum weaponise and manipulate fear and anxiety about crime and violence for racist ends and promote the idea of a white genocide in an elaborate process of trying to rewrite history where whites, particularly Afrikaners, are victims. Falkof makes a revealing link between the supposed genocidal white farm murders and the fight against land expropriation. In other words, white groups like AfriForum's use of the narrative of white genocide is about 'entrenching white property rights and securing white economic power rather than about countering genocide' (p. 63). Equally important in the narrativisation of white genocide in South Africa,

is how the Red October campaign and AfriForum refuse to see and acknowledge that the problems they care about – crime and joblessness – are issues that disproportionately affect the black population of South Africa. The way crime affects black communities disproportionately is demonstrated in the narratives about 'plasma gangs' and the ways that residents of Alexander township respond to the plasma gangs, discussed in one of the chapters of the book.

Plasma gangs are said to be crime rings situated in Alexander township in Johannesburg. Falkok delves into the mythical world of gangs who break into people's homes in the township and steal plasma televisions for the purpose of opening them up to extract a mysterious powder that is then used to make 'nyaope', a street drug popular with young people. The powder in question is magnesium oxide, and research shows that this substance does not contain any psychotropic qualities. Regardless of the facts around the effects of the substance, the myth of the plasma gangs gripped Alexander and other townships in the country. Falkof demonstrates that new social media, like Twitter, have played a significant role in the spread of the narrative of plasma gangs and their need for magnesium oxide. A popular white radio DJ started the narrative about plasma gangs on the radio. It was a story he had heard of the gangs, and then proceeded to tweet about the topic, which then caught fire and moved to other social media and news outlets. Here, it is important *how* the story finds traction, that it was a popular white DJ on radio that enabled the story before others jumped in on the narrative. This then raises questions of power, because through the radio the white DJ has power to disseminate all kinds of information into the public realm. The DJ in question is not a resident of Alexander township but talked about a story he had heard. While there was traction for the story, some Twitter data and some of the interview respondents from Alexander that were asked about the plasma gangs showed ambivalence about the mythical gang. Instead, the sceptics, and Falkof, places the plasma gang within the larger problem of crime in South Africa instead of a specialised, mythical entity. The plasma gang narrative is a peculiar story about consumption and anxiety, because plasma screens are desirable objects that are also relatively accessible status symbol artifacts within the township environment, but their visibility in someone's house could mean the danger of a break in. Through the plasma gangs, Falkok is urging us to take seriously 'the centrality of African urban to contemporary city forms' (p. 116) and develop theories about these city forms that are generated in their local environment and refrain from using global north ideas about city life in Africa or the global south in general. Debates about consumption in post-apartheid South Africa have been controversial precisely because African/South African urban life has not been adequately theorised. Therefore, debates about consumption in Africa/South Africa are seen through the lens of 'conspicuous consumption', that see African consumption as only excessive and in bad taste, that obscure what is really taking place. There is no escaping the fact that consumption is a 'fundamental component of modernity and urban self-making' (p. 116) but that we need to be more careful and nuanced in our reading of African/South African consumption. The biggest take-away here is that the plasma story demonstrates what Falkof calls the 'contradiction of life in the globalised South African city' (p. 118) and this, for me, is what makes Johannesburg such a compelling place to theorise from and about.

In the last chapter where Falkof discusses the production of fear and anxiety within white suburbia in South Africa, again, technology becomes an important tool that is used in fostering community in the white and wary suburb of Melville in Johannesburg. White suburbs are notorious for their neighbourhood or apartment block Facebook and WhatsApp groups, where loathing,

paranoia and ongoing fear are cultivated behind a sheen of community solidarity. Falkof does a detailed analysis of a Facebook page called 'I Love Melville' where the neighbourhood of Melville is presented as a welcoming place for middle-class people, a middle-classness that is associated with whiteness. In this group you clearly see Falkof's argument that 'we are active consumers and producers of discourses of fear, with agency and impact' (p. 13) as you read white suburban residents' preoccupation with risk, crime and outsiders. These outsiders are black outsiders consisting of homeless people, car guards and really just any random black man, all scapegoated for a range of social ills that befall people in South African communities. Falkok's analysis enables us to see how 'white talk' refuses to make any links between the continuation of colonial and apartheid structures, colonial and apartheid acquired white wealth, which the majority of white South Africans benefit from, and the homelessness, joblessness, and crime in post-apartheid South Africa. Facebook and WhatsApp groups are where white people congregate to talk about their fears and these groups themselves generate fear and paranoia, in the process 'demonising poverty while simultaneously ignoring its causes' (p. 164). Similarly to the Red October campaign and AfriForum that fight against a supposed white genocide, these Facebook and WhatsApp groups negate the fact that black people are by far more likely to be the victims of crime and violence without the financial resources to buy security and high suburban walls. Therefore, the questions that drive *Worrier State*, like 'what risk, anxiety, and moral panic look like and feel like in South Africa, how are they communicated, what forms they take, how these are influenced by the country's history of racial violence and segregation' (p. 17), are pertinent in understanding the production of the culture of fear in post-apartheid South Africa.

It goes without saying that crime is a highly emotive issue in South Africa. All the material covered by Falkof in *Worrier State*, in newspaper articles, radio conversations, websites, television shows, Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook, are full of high emotions about crime. Here, then, Falkof's argument that 'emotions are performative. . . . They are political rather than ahistorical' (p. 15) rings true. Emotions as performative is highly visible in the chapter that chronicles white suburban fears about black danger. Falkof expands on the idea of ethnosociologies to make sense of the transmission of the cultures of fear, focusing not only on the narratives that people produce to make sense of the world but taking seriously the *ethno* in ethnosociology and asking *who* is producing the stories of fear. Here then, the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, income and geography plays an important role in how people think about and narrate crime and criminality, and the anxieties that they produce. Using Critcher's (2011) idea that 'fear distorts and misrecognises social realities', Falkof addresses how people misrecognise real problems to support simplistic solutions which inevitably do not solve their problems. Here again, the idea of black danger and black criminality is an easy scapegoat, a shorthand, that ignores the difficulty of South African history replete with land wars, deprivation, segregation and apartheid laws that has outright criminalised the black body. With the idea of distorted social realities, I wish Falkof would have created space to discuss afro-phobic xenophobia. While the author touches on afro-phobic xenophobia in the book, they do not give it substantial space. Distorted social realities is an apt description for the multiple ways that anxieties around foreigners from other parts of the African continent are produced, where South Africans blame foreigners for their lack of jobs and accuse foreigners of stealing 'our women'. The narrative of 'stealing our women' is, of course, itself replete with toxic gender ideologies where South African women do not belong to themselves but to South African men; a narrative that has been the subject of two books by Gqola

(2015, 2021), both of which are referenced in *Worrier State*. I couldn't help but think of the urgency of Gqola's work on sexual violence particularly, and gender-based violence in general when reading Falkok's analysis of two different 'satanic murders' that took place in Johannesburg. Falkof pays attention to the reporting of the murder of Kirsty Theologo, who died from heavy burns from a satanic ritual, and Thandeka Moganetsi and Chwayita Rathazayo, who were also killed in a ritual sacrifice. Falkof takes issue with the fact that the media was overly invested in the satanic panic elements of the stories of these murders, ignoring the general high number of gender-based violence and sexual violence in South Africa. The narratives surrounding these murders is that the girls killed were part of some kind of cult and were part of a sacrifice, and this explanation seemed to be accepted at face value in media coverage. Falkof argues that 'in over-investing in evil as the sole explanation of these spectacular murders, media representation avoided the need to interrogate them' (p. 82). Often, in South Africa, when cases of gender-based violence, and femicide, enter the public domain, all kinds of excuses are given about possible explanations for why violence occurred, often excusing the violent behaviour of the perpetrator. Another tactic in dealing with violence in South Africa is focusing on the extreme cases of violence and giving them supernatural explanation that 'distracts us from the social/cultural and structural qualities of gender-based violence' (p. 83). The focus on satanism in the murder of these girls enabled society to ignore problematic masculinities that see women as objects to be owned. As Falkof demonstrates, the majority of the media coverage of the court cases of these murders focused on sensational ideas about satanic rituals, where in the murder of the two girls, priests and prayer sessions were involved in order to create a cleansing ceremony. Here then, religion and the satanic framing of the murders provides relief, they have a balming effect that enables people to escape the reality of everyday violence, and gender-based violence that is not spectacular but quotidian in its destruction.

Worrier State is a welcomed contribution to our understanding of risk, anxiety and moral panic in post-apartheid South Africa. The multi-disciplinary approach employed by Falkof is instrumental in having a bigger picture that includes histories of colonialism and apartheid, that enables us to see how we arrived at the cultures of violence in the contemporary moment. Equally important, as demonstrated by Falkof, we cannot begin to understand contemporary forms of violence without taking seriously the complex intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, income and geography and how these impact on one's vulnerability to violence. Lastly, Falkof's urging for us to take seriously urban African city forms is paramount. The focus on Johannesburg and its particularities has much to teach us about local cultures of fear and how they are forged through global and multinational neoliberal processes.

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