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Work, leisure and ageing

Work imaginaries in South Africa
H. J. Dawson and E. Fouksman

Leisure time in eastern Uganda
Ben Jones

Cross-racial joking in South Africa
Casey Golomski

Contesting law and authority

Lawyers and liberation in South Africa
Timothy Gibbs

Corporatization of tradition in Namibia
Mario Krämer

Rural-religious responses to drought
Laura L. Cochrane

Civil society in Niger
Jannik Schritt

Yorùbá Èṣù and ethics
Ọlásopé O. Oyèláràn

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Greying mutuality: race and joking relations in a South African nursing home

Casey Golomski

Scene I: 'He is always looking'

It is a Thursday after lunch at a 'frailcare' or nursing home for older adults in rural South Africa that I call Withuis. I sit with two black women caregivers, Special and Mhambi – bored, scribbling on supermarket advertisements for chicken thighs. At the end of the hall, Ambrose, a white male resident, comes out of his room, taking short strides in his dingy slippers. His brow furrows and his green eyes water. It seems he is speaking as he approaches, but not audibly and not directly to us.

Mhambi calls out to him, 'What do you want here? What are you saying?'

Ambrose replies smilingly with another question, 'Are you being naughty here?'

Special asks, 'Ambrose, are you talking to yourself?' Mhambi laughingly follows, 'This one here!' 'He thinks he is talking to Pik!' says Special.

'Oh no, man!' says Ambrose, shaking his head. Special intercedes: 'Pik is looking down on us.' Ambrose agrees, 'Yes, he is always looking.'

Mhambi laughs, 'He wants to know that we're being nice to you!' Ambrose laughs too, turning to me. 'Ha! They [the caregivers] are always nice. No complaints. Pik never thought they were nasty. They're always kind to me, always.'

Mhambi agrees – 'Yes, we're always kind to you' – as does Special: 'Ambrose is always kind to us. Pik and Ambrose are always kind to us.'

When I first met Ambrose in 2015, he was seventy-four years old. The Withuis staff nurses appreciated his willingness and ability to help them on small errands, and he often accompanied them on shopping trips for residents if they asked for cigarettes and special groceries. He was also a good gossip, telling nurses when the caregivers, whose work the nurses oversaw, cut corners. The caregivers were not unaware of this spy game, a dynamic echoed in his joking question about whether or not Special and Mhambi were being 'naughty' on the job.

Ambrose also had epilepsy, which resulted in sometimes tremulous movements, including a mouth that appeared as if it were about to say something. He never directly told me about his diagnosis, but the nurses said that it was the primary medical condition that led him to reside there. He arrived in late 2013 with his husband, Pik, to whom he was married for over fifty years. There they shared a room and put up photographic portraits of each other on the wall above each other's beds. Ambrose identified his major illness to be lingering emotions surrounding the experience of

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Pik's death in the home in 2014, namely the moment he was ushered out of the room by the staff after reporting that Pik had stopped breathing.

Cheekily, Ambrose told me over cigarettes on the garden patio that 'no one' knew that he and Pik were married life partners, although several caregivers made suggestive comments to me, both singly and in front of Ambrose, that they did. Ambrose also told me that their relationship was not part of what 'they' believed in – 'they' referring to Withuis's mostly white heterosexual Afrikaner residents and nurses and his previous, largely segregated, white Pretoria neighbourhood. What was significant about this moment of joking was that the caregivers indirectly acknowledged and affirmed their marriage, and Ambrose trusted them for it. He also found the caregivers to be better daily company than his fellow hallway residents who lived with advanced stages of dementia. By joking about his tremors as a form of verbal communication with his deceased husband, the caregivers also invoked Pik as a spiritual presence watching over Ambrose in the home. For Ambrose, this was a chance to joke that both he and Pik were watching the caregivers to see if they were attending to the residents rather than bantering with me, an ethnographer.

Postcolonial joking: race, history and limits of participation

Following this case, I discuss how joking unfolds in this small-town, multiracial nursing home and theorize the implications it has there and elsewhere in postcolonial Africa as a form of social life described in anthropological theory as mutuality. Through the interactions of Ambrose, Special, Mhambi and the other people featured in two additional ethnographic scenes, I trace how residents and staff in Withuis exchange jokes with each other in everyday encounters of caregiving to depict the emergence of mutuality amid interracial and intergenerational complexities. These complexities and the form of joking also echo their country's history of racist inequality. Despite many advances in social gerontological research across the continent, race and age as intersecting axes of social difference in postcolonial societies are still rarely discussed in critical theory.[1] I thus consider what joking can show us about the contemporary social dynamics of multicultural coexistence, particularly in institutionalized spaces such as nursing homes where certain people's lives tend to be marginalized or put out of the 'public sphere' in what Biehl (2005) terms 'zones of abandonment'. People's marginalization in and through these spaces, however, does not necessarily entail their social homogenization. Questioning how diverse others in such spaces and in close proximity amiably interact and imbricate themselves in each other's lives – part of what I take to be mutuality – is an overarching aim of this article.

In Africa and the African diaspora more broadly, joking and humorous enactments, like the one described above, are said to do many things.[2] My interpretive

[1]See van Dyk and Küpper (2016) and Rajan-Rankin (2018), and, relatedly, Buch (2015) on the extensive literature on racialized immigrant workers involved in eldercare globally. One major historical effect of capitalist industrialization on the human life course has been the institutionalization of older adults who are deemed no longer productive, a move only recently being replicated for non-white older adults in postcolonial Africa (Hoffman and Pype 2016).

[2]Politically, for example, ribald performances may reproduce 'convivial' socio-cultural inequalities between rulers and ruled (Mbembe 2015) and, as comedic media, serve as powerful

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approach aligns with those who argue that, in multicultural postcolonial societies and along their borders, joking operates to mediate cultural, ethnic and class differences among diverse groups in both everyday and high-stakes events (Diallo 2006; Pype 2015; Devlieger 2018). Another key dimension of this approach that also originates in *Africa* is that joking mediates intergenerational relationships and, in turn, may reaffirm obligation and hierarchy among age groups (Radcliffe-Brown 1952; 1940; 1949; Drucker-Brown 1982; Rosenberg 2009). Radcliffe-Brown (1952), for example, contrasted domestic or more private consociational joking among kin of alternate generations, like grandparents and grandchildren, with the social dynamics of contractual relations where duties to others are structured by societies' public laws and economies rather than kin rules. For him, the joke itself was how conflict was resolved and social breakdown was avoided in relations of consociation. Joking did not have this function or was missing in contractual relations.[3]

Today, we see this contrast between spheres of kinship and political economy, the private and the public, as overdrawn (McKinnon and Cannell 2013). Rather, these spheres co-constitute each other along axes of race, gender and sexuality (Bear *et al*. 2015), as well as age. Still, insights on contrasting spheres of social action and communicative expression offer a productive point of engagement because they speak to the contrasts surrounding notions of kinship and care work that people in Withuis draw among themselves. Kinship is a primary model for social reality, in a Geertzian sense, for residents and staff, in that many claimed that they were living and working together 'like a family', despite no one being genetically or legally related to each other in this institutional setting deemed a 'home'.

On one side in the home are mostly black women staff caregivers. They make 3,500 rand (US$240) per month, commute at least an hour and a half to work from communities that were formerly (and largely are still informally) racially segregated, lift heavy sagging bodies onto toilets, try to feed un-opening mouths, and often face stony silences and aggression from unhappy, indifferent whites who inevitably represent generations of apartheid oppressors. On the other side are

commentary on the nation state (Obadare 2010; Bernal 2013). Joking is a resource to laugh politically and existentially in the face of disease (Black 2012; Livingston 2012), poverty and violence (Goldstein 2003; Hernann 2016), and histories of enslavement (Carpio 2008). Joking disentangles contemporary identities among histories of modernization and infrastructure (Fouéré 2006; Droney 2014; Degani 2018) and complicates gendered and sexual power (Yitah 2012; Chernoff 2013; Groes-Green 2013).

[3]In articles originally published in this journal and then collectively reprinted, Radcliffe-Brown (1952; 1940; 1949) argued that, as a form of social action, joking stably organizes conflictual behaviours in stereotyped moments of playfully permitted disrespect, the effect of which Griaule (1948) characterized as cathartic. Radcliffe-Brown (1940; 1952: 96) saw consociational joking as 'united by kinship' but 'separated by age' and social differences pertaining to younger cohorts' increasing participation in society and older cohorts' withdrawal from it. This juxtaposition engendered joking 'of a relatively mild kind' between the two groups. These relations contrasted with contractual relations 'entered into by two persons or two groups, in which either party has definite positive obligations toward each other, and failure to carry out the obligations is subject to a legal sanction' (Radcliffe-Brown 1940; 1952: 103). In both kinds of relationships, there are shifting degrees of 'asymmetry', but the onus of responsibility for resolving conflict is different. Discussing these theories also historicizes my ethnography as these ideas were in circulation when some of the individuals discussed in this article were born (the 1930s and 1940s).

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mostly lower-class white women residents who lived in the area as farmers and housewives and are now alone and lonely, ailing physically and/or psychologically, and socially abandoned by their kin. The violence of the country's history cannot be erased in encounters between these groups; it inevitably shapes them. Indeed, both low-paid black caregivers and elderly middle- to lower-class white residents in the home are rendered effectively peripheral people in contemporary South Africa, their respective life histories and realities made mutual by their co-dependencies on privatized social welfare – for one group, as a form of labour to live by, and for the other, as a way to keep on living in late life.

As a conceptual and theoretical intervention, I argue that joking interactions among these diverse yet kin-like groups constitute a form of mutuality. While seemingly a basic term connoting relationships of reciprocity, mutuality is being interrogated in anthropological theory to better conceptualize forms of sociality. Recent research questions surrounding the concept of mutuality pertain to who and what are kin-type relations (Sahlins 2013; Carsten 2013; Strathern 2014); how people in these relations get along, get by and recognize each other differently in precarious circumstances (Pina-Cabral 2013; Chari and Gillespie 2014; Rodima-Taylor and Bähre 2014; Hage 2015); and how anthropologists work among these relations (Sanjek 2015). Much of this research focuses on kinship, which should not be taken to be synonymous with mutuality. Relatedness can emerge amid systematic 'exclusions, anxieties about (in)appropriate difference and similarity, and destabilized social ties' (Goldfarb and Schuster 2016: 2). Given that hospitable coexistence endures amid radical social and sometimes cognitive differences, an important line of thought I consider is that mutuality among kin-like relationships is produced through people's interactive 'participation' in each other's lives (Sahlins 2013; Hage 2015). My interest lies in questioning what form participation takes and the extent or limits of such participation between people who variably define one another as family in a field marked by multiple languages, different cognitive faculties (dementia, for example) and a shared national history of racism.

In South Africa specifically, joking and comedy tuned to race reflect a politicized freedom of expression about post-apartheid public life (Seirlis 2011; Musila 2014). Discussing race remains a significant theoretical if not practical challenge for Africanist anthropologists (Pierre 2013), as well as for African comedians such as Trevor Noah, whose popularity partly lies in his ability as a biracial South African man to wittily convey his country's racist history to global audiences. His performances are partly funny because racially classified non-white South Africans formerly could not make fun of or talk back to whites (in metaphoric and literal senses) without real threats of state-sanctioned violence. Today, however, 'new normative constraints' of a 'youthful' generation of media consumers, who foreground intersectional sensitivity and historical redress, may critically police aspects of comedy like Noah's that they deem unconscionable (Berlant and Ngai 2017: 234). For some, comedy and joking are more directionally mocking, if not cruel.

Within this freer yet still tense multivocal field of critical expression, Musila (2014: 149) asks, '[W]hat are the possibilities for humour as a vehicle of transgressive engagement with a problematic racial status quo?' – one that explores 'cracks in the rainbow'. Cracks refer to dissonances in the supposedly multicultural harmony that decreasingly defines the political ideology of the post-apartheid

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'Rainbow Nation' that South African citizens were encouraged to celebrate and identify with after the major political transition of the early 1990s. While joking about race – in the manner epitomized by Noah and others such as Lesego 'Coconut Kelz' Tlhabi – may rearticulate racist discourses, it also renders race 'thinkable and speakable' as an otherwise taboo subject (Musila 2014: 165). Joking's ambiguity complicates historical and contemporary racialized social relationships amid local diversification of both race- and class-based identity politics (James 2014; Khunou 2015; Schramm 2015). My attempt to answer Musila's question about humour's critical potentialities shifts from her discourse analysis to an ethnographic one by examining joking in a setting that foregrounds an ambiguous simultaneity of radical social difference and shared existential conundrums.

If we are to understand how joking or humour can engage in a transgressive way the racial status quo of the Rainbow Nation or move beyond it here and in other postcolonial sites, the intersection of race and age might be one critically innovative place to look. Race and age, I argue, uniquely co-inflect the production of mutuality, especially in zones such as Withuis. Instead of marking distinctions between the spheres of contract and consociation, joking enables their convergence, a form of human mutual interaction that affectively undoes the culturally racialized and antagonistic priming of difference inherited across generations. In this case, alternative forms of sociability among radically different others (rather than bonds between them) at the end of life and the ends of apartheid's histories are forged in the play of permitted disrespect.

Ethnography and intentionality

Demographically, the residents at Withuis are mostly white women, as are most of the administrative and nursing staff, while the staff of caregivers and a few nurses are black women. There are important exceptions to these distinctions, and most of the people living and working there are variably multilingual.[4] Founded in the 1950s near Kruger National Park in what was then the Transvaal Province (now Mpumalanga) as a local chapter of a national Afrikaner women's charitable association, it houses about fifty residents, mostly aged sixty and over, who are grouped residentially based on their cognitive and physical faculties. I focus on joking between mostly white residents who live with clinical or presumptive diagnoses of advanced dementia and the black caregivers regularly working with them.

Ethnographically tracing the intimacies and subtleties of joking encounters among these individuals can interrogate contemporary notions of the 'racial status quo' and, importantly, it can grey the lines of historically and structurally reproduced distinctions among generations and 'racial groups'. Recalling

[4]Still, amid this multilingualism, the majority of black staff in the home speak siSwati, Xitsonga and English, while the majority of white staff and residents speak Afrikaans and English. The majority of the staff and residents are heterosexual, Christian women, but there are a few people who also tacitly identify as gay and lesbian Christians.

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Musila's (2014) metaphor of 'cracks', Goldstein (2003: 5) argues that Rio de Janeiro shantytown residents of colour, in laughing at their own rapes, illnesses and others' deaths, 'reveal … the cracks in the system [of racialized power]' and their 'humour is one of the fugitive forms of insubordination' against this system. By using the case of Withuis, a home-like space preoccupied with matters of mortality and the shadows of history, we can domesticate this otherwise fugitive quality of joking and closely examine how 'insubordination' unfolds among people who collectively face these matters on a daily basis.

I conceptualize joking as forms of linguistic, bodily and social play that emerge over time from interpersonal relations, produced here out of contractual obligations of care work. Interpersonal relationships accrete in everyday encounters such as chatting, prayer, counselling, clothing, bathing, administering medication, bandages and ointments, feeding, and toileting. These regular, intimate and sometimes grotesque encounters build up licence to playfully interact with each other, given increasing familiarity. Sometimes people joke with others they do not like, or become the butt of others' jokes, an envelopment in joking regardless of the two sides' volition.

These joking relations are largely cross-racial, but the content of joking is only sometimes directly about race. Stock racial or ethnic stereotypes inform some of the jokes, and embedded racial hierarchies in both this institution and in South Africa obviously inform how joking unfolded and between whom. As I discovered, though, joking was topically more about human conditions of love, loss, sexuality, bodily and mental disintegration, and death, all of which were readily and often depressingly clear to both staff and residents. Debility associated with advanced age or dementia or linguistic or social unintelligibility were the more common motivators for jabs. In other words, residents and staff comprehended and appreciated jokes based on factors relating to people's minds, languages and co-presence.

In presenting two additional ethnographic scenes for analysis, I first describe each scene in the present tense to give a sense of the immediacy of turn taking, surprises in the encounters, and my own positionality and uncertainty about what was going on (Carty and Musharbash 2008; Livingston 2012). Following Goldstein (2003: 44), this approach may not explain why something is 'funny', but it offers more ethnographic context. Carefully detailing these encounters shows that a single joke is always empirically surfeit. It involves what people say (and what they mean to say), directly or indirectly, and what is heard or not (and by and for whom). It involves evoking how joking also resonates with those to whom it is directed or with those who hear it indirectly. Joking also presents a methodological impasse surrounding intentionality (Herzfeld 2001: 63–4; Robbins 2013). In this, the challenge lies in fully discerning what a speaker thought and meant to say in a joke and what they expected others to hear (or not hear). This is a particular analytic challenge given some older adults' changing cognitive faculties and the uneasily shared multilingual participant framework among staff and residents. Documenting these dimensions requires scaling to a micro-sociological level of analysis without disregarding cultural specificities and history, a move that also leads me to develop the interpretive analytic of mutuality.

After an initial site visit in November 2014, I conducted twenty to thirty hours per week of participant observation and interview-based fieldwork at Withuis in

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January–June 2015 and August–October 2019.[5] In terms of forging my own mutual relations with people I met there, I felt subjectively that I crossed several 'insider/outsider' borders (Sanjek 2015), given the many strong interpersonal connections I made and given the kinds of life stories and experiences people confided in me. Talking with and around an ethnographer was also a welcome novelty given the daily, often slow (in)activity in the home. Still, my positionality also critically shaped the unfolding of joking encounters in situ, as I describe below.

Scene II: Ghost money – 'A pack of monkeys'

It is Monday 4 May, the 'first of the month' and the day to do weigh-ins and blood-pressure checks. Special and Mhambi yoke me in to help them, saying 'He'll write fast' and that they will then be done with their documentary work sooner. Going room to room, the two cajole the residents to *gibela i-scale* – 'ride the scale' – and allow them to strap on a shabby blue blood-pressure monitor. It is a task that is both routine yet somewhat extraordinary given its infrequency, and is an opportunity for a little joking.

Resident Anje LeRoux is next. I look through her door, which is ajar. Special and Mhambi are behind me. I tell them she is sleeping. Mhambi knocks loudly and walks in. Anje turns under a pastel knitted blanket. 'We are here to check on you,' says Special. Mhambi begins rubbing Anje's hip as she is lying on her side. Anje mumbles.

Mhambi goes on, 'You are not dreaming, LeRoux! Wake up! Come, wake up now!' Special laughs.

'LeRoux, what do you see?' asks Mhambi. 'There is a man. He says you must go to the mountain. There is money hidden in the mountain. You must find the money.'

Special howls with laughter. I laugh too. It sounds so ridiculous.

'Yes,' Anje says, blinking and seemingly irritated. She rolls over. Mhambi tugs on Special's disposable plastic smock, and they leave to measure Nettie next door as I follow. We come back a few minutes later and Anje is still lying in bed. Mhambi is more forceful, getting Anje to rise, saying, 'Come on now, we must take your BP. Come now.'

'I've just been asleep,' says Anje. 'You just woke me up from the middle of a deep sleep, give me a few minutes.'

'Come on, stand up,' Mhambi says and touches her shoulder, and Anje sits up slowly. Mhambi stretches out her arm in front of Anje for Anje to grab onto and stand up. Anje refuses: 'No man, leave me a moment – I just woke up!'

'*Gibela i-scale*,' says Mhambi, boldly.

Anje reaches out to grab Mhambi's arm. Mhambi suddenly jerks it away, saying, 'Oh, now you want my help? Before you did not want my help. What is this? You are disrespectful.'

I am getting disturbed by what is happening. '*Yekela* man [leave off],' I say to Mhambi; then, to Anje, 'Let's get up, is it fine?' Anje takes my hand and steps up onto the scale. We wait for the black analogue number to appear. She sits back down on the bed.

[5]Over this five-year period, three different institutions' review boards for ethical human subjects research approved the project. I use pseudonyms.

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A black staff woman from the kitchen comes to bring late morning tea and banana bread, and she and the caregivers start talking loudly over each over. I am worried that Anje will get anxious because there are now four people in the room. 'Wow, they are noisy!' I say. Anje smiles and pats her knees: 'It's like a pack of monkeys in here!' The staff are laughing. I do not know if they heard her say that.

Special carefully puts on the monitor and we take Anje's blood pressure. 'Is it fine?' Anje asks. 'You are always fine,' says Mhambi. 'It's tea time.'

'*Cup iku*' [where is the cup]?' asks Mhambi. She and Special bend down, rummaging through a bedside cabinet trying to find where Anje keeps her cup as the staff woman holds a silver pitcher of tea. They open the cabinet and find a soiled white mug with a coloured print of a reclining lioness on it. 'LeRoux, '*tak'shay*' [I or that person will beat you],' laughs Mhambi. 'This is [head nurse Marlene] Vorster's cup,' says Special. 'What do you mean?' asks Anje, seemingly bewildered. The kitchen staff woman has left during the commotion. 'You will get your tea, don't worry,' says Mhambi. 'See you in the near future!'

We leave. A few minutes later I look back in. Anje is asleep again.

Anje LeRoux has a clinical diagnosis of Alzheimer's, comparatively rare for residents in this wing who are said to suffer from dementia generally. It is difficult to get an official diagnosis for the condition; there are only about 300 psychiatrists for South Africa's population of almost 53 million. Within the space of ten minutes, Anje tends to forget what she has planned to do, whether that be preparing to go to eat lunch or simply getting dressed. Like most white women in the home, she lived a life as a dedicated mother and housewife in the nearby town.

Mhambi and Special are South African Swazi and come from underdeveloped peri-urban and formerly racially segregated communities called Bantustans, established for black people via apartheid policies in the 1970s. They both liked to regale me with hyperbolic descriptions of Swazi culture. When rousing Anje from sleep, Mhambi invoked the cultural phenomenon of *imali letipoko* or *imali lePawela* – 'ghost money' or 'Paul [Kruger]'s money'. Originating in the regional history of settler colonialism and artisanal mining, Swazi folklore cites that Afrikaners strategically hid gold coins in landforms such as forests or mountains to avoid taxation and/or in anticipation of unearthing them later.[6] The original settlers having died or left the area, the gold is free to take if one can find it and if one can avoid the settlers' ghosts who haunt the sites and the money. In popular press coverage about this phenomenon, some people employ herbalist healers and sorcerers, *tinyanga*, to help find its location, or otherwise come to it in dream visions (Nsibande 2014). Mhambi tried to engage Anje in what is likely beyond Anje's cultural purview, given that, according to Swazi folklore, it is an adventurous Swazi looking for Afrikaner gold. This is perhaps why the joke was funny to the caregivers – that Anje would be the one looking for gold hidden by her own ancestors. Despite sharing in the legacy of racialized

[6]'Kruger money' refers to currency of the former South African Republic (1852–1902) and is named after one of its presidents, Paul Kruger, who established the Republic's first mint following the local discovery of gold.

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settlements in the area, Anje's waking delirium coupled with her whiteness laid the intersectional grounds for an incongruity necessary for the joke. Anje did not get it, and Mhambi did not seem to care.

In another instance of hiding, surreptitiously hoarding objects was a well-known symptom of a few residents' psychological condition. Part of my rather innocuous participant contributions to caregiving was looking in residents' already open bedroom cupboards or closets for utensils provided by the kitchen staff that some residents hid after finishing their meals. Anje was in possession of – and had likely taken – a mug that Mhambi and Special claimed to belong to Marlene Vorster, the white head nurse. Joking that either she herself or Vorster would beat Anje for taking the mug, Mhambi acknowledged the problem of the mug out of place – despite knowing that Anje would not remember why it was problematic. She did so in the vernacular of *kushaya*, which, as I know it to be levelled in everyday life in Southern Africa, is less a fearsome threat of violence than a cheeky chide to behave.

Although staff did not accuse residents of stealing items (items were simply re-collected), some residents with dementia certainly spread rumours that staff stole from them. One day, Lesedi, a caregiver, became furious after Anje accused her of taking a pear. 'We don't make much,' yelled Lesedi within earshot of everyone in the hallway. 'That is pathetic to think we are going to take some stupid thing like that. I can get that anywhere.' While whites might be assumed to be above residents' antagonism, Noreen, the second-in-charge white nurse, told me that some of the residents often badgered her and the white nurses more than the black caregivers because they were white. Noreen said that some residents reasoned or were afraid that their families would not believe that they suffered abusive neglect at the hands of a white staff person with power, rather than a black caregiver. 'It's flippin' *kak* [bullshit],' said Noreen, asking me to pardon her language. 'I say to them [the accusing residents], "Fine, we have [security] cameras so look for that treatment there." You won't find it!' The fading mind of an emotional resident then posed significant challenges for staff of all ranks to locate themselves institutionally and socially across the racial spectrum.

Given what I knew about eldercare in the US, I was primed to believe that elder abuse was a significant problem, and my situated reaction (and racialized subject position) within the scene shaped the unfolding of the joke itself. I first interpreted Mhambi's comments about Anje being 'disrespectful', jerking her arm away and chiding her for not mounting the scale fast enough, as hostile. In that moment, rather than seeing it as a form of joking, I became anxious that Mhambi would be disciplined should Anje get the attention of the white nurses. I asked Mhambi to 'lay off', offering Anje my own help, and commented on the crowding as it was known by staff generally that some residents were disturbed by sudden noisy activity. Some of the residents with dementia were also more likely to say nasty things to the caregivers or ask white nurses to help them out of distrust, and I wanted to prevent the staff from becoming verbal targets. It was not enough, obviously, to short circuit the 'monkeys' comment. Despite the comment's racist connotations, because Anje was the butt of the joke in this encounter, rather than an instigator, the other women were laughing in the face of it.

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Scene III: Jan van Riebeeck – 'Your husband is coming today'

Resident Nettie (a white woman) is now eating in the dining room with the other residents of the Alzheimer's wing instead of in her room as she usually does. Gugu, a (black woman) caregiver, calls Nettie 'Shakira', and says she is her favourite performer. The residents sit for breakfast. We just put down their cups of tea and plates of chicken livers and brown bread, freshly donated from the local Spar supermarket the night before expiring by one day.

The head nurse Marlene comes in with stacked transparent cups of medication and puts one down next to each person's plate. She leans lower to each person, face to face, siding up cheek to cheek with some to encourage pill consumption. For Marietjie, a white resident, Marlene mimics a big gulp, tossing her own head back to show her how. '*Nee* [no]!' says Marietjie laughingly. Marlene also laughs. Marlene chirps '*Sawubona* Olipie [hello, little Olipah]!' to Olipah Motsa, a black siSwati-speaking resident, who is seated across the table. Marlene looks at me, seemingly pleased to show that she greeted the woman in siSwati. '*Sawubona mntanam* [hello, my child],' says Olipah, who is blind, flailing her hand in the direction of Marlene's voice. After setting out their pills, Marlene leaves.

As soon as she does, Gugu starts joking with Nettie, saying, 'Nettie, your husband is coming today. He is coming here to take you to town. I bet you go shopping. Take those pills because your husband is coming now.' Nettie gasps, 'Oh! Oh really?' Gugu laughs. 'Oh?' Nettie says again, smiling. Gugu and the other caregivers laugh more.

Suzanne, another white woman resident, mutters, pushing her livers around the plate: 'Her husband has been dead a long time.' Madge's eyes dart to Suzanne, her constant companion and roommate, then to me. 'What's going on here?' Madge asks, laughingly. I think she asks that because it is now loud with the caregivers laughing and Nettie repeating, 'Oh! Really?'

The residents finish their breakfast. As on the past three days, Nettie asks me why I don't know Afrikaans. Mbongi, a black male caregiver, says to her that there is no Afrikaans in the US because it is an African language. I agree and say it is also a European type of language. 'Jan van Riebeeck came from someplace like that in the 1900s,' says Gugu, 'he gave us the mirror! We got the mirror and they took the cattle.' 'Did they take the land?' I ask. Gugu replies, 'First the cattle, then the land. We took the mirror, but we already look in the river to see ourselves. Our *gogos* [grandmothers] were stupid!'

Mbongi, other caregivers and I all laugh. Gugu laughs: 'It was our wealth!' Mbongi says, 'It was our inheritance.' 'What can you say, they took our wealth,' says Gugu. She looks at Nettie and points, 'I bet it was you!'

Nettie laughs, 'What is going on?'

'Gugu says you know Jan van Riebeeck,' I say to her. 'Do you think she is that old, Gugu?' Gugu, Nettie and Mbongi laugh.

This encounter foregrounds how race informs joking relations: namely, how joking about the region's multilingualism becomes a performative vehicle for expressing the limits of apartheid-era interracial relationships. In nomenclature, for example, Marlene and the other white nurses jokingly remade many of the resident's names, both women and men, black and white, in an Afrikaans diminutive

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form. For example, white residents Maria Matthyssen and Leonard Louw became Marietjie and Louwtjie, and black resident Olipah Motsa, Olipie. 'I hate those *-tjies*!' laughed Lesedi when I pointed out how often I heard it. Marlene's pride in speaking siSwati to the Swaziland-born Olipah Motsa and the few other black residents was a kind gesture, but telling in what were its obvious limitations. Besides '*sawubona*', '*ngithanda wena*' ('I love you') and a few church songs, the white administrative staff and nurses knew very little siSwati, Xitsonga or other Bantu languages predominant in the region, while the black caregivers were fluent in several such languages, as well as Afrikaans.

Still, several of the white residents were quite adept in southern Bantu languages and the pidgin language *Fanagalo*, having employed, and in some cases worked alongside, black people on their farms and in small farming communities. Based on her experience of working with immigrant black African caregivers and their older white British clients in the UK, Chipo Dendere suggests that because Withuis houses predominately lower-class whites, they were more likely to find affinity and joke with black caregivers than would upper-class whites.[7] Howie, for example, an ardent white millenarian with debilitating Parkinson's disease, had lived most of his earlier adult life in the area evangelizing to black communities. He had daily conversations with staff in siSwati, and his often incomprehensible speech due to his shaking, like Ambrose's, itself became a source of joking for both himself and staff, especially Mhambi and Lesedi.

Joking also took shape for staff in describing how residents were 'performers', a vernacular term used in the home and mentioned by Gugu. She and other caregivers, including Lesedi, often said that despite the quiet boredom of the job, they were enlivened by residents who were good performers, and they got a kick out of residents' sayings and doings. Gugu's nickname for Nettie was Shakira. Lesedi's nickname for Marietjie was Beyoncé. Some residents had established careers earlier in life as church musicians and recitalists and took part in singing in the biweekly church services held by visiting pastors in the common sitting and television room, but performance here did not refer to this. Not so much rooted in an intention to amuse or entertain others, residents' performances were rather those strange, surprising or unexpected outbursts that left caregivers multiply confused, angered or genuinely bowled over with laughter. An angering performance might be when a resident threw her faeces out of the window in the middle of the night. An amusing performance, like the one here, was Nettie's reaction to Gugu's claims that her dead husband would soon arrive to take her to the supermarket.

The deeper colonial history of Southern Africa emerged in this encounter across racial and generational lines on the point of my inability to speak Afrikaans in a space where it was primarily used by those being cared for and those administering duties of care, namely the residents and the head nurses. Mbongi's attempt to rescue me from Nettie's interrogation by identifying me as a (white) non-South African laid the joking grounds for Gugu's interesting historical rendition of Dutch colonial administrator Jan van Riebeeck's seventeenth-century invasion of the lands that became Cape Town. In tropes of racialized trickery and stupidity, she jokingly denigrated both her own ancestors as 'stupid *gogos*' and the white

[7]Personal communication, Burlington, VT, 17 April 2016; see also Buch (2015).

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residents' ancestors as money-hungry cattle-grabbers, bringing this longer history up to the present in her accusation of Nettie. No one was safe from scrutiny in the joke, which collapsed social and racial distinctions to suggest that everyone paid a price in the fateful colonial encounter's aftermath.

I was struck by the penultimate moment in the encounter when Gugu, a black woman wearing a food-stained plastic smock, pointed her finger at a bewildered white woman wearing clip-on earrings and a bib tucked into her makeup-smeared blouse, locating a target who embodied black peoples' historical dispossession. Coates (2014), in an essay titled 'The case for reparations', writes that 'the popular mocking of reparations as a harebrained scheme authored by wild-eyed lefties and intellectually unserious black nationalists is fear masquerading as laughter'. In the US context Coates writes about, whites fearfully laugh at blacks who claim political-economic reparations for the history of slavery. Here, it is blacks such as Gugu who laugh at whites, (jokingly) claiming reparations in a context where blacks have made serious yet complicated inroads in land restitution (Ndlovu 2018), and where whites such as Nettie (or rather her adult children and grandchildren) in postcolonial Africa are increasingly uncertain about their bids to belong. The former Bantustan communities where many of the black staff reside, and from where they commute daily for up to two hours each way, provide evidence for the historical and geographic reality of whites' political-economic appropriations.[8] In their care labour, an indirect outcome of these appropriations, black staff members' intimate proximity to white residents enabled them to launch damning historical exposés in the form of jokes. Practically, though, their targets in the nursing home occupy a zone of oblivion, one that is multiply racial, geo-historical and psychological, an unfinished plate of donated and one-day-expired bread and chicken livers.

Greying mutuality: (not) like a family

The history of South Africa's systemic structural racism inevitably coloured the way in which people joked cross-racially in this home. Still, in terms of content, not all cross-racial jokes I documented were about race, nor – as far as I could discern – were many consciously racist. The interpersonal relationship mattered between the teller and the recipient of the joke, but this should not belie jokes' non-dyadic social form. All joking actors in these scenes, including myself, embodied culturally primed and multiply age-based, gendered and racial optics that partially constructed the frames through which we participated in joking, although these focused more on social, linguistic and bodily-cognitive moments of unintelligibility. I take the ethnographic evidence offered in the scenes above to argue that joking works as a form of participatory mutuality among actors, rather than something like reciprocity or conviviality – one that deconstructs received, contentious categories of otherness amid the fragilities of encounters that people try to construe through kin-like scripts. It is not my argument

[8]Despite witnessing the recent local rise of a populist political party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), who tout more radical restitutions, nearly all of the black caregivers I knew in the home were African National Congress (ANC) supporters and voiced far more discreet positions on issues such as reparation from their fellow (white) citizens in general conversation.

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that people here necessarily create bonds with each other as they joke. Joking, I think, is more oblique. It is a form of attuned sociability involving people's participation in aspects of each other's situated existence.

What do I mean by participatory mutuality? In Sahlins' (2013) treatise on kinship, 'mutuality of being' is defined in one way as 'participation in one another's existence'. For him, it can be illustrated using most of the examples of social relationships and actions discussed in this article, including 'alternate generational' kin-like relationships, healing and feeding. It involves people getting up close and personal with each other insofar as they feel themselves somehow changed by or incorporating aspects of the other in their being. These dimensions of people's sustained, felt and culturally scripted being-together offer comparative grounds to identify kinship in diverse settings, he argues. The nursing home partially resists this qualification in that residents and staff did not report incorporating or changing aspects of themselves by being together. Radical racialization and age or generational difference, key combining axes of alterity in this case, require further analysis.

Building on Sahlins' theory, Hage (2015: 187–90) clarifies mutuality in terms of race and against the concepts of reciprocity and domestication, to delineate modes of human existence that take alterity, or 'otherness', as their socially operable basis in contexts shaped by inequality. For Hage, reciprocity operates as 'otherness *is with* us' in the sense that otherness is given in a type of Maussian gift exchange, where one party's gift to another entails obligations to receive and regift and through which each party may prestigiously build up aspects of their selfhood. An example of this might be a liberal cosmopolitanism in which one group's material culture circulates and may be refashioned among diverse others but is not deemed to be culturally appropriated because its origins are honorifically acknowledged. Next, domestication operates as 'otherness *for* us' in the sense that otherness is unequally distributed, objectified or possessed in order to wield power: such is enslavement and apartheid. These are instrumental modes surrounding the volitional use of other people or aspects of them, which Hage recalls as racist in their classificatory and extractive dimensions.

As for mutuality, Hage (2015: 189–90) writes that it operates as 'participation in otherness' or 'otherness *within* us', a seemingly positive 'inter-penetration of existence whereby the other is seen as participating in our very existence and vice versa' by virtue of exposure to each other's 'life force'. Mutuality as a form of sociability is enlivening, but not necessarily empowering, nor substantively transformative in Sahlins' sense. Human beings exist in the same lifeworld but go about much of their existence according to different culturally shaped world views. These tend to be more than just points of view: they are embodied, coherent lived realities produced through social relations in the lifeworld. Insofar as such realities are coherent yet unbounded historically and culturally primed fields of perception, groups' lived realities may also be subordinate or dominant in a given multicultural field because relations between groups are also construed along lines of power. Forms of mutuality, like joking, afford an attuned or embodied convergence of these realities that does not foreground instrumentalizing others, but sociably coexisting with them.

At Withuis, the (racially enclaved) personal and social histories and cognitive faculties of staff and residents arguably constitute different perceptual realities that may only be partially accessible to each other. Related to my earlier

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methodological caveat of the inability to fully know (or do something about) what others are thinking, Robbins' (2013) critique of Sahlins' (2013) term 'mutuality' also concerns intentionality, in that Sahlins does not fully account for the ways in which one cannot (fully) know or share in another's mind. In using the term 'mutuality', Robbins cautions against conflating a kind of phenomenological social solidarity with 'intersubjectivity', as the latter depends conceptually on a kind of mentalism. This distinction is important for the case here in that residents with dementia and staff do not always congruently participate in each other's lines of thinking or languages yet still coexist interactionally. Given the history of racial segregation in South Africa, they are also culturally primed to be radical alters, and, in this priming, reproduce difference in and between their respective communities and realities.

Joking, as I perceived it in this nursing home, is a key mutualist medium in which these historically situated realities converge in daily life, as mandated by Withuis's contractual yet kin-like relationships of care work. Built up as a licence of interpersonal relationships and their embodied intimacies, joking emerges as a striving to recognize and creatively be with someone historically made into an 'other'. First, a contract of labour binds people together in the home. It governs actions that are monotonous and unsettlingly close: pouring tea that is not too hot to scald thin skin; discerning the faint pulse of blood running through veins or meaning communicated in stuttering dried lips; amid a wash of loneliness, autonomically releasing oxytocin in the act of reaching out for and receiving a hug. Humans' biosocial frailty compels some form of action or language, which is needed to confront the disgust, distrust or indifference they have come to experience among themselves. The initiation of joking here signals an encounter with linguistic and cognitive uncertainties and social differences. Then, by participating in joking, people playfully work among these uncertainties and differences to interactively forge a mode of coexistence that does not depend on fully understanding or taking advantage of an other, but rather on historically situated sociability.[9] This is what I take to be evidence for participatory mutuality.

Inspired by this case, I see mutuality as a form of sociability forged in participation in each other's existence despite *and* because of radical difference, where people partially hold some ground together, by virtue of the circumstances in which they find themselves. Through momentary interactions such as joking, they play with the historically and culturally received categories of racialized and aged personhood they inhabit and perceive in others. In turn, they may partially deconstruct these categories. Due to this playfully de-constructive dynamic occurring in a context of existential proportions – namely, daily encounters with one's own and others' mortality – flashpoint black-and-white optics may decelerate, fog or grey.

For example, younger black staff, many of whom were born in the post-apartheid era, acknowledged that they would one day be like their debilitated older

[9]In a regional example of joking as historically situated and relating to existential matters in the aftermath of violence, Mitchell (1956: 38, note 112) noted that in urbanizing colonial Rhodesia, Ngoni peoples explained their contemporary 'joking relationship with the Bemba [people] by the fact that since they were formerly enemies they came into possession of each other's corpses and therefore had to perform the burial duties for them'.

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adult charges. Sometimes staff found the residents' late-life age and situation of being cared for by paid strangers pitiable and the space itself troubling, noting that there was no such thing as nursing homes in their (black African) 'culture'. Withuis was partially a space of pity and revulsion for some staff, perhaps an antithesis of pre- or non-capitalist forms of kinship, because care was contracted rather than consociational. Most of those being cared for were also behaviourally strange racial alters. Yet the home was also partially seen as a site of compassion; their resident charges deserved care when or if families could not give it, or if there were no families, as was the case of several formerly indigent residents. While few black staff imagined that they would end up in a nursing home like this (some said they prayed that they would not), they also worked daily with black older adult residents, which opened up the possibility for changes in caregiving for their own relatives. One black caregiver, Goodness, told me that she had placed her own mother in the region's first black-majority residential nursing home, which only opened near her rural community in 2012. The post-apartheid conjuncture of race and age, as epitomized by Withuis, compelled some staff to envision new care prospects for their older kin amid their own earning capacities, their own future senescence, and the changing landscape of care. In this, the definitionally 'cultural' lines of what black versus white families should supposedly do for their own begin to blur.

In turn, most of the white residents I talked to who had living adult children desperately missed those kin and would rather be with them than in the home. Others had no one to depend on and resigned themselves to life at Withuis. Whites maintained some degree of lingering generational and racial power over black individuals in that the majority-white residents still received domestic-like service from the majority-black staff. For some white women residents, this replicated contractual arrangements they had had in their earlier lives, being 'madams', in the local vernacular, or housewives employing and being served and cared for by black women domestic workers as their 'maids'. White residents also got nicer meals than staff, who ate the leftovers and simpler meals prepared by fellow black women kitchen staff.

Some residents levelled racist commentary at staff that usually went without retort or remonstration by other residents or white administrators, despite there being an 'abuse register' to record these instances. This subordinating and racist dimension of black African women's caregiving labour is found globally (Dodson and Zincavage 2007; Coe 2016). Still, some residents were also incredibly vulnerable or frail and often depressed. Many often cried for reasons that no one could understand – an insular, isolated expression. Residents also often wanted certain caregivers to aid, bathe or feed them, signalling affection of some kind, and they also joked or played along in the joking situations in which they found themselves. Despite dementia, some residents could appreciate an accumulated, phenomenological familiarity with staff, rather than traffic with them in discrete memories.

Participatory mutuality emerges at Withuis and in other postcolonial sites of care precisely through what Radcliffe-Brown calls contractual relations. These increasingly temper what manifests as kin-like care for many people in late life worldwide (Buch 2015). Joking then enables kin-like relations of consociation to accrue and then suffuse the domain of the contract. I do not claim that younger black caregivers carry with them or consciously replicate indigenous cultural

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models of alternate generational joking relationships with their white resident 'grandparents', along the lines Radcliffe-Brown (1952; 1940) suggested. For staff, residents cannot disembody their historical identity as apartheid's beneficiaries, unless they practically delude themselves, but joking interactions also befit the structural relation in which they find themselves. Intimate and continuous caregiving encounters may inevitably trigger the mildly weird joking that renders these encounters humane or at least sustainable. The transposition of kin scripts into caregiving here helps characterize institutionalized life and its endings as something else: more familial, less economically transactional, and less resonant of the underdeveloped social welfare systems that, in the wake of apartheid, bind and cast away certain people. The recent scandalous horrors of one of Withuis's institutional peers, Life Esidimeni, suggest that mutuality in the domain of contracted care is needed more than ever in South Africa.[10]

Recognizing each other's humanity might not have been a consciously ethical or ideological prerogative of the staff or residents. I saw that neither side was doing so volitionally, nor was there an explicit objective to create similarity as (a kind of) kin despite their variable use of the term 'family'. To me, the term was meant to positively qualify their jocular but still sometimes stilted interactions and was born out of their interpersonal familiarity. Daily proximity encouraged them to reach for this kind of recognition. Also, as I saw it, staff and residents were not consciously aiming to realize the Rainbow Nation ideal, move beyond it or crack it apart (Musila 2014) in order to realize new socio-political configurations. For Hage (2015: 192), a post-Rainbow Nation might look something like what he calls the 'a-racial' or 'alter-racial', a potential radical societal future forged in antiracist activism, scholarship and policy where race disappears altogether as a system of identification. Indeed, he argues that mutuality 'offers one of the most important grounds for setting the utopia of the a-racial on secure grounds'.

In South Africa, as in many other postcolonial nation states on the continent, these grounds have been shaped geographically by histories of settler colonialism and its overriding logic of domestication, to return to Hage's typology. Both Africanists and African peoples expertly recall this regional history of unequal habitation of these lands, especially with regard to matters of belonging and 'home' in the wake of historical expulsion and more contemporary projects of land reforms and restitution. The contractual spaces created in this structuring, such as this charity-based nursing home, turn out to be, simultaneously, zones both echoing this history of expulsion based on difference (both race and age) and offering potential for sustained participation. They afford mutual recognition despite and because of obvious alterities that collectively constitute postcolonial national identities in Africa or elsewhere.

Staff and residents' joking and its mutualist dimensions therefore hold a kind of nascent political potential. Their joking is not of the same global reach as the aforementioned African primetime or social media comedians, but then it is less likely to be publicly or ideologically policed. Their joking also complicates our

[10]Life Esidimeni was a private psychiatric care provider contracted to deinstitutionalize patients from South Africa's Gauteng Province state facilities. In the process, nearly 200 patients died from neglect and starvation between 2015 and 2016.

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presumed notions of race-based power in that such power is construed as relational, here jockeyed between groups of people – low-paid workers and older adults – who are both rendered peripheral in the nation state. The former 'rulers', older white adults, have their power inverted in their conditions of frailty, and engaging in ribaldry does not necessarily reproduce or shore up their former status position. Joking is not performed at a distance, on the stand-up comedian's stage or in a video clip on a mobile phone screen, or in an absurd nationalist spectacle of a dictator's parade. It is done in the midst of trained caregiving staff, who recognize older whites' and their own mortality, and where the existential and 'vulgar' morbidities – or 'aesthetics', as Mbembe (2015) terms it – of a biomedicalized human body are revealed.

It is perhaps easier for some to simply critique racially tinged jokes (or be liberally repulsed by them). Yet despite their sometimes macabre and racialized connotations, such jokes mattered socially, indeed humanly, for the people who participated in them at Withuis. Exploring intersections of race and age can innovate understandings of how mutuality, a kind of relationship, emerges in particular socio-political fields and also deconstructs the historically received parameters of those fields. Perhaps for the so-called Rainbow Nation, joking and off-colour humour both reveal and suture social cracks left in the aftermath of racialized violence. And maybe here, off-colour is itself a political shade of black.

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Abstract

This article describes how residents and staff of an eldercare and Alzheimer's home in a small South African town joke with each other. Residents are mostly white and staff mostly black, but there are exceptions, and both groups are multilingual. Jokes between the two groups in the home are racialized, if not sometimes racist, in light of historical and contemporary post-apartheid socio-political and economic circumstances. Yet the relations between these two groups are forged mostly in joking about residents' diminished cognitive and bodily abilities, staff work, multilingualism and interpersonal ties. In describing joking encounters in three ethnographic scenes, the article traces the ways in which age and race combine in institutionalized relationships of dependency to innovate social theory about human mutuality from the vantage point of multiracial, multicultural, postcolonial Africa.

Résumé

Cet article décrit comment les résidents et les membres du personnel d'un établissement pour personnes âgées et malades d'Alzheimer d'une petite ville sud-africaine plaisantent entre eux. Les résidents sont en majorité blancs et le personnel en majorité noir, mais il existe des exceptions, et les deux groupes sont multilingues. Au sein de l'établissement, les plaisanteries entre les deux groupes sont racialisées, sinon racistes parfois, au vu des circonstances sociopolitiques et économiques post-apartheid historiques et contemporaines. Cependant, les relations entre ces deux groupes se forgent principalement à travers des plaisanteries à propos des capacités cognitives et physiques réduites des résidents, du travail du personnel, du multilinguisme et des liens interpersonnels. En décrivant des plaisanteries observées dans trois scènes ethnographiques, l'article montre comment l'âge et la race se combinent dans des relations de dépendance institutionnalisées pour innover la théorie sociale concernant la mutualité humaine sous l'angle de l'Afrique postcoloniale, multiraciale et multiculturelle.

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