

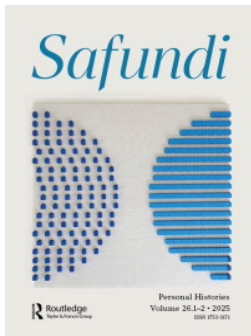
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ROUNDTABLE



Race, vulnerability, and aging in post-apartheid South Africa

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ARTICLE HISTORY

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At the first Steve Biko Memorial Lecture in 2000, Njabulo S. Ndebele reflected on how racial orders distribute inviolability and vulnerability to different groups of people. Analyzing the “global sanctity of the white body” he noted that whenever

the white body is violated in the world, severe retribution follows [...] for the perpetrators if they are non-white, regardless of the social status of the white body. The white body is inviolable, and that inviolability is in direct proportion to the global vulnerability of the black body.¹

From the killing fields of Gaza to police violence in the United States² the inviolability of “whiteness” and the vulnerability of racial “Others” are co-constructed and interlocking Janus faces of the racial regime. Vulnerability has thus been an enduring preoccupation of critical approaches to race and racialization. Tracing the enmeshment of the California prison system with capitalist crisis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore notes that turning young Black men into “surplus populations” to be locked away required the systematic material and symbolic devaluation of Black life. Racism, she argued, could therefore be defined as “the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”³ If “premature” deaths are the stuff that race is made on, then an intriguing institutional site for the study of racial regimes must surely be geriatric care, where lives may be “differentially” shortened or lengthened. It is just such an opportunity that Casey Golomski offers us in *God’s Waiting Room: Racial Reckoning at Life’s End*.

Old age homes in South Africa, as Golomski observes, were set up “by and for whites”⁴ in the wake of the US-based Carnegie Commission’s report on the so-called “Poor White Problem.” The Carnegie report, though ostensibly a “philanthropic” text, provided the basis for “enduring violence and injury for black people.”⁵ Tiffany Willoughby-Herard argues that while white nationalist and colonial projects were

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¹Ndebele, “Iph’ Indlela?,” 53.

²Abu-Laban and Bakan, “Anti-Palestinian Racism and Racial Gaslighting.”

³Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 247.

⁴Golomski, *God’s Waiting Room*, 10.

⁵Willoughby-Herard, *Waste of a White Skin*, 3.

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boosted by the invention of Black racial inferiority, their consolidation into a global order relied on an institutional project that focused on the threat of white “racial degeneration” offering “limitless possibilities to criminalize, intervene in, and interrupt black racial resistance and to minimize and normalize black racial suffering.”⁶ At first blush it might seem strange that poor whites, whose existence seems to “threaten the symbolic and social order”⁷ should be so important for white supremacy. And yet throughout history the repeated rediscovery of the poor white works to “suture over racial regimes.”⁸ Anxiety about “degenerate” whites is indispensable fuel for racialistic fervor and conviction. In a similar fashion to how colonial cultural production lingers over representations of harm to white women and children, which signifies the “invasion of the body of the nation”⁹ a preoccupation with white vulnerability has the discursive effect of proving that whiteness must be protected. The more vulnerable the white body, and the greater the threat of its total annihilation by racial Others, the more robust is the justification for “any abuse, massacre, torture [or] incarceration”¹⁰ of the Other, which in turn buttresses white inviolability.

Racial vulnerability under apartheid and after

In the context of South African apartheid, the protection of vulnerable whites was crucial for the historical development of Afrikaner nationalism. The “poor white problem” was theorized by organic Afrikaner intellectuals as caused by the uprooting of Afrikanerdom from an essentially rural and agricultural way of life centered on the family farm. Urban life was rife with “worldliness, immorality, sensual enjoyment and [the] loss of religious bonds”¹¹ – and associated with Englishness and Jewishness. White Afrikaners were thus urged to embrace the myth of the *volkseie*: “that which is ‘ours and ours alone,’ inaccessible to the ‘other,’ and that which is threatened by ‘others.’”¹² In apartheid’s short-lived hegemony, a *volkseie* for every ethnic group in South Africa was envisioned. It was in the name of the poor Afrikaners targeted by the Carnegie report that a new form of capitalism, *volkskapitalisme* (“people’s capitalism”) was developed. As Aletta Norval argues, *volkskapitalisme* “was hailed to be an indigenous product of Afrikanerdom: it arose out of the traditions and *Weltanschauung* of the volk; it was anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist and did away with the negative freedoms of the democratic state.”¹³

Apartheid’s national development model with mixed public and private investments resembled a social democracy, with public healthcare, education, and geriatric care, the best and bulk of which (by many orders of magnitude) was reserved for white people, though enabled almost entirely by Black labor. The post-apartheid period

⁶Ibid., 8.

⁷Wray, *Not Quite White*, 2.

⁸Willoughby-Herard, *Waste of a White Skin*, xiv.

⁹Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 119.

¹⁰Schotten, “TERFism, Zionism, and Right-Wing Annihilationism,” 359.

¹¹H.S. Brink, quoted in Norval, *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse*, 75.

¹²Norval, *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse*, 96.

¹³Ibid., 86.

saw an extension but also a thinning out of the public sector, with many choice public entities privatized and surrounded by pockets of white prosperity, certain of which have retained some of their apartheid neighborhood character – in a phenomenon Christi van der Westhuizen calls “enclave nationalism.”¹⁴ At the same time, “civil rights” organizations such as AfriForum have increasingly challenged the ability of multiracial rule to protect the rights and dignity of white Afrikaners. These new centers of white power are as preoccupied with white misery as were the architects of apartheid. Their entrepreneurial approach to the fabricated “crises” of white poverty, especially among older people, as well as to “farm murders” turn isolated phenomena into racial parables that fuel the global far right and help solicit donations.¹⁵ In the 2020s, as in the 1920s, wounded and woundable whites are thus “sensational signs”¹⁶ that renovate colonial fantasies.

Grace, security, and racial “alongsidedness”

Golomski’s nuanced and perceptive portrayal of nearing “life’s end” in the Lowveld region of Mpumalanga province three decades after the end of formal apartheid offers important insights into enduring racial vulnerability, enclave nationalism and *volkskapitalisme*. His account centers on the almost exclusively white old age home he calls “Grace,” which is juxtaposed later in the book with another, entirely Black one, dubbed “Security.” He sketches the similarities and differences between these spaces telegraphically:

Cost here [at Security] is 850rand (\$46) per month. At Grace, it’s 6,000 (\$330) per month. [...] fifty-one souls here, forty-six there. Both have round-the-clock staff; here there are fewer nurses in the sense of professionals holding a titled degree. More nurses at Grace. Both mostly run on government subsidies, donations, and fundraising – here more, there less. Grace has the levies from the independent-living cottages – white capital. Both run on the residents’ grants and supplemental savings – here it’s mostly grants, fewer at Grace.¹⁷

These sketches – “fifty-one souls here, forty-six there” – might suggest what Sara Ahmed calls “alongsidedness,” the belief that race is “a question of surface” where whiteness is “just a colour, along with other colours,”¹⁸ and that the elderly whites of Grace and the Black elders at Security may be aging in different places, but they’re doing so similarly. Alongsidedness is a byproduct of the “rainbow” illusion that has proven such an obstacle to structural transformation in South Africa. “Rainbowism”¹⁹ treats the spoils of colonialism and racial capitalism as property to which white people are entitled in a liberal regime of rights. Whites are just a group,

¹⁴Westhuizen, “Afrikaners in Post-Apartheid South Africa.”

¹⁵Burnett, *White Belongings*, 143–45; Holmes, “Victimhood Gone Viral.”

¹⁶Deumert, “Sensational Signs, Authority and the Public Sphere.”

¹⁷Golomski, *God’s Waiting Room*, 156.

¹⁸Ahmed, “Declarations of Whiteness.”

¹⁹Gqola, “Defining People,” 98–99.

along with other groups, and deserve the same protections as others. That they should have to sacrifice wealth or power in the name of redistribution is unthinkable.

God's Waiting Room manages to undercut alongsidedness in a profoundly humanizing way that avoids descending into racial caricature. So while it is true that the elders at Security are not abandoned, their staff often have to work as volunteers when funds dry up. Men and women are separated into large dormitories very different from the individual rooms and cottages at Grace. The quality of the food and the care led the mother of "Goodness" – one of the nurses at Grace – to prefer to die at home than stay at Security. But the inequalities go far deeper than the experience of the homes, as Golomski shows throughout the book.

"Goodness" has a daughter who died at 11 of cryptococcal meningitis in the "township" hospital. She earns minimum wage, and her employer does not cover the expense of minibus taxis to her home in the "township" and back again. She must carefully monitor her CD4 count – which she refers to as her "soldiers" – and take her antiretrovirals regularly in order to manage her HIV. Goodness is embattled on all sides; she is strong, agentive, and in some ways a moral center in Golomski's account – but she is also precarious, vulnerable to "premature death" if her CD4 count drops, if her taxi is involved in a road accident, or if she receives substandard medical care in the township hospital, unable to afford the private healthcare she herself provides and to which her white boss has access.

Fading rainbows

Living to a "ripe" old age in South Africa is inflected by race. In a chilling scientific euphemism, Black people are said to have "lower rates of aging"²⁰ than whites. Whereas in the general population there are ten Black people for each white person, the ratio for people over seventy is three to one.²¹ Whether one lives long enough to get into Grace or Security in the first place is thus a matter of surviving the racial state and apartheid spatial planning, before it becomes a matter of whether one can afford the monthly cost. For many Black elders, retirement is not even an option. Scattered throughout the book are old people working: a grandmother selling groundnuts on the side of the road; a grandfather serving cappuccinos in a Kruger National Park rest camp. Retirement is a luxury when monthly state pensions of 2,080rand (\$114) are often stretched to support other family members.

But as with so much in South Africa, real life is complex. A recent comment in the *Mail & Guardian* by the founder of a charity for elder care in Kwazulu-Natal speaks to a different racial dynamic:

Indian people idolise and look after their parents until the day they die. African people, when they are old, want to go to their rural home. Coloured people are generational, so it's a great-granny and the granny and the dad and everyone lives together. White people dump their parents.²²

²⁰Lloyd-Sherlock, "Long-Term Care for Older People in South Africa."

²¹Ibid., 153.

²²Erasmus, "Abuse of Senior Citizens an Unspoken Shame in South Africa."

Though Golomski is careful to avoid these reductive racial stereotypes, his work shows us that while aging is certainly conditioned by white supremacy, it is no less true that if “we make it far enough in life, aging to frailty and dying can show us powerlessness.”²³ Power relations shift with age, and vulnerabilities to a death perhaps premature or not is conditioned through the multiple ways people are dependent on each other, vulnerable to one another. Many of the people he meets in Grace are themselves wounded. “Yvonne” is one of the white people now “dumped” in Grace. In many ways she is the very figure of the white colonial: born in the UK, raised in South Africa, and a former resident of both Botswana and Zimbabwe – or as she refers to them, Bechuanaland and Rhodesia – she wryly imagines herself as Meryl Streep in *Out of Africa*. Her leg, face and hand are scarred by the bullets of an ambush during the Zimbabwean liberation struggle, where she and her husband fought for a white Rhodesia. One of the bullets fell in her lap, and she keeps it as a memento. Estranged from her biological son who moved back to the UK, her rent is paid by a stepson, whom she adores but who seems to visit only rarely. Despite himself, Golomski finds himself saying to her: “You’re so brave.” Yvonne later confides in him that while “most whites in here have a thing against the blacks” she does not: “color doesn’t matter. God loves us all, and I do too: black, yellow, or purple.”²⁴

The appeal to multicolored people echoes the breezy Rainbowism of the white manager of Grace, dubbed “Angel,” who speaks of her facility as “one big happy family” where everyone is welcome: “black, white, purple, pink – everyone’s here!”²⁵ With three Black residents out of forty-six, as Golomski points out, the facility is hardly representative of South Africa’s racial diversity. And in many ways, the business model of Grace is emblematic of the new face of the “white capital” he refers to in his comparison: ensuring that institutions are dominated by whites with a sprinkling of “diversity” to guard against accusations of racism. This new iteration of *volkskapitalisme* where a mix of donations, rental income, and public money enable an (off-) white enclave entirely reliant on cheaply available skilled and vulnerabilized Black labor does not represent a decisive break from the past, no matter how much people seem to live “alongside” one another. As Golomski observes, the “rainbow” of post-apartheid South Africa is seen by some as “vacuous, cracked, shattered, nightmarish, a fragmented performance.”²⁶ In the case of Grace, which is a business with a new CEO who is trying to shake things up – it is “not a charity”; as Angel says, “for him it’s all about financials”²⁷ – the hope that more space will be shared with Black elders in a country where 71% of Black households are “poor” while 96% of white households are not is a very slim one. More than likely, the structure of power around aging in this corner of South Africa – like many other

²³ Golomski, *God’s Waiting Room*, 17.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

parts of the country and the world – will work to extend white life while feeding off Black vulnerability to premature death.

In the conclusion to Ndebele's 2000 Biko lecture, he gestures toward a possible future in which the whites in South Africa have disaffiliated themselves from the global racial regime:

Putting itself at risk, it will have to declare that it is home now, sharing in the vulnerability of other compatriot bodies. South African whiteness will declare that its dignity is inseparable from the dignity of black bodies.²⁸

This is a beautiful future to hope for, though one not yet in evidence at "Grace."

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