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To cite this article: Ksenia Robbe (2018) Confronting disillusionment: on the rediscovery of socialist archives in recent South African cultural production, *Safundi*, 19:4, 398-415, DOI: [10.1080/17533171.2018.1504498](https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2018.1504498)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2018.1504498>



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Published online: 08 Oct 2018.



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## Confronting disillusionment: on the rediscovery of socialist archives in recent South African cultural production

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years, South African literature, art, and cultural criticism have been registering the feelings of disappointment, nostalgia, and of a general impasse that signify a crisis of postapartheid imaginations. At the same time, we can observe a turn in cultural production toward reexamining South Africa's socialist archives and reconnecting them to the present-day predicaments and emerging social movements. Reading these processes in Imraan Coovadia's latest novel, artworks by Haroon Gunn-Salie, and an exhibition by the Stellenbosch *Open Forum*, this article argues that they confront the feelings of postapartheid disillusionment by critically re-invoking memories of the 1970–80s socialist practices in South Africa and the transnational frameworks they involved. It argues that these changing approaches to the socialist archives can be read as a decolonial critique, which links the described trends in South African culture to other “post-dependence” (and specifically, post-socialist) contexts worldwide.

### KEYWORDS

Socialism in South Africa; disappointment; postapartheid; post-socialist cultural practices; decolonial epistemologies; *Tales of the Metric System*; *History after Apartheid*

### Introduction

Written at the height of celebrations of the end of apartheid and debates about the directions of political change in South Africa in the early 1990s, Ivan Vladislavic's short story “Propaganda by Monuments” brilliantly captured the paradoxes of attachments to socialist ideologies and practices at this, local and global, transitional moment. The story unfolds as an epistolary exchange between a South African tavern owner seeking to acquire one of the “surplus statues” being dismantled all over the post-socialist space to redesign his pub into *V.I. Lenin Bar & Grill*, and a junior translator at the Administration for Everyday Services in Moscow who is facilitating the deal. The image of Lenin's statue uprooted from its pedestal and transported to a very different sociocultural space, or rather the fantasy of transplanting which involved this iconic image, captured the peculiar entanglements between postapartheid and post-Soviet states of transition, and between the processes of revising socialist and colonial attachments in local situations that reflected and produced the global moment.<sup>1</sup> In her perceptive reading of Vladislavic's story, Monica Popescu interprets this negotiation

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<sup>1</sup>Indeed, the figure of Lenin's monument encapsulated a global “post-transitional” imaginary, prefiguring a scene of a similar statue floating in the air in the film *Good-Bye Lenin!*, embodying the tension between the necessity of parting and desire of retaining.

of a posttransitional “deal” in terms of translation – between the post-Soviet and postapartheid, postcommunist, and postcolonial – which involved shuttling between different temporalities, various idioms of English, and diverging modes of “emplotting” history.<sup>2</sup> Popescu’s analysis of a series of “mirrorings and reverse-mirrorings”<sup>3</sup> within this exchange stresses non-synchronicity, noncoincidence, and the presence of “surplus” meanings in cross-cultural conversations at a global historical juncture. This leads us to focusing on local practices and trans-local negotiations; it also makes us think of the processes of transition as open into the future, without resolution (just like translation).

In hindsight, Vladislavić’s story with its trope of translation, and Popescu’s reemployment of this trope in her theorization of interfaces between postcolonialism and post-socialism, both provide insightful critiques of the early 1990s “transition cultures.” Reading them 20 years later, we might wonder about the (suspended) question of the legacies of socialism today. What has happened to communist statues and their cultural baggage after their travels between institutional spaces, continents, and historical imaginations? While critical reflections on the transitions in the wake of the historical moment used the tropes of suspension, it is time now to consider those monuments’ “landings” and the practices of making sense of their past travels. Such consideration is needed particularly in the context of South African literature’s concentration on the (hyper-)local and the “glocal” in recent years, and the significance of the “archival turn” in South African literature, art, and other forms of cultural production (echoing global archival and mnemonic turns). As reflection on the production of the past is becoming a leading motif in South African artistic discourses, how do the latter engage with the histories and legacies of the 1970–80s socialist imaginations?

A significant factor in the resurging memories of the New Left movements, evidenced by commemorations of the 50th anniversary of 1968 in popular and academic events worldwide, has been the sense of a crisis of emancipatory ideologies and pursuits of equality in the post-Cold War world. In South Africa, the crisis of “rainbow nationalism” – an ideology that carried the hopes of the 1990s transition for two decades – became particularly palpable in the wake of the Marikana massacre in 2012.<sup>4</sup> One of the markers and consequences of this growing disillusionment with the present as perpetuating deeper colonial and apartheid structures has been the recent interest in rediscovering the socialist practices of the 1970s. Ian Macqueen discusses this trend in South African scholarship and activism by focusing on contemporary engagements with “the Durban moment” of the 1970s, including both Steve Biko’s Black Consciousness and Richard Turner’s New Left, which he regards as interrelated movements.<sup>5</sup> Focusing in particular on the afterlife of Turner’s ideas after his assassination in 1978, he attributes reengagements with them to “the unique nature of Turner’s work and its resistance to easy accommodation within set labels,” on the one hand, and on the other, to the unifying and generalist character of his ideas, with their focus on class, in the situation of “the fractious present.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Popescu, “Translations.”

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 421.

<sup>4</sup>Hart, *Rethinking the South African Crisis*, 1–5.

<sup>5</sup>Macqueen, “Class versus Nation.”

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 36–37.

It is in this context of recollecting socialist practices that this article zooms into the narrative of South African history from the 1970s to the present in Imraan Coovadia's *Tales of the Metric System* (2014), which directly references Turner's work and life and reflects on the afterlife of the New Left and Black Consciousness in the present. My reading places this novel within the same historical trend as described by Macqueen; however, compared to the scholarly and popular discourses he evaluates, a literary work seems to reassess past socialist practices and their legacies in a different way. Rather than simply recalling a unifying political vision, it creates a complex temporality by both re-invoking and critiquing the forward-looking impetus of revolutionary ideologies (along with a future-oriented vision that accompanied the political transition).

In his critical examination of recent South African writing in *Present Imperfect*, Andrew van der Vlies observes similar shifts in temporality that reflect changing modes and genres of representing history. He develops Laurent Berlant's reflections on the sense of an "impasse" in the current historical moment and its temporalities of an "elongated present" that necessitate questioning the certainties of the past and future and the search for new genres of sense-making.<sup>7</sup> Van der Vlies' engagement with the genre of the novel and its reconfigurations of the past, present, and future is indicative in this sense. Vladislavić's own turn to the genre of the novel in his more recent writing and, in his latest novel *Double Negative* (examined by Van der Vlies) to a retrospective gaze onto the transition years, confirms this shift. Compared to the genre of short story that suited the representation of uncertain hopes in the times of abundant hopefulness, the novel provides a more apt vehicle for literary reflections on the (lost) promise of revolutionary imaginations. Since both Vladislavić and Coovadia seem to respond to the challenges of the present moment in similar ways – through their choices of genre and structures of temporality – I will start the following section by reading the two novels alongside each other.

While a major part of this article is focused on Coovadia's novel,<sup>8</sup> which offers a wealth of material to reflect on the abovementioned themes, I considered it important to include a discussion of several examples of recent visual art. For the younger generation, often growing to be interested in the past of socialist and Black Consciousness movements in recent years,<sup>9</sup> visual art (and visual practice more broadly) tends to provide more direct and accessible avenues for historical reflection due to being situated in public spaces and addressing – and often activating – broader audiences. This could be seen, in particular, in the context of the recent student protests.<sup>10</sup> Engagements with the past socialist imaginations are most evidently present in the works by authors who were involved in or supported the nation-wide student protests of 2015–16, starting from the *#RhodesMustFall* campaign and culminating in *#FeesMustFall*. In his reflection on the afterlives of the 1970s movements now,

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<sup>7</sup>Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 5–20.

<sup>8</sup>*Tales of the Metric System* has so far received little critical attention. Andy Carolin's analysis of the *Tales* together with Coovadia's earlier novel, *The Institute of Taxi Poetry*, provides valuable observations that resonate with my reading. Using Ronit Frenkel's concepts of "post-transitional palimpsest," he identifies the texts' inscriptions of "multiple historical temporalities and discourses that are rendered legible simultaneously" (23) as their distinctive characteristic. The focus of my readings is how such temporality is constructed through the memory of (trans)national socialist practices and how this temporality involves imaginations of the future.

<sup>9</sup>Macqueen, "How the Failed Ideals of 1970s Activists Haunt Post-apartheid South Africa"; Maserumule, "Why Biko's Black Consciousness Philosophy Resonates."

<sup>10</sup>Thomas, "Decolonization is Now."

Macqueen notes that the New Left and Black Consciousness emerged from the 1968 student sit-ins at the University of Cape Town and the University of Fort Hare, respectively,<sup>11</sup> and draws a parallel between those historical and contemporary student protests.<sup>12</sup> My reading will develop this observation by examining Haroon Gunn-Salie's installations from his exhibition "History after Apartheid" that link memory of Left activism across the world with reflections on the colonality of the present, particularly in South Africa. Finally, I consider some works of the *Open Forum*, a collective that formed at the University of Stellenbosch in response to the student protests and has been engaged in critical reflection on the possibilities of decolonization and institutional transformation through a residence program and a traveling exhibition. My reading of these artworks will not involve detailed visual analysis (which would form a study of its own), but will focus on their discursive framing (through the statements and interviews with the artists), mainly for the sake of establishing a comparison with the literary text.<sup>13</sup>

Drawing on examples from different media and genres of aesthetic praxis, the article contributes to the discussion of the broader question regarding the changing perceptions of (dis)connection between the apartheid past and postapartheid present. Hence, I read the temporalities revealed by these works as indications of new practices of remembering the apartheid past that involves, on the one hand, reflections on the continuing colonality and, on the other, emerging reengagements with the past of socialist/Left struggles. I am especially interested in tracing how contemporary works of literature and art interconnect these two tendencies, both of which entail a transnational dimension. Building upon Van der Vlies' and other critical insights into the feelings of disappointment and their mediation in contemporary South African culture,<sup>14</sup> the readings inquire into the emerging reengagements with past socialist imaginations – and their forward-looking temporality – within this crisis-ridden socio-historical context.

Engaging with the temporalities and performances of memory in the literary and visual works, the readings will focus upon two interrelated points. First, they will explore the shift from the structures of noncoincidence and aberration in thinking about the global political transformations after the Cold War, as registered in "Propaganda by Monuments,"<sup>15</sup> toward an emphasis on synchronicity and unexpected similarities. Both structures, I suggest, intervene into the typical generalizations of public discourse, which have shifted over the past 20 years: while the early post-Cold War discourses were constructing superficial similarities, mainstream narratives of history today privilege visions of incommensurable difference between various post-colonial and post-socialist contexts. This can explain the emphasis on untranslatability in Vladislavić's short story as a response to artificial unifications of the transitional period. The tropes of simultaneity in contemporary texts, conversely, can be interpreted

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<sup>11</sup>Macqueen, "Class versus Nation," 30.

<sup>12</sup>Macqueen, "How the Failed Ideals of 1970s Activists Haunt Post-apartheid South Africa."

<sup>13</sup>Significant differences in terms of accessibility between a novel and artworks as well as between different types of artworks (those exhibited/ performed in a museum or in public spaces) need to be kept in mind when doing such a comparison. However, in this particular discussion questions of this type are bracketed as it does not focus on the aspects of reception or participation.

<sup>14</sup>See Worby and Ally, "The Disappointment of Nostalgia"; Hook, *(Post)Apartheid Conditions*.

<sup>15</sup>Popescu, "Translations," 408.

as countering practices of discursively polarizing different post-Cold War situations. Second, the readings will focus on the role of memory – as represented and performed by the text and artworks – in constructing dialogical relations between the socialist practices of the past and the struggles for social equality in the present, often through personal links between different generations and practices of postmemory. In these works, memory of socialist engagements becomes a tool of reactualizing the neglected archives and tracing their afterlives.

Such recollections of neglected origins of the present are becoming part of literary, artistic, and academic practices recently. Corinne Sandwith's research on the early socialist movements in the Western Cape, and particularly their visions and practices of culture and the arts, has examined their impact on twentieth-century critical thought in South Africa.<sup>16</sup> One of the aims of her research

has been to establish the significance of this [communist cultural] discourse as part of a reconfigured genealogy of South African literary culture, to assert its place as intellectual inheritance and constitutive antecedent of the “now,” rather than as something to be bracketed off or transcended. At least one implication is the centrality of this legacy in the production of what Bethlehem has identified as the “rhetoric of urgency,” the privileging of realist mimetic modes and the acceptance the moral authority of art. What remains unexplored is its continuing, even persistent, imaginative purchase in the understanding of literary-cultural forms in the postapartheid present.<sup>17</sup>

My reading picks up on the last note, aiming to explore the “persistent, imaginative purchase” of the socialist archive in contemporary cultural productions, concentrating on the memory of socialist practices of the 1970–80s (as compared to Sandwith's examination of the echoes of the 1930–40s in post-1976 writing). In this exploration, furthermore, I focus on critical practices of literature and art, rather than discourses about them. In so doing, my analysis responds to Peter McDonald's plea for literature to be “br[ought] back into the frame” of studies in literary cultures<sup>18</sup> as well as Van der Vlies' insistence that literature can “turn missed appointments and bad feelings into new appointments with the unfolding experience of alternative lives and possible futures.”<sup>19</sup> It also aims to continue exploring critical interrogations of colonial genres and representations that have been disregarded by a liberal paradigm in postcolonial studies, drawing on Christopher Lee's reading of Alex La Guma's *A Soviet Journey* as a *decolonial* text.<sup>20</sup> My readings will close by considering whether the changing approaches to the socialist archive can be read as decolonial critique – which would link the described trends in South African culture to other “post-dependence” (and specifically, post-socialist) contexts worldwide.

### Dwelling in gray zones: *Tales of the Metric System*

Even though South African writing extensively addressed ambiguities of perpetratorship and victimhood in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC),<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Sandwith, *World of Letters*.

<sup>17</sup>Sandwith, “Yours for Socialism,” 304.

<sup>18</sup>McDonald, “A World of Letters,” 700.

<sup>19</sup>Van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect*, 20.

<sup>20</sup>Lee, “Decoloniality of a Special Type.”

<sup>21</sup>See e.g. Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing*.

Coovadia's two latest novels<sup>22</sup> have been among the first texts to initiate a meta-reflection on such ambiguity as a marker or life under and after apartheid. In this sense, they resonate with Jacob Dlamini's examination of the paradoxes of "native nostalgia" – a historical emotion he registers in recollections of everyday life during apartheid by black South Africans,<sup>23</sup> and, in far broader ways, with Njabulo Ndebele's famous plea for focusing on the inconsistencies and oddities that characterize "ordinary" existence even under the "extreme" conditions of apartheid.<sup>24</sup> What we observe in *Tales of the Metric System* might even come close to what has only been too familiar for post-socialist writers and intellectuals dealing with the past in which everyone was implicated as "both victims of the system and its instruments"<sup>25</sup> – the aspect that often does not allow for acts of mourning and closure.<sup>26</sup> Although South African postapartheid creative production includes multiple examples of mourning and, thus, seems to present a different trajectory, critiques of commodification in public, state-led practices of mourning have indicated the necessity to rethink ways of remembering the past and imagining closure.<sup>27</sup>

This tendency is perhaps most clearly reflected in the metaphor of the *double negative* in Vladislavić's latest novel. Engaging with the moral dilemmas of the late-apartheid period through a perspective of a white middle-class character, the novel traces the echoes of these concerns in contemporary South Africa, disenchanted in the wake of postapartheid euphoria and confronted with persisting questions from the past. The negativity of apartheid is, thus, doubled by the lack of vision within the postapartheid times. This is, similarly to Vladislavić's earlier texts, a strategy of translation, though now not between different geopolitical contexts, but two periods within a country's history. Rather than repetition, this approach involves superimposition – an interaction between photographic images around which the process of remembering in the novel is staged and reflected upon.<sup>28</sup> A type of dialogism is implied in the protagonist's ironic reflection on the radical tradition in South Africa narrated through his memories of attempts to connect the history of Soviet revolution and the Left movement in South Africa. The effort of bringing together "the Bolsheviks storming the Winter Palace and Lenin addressing the crowds in Sverdlov Square" and "school-children battling the police in the streets of Soweto and Oliver Tambo addressing the General Assembly" fails as Neil admits that he "couldn't see through both windows at the same time."<sup>29</sup> Instead, his imagination produces a postmodern pastiche of "Marx with his Boer beard and his watch chain ... [who] was treated like a patriarch in *War and Peace*, but [...] was more at home in *David Copperfield*."<sup>30</sup> This sarcastic

<sup>22</sup>The *Institute of Taxi Poetry* published in 2012 involves similar interrogations of the cultural memory of the late apartheid period.

<sup>23</sup>Dlamini, *Native Nostalgia*.

<sup>24</sup>Ndebele, "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary."

<sup>25</sup>Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," 36.

<sup>26</sup>Etkind, *Warped Mourning*.

<sup>27</sup>Thomas, *Impossible Mourning*.

<sup>28</sup>The novel was part of Vladislavić's joint project with the famous South African photographer David Goldblatt which was published as *Double Negative/ TJ* – a catalogue of 300 images from more than 60 years of Goldblatt's photographing of Johannesburg and the novel brought under the same cover. One of the novel's characters is modeled after Goldblatt, and the narrative refers to several photographic images.

<sup>29</sup>Vladislavić, *Double Negative*, 36.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.



superimposition gives way to a more philosophical reflection on time and history (though still steeped in irony). Triggered by the photo of the protagonist as a young man standing “with the cold shell of the car against [his] bum and the morning sun on [his] face,” the memory, using the figure of Klee’s Angel and its reading by Benjamin, invokes his feeling of being “dumped by history” – an object “toyed by a rising tide” of revolution yet distrustful of the prospect of being “carried out to a classless shore.”<sup>31</sup> This image and interpretation speak about the protagonist’s present condition of an “impasse” which can be read as part of the South African and global (post-)neoliberal situation.<sup>32</sup>

Looking back at the same 40 years’ period in an attempt to find a new historical lens for the present-day condition, Coovadia’s novel pursues an approach both similar to and different from Vladislavić’s. Like *Double Negative*, focusing on the uncertainty and the blurring of memory which might, ironically, provide new visions of the future, *Tales of the Metric System* zooms into the “grey zones” not only as a feature of representing experience within a repressive regime, but also as a characteristic of memory and a temporality that relates past to the present dialogically (thus, invoking dialectics, but rejecting teleology). Where it differs from Vladislavić’s novel is in its more focused and nuanced exploration of South Africans’ engagement with the radical tradition by featuring several directions and, as a result, possibly offering a more optimistic vision of its potential for the future.

Thus, rather than pointing at the delusions involved in attempts to “translate” different contexts into each other, the novel explores synchronicities between different contexts of transition while also keeping in mind crucial differences. An example of this is the chapter “Soviet Embassy” presenting a series of conversations between representatives of the late-apartheid and -Soviet societies (“systems”). In this story set in 1985 – a high point of anti-apartheid struggle and the “state of emergency” in South Africa as well as the year of declared Perestroika in the Soviet Union – a South African anti-apartheid activist, a left-leaning British author of spy novels, and a Soviet diplomat meet at the Soviet embassy in London. The conversation between Ann Rabie, widow of a Marxist professor assassinated by the apartheid secret police, and Vadim Gerasimov, Soviet information officer, both working for semi-secret organizations (ANC and KGB) away from their home countries, involve peculiar “mirrorings and reverse-mirrorings,” both implicit and directly discussed. These dialogues capture two societies in flux: as Gerasimov remarks, “[i]n the Soviet Union today, nobody knows what is the official policy.”<sup>33</sup> The narrative, however tentatively, zooms onto the *similarities* between the Soviet and the apartheid social systems (rather than the “surpluses” of translation); but even more importantly, it focuses on the ways in which both systems were transforming and considers the *ambiguities* of these transformations. Viewing these historical processes through the eyes of specific characters and the lens of their private lives, it brings to light individuals’ agency of adapting, maneuvering and resisting rigid institutionalized choices (of the states or liberation movements) through everyday practices. The narrative steers toward deflating the myths of monolithic repression or uniform

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect*, 9–16.

<sup>33</sup>Coovadia, *Tales of the Metric System*, 134.



struggle, decentering self-righteous representations of the past. In addition, it connects comparative reflections on the Soviet and the apartheid to meditation on postapartheid society (and a larger condition of post-socialism). As Ann's British friend Sebastian who, as a writer speaking both English and Russian and having no immediate political affiliations, performs the role of a cultural translator, concludes:

I would say, like communism, there is something inherent to that system [apartheid] which degrades people in their own eyes. But when you have money, you can admire yourself again. Despite all this talk of socialism and communism, you might end up as the most capitalistic country in the world.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, by interconnecting different contexts of transition dialogically the novel questions the received certainties of repression versus freedom and the temporal boundaries of apartheid/postapartheid and Soviet/post-Soviet.

This leads to its interrogation of the cultural memory of historical change. References to its understanding of recent sociopolitical transformation as part of the long process of decolonization are already embedded in the novel's title. The change from the Imperial to the metric system in South Africa during the early 1970s refracts the historical lens, from the habitual focus on the 1994 apartheid/postapartheid boundary toward a more complex consideration of coloniality in South Africa. One obvious implication is writing the history of South Africa, with the focus on the antiapartheid movement and its mutation into a neoliberal government, into the global processes of negotiating between the aspirations of socialism and demands of capitalism during the Cold War and in its aftermath. Certainly, the novel recollects the years of the country's formal political transition, between the release of Mandela in 1989 and the first elections of 1994, as a watershed: the story focused on this period is the center of the novel's composition, framed by four chapters before and after it, with an epilogue returning to the 1970s. But by foregrounding the earlier boundary of 1970, it interprets the end of apartheid as a gradual waning out of the old structures of racial capitalism and the emergence of neoliberal practices. This mutation is embodied in the figure of Uncle Ashok, nicknamed by his family as King Midas,<sup>35</sup> who started with a small business but was driving a Mercedes already in 1976 and by the early 1990s became a billionaire providing financial assistance to the ANC. This shift of attention from race to class and the focus on close ties between the ANC and South African and foreign capital during the 1980s does not simply respond to recent corruption scandals, but it also reflects the deeper structures and dynamics of coloniality<sup>36</sup> that become visible in the present. The novel can then be read as a tracing of the origins of contemporary forms of global coloniality in South Africa. In this quest of mnemonic rediscovering, the regime of modernity/coloniality is invoked through the trope of measuring: it is via the imposition of Eurocentric standards that the production of colonial subject has been accomplished up to the present.

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 146.

<sup>35</sup>Like several other characters based on historical figures, Uncle Ashok is a fictional rendering of Shabir Shaik – a corrupt businessman and a close friend of Jacob Zuma, who was “assisting” him during the 1990s and 2000s with interest-free loans. Having been convicted of fraud and corruption, he was released on parole after 2 years of prison.

<sup>36</sup>Coined by Anibal Quijano (2000) and further theorized by other Latin American decolonial philosophers and scholars, “coloniality of power” refers to the Eurocentric hegemonic structures, originating at the beginning of the modern/colonial period and maintained up to the present day, that act to dismantle “other” types of knowledge.

This focus on the production of dependence through rituals of consumption is sustained throughout the novel – it can be viewed as a contemporary example of “rediscovering the ordinary” in writing about politics and the state of the nation. This reading of history through the material changes in everyday life begins from the first chapter, but is more explicitly articulated in the second, narrated from the perspective of Victor Moloi, a young helper to the caretaker of a worker’s hostel and assistant to the theater director<sup>37</sup> staging his first play with workers as the cast. During this meta-historical reflection, the perspective shifts to that of the omniscient narrator addressing Victor in the second person:

You weren’t familiar with litres, not to say centimetres, kilograms, and electricity sold in bundles of kilowatt hours. The terms had the ring of the space age, the vocabulary of astronauts and cosmonauts. You had heard about the success of George Foreman, studied the indistinct portrait of the world heavyweight champion in the same newspaper where you read that the Vietnam war had ended.<sup>38</sup>

In explaining the significance of transition to the metric system, the narrator imagines the ways in which it was experienced by a young black urban person in 1973. This imagination draws on details such as cars queuing at a petrol station during that year’s oil crisis, the end of Vietnam war and news articles about the US boxer, alluding to the following year’s George Foreman and Mohammed Ali match which was interpreted as a contest between the socialist and capitalist alternatives (just like the competition between the “astronauts and cosmonauts”). Thus, it focuses on the details of an ordinary South African’s daily life as a reflection of global processes and charts the production of new subjectivity as a battlefield of competing and overlapping discourses. It is also noteworthy that the switch from the third to the second person, as in this episode, occurs several times within the novel, signaling an explicit dialogue between the narrator placed in the present and the character in the past. In underscoring dialogue between two located subjectivities, the narrative emphasizes the performative force of memory in making sense of the past.

With all its attention to socialist practices, the novel foregrounds the perspectives of characters who do not have firm political affiliations or can relate to *different* ideological positions. This does not imply depoliticization (in fact, some of them are involved in anti-apartheid activism), but rather decenters abstract ideological constructions. The most obvious example of this is the differences between Neil Hunter and his wife Ann. A Marxist philosopher, friend of Steve Biko, and the founder of a Free University, Neil became a legend, especially after his assassination by the secret police in 1978. For most of the narrative, however, we see him through the eyes of Ann who is fully supportive of her husband’s activities, but is apprehensive of his detachment from daily matters and his disregard of the complexity of negotiating one’s position in a country like South Africa:

Ann wasn’t sure that her husband was adapted to real frustrations. He wishes for a world in which fair play was the norm and believed, following Sartre’s example, that injustice must be strenuously opposed in each detail. And yet politics, even in this country, was one grey thing opposing another.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>The figure of the playwright and director Peter Polk alludes to the famous Athol Fugard.

<sup>38</sup>Coovadia, *Tales of the Metric System*, 61.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 42.

The metaphor of the gray zone unfolds fully in the last chapter that gives the readers an insight into Neil's consciousness in the hours before his death. Evaluating his own living up to his principles, he observes:

On the one hand there was the sunshine world. This was the lawful domain, brilliant by the pool, predictable to the millimetre and millisecond by means of the scientific calculator and the quartz-crystal watch. In sunshine you could calculate your efforts to the last decimal. In sunshine the world was capable of measurement. Then there was the twilight zone, like the television programme. [...] The forces in the twilight zone buried your illegal books, made informers of your friends, stole exam questions from the locked cabinet in the department office, burned the labourers' cottages your mother had borrowed money to build. These two domains sat side by side, so close the transition was seamless and instant, up and down the country. They required different schemes of measurement.<sup>40</sup>

Here Neil's imagination of socialism is presented as an attribute of a future measurement system never disturbed by worldly irregularities. What is more, it is shown as embedded in commodities that signify the privilege of Neil's meditative position – the pool, the calculator, the quartz watch. Such distrust to theorization by a white middle-class man can be read as the novel's statement against *any* measurement systems and their colonizing claims. This distrust is already indicated in Ann's reflection on the sense of infinity in London's cityscape: "This infinity told her Neil had died at the edge of what was meaningful and could be recorded. She was no better than a spectre in the system of what could be defined, counted and exchanged."<sup>41</sup> It also resonates with the retrospective look at the work of the TRC, again linked to Ann's perspective denouncing this project for its technocratic approach: despite engaging sophisticated legal machinery, "there was no simple way to measure a sin."<sup>42</sup>

As a whole, the novel can be read as a project of remembering resistance practices that provides an alternative to versions of history and memory authorized by the state. It foregrounds a memory involving many varied visions and voices: only through these perspectives from later periods, we can reconstruct a fuller picture, however imperfect it remains. The fact that these recollections are attuned to present-day concerns is not regarded as a distortion of an original, but is treated as an opportunity to historically situate and rethink what has been obscured by politics of the day. The "forgetting" of Neil's assassination by this history – his case not considered by the TRC – is contrasted by the living memory of him among his family, friends, and former comrades. It also finds its way into the alternative public memory through verbatim theater – a play staged by his step-son together with retiring Polk, a collaboration that hints at passing on the practices of people's theater and art to the younger generation.

The survival, inheritance, and transformation of 1970–80s socialist practices can be read along the lines of this cross-generational passing on. While in many cases being at the head of liberation movement would translate into paranoid holding on to power,<sup>43</sup> the figure of Victor, who also becomes an ANC official, represents a principled existence: at the end, he is appealing to the president, having been falsely accused of

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 372.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 132.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 245.

<sup>43</sup>Among the characters whose stories suggest this is are those alluding to Thabo Mbeki, his spokesperson Parks Mankahlana and an ANC stalwart Essop Pahad.

disloyalty due to his criticism of party leadership.<sup>44</sup> But even more significant is the figure of Logan Naicker, a Black Consciousness activist very popular among high school students during the 1970–80s. We first meet him in 1976 as a passionate revolutionary who “puts his faith in the future”<sup>45</sup> and whose firmness of mind is matched by his training as a bodybuilder – a source of fascination for his nephew Sanjay. He had just been released from prison due to the publicity around Neil’s murder; linking this to Neil’s attempts of tracing Logan (who had been detained without trial) in the last moments before the assassination, this can be read as another case of passing on a revolutionary practice – now from a white intellectual dwelling in the world of ideas to an Indian activist fighting injustice through his body and mind.

In the story that takes place in 2010, Logan appears at a party of his nephew Sanjay who became an heir of “King Midas.” Through the eyes of Sanjay’s daughter, he appears “self-contained” and not needing “to show off,”<sup>46</sup> vastly different from her parents and the crowd of guests she detests. Her witnessing of Logan teaching his daughter Amrita to dance near the pool is full of fascination and slight envy; she joins in by blowing a vuvuzela, but remains at a distance from the father–daughter pair. Speaking to Logan later, she hears him refusing to be called “uncle”: “Plain Logan to everybody. Even as a teacher I was known as Mr Logan, never by my last name. Today it is Logan the driving instructor. No change.”<sup>47</sup> When she wonders whether his experience has not changed him, he replies: “As far as I can tell I am completely unscathed. My experience has taught me nothing. I am the same as before it started.”<sup>48</sup> Rendered through the scene of dance, this can be read as a statement about his moral principles and political convictions which he indirectly passes on to Amrita.

### **“History after Apartheid”: memory of coloniality and resistance in activist visual art**

The second last chapter of Coovadia’s novel focuses on the experience of the “born free” generation of South Africans (Shanti who focalizes the narrative is born in 1996) stressing their feelings of disappointment (in their parents) and longing (for a different future). But it does not portray any resistance practices that could match the activism of their parents or grandparents. The figure of Amrita is the most intriguing in this respect as it represents a contrast to both Shanti’s bored loathing of life in a “golden cage” and her bodyguard Joris’ aspiration to enter the world of the nouveau riche. Her character, however, remains undeveloped, only standing for an opportunity of continuing her father’s trajectory in the present. If we want to explore current forms of public engagement with the legacies of anti-apartheid resistance and its socialist trajectories, visual art practices can offer striking insights. Particularly in the context of the 2015–16 student protests and the prominent part played by visual activism, it is important to consider how young people engage with the histories of protest in South Africa today.

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<sup>44</sup>Coovadia, *Tales of the Metric System*, 320.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 113.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 360.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 361.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

Given the transnational character that visual activism against apartheid took during the 1970–80s,<sup>49</sup> do memories of it feature in current contestations of globalization?

Calls for reconsidering history and for historical reckoning were at the center of the student protests. Among the issues they raised were not only the accountability of the postapartheid elites, but also the ways of history teaching at South African institutions and the practices of “public history.” The exhibition by young Capetonian artist Haroon Gunn-Salie *History after Apartheid* (named after the same-titled installation) that opened at Johannesburg Goodman Gallery in 2015 powerfully resonated with the mood and struggles of the day. Borrowing its title from Annie Coombes’ seminal study of postapartheid visual culture and public memory,<sup>50</sup> it also implicitly engaged with this book’s central historical and theoretical line of inquiry. As Coombes notes in the “Introduction,” she was intrigued by the presence of two kinds of historical research in South Africa – the “tradition of historical writing from the left that prioritized a ‘history form below’” and the “model of historical knowledge based on an appeal to individual experience” offered by the TRC.<sup>51</sup> Her study, then, was driven by the question of

how one might embody new national histories in the public sphere that engaged larger structural narratives and material conditions *and* individual lived experiences without reducing their public expression to either some monolithic representation of ‘the struggle’ or some unlocated and ahistorical notion of individualised experience [...].<sup>52</sup>

It is this aspired combination that one can observe in Gunn-Salie’s and some other young artists’ work which makes use of but also transforms approaches to history and knowledge “from the left” under the postcolonial neoliberal conditions. On the one hand, *History after Apartheid* stresses the importance of historical materialist approaches to the present; on the other, it approaches “history” as rooted in memory, i.e. an embodied and personalized account. In an interview discussing the artist’s site-specific installation *Witness* that addressed the erasure of history and identity of Cape Town’s District Six, the area where Gunn-Salie’s family lived and from which it was removed under apartheid legislation, he defines his work as “ha[ving] to do with history and the fact that many historical things have not been corrected in South Africa”<sup>53</sup> (“Haroon Gunn-Salie”). At the same time, it draws on personal memories of everyday life in District Six as intimated through oral history work with former residents and the artist’s own “postmemory.”<sup>54</sup> It, thus, creates a dialogue between history and memory, and between the memories and traumas of different generations.

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<sup>49</sup>This included transnational circulation of photographic images, artworks, and texts that involved political message as well as transnational collaboration of artists, such as the 1982 *Culture and Resistance* conference in Gaborone that brought together hundreds of artists living in South Africa and in exile or the 1987 *Culture in another South Africa* festival in the Netherlands.

<sup>50</sup>Coombes, *History after Apartheid*.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup>Gunn-Salie, interview with Kelly Berman.

<sup>54</sup>Marianne Hirsch’s (2008) concept of postmemory describes “the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (103). It can illuminate Gunn-Salie’s reworking of his family histories and traumas: his mother, an antiapartheid activist and member of the MK, the ANC military wing, was detained together Haroon as a new-born, was separated from him and tortured with recordings of her son’s weeping. (<http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/shirley-gunn>).

The installation *History after Apartheid*, consisting of a series of two-colour lithographic prints and a two-channel video, returns to the episode of mass anti-apartheid resistance in 1989 when a group of activists peacefully marching to the Parliament in Cape Town was attacked by the police's new weapon – a water cannon using purple paint to mark demonstrators for arrest. Invoking this history, the installation engages with the recent appropriations of the method to suppress public protest driven by Left movements across the former “Second” and “Third world.” It includes a row of photographs documenting the acts, accompanied by posters with names of the countries:

pro-democracy protestors in India blasted with purple dye; Ugandan police painting opposition leaders in luminous pink; Bangladeshi lawyers protesting outside the Palace of Justice painted a pale pink; Hungarian police using a combination of blue and green to disperse a pro-Socialist demonstration in downtown Budapest; Turkish teachers coloured bright yellow while marching in Ankara for secular education and South Korean protestors marching against US president George W Bush's visit to Seoul illuminated in orange. In lower Woodstock, Cape Town, a protest by the Ses'khona Peoples Movement is broken up by a South African Police Service water canon dispensing blue and Israeli police using bright cerulean blue to identify Palestinian stone-throwers in Bil'in.<sup>55</sup>

The rest of the installation consists of a dark room with shadow sculptures of the countries' names covered with projections of light in pink-purple-blue hues. By using both factual and affective means in drawing parallels between local histories of violence and resistance to them, it addresses the global scale of “apartheid” as one of the most visible instances of coloniality. The parallelism of this representation (the copresence of multiple sites and historical moments) forms a structure similar to that of exploring synchronicity between (post-)apartheid and (post-)socialist contexts in Coovadia's novel. At the same time, the installation creates historical depth by engaging with the local moment of 2014 when spray paint was used against a march by the Ses'khona People's Rights Movement demanding decent housing and sanitation for residents of informal settlements, and of 2015 when police would use rubber bullets and teargas against peacefully protesting students.<sup>56</sup> An important allusion also involves the agency of protesters invoked in the memories of the 1989 march, since its turning point was when one of the protesters took hold of the cannon and turned it against the police. This counter-hegemonic moment created through an aesthetic means of the “purple rain protest” served as a powerful inspiration for further activism: a week later, 30,000 people led by Desmond Tutu dressed in purple robes marched through Cape Town without being attacked by the police; a graffiti that appeared next day on the Townhouse in Greenmarket square declaring “the purple shall govern” reworked the famous phrase of the Freedom Charter, “the people shall govern.”<sup>57</sup>

An important aspect of Gunn-Salie's installation is that, while interlinking practices of unrest and police violence across the periods and transnationally, he lends this comparison further historical depth by reflecting on the coloniality of power that underlies all

<sup>55</sup>Goodman Gallery, “History after Apartheid.”

<sup>56</sup>Importantly, the links between the government's mistreatment of people living in informal settlements and students from low-income families were stressed by the RhodesMustFall and FeesMustFall as they included demands to stop outsourcing of workers by universities. Joint demonstrations by students and workers took place at several campuses.

<sup>57</sup>A detailed description of the “purple rain protest” and its aftermath can be found at: <https://www.thepurpleshallgovern.com/about>.



these conflicts. It is explicitly referred to in another installation within this exhibition, “Soft Vengeance,” featuring red-painted hands and arms cast from the monuments to Jan van Riebeeck, Cecil Rhodes, and other colonial leaders still reigning public spaces in South Africa. As art critic Lwandile Fikeni observed, the blood-stained hands

point to the ways in which white South Africa created its wealth and the ways in which it maintains it till this day. This blood also points to the legitimacy of the grievances of the #RhodesMustFall student movement, the legitimacy of the #FeesMustFall student movement and the many other black student uprisings, which have exhumed the skeletons of history which bind their feet and their hands.<sup>58</sup>

Keeping in mind this link in Gunn-Salie’s work, it is interesting to see whether artworks directly connected to the “Must Fall” movement involve similar mnemonic structures. A compelling case is the exhibition *Phefumla! (breathe!)* that took place at the District Six Museum in Cape Town and the Goethe Institute in Johannesburg in 2017. It included works by young South African artists who took up micro-residences at the *Open Forum* and was curated by Cape Town-based artist and former Stellenbosch student Greer Valley together with the resident artists. The title’s exclamation points to the search for spaces of openness and freedom: the metaphor of breathing indicates the immediate bodily necessity while the use of the Xhosa/Zulu verb implies the specificity of black experience within white institutions. The *Open Forum* emerged as a space of resistance to education policies at Stellenbosch and involved cultural and art activism from an outset, similarly to activist groups at other South African universities.<sup>59</sup> The series of workshops, lectures, performances, and film screenings organized as part of the residency program was a logical continuation of this type of activism. Valley articulated the purpose of this institution in the atmosphere of violence as “to provide a space to question art’s role in stimulating change. Can art be intertwined with activism and how? It’s also a space to engage and reflect on what’s happening – a space to breathe [...]”<sup>60</sup>.

Conceived within the movement for decolonizing South African education and probing the role of art in this process, the exhibition involves many references to the struggles around education during the late-apartheid period. Among them is the popular rally cry “Amandla!” (translated as “power”) which served as a title for Stephané Conradie’s installation styled as an exhibition brochure, with contact details and a note: “call to decolonise.” It, thus, combines the seriousness of canonic references to the history of anti-apartheid struggle, pointing at the historicity of violence, with self-ironic allusions to the artist’s “implicatedness” within education and art institutions.

While associatively connecting memories of late-apartheid resistance to the present, the installations within the exhibition, similarly to Gunn-Salie’s works, do not merge different historical moments or generational positions. While these works, unlike Gunn-Salie’s, do not involve any references beyond South Africa in terms of the histories of socialist struggles they address, they do forge transnational links in the ways they “theorize” present-day resistance as both situated and global. For framing the

<sup>58</sup>Fikeni, “The Stains of History.”

<sup>59</sup>Cf. Robbe (2016) for a discussion of artistic expressions including poetry and visual art as an integral part of the RhodesMustFall and FeesMustFall protests at the University of Cape Town.

<sup>60</sup>Maseko, “Make Art Not War.”



exhibition, the curators/artists used explicitly decolonial and queer theory terms, thus interpreting the current situation as requiring a distinctly new lens. For instance, the exhibition brochure describes the *Open Forum* as developing innovative approaches to resistance – “a collective of bodies interested in artistic and interventionist work that challenges hegemonic ideas of protest and activism.” Valley’s reflection on the exhibition places the project within the larger context of public education, gentrification, and racialized politics of protest, and presents it as “encourag[ing] intergenerational and intersectional conversations.”<sup>61</sup> Engaging with issues of knowledge production, the artists question forms of protest that are considered (il)legitimate in South Africa at present. In so doing, they expose the coloniality of knowledge at the heart of the postapartheid regime: regarding the media representations of the Mother City March against President Zuma in April 2017, Valley notes that it

presented itself almost as a direct rebuttal of recent student protests with many commentators across various media platforms lamenting the behaviour of students battling the police in riot gear, conjuring up images of the riots of 1976 as it was then described in the media.<sup>62</sup>

This observation bridging the past and present of student resistance against the state and the complicity of the media can be read as a commentary on Grace Peterson’s performance “Silencing Me, System!” from the same exhibition, which explores the militarization of South African university campuses as a historical trace.

## Conclusion

The discussed literary and visual works responding to the crisis of the postapartheid imagination invoke the disillusionment that has been described as a dominant mood and mode of representation in contemporary South African culture. What is especially interesting about these works is that while joining the current tendencies of disappointment, nostalgia, and reflective introspection, they address some disremembered modes of imagining the future which inspired the Left tradition in South Africa. This exploration is uncertain, self-critical, and fragmented – which points at the difficulty of confronting postapartheid disremembrance of socialist activism, but also the self-reflective quality of these memory practices. The novel and the artworks create intriguing dialogues between depictions of disillusionment and tentative recollections of alternative pasts, hinging on a counterpoint between remembering and imagining a future, the senses of defeat and hope, discovering the roots of the current impasse and exploring hidden undercurrents that might feed future practices and imaginations. These works can be considered as opening up spaces for thinking about the present of socialist archives in South Africa at the time of national and global disillusionment and uncertainty.

Several strategies of engaging with the socialist archives interrelate the discussed works and allow for considering them as part of the present-day social imagination. First, their focus on similarities and parallels between practices of resistance to authoritarian regimes in different parts of the world. While societies that underwent political

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<sup>61</sup>Valley and Sanger, “Critical Conversations on Freedom.”

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

transitions during the 1980s and 1990s have encountered different obstacles and are facing different challenges, the ways in which socialist alternatives have been discredited and in which they are revoked now brings them together. Such comparative explorations take place in Coovadia's juxtaposing of the ambiguities of resistance and the uncertainties of imagining the future by South Africans and Russians at the edge of political turnover. A similar outlook defines Gunn-Salie's installation interlinking the practices of state violence and of resistance by Left activists from different parts of the world. Looking onto the world from the postapartheid present, both works question the extent of change after political transition and zoom into the intricacies of resistance and agency, by-passing grand narratives to explore gray zones and sideways trajectories. Together with the works included in *Phefumla!*, these representations ask whether and how socialist practices of resistance are passed on to younger generations. These engagements with the past are not just commemorative, but also self-reflective, aspiring to develop a new historical lens. The dialogues they establish between practices of socialist resistance during apartheid and today develop historical temporalities that move away from the moment of transition toward a critique of ongoing coloniality, thus broadening historical and geopolitical horizons.

These critiques developed in South African literary and artworks take part in what Madina Tlostanova has described as a series of meeting points between post-socialist and postcolonial studies. Though proceeding from different traditions, some recent practices within these currents are producing "similar results and even possible coalitions [...] because ultimately they manifest the spectrum of different reactions to the coloniality of power."<sup>63</sup> The artistic representations examined here demonstrate a trajectory similar to that of decolonial thought which, among other things, interlinks the colonial and socialist pasts as well as the postcolonial and post-socialist presents. It remains to be seen what forms the emerging explorations of the socialist archive in South Africa will take, whether they will inflect postapartheid imaginations, and if they will create new transnational and transcontinental connections.

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the support of the African Studies Centre in Leiden which granted me partial teaching relief and a research stay in 2017, during which I worked on this article. The research environment and dialogues with resident and guest scholars encouraged and broadened my inquiry. Furthermore, special thanks to the organizers of the conference "After Socialism: Forgotten Legacies and Possible Futures in Africa and Beyond" at the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies for inviting me to contribute with this paper. Finally, I cannot thank enough Hamish for his encouragement and support, and Kostja and Sasha for their patience.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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<sup>63</sup>Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism*, 13.

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