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## South African end times: Conceiving an apocalyptic imaginary

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The future of South Africa has most commonly been conceived as a prospective apocalyptic upheaval in which the nation fractures along race lines. This expectation preceded, but informed the rise of apartheid, and has accompanied its demise. This article argues that catastrophic prediction—the trope of a looming racial Armageddon—is like a worn coin: familiar currency so often spent. Nonetheless, we need to conceive how this particular political theology settled into our polity; why it has proved so adaptable (through and despite the “miraculous” transformation of 1994); and, how its tenacity—which is politically anodyne at best and fascist at worst—might be challenged. The article conceives of a study (comprising nine essays) which sets out to analyze aspects of this history of fear, without simply taking its existence and persistence for granted. **Keywords:** South African apocalypse, catastrophism, dystopia, political theology, white fear.

The flame of devastation will not only destroy our habitations, but will also cause your houses to fall in ruin! Not only our wives and daughters, but also yours will in libidinous manner be prosecuted by our slaves with rape and defloration, and when, after all this out of the pit of murdered citizens a Saint Domingo has risen, then may God grant that we be no more amongst the living, but then you yourselves will be compelled by the slaves who fought themselves free to carry the bones of your wife and your child to make a monument of their freedom obtained by fire and murder.  
—F.N.L. Neethling’s 1826 letter to the Cape Town Burgher Senate cautioning against the emancipation of the slaves (cited in Moodie 1).

**1**

Apocalyptic presentiment, iterating a long history of colonial anxiety, marked the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, its political tenure from 1948 and its dissolution after 1990. Fear was hegemony’s currency. It was distributed liberally among the white middle and working classes, in the rural hinterland, to apartheid’s bloated civil service and in the military. It was systematically invested in Christian National Education. Resistance politics, from its colonial origins in slave rebellion, related to this fear

dialectically: it responded explicitly or pointedly ignored white cultural foreboding. In either case, it was inadvertently trapped in the prevailing eschatology. Whatever else it may have been, the “miracle” of 1994 was the celebration of an averted bloodbath. In its fading afterglow, post-apartheid anxiety has been expressed in predictions of very familiar horrors. Populism is the spectre that haunts the post-apartheid dispensation: the mobilization of the poor (such a historical fear in itself) spells the nation’s contemporary doomsday. To concern ourselves with the cultural history of this structure of feeling<sup>1</sup> is not to privilege (and certainly not to exonerate) white fear. It has signally constituted our public discourse, and has been contagious.

Writing in 1946, Arthur Keppel-Jones, a professor of History at the University of the Witwatersrand, presented a “history” of the country, *When Smuts Goes* (1947), as if looking back from 2015. The work predicted the Nationalists’ electoral victory (although it imagined it would occur in 1952, four years later than it did). In Keppel-Jones’s prolepsis, a relatively moderate republicanism is gradually displaced by fascism: the Afrikaner government limits its definition of citizenship, nationalizes industries, implements drastic censorship, takes full control of education and deploys *Stormjaers* (storm troopers) to suppress any dissent. Mass emigration of liberal whites follows, predominantly English-speakers, but also many Afrikaners. Outraged by the extent of human rights abuses, in 1977 the United Nations Security Council resolves to invade the country, and a military assault, led by Britain and the United States, deposes the “Obadja Bult” regime and facilitates the formation of a new administration led by “Lincoln Mfundisi,” the wise and moderate leader of the African National Party (ANP). Most Afrikaners relocate to the comfortable “Fascism” of Argentina.

Untutored in political processes, the new black administration lapses into factionalism and widespread corruption; Mfundisi is assassinated and political and economic chaos ensues. The country disintegrates into a barbaric contestation among rapacious clans. Keppel-Jones is at pains to explain that the widespread savagery is not a result of any racial deficiency: the legacy of Afrikaner nationalism is that each cultural group is concerned only with its own members and priorities. Finally, a devastating plague descends. “The bodies of the dead could not be buried quickly enough. Houses were often seen in which the corpses of a whole family had lain for days or weeks” (268). Entire regions are depopulated. “The Republic,” Keppel-Jones concludes his account, “had begun to disintegrate after 1996, and [the plague] completed its conversion to a primitive subsistence economy. Every locality now depends on its own resources. Lacking economic unity, the country tends towards political chaos of the medieval type, with local chieftains exercising power and bandits preying upon strangers” (269)

Jan Toekoms’s (“John Future”) *When Malan Goes* (1953), written at the end of the Nationalists’ first term in office, is a polemic that presents a “Progressive Programme” to address what, at the time, was generally referred to as “The Native Question.” A

response to Keppel-Jones, it suggests what political and economic reforms are necessary if a national catastrophe is to be averted. Toekoms advocates the maintenance of “*social apartheid* and *political apartheid*” but the incremental abolition of all “*economic distinctions*” (126).<sup>2</sup> Since democracy is apparently unimportant to “the native,” there is no urgent need for universal franchise; all efforts should focus on development, and the creation of equal (educational and economic) opportunities for all races. The “Progressive Programme” is essential to forestall political revolution and environmental and economic collapse. “If we go on as we are, squabbling over shadows instead of the substance of life, we shall have no posterity to record our follies or to admire our ruthlessness. Life will disappear and our interior plateau will become a great space of sand, blown into dunes and broken by rocky outcrops. [...] Archaeologists will come to dig up our ruins and marvel at the extent of our lost civilization. [...] They will stare at what was once the Union Buildings, now a series of arches rising to a burning sky” (140).

Lester Venter’s *When Mandela Goes: The Coming of South Africa’s Second Revolution* (1997) concerns the widening gulf between the privileged and the economically desperate in post-apartheid South Africa. The author’s signal anxiety resides in the “un-people” (30), the marginalized poor, who, given their susceptibility to agitation by unscrupulous politicians, could be mobilized into violent action against the economic and political status quo. (Interestingly, like the historical National Party, Keppel-Jones’s fascist “Bult Regime” blames all defiance and insurrection on “agitators” —those shadowy puppet-masters whose existence refutes proletarian agency.) In a creative digression, Venter imagines the lives of two future South Africans.

In 2002, in the wake of the collapse of the ANC-Cosatu-SACP alliance and the electoral victory of the African Labour Party, Erwin Barnard’s existence is defined by privatization. He lives in a suburban compound, protected by a militarized security force; South Africa is virtually a criminal state, with an increasingly precarious infrastructure (among other indicators, water and electricity supply is intermittent); Erwin’s car is mobbed by the desperate and belligerent poor whenever he leaves his walled community; he has kidnapping insurance; and, his children’s school is located in the safety of a shopping mall. Zama Mizilikaze, having left his home in “Natal” after 1994 in the hope of employment in Johannesburg, becomes an informal recycler, collecting waste in a bulk bag on a trolley and selling it at a depot. In a rather anachronistic repetition of the “Jim-comes-to-Joburg” trope, Venter traces Zama’s journey from one precarious job to the next, his gradual moral decline and his eventual—inevitable—turn to a life of violent crime. He becomes “Zakes,” a warlord in an AIDS-ridden criminal subculture.

Venter characterizes the rampant criminality he envisages as a version of class war. He advocates that, in the short term, it must be brought under control by expanding and restructuring the police force and overhauling the criminal justice system. His

longer term solution to the crippling social bifurcation he describes, which he believes can avert the nightmare of a bloody “second revolution,” is neoliberal. “Vigorous economic growth is the key to South Africa’s salvation. Only through the creation of real prosperity can a future of social decay and political regression be avoided” (296). This is the same solution proposed by Toekoms four decades earlier.

Each of these three works of analytical speculation is a jeremiad urging us to mend our ways lest our worst fears are to be manifested. Each conceives of South Africa as consisting in communities with discrepant histories, priorities and probably irreconcilable needs. If the nation is not to fracture along these fault lines—and plunge into apocalyptic chaos, with blood running in the streets, whites chased into the sea, widespread atavism—fundamental political and economic transformation is essential. The general sense is that the nation (*as nation*) is dangerously moribund; what hope exists is qualified and counter-historical, necessitating desperate measures. As if a social implosion were not bad enough, Keppel-Jones, Toekoms and Venter all situate their visions of pending social catastrophe in our precarious natural environment. Soil erosion, water scarcity and the over-exploitation of resources all suggest that the means of our livelihood are finite and diminishing. At some point in the not too distant future, unless we do something drastic, everything—water, patience, tolerance and civilization—is going to run out.

## 2

What follows is an *essay* concerning what a study of South Africa’s morbidity might comprise. In Montaigne’s sense of the term, this is an essay into a territory; it neither aims to be comprehensive nor definitive. In some ways it resembles a research proposal; its mood and tense should be read as conditional: “What would a scholar need to consider if she were to theorize the affect I will refer to as ‘South African apocalyptic anticipation?’” There is—true to the essayistic mode—nothing programmatic about what follows. It seems reasonable to publish a discussion of ideas at an early stage of a project; perhaps less formed notions encourage dialogue and thinking.

The first complexity relates to the ubiquity of catastrophist expectation and prediction in this country. In 1951, a foreign correspondent for a “prominent British newspaper group,” Michael Ardizzone, wrote *The Mistaken Land*. It is one of a number of pessimistic prognoses published in the decade after the Nationalist victory.<sup>3</sup> In keeping with Keppel-Jones’s prolepsis, Ardizzone advocates that the United Nations invade South Africa to prevent its descent into violent anarchy. More salient, though, are his comments on the routine of fear.

For years I had wakened in the morning and had gone to bed at night with the knowledge that South Africa was rushing into civil war, that its lands were drying up and turning to dust, and there was no hope anywhere that did not lie first in

bloodshed and chaos; but somehow the sun shone every day and the little round of office and home went on as if nothing much were wrong, and the hideous things which lay just beyond took much the place in my mind that the thought of his own, inescapable death takes in the mind of every sane and healthy man. (203)

The death drive, Sigmund Freud (2003) argues, is commonly satisfied by its redirection into other drives, or is obscured by the sublimation and inhibition essential to self-preservation (and civilization).<sup>4</sup> It is also plastic; susceptible to the torsions of intersubjectivity, culture and history (88–89). The converse also holds: the death drive is a psychic mechanism for the gratification of other drives. The thought of our “own, inescapable death” (Ardizzone 203) is at once ever present, and constantly transacting—masking, inflecting, subsuming or subverting—those aspects of our affect and cognition that seem unrelated to our mortality. The same arguably pertains at the level of ideology: we can easily identify the myriad invocations and representations of a South African doomsday (in political speeches from left and right, polemics, analyses, literary works, films, artworks ...), but the dissemination of the idea makes it at once too ubiquitous and varied in its transformations to constitute a discrete subject for enquiry. That with which we live—as if in the nape of our neck—is the most ineffable; the most resistant to analysis.

Apocalyptic fear has, though, been constitutive of the political, economic and symbolic domains of the South African public sphere. Recently—with the apocalypse so in vogue in critical theory, literary and popular culture—unconscionably ahistorical and general arguments relating to End Times in the late-capitalist Global South and the “zombification of the poor” are achieving currency. Some are aphoristic (see Comaroff and Comaroff 153–71), some unsubstantiated (see David McNally 108–27), or—at their worst—sashay between the films of George A. Romero—*Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985) ...—and the lived realities of impoverished migrants and the homeless in South America, South Asia and Africa (see Evan Calder Williams). In the face of this reduction of the apocalypse to an “analytical” poetics (amounting at times to little more than figural incontinence)—and given its centrality in South Africa (and, no doubt, other contexts)—it is incumbent on scholars to think more carefully, or at least to imagine what such care might entail. This is not reactionary exceptionalism. (“Think they can come over here—or not—and pronounce on our apocalypse!”) While Armageddon, by definition, is levelling (the end of all things), any analysis of its rhetorical invocation needs to be historicized and contextualized. Anyone who proclaims that the End is nigh, given that all aspects of reality are contingent, provisional, prudential and muddled, is selling something. There are accomplished introductions to the history and philosophy of the apocalypse<sup>5</sup> and any synopsis would be banal. Yet, before proceeding to South Africa’s colonial and apartheid history, it is worth rehearsing certain tenets.

Teleology—a doctrine that assumes ends are immanent and that the linear progression of history is purposeful—becomes the dominant temporality with the emergence of monotheism (which displaced cyclic, as well as other mystical and ritualized temporalities). Judeo-Christian eschatology (as does Islam) conceives of existence extending from the divine creation to a revelatory destruction of the world, at which moment the righteous elect will ascend to heaven, in rapture, to be united with the divine. At that moment, not only will God’s true nature be revealed to man, but the meaning of our existence and the history of humanity will be disclosed. The devastation of the world—that gothic vision revealed to John of Patmos (previously intimated by Daniel and Isaiah)—will be as cataclysmic as the revelation of divinity will be glorious. “Apocalypse” refers, of course, to the lifting of “the veil,” the fabric of illusion, desire, sin and deception which obscures the truth: the curtain in the temple shall be rent asunder and the Ark of the Covenant revealed. The history of Christianity, among other peculiarities, has consisted in debates as to whether Armageddon is a literal prediction (as fundamentalists maintain) or an allegory (which has lent itself to a legion of interpretations). In either instance, the imagined End—no matter how it is conceived—clarifies mundane existence retrospectively. Using a phrase from Revelation 22.2, Frank Kermode expresses this most elegantly: “Men [...] rush ‘into the midst,’ in *medias res*, when they are born; they also die in *mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives [...]. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations” (7).

I will consider later the ways in which this eschatology is translated into a distinctly South African political theology. First, it is necessary to consider whether “apocalypse”—as it is used in catastrophist rhetoric generally and South African prolepsis in particular—retains its theological meaning. In his nod to Francis Ford Coppola’s film, J. Hillis Miller argues that the apocalypse is never “now” (117). Our epistemic horizon—following the discursive turn and the concomitant cynicism about grand narratives—countenances neither teleology nor the trope of revealed truth. In Hillis Miller’s argument, the torn curtain reveals just another curtain; the “apocalypse” is endlessly deferred. It is this that leads Teresa Heffernan, a scholar of modernist and contemporary literature, to refer to our epoch as “post-apocalyptic” (7): not that the “apocalypse” has occurred, but that—in the absence of any conviction that revelation or truth have hermeneutic purchase—the concept loses descriptive or analytical valence. Academics incline, though, to thinking that the world and the academy are alike. Just as societies are neither increasingly secular (see, among others, Alister McGrath’s *The Twilight of Atheism*, 2004) nor liberal, they are not populated by poststructuralists. For the vast majority of Jews, Christians and Muslims (most of whom live in the Global South), whatever the world is, it is not “post-apocalyptic” in Heffernan’s sense.

We should also acknowledge that “apocalypse” and “revelation” have become uncoupled in common parlance. In her excellent study, *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract* (2010), Claire P. Curtis argues for the use of “apocalypse” in its popular rather than technical sense: the “apocalyptic event or events cause a radical shift in the basic conditions of human life: it does not require the destruction of all humans or even the destruction of all potential conditions of human life” (5). Concerned with the efforts of survivors to start over—presented in narrative modes reminiscent of the Robinsonade—Curtis is concerned with utopian and dystopian consequences of the destruction of “all hierarchies, laws and systems for organizing people” (7). Her preoccupation is with “secular eschatology” (5), not with any divinity that shapes our ends. While South African apocalyptic fear is enmeshed with Calvinism, we also need to consider this more popular—even fetishized—secular understanding. Insisting on the theological cogency of “Revelation” would impose a false limit on any study of our history of eschatological (and chiliastic) dread. A caveat: setting aside epiphanic Revelation does not mean that secular apocalyptic narratives do not reveal social, political and existential dynamics. Indeed, stripping away the habitual and routine world—reducing individuals and communities to the basics—resonates with apophatic theology: it dispels our misconceptions about ourselves and our society in a poetics of radical defamiliarization.

### 3

Is it feasible to map the history of South African apocalyptic presentiment? It is tempting to read metonymically the hedge planted by officials of the Dutch East India Company outside the precincts of the Castle at the Cape to control incursions by the Khoekhoe. In figural terms it could be taken to foreshadow the patrolled frontiers, buffer zones, *cordons sanitaire*, influx controls, and now the booms, electric fences and access control of suburban enclaves. A Manichean meta-narrative is seductive in its simplicity: white settlers always considered black Africans inferior; represented them in primitivist tropes (as governed by instinct, incapable of rational reflection, as savage and barbaric—or in Romantic terms, as a noble, innocent alternative to “modern” European decadence); feared that they might mobilize as a swarming horde; and, considered the prospects of their civilization challenging, dubious or doomed. Of course, politics of race—and the South African racist fear of an inordinately threatening alterity—has a long and complicated history. In addition to being characterized by an overriding sense of white superiority, race relations have also exhibited a significant history of complicity (in the extra-moral sense elaborated by Mark Sanders)<sup>6</sup> and have been marked by a seam at which, in Leon de Kock’s elaboration of the Comaroff’s phrase, a “grammar of distinctions” fails to capture the intricate suturing of white and black modernity (15–22). Contemporary reactionary historians incline to arguing that race

has not always been constitutive of social hierarchy; that a Christian paternal beneficence is now misrepresented as cruel exploitation (“Kaffertjie,” I have been told more than once, is a term of endearment); and, perhaps the most invidious argument, that the history of South African colonialism and apartheid was different in neither degree nor effect from the conduct of other European nations (the genocidal elimination of Native American, Aboriginal Australian and South American societies and clans is commonly cited with a disturbing self-righteous envy). Even if we reject the abhorrence of right-wing denialism of the atrocity of apartheid, we do have to engage the complex debates between liberal and conservative positions on “The Racial Question” and complicate pronouncements in which “the Afrikaner”, “English-speaking liberal” or any equivalents are treated as categories. There are—as South African social and political historiography attests—long traditions of contestation in each of these loose groups.

Before turning to the key concept of “political theology”—in terms of which I will conceive of the study of apocalyptic anticipation—it seems incumbent on me to explain why, in the imagined study, I would not address, except as subsidiary histories, the millennial cattle-killing among the amaXhosa in 1856–57, and other instances of chiliasm in black communities (such as the apocalyptic prophecies of Nontetha Nkwenkwe in 1918 during the Spanish flu epidemic). As Jeff Peires (*The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing of 1856–7*), Noel Mostert (*Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa’s Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People*) and others have so fully illustrated, the prophecies of Nongqawuse and their apocalyptic consequences—arguably the most severe of any millenarian movement in the country’s history—were a desperate response to colonial expansion and the unravelling of the social fabric of the chieftaincies and clans of the Eastern Cape. Similarly, Robert R. Edgar and Hilary Sapire (*African Apocalypse: The Story of Nonetetha Nkwenkwe, a Twentieth-Century South African Prophet*) describe the increasingly paranoid reactions of government officials to Nkwenkwe’s prophecies, which were counter-hegemonic (in their unsanctioned interpretation of colonial history) and considered seditious.

There are three reasons for not engaging material of this order, except, as I indicated at the outset, indirectly and comparatively. First, it has been authoritatively documented and analyzed. In addition to social and political histories, an excellent monograph concerning the place of prophecies in resistance against colonialism and apartheid exists: *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy in South Africa and Beyond* (2009) by Jennifer Wenzel. Second, liberation theology (whether Christian or a hybrid of indigenous and Christian beliefs) signals a politics of hope and aspiration; of deliverance. While this articulates directly with the apocalyptic theologies I will discuss, this study would limit itself to the history of morbidity linked to Calvinism and the rise of Afrikaner nationalism. This is not a capricious exclusion. I hope that



my motivation—apart from the obvious question of scope—becomes clear as the discussion proceeds.

#### 4

It is axiomatic that to conceive of a South African apocalypse one is drawn to the intersection of the political and the theological. Hermann Giliomee suggests that historians ascribe Afrikaners' "belief about the inferiority of the blacks" (his phrase "the blacks" carries a reactionary taint), to a "degenerate form of Calvinism that developed on the frontier" (35). He cautions against asserting any homology: "There is a danger in attaching too much attention to the theology before the exact relationship between theology and the historical reality on the ground is established" (43).

As Dunbar Moodie (1975), Willem de Klerk (1975) and Giliomee have all argued: in the 1790s, fundamentalist Calvinism spread through Afrikaner communities like wildfire. These mass conversions were synchronous with the emergence of an "Afrikaner" identity: when settlers began to think of themselves as "Afrikaners," rather than as Dutch, French or German. Not only did Calvinism—in its various sectarian forms—become the dominant Afrikaner religion, but the churches also became the locus of an emerging language (the hybrid dialect that became Afrikaans) and the key institution of social cohesion. By the mid-nineteenth century, travel writing emphasizes the extent to which Afrikaners were devout; they were commonly described by both English and French travellers as among the most God-fearing and dour communities. By the early 1800s, the notion had already developed among the broader Afrikaner community that a unique covenant pertained between them and God; that they existed in some continuity with the Israelites of the Old Testament.

Our history is the greatest masterpiece of the centuries. We hold this nationhood as our due for it was given by the Architect of the universe. [His] aim was the formation of a new nation among the nations of the world. [...] The last hundred years have witnessed a miracle behind which must lie a divine plan. Indeed, the history of the Afrikaner reveals a will and a determination which makes one feel that Afrikanerdom is not the work of men, but the creation of God. (D. F. Malan, cited in Moodie 1)

Moodie argues that the history of the Afrikaner people has been rendered—in the popular imagination, but also in a significant body of (pseudo)scholarly historiography—as a providential epic organized in terms of an ideology he calls a "civil religion." Following the desultory Slagtersnek Rebellion in 1815, rural Afrikaner communities found themselves increasingly alienated by Britain's abolitionist intentions, and particularly outraged by the failure of the colonial administration to pay full compensation for emancipated slaves. The farmers on the Eastern frontier, at odds with the liberal Cape Afrikaners, experienced their situation in the wake of the

Frontier Wars as precarious: cattle-raiding by the Boers and the amaXhosa alike became endemic and competition between these two pastoral societies over grazing and water escalated. These tensions resulted in skirmishes and raids. Feeling unprotected by the English administration, secessionist sentiments began to coalesce. In the 1830s, Afrikaner communities—quite loosely affiliated and under the guidance of leaders whose differences were as marked as their project was shared—began heading north, with the intention of getting beyond the pale.

The Great Trek was rendered, at the time, in broadly theological tropes: as an ordained migration, through the land of the heathen, to the Promised Land (as if out of Egyptian slavery). On the 6 February 1838, endeavouring to negotiate the borders of Boer farmlands, Piet Retief and his delegation were killed by the troops of the Zulu King Digane waSenzanghakone. Nearly a year later, on the 16 December 1838 at the Battle of Blood River (*iMpi yaseNcome*), the trekkers, led by Andries Pretorius—having entered a covenant with God—survived, in their laager on Vegkop, the onslaught of between ten and fifteen thousand Zulu warriors. In 1854, after a great deal of wrangling with Moshoeshoe and the British, the Oranje-Vrystaat (the Orange Free State) was established and, in 1856, the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (Transvaal Republic) achieved independence.

While these events were interpreted at the time in a religious register by Boer leaders and their followers, they were only combined into a coherent national epic several decades later—when the Boer republics faced the direct threat of British expansionism. Central in the public enunciation of this “civil religious” epic was Paul Kruger, who had been on the Great Trek as a child and was elected as president of the Transvaal Republic in 1883. It was his speeches, Giliomee and Moodie argue, that consolidated and sanctified the history of the Voortrekkers and evangelized their divine deliverance on the Day of the Covenant (which was not officially marked until Kruger instituted solemn public commemorations). It was he who repeatedly designated the English “the enemy” of the Boer republics and who blamed them for the historical travails of the Afrikaner. Giliomee goes as far as to argue that it was Kruger who established the close and abiding link between “religious and national identity” (Giliomee 234) and promulgated the notion that the survival of the *volk* would be God’s blessing and only by His grace, while its destruction would result from its collective sins or its failure to follow God’s commands. It was in Kruger’s rhetoric (he was, of course, illiterate so all written records of his life and beliefs are mediated by amanuenses) that faith in the Republic and God, in the *volk* and righteousness, become synonymous.

*Perhaps the first essay in a study (conceived as a cycle of nine essays) should concern representations of Paul Kruger, whose theological understanding of Afrikaner history was expressed in a fiery rhetoric which inflected Afrikaner nationalism (and fashioned much of*

*its covenantal and eschatological foundation). The literature on Kruger is, of course, vast, but I would anticipate working with the transcripts of his speeches, his memoirs, numerous portraits by his contemporaries and biographers, as well as in English and Afrikaans fiction. I am, though, particularly concerned to analyze a filmic biography, Ohm Krüger (1941), directed by Hans Steinhoff, and commissioned by Joseph Goebbels as Reich Minister of Propaganda. The film ends in an apocalyptic conflagration (a searing representation of the effects of Britain's scorched earth policy used at the end of the South African War) and shots of the British concentration camps in which Boer women and children were interred. Burning farms and starving women and children persisted as central icons in the scripting of Afrikaner dread. This film exists in counterpoint with the hugely popular South African film, Paul Krüger (1956), directed by Werner Grünbauer, which was shown to generations of South African school children.*

*A second essay could concern Nicolaas Pieter Johannes Janse van Rensburg, generally known as "Siener van Rensburg." While Kruger was a statesman eschatologist, van Rensburg was a prophet who exerted considerable influence among the Boer leadership during the South African War: he was a trusted friend—and many claim, an advisor—of General de la Rey and President Steyn, and is discussed at length by many contemporaries, among them Deneys Reitz in *Commando: A Journal of the Boer War* (1929). He was protected as a non-combatant visionary during the war, and passed from one commando to the next predicting events and describing his opaque, but enthusiastically interpreted visions. On several occasions of historical significance, his advice were heeded. Over 700 of the seer's predictions after the South African War were recorded, and it has been widely believed that they foresee the fate of the Afrikaner nation. Most of these visions are apocalyptic; and many resonate directly with the iconography and narratives of Revelations. In addition to a number of academic articles, in the last three decades at least twenty books concerning these visions have been published, most of them privately, for distribution to particular readerships (there is a "church" dedicated to the study of the prophecies, but they are also widely discussed on a remarkable number of websites, including that of the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging). The most comprehensive of the privately published works is Siener van Rensburg: *Boodskapper van God* (2010), one of many books and DVDs by Adriaan Snyman. This textual history of recounting and interpreting the Siener's apocalyptic prophecies (from 1888 to the present) is a remarkable corpus for reflecting on the popular cultural history of Afrikaner dread.*

To continue this aphoristic history: following the defeat of the Boer forces in 1902, Afrikaner society suffered political demotion and fragmentation. During the 1920s and 1930s, religious, cultural, and political organizations began to proliferate and flourish among the elite and middle-classes as Afrikanerdom sought to craft (some would argue, to recover nostalgically) a sense of community. Certain organizations were generally benign—such as the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge (FAK) and the Afrikaanse Taal en Kultuurvereniging (ATKV)—which sought to consolidate a version of Afrikaner heritage, codify and promote the language and

foster a literary tradition. Other organizations were more sinister. The Broederbond, founded in 1918—which is much beloved by conspiracy theorists—was a secret society for the promotion of Afrikaner interests in all spheres, from the political to the economic, religious and cultural. The Ossewabrandwag (OB) was founded in 1938, was directly linked to German National Socialism and drew its primary constituency from the mass of urbanized, impoverished Afrikaners.

The most comprehensive account of the links between Afrikaner Nationalism and the Nazi Party in the 1930s is Patrick Furlong's *Between Crown and Swastika* (1991). It establishes their intersecting intellectual histories and traces some direct connections: Hendrik Verwoerd (prime minister from 1958–66) "and one of the most powerful figures in the Transvaal National Party from the late thirties, studied in Germany, and Hamburg, Leipzig, and Berlin" (80); later Piet Meyer (who headed in turn the Broederbond, the South African Broadcasting Corporation and the FAK) studied at the Free University in Amsterdam, but attended occasional studies at Leipzig and Berlin (and was delighted to learn to ski with Rudolph Hess and to see Hitler up close); and, Nicolaas Johannes Diedrichs (finance minister under Vorster and state president from 1975 to 1978) studied at graduate level in Munich, Cologne and Berlin, although he completed his doctoral programme in Philosophy at Leiden in the Netherlands (80). Giliomee is skeptical about the significance of these connections (see 442–44), arguing that—despite the fact that some Nationalists (including the future prime minister, Balthazar John Vorster) were interred during the Second World War for their anti-British, anti-war sentiments—the general support for fascism in South Africa declined rapidly during the 1940s. He suggests that this is indexed by the reduction in membership of the OB from around 100 000 in 1938 to comparatively trivial constituency by 1945 (Giliomee 442).

Yet, ideological lineage is not only a matter of numbers. Furlong and Dunbar Moodie describe the intellectual atmosphere in which these influential Nationalists studied as dominated by anti-liberal German Romanticism, particularly that strand identified with the nineteenth-century neo-Kantian philosopher, Johann Fichte. His *Addresses to the German Nation* was most influential, extolling as it does the priorities of *volk* and nation, of communities bound by language and history, above the priority of individual civil liberties. Furlong and Moodie use the term "neo-Fichtean" to describe those thinkers in Weimar Germany who elaborated this Romanticism to address the pressing matter of German economic and cultural regeneration in the 1930s, the most often cited of whom was Alfred Rosenberg.

*Rather strangely, no intellectual or political history of South Africa in the 1930s and 1940s mentions the writing of the philosopher jurist, Carl Schmitt, who contributed so centrally to the intellectual foundations and jurisprudence of Nazism (he was tried at Nuremberg, but not sentenced). He was widely read and his ideas extensively debated in Weimar*

Germany. It would be interesting to establish whether Verwoerd, Meyer and Diedrichs were familiar with Schmitt's Hobbesian account of sovereignty, his understanding that political praxis depended on designating "friends" and "enemies," and his unwavering commitment to the sovereign's right to decide on the state of exception. There are countless resonances of Schmittian philosophy in Afrikaner nationalist debates of the 1930s, particularly relating to their fetishization of crisis, their (neo-Fichtean) limitation of an imagined social contract (among those of common descent) and a commitment to extra-judicial governance in order to secure—at all costs—the stability of the state. In the light of the extensive research concerning the most eminent of the "Dertigers," N. P. van Wyk Louw—a poet, dramatist and intellectual—there may seem nothing more to say. Annika Thiem, a critical theorist and scholar of Weimar intellectual history, has recently argued that Walter Benjamin's refusal of political theology, in favour of an "aesthetic mediation of sovereignty" (9), represents a trenchant critique of the secular eschatologies that are the foundations of nationalism and fascism. My envisaged essay would emulate Thiem's approach: reading Louw against the grain of Schmitt. It is clear that Louw was deeply troubled by the eschaton assumed and advocated by the ideologues he engaged, just as he argued (in *Lojale verset*, 1939, and elsewhere) for a more nuanced understanding of historical temporality than the doctrinal nationalist teleology; he refers, rather poetically, to the need to recognize the "warreling van die geskiedenis" ("*Suid-Afrika as ou land*" 1–5). Further, many of Louw's plays and poems can be read as an "aesthetic mediation of sovereignty," dwelling as they do on the uncanny, on haunting and on radical instances of alterity, many of which unsettle Afrikaner ideology. This brought him into direct and public conflict with Verwoerd. Central to the essay would be Louw's verse epic, *Raka* (1947), and perhaps Koos Kombuis's snub-nosed intertext, *Raka: die roman* (2005), a post-apartheid work of dystopian fiction.

The rise of Afrikaner Nationalism caused a tide of white liberal anxiety to sweep across the land. This was expressed in a significant number of pessimistic predictions in reportage, works of non-fiction and novels by both South Africans and a number of visitors, foreign correspondents and academics from the UK and the US. This essay would juxtapose Keppel-Jones's *When Smuts Goes* (1947), which I described earlier, and the arch-liberal novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton (written in 1946-7, but published in 1948, the year the Nationalists came to power). It would link to the previous essay; both explore responses to the emerging political eschatology, although from different quarters. The question the essay would address is whether apocalyptic prediction is a viable rhetorical and aesthetic mode to contend with nationalist or fascist political theology. Is the liberal jeremiad—in its escalation of a sense of prospective crisis—not self-defeating in that it reiterates the eschatology it seeks to oppose? Is this not the contradiction of Paton's Christian liberalism? The essay would consider the limits of prediction as a mode of political engagement—does being bound to "predictability" not depend on the most obvious interpretation of the signs of the times? Would it not, when the terms of an ideology are adamantine, be preferable to work with material that is poetically and ideologically more pliable?

After the horrific precursor of the Sharpeville massacre, on the 21 March 1960, when 69 people were shot during a protest against influx control, resistance against apartheid

became increasingly militarized. In 1960, property prices slumped and the press encouraged white South Africans to store canned food and bottled water: it was time to prepare for the revolution. This is not the place to rehearse a familiar contemporary history: the banning of the ANC, PAC and SACP; the exile of a significant number of activists; the waging of an underground war of sabotage; and, the escalation of military action in those diffused zones referred to as “the Border.” In 1976, with the Soweto uprising—and its rapid spread across the country’s townships—it was suddenly clear that the possibility of revolution was again conceivable (it could be *visualized* for the first time in that television had only recently been introduced to the country). For many, it seemed as if the apocalypse was imminent; and once again white South Africans stocked their kitchen cupboards—our own little fall-out shelters.

*In 1972, Karel Schoeman published Na die geliefde land, which was translated as Promised Land in 1978 (the translated title misses the ambiguity of “na,” which means both “towards” and “after”). The novel is a dark shadow of the plaasroman (those sentimental farm novels of the 1930s and 1940s that were integral to the self-fashioning of Afrikaner culture). In Schoeman’s novel, George, having lived abroad since his childhood, returns to South Africa to discover that his family’s original home, Rietolei, is now in an isolated farming community in a country in which Afrikaners are marginal and repressed. The conservative community faces its changed fortunes with, what Michael Green describes as, “a stifling commitment to the past” (245). They are planning a clumsy version of armed resistance, but their insular society is ineluctably doomed because they are trapped by nostalgia—which is depicted as a stultifying reduction of the complexities of history to a national allegory. This essay would compare Na die geliefde land (which pre-empted several post-apartheid dystopian novels) with the somewhat gauche and spectacularly apocalyptic film version, directed by Jason Xenopoulos (2002).*

*The two most influential depictions of a South African revolution (if we discount Mongane Serote’s To Every Birth Its Blood (1981), which, in its second half, presents a socialist realist counterpoint to modernist despondency) are Nadine Gordimer’s July’s People (1981) and J. M. Coetzee’s The Life and Times of Michael K. (1983). Both depict armed rebellion, and cities (Johannesburg and Cape Town respectively) laid waste, and both are structured around journeys away from the wasteland towards a possibility of redemption that is finally deferred. While both novels are critically saturated, they can be read—using Claire P. Curtis’s insights—as representations of both catastrophic social eruption and the versions of social contract that are (and are not) possible in the wake of a long history of harm. The essay would consider the ways in which both novels propose prudential and secular alternatives to the destruction wrought by the grand narratives of South African history. At the same time, the essay would address—engaging Derek Attridge’s persuasive critiques (The Singularity of Literature, 2004; J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event, 2004)—the South African compulsion to represent political complexity in an allegorical mode. In this regard, the essay would also consider certain apocalyptic allegories by André Brink and Mike Nicol.*

Revolution, of course, was averted by the Nationalist Party's decision, announced in 1990, to negotiate with the resistance movement. Democratic elections were held in 1994 and the ANC duly elected to form a government, under the leadership of Nelson Mandela. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established, and achieved some success in addressing (symbolically and publicly) some of the evils perpetrated in the forty-six years of National Party rule. As Shane Graham and others have shown, the TRC became the organizing trope of the majority of literary works. Yet, while the sequence of confession, expiation and forgiveness was the sanctioned ethical logic of "transition" and "nation-building," a number of works were published that represented the contrary: the collapse of the state. These could be read as morbid symptoms of the death of the old order—the last twitches of a corpse. It is, however, not as simple as this.

*Of all the works analyzed in Joan-Mari Barendse's doctorate concerning speculative dystopian novels in Afrikaans published after 1999, two of the most haunting are Eben Venter's Horrelpoot (2006) and P. J. Haasbroek's Oemkontoe van die nasie (2001). This essay would analyze these two works as hyperbolic depictions of the failed political theology of Afrikaner Nationalism, both of which tread a fine line between satire (depicting the actualization of the pathological fears of the volk) and reactionary critique of the post-apartheid dispensation.*

*Venter's novel is a literary reframing of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. Much as in Schoeman's Na die geliefde land, a South African émigré, the club-footed Marlouw (Martin Jasper Louw), returns to his homeland from Melbourne in order to seek out his nephew, Koert. The country through which Marlouw travels is desolate. It has been ravaged by an explosion at the Koeberg nuclear reactor in the Cape, its economy has been reduced to barter and bribery, the only currency is the US dollar, and the population has been decimated by AIDS. The sick and dying are everywhere apparent, gathered along the roadside or in makeshift shelters. Most of the roads are impassable. The few white South Africans who remain are castaways clinging to the detritus of a wrecked world. When he arrives, Marlouw finds that Koert exercises control over, not only these workers who have become his minions, but also the entire region. He has established himself as the "King of Meat" for a starving population, distributing largesse (the flesh of dwindling and diseased herds and flocks) in ways that are capricious, manipulative, and seemingly arbitrary. Surrounded by emaciated bodies, Koert is grotesquely obese and bed-ridden, sweating constantly as he plays obsessively a Nintendo game. He is pale and gangrenous, rotting from the feet up.*

*Dawid de Villiers suggests that Trencherman grants a "certain kind of Afrikaner his doomsday prophesy, only then to reveal the depravity of such a vision, which finally comes down to having no vision at all" (2008). The novel is the finest literary dissection of white fear – its vision of a South African dystopia simultaneously nightmarish, uncanny, mundane and predictable. It critiques apartheid ideology, as de Villiers implies, in that the South Africa Marlouw experiences is no more than a self-fulfilled Afrikaner apocalyptic prophesy being reiterated in the present.*

*Haasbroek's Oemkontoe van die nasie (a previous novel, Lem 1993, concerns a right-wing military coup in South Africa) is a satirical rendition of a reverse Great Trek: modern-day Voortrekkers who load up their bakkies, leave the interior (in which they are suffering attacks and dispossession), and head for the relative safety of the Cape. This migration marks, symbolically, Afrikanerdom coming full circle: opting finally for the protection of what remains of liberalism.*

*The penultimate essay will present a survey of new South African apocalyptic fiction which, while implicated in the nation's history and complicated present, simultaneously engages global issues of climate change, species extinction, the desalination and warming of oceans, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the politics of food distribution, and the entropy of global financial systems. The essay might consider the peculiar dialectic between South African and global catastrophism. When in Max Brook's World War Z ([2006]2013), which concerns a zombie apocalypse (and should not be confused with the abysmal Zionist film adaptation), an expert on "total war" is required, an ex-apartheid operative (modelled loosely on Wouter Basson) is visited in prison on Robben Island (which is no longer a tourist attraction) to advise the world on strategy. It should be remembered that one of Verwoerd's favourite authors was Raymond Aron, the author of The Century of Total War (1954) and that the National Party's default propaganda phrase was "total onslaught." Neill Blomkamp's films, District 9 (2009) and Elysium (2013), engage a similar logic. Among the most impressive recent apocalyptic novels the essay might consider, each of which presents a rejoinder to a purely nationalist political ideology, are Alastair Bruce's Wall of Days (2012), Henrietta Rose-Innes's Nineveh (2011), Patricia Schonstein's The Master's Ruse (2007) and Louis Greenberg's Dark Windows (2014).*

## 5

What might an essayistic study of the transformations of the South African apocalyptic imaginary offer critical theory? In *Theory from the South: or How Euro-America is Evolving Towards Africa* (2012), Jean and John Comaroff argue that "the history of the present reveals itself more starkly in the antipodes" (7). Africa in particular, they suggest, currently anticipates the unfolding of history in the global north—if one seeks to understand what the world will become, what pressures and tensions will fashion its future, what forms capital will take (as the Euro-American complex is superseded by India and China), it is probably best to focus on Johannesburg, Lagos, Somalia and South Sudan rather than on Wall Street. The Global South (a phrase, like "Third World" or the word "postcolonial," at which one should balk) is less immunized from the concatenation and flows of capital and labour, and more susceptible to unregulated effects of late-capitalist modernity. It intimates, in biopolitical, environmental, ideological and demographic terms, something about what Euro-America will eventually become.

How does this relate to the history of white South African dread specifically? Perhaps the history of Afrikanerdom is emblematic: in the next decades, the ideological



balance of the world will tilt away increasingly from the eschatologies of white histories. The world has been deeply invested in the trajectory of South Africa—from international pariah, to a miracle of social justice, to a conventionally corrupt African state with modest hopes. This attachment—which combined projection and sublimation—embraced and promoted South African exceptionalism. Apart from Zionist parallels, the world has refused to acknowledge that the history of Afrikanerdom might be proleptic; at the very least a narrative metonym for the prospective social demotion of historically recalcitrant, white, bourgeois communities in other contexts. It seems to me that the collapse of the Afrikaner national narrative (and its fragmentation into vital new forms) might be a significant cause for political optimism.

There is something, perhaps more profound, to learn from the history of South Africa's political theology. If this nation, as the Comaroff's suggest, distills the tensions between the rich and poor, between those who were once settlers and those who were dispossessed, it should be salutary that there has not been a South African apocalypse. Even in the most extreme moments—propelled by the darkest eschatologies—we have collectively held the middle ground. The End, supposedly always nigh, has never actually approached. Perhaps the most startling implication is that the present contains our future, and our signal failure—and not South Africans' alone—has been to think it terms of spectacular upheavals, reversals and cataclysms. Of course there is more to politics and philosophy than the sum of our everyday practices, but there is also more in the sum of our everyday practices that we can imagine or theorize. The apocalypse is a fiction—it is revealing to know by whom it has been told and to what ends. Reality, though, is the relentless challenge of persistence.

*The final essay would concern a project by the artist Jacki McInnes, Hazardous Objects: House 38. I have described it—briefly—elsewhere (see Titlestad "The Logic of the Apocalypse"). The project entailed sustained interaction with a community of informal recyclers in downtown Johannesburg, whose lives were simultaneously documented in a series of photographs by John Hodgkiss. The recyclers generally live in derelict "dark buildings" in which they have established informal settlements. Each day, they haul trolleys (plastic pallets liberated from retailers across the city to which the legs of ironing boards are attached) on which bulk bags are placed to collect recyclable waste: plastic, white paper, cardboard, tins and occasionally scrap metal. Thousands of these recyclers walk many kilometers each day—across negotiated territories—collecting waste and selling it (by weight) at collection depots. McInnes won the Sacatar-Spier Contemporary Fellowship Award in 2010 for an artwork comprising a bulk bag filled with those items collected by informal recyclers, but fashioned from beaten sheet-lead (for an overview of Jacki McInnes's work, see [www.jackimcinnnes.net](http://www.jackimcinnnes.net)). Since then, she has continued working with lead objects placed in a number of contexts or alongside organic objects whose form they echo. In my view, McInnes's work is a profoundly philosophical engagement with "recycling" and its limitations, not only as practice, but as a trope integral to late-capitalism. It also intimates*

*the tension between the leaden logic of apocalyptic eschatology and a refusal to accept that this is the way the world ends. I cannot preempt this essay. It would oppose the banality of the “zombification of the poor” and any triumphalism regarding the ways in which they make do. There is, though, an aesthetic and theoretical proposition in McInnes’s work which articulates with South Africa’s history of anxiety, but also opens it to the world.*

#### Notes

1. This phrase is adapted from Victor Turner’s notion of “the structure of mind” (*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* 3).
2. I have been unable to ascertain the identity of the person for whose nom de plume was “Jan Toekoms.” A second book was authored under that name, *South Africa’s Eleventh Hour* (Johannesburg: CNA, 1958).
3. Among others, see, Gibbs, Henry *Twilight in South Africa* (London: Jarrods, 1950); Robert St. John’s *Through Malan’s Africa* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1954); and, Garry Allighan *Curtain-up on South Africa: Presenting a National Drama* (Cape Town: Purnell, 1960).
4. In addition to *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) pertains directly to this argument.
5. Among the most useful are Frank Kermode’s remarkable *The Sense of an Ending*, but also very informative are Stephen O’Leary’s *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (1994) and John R. Hall’s *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity* (2009).
6. See Mark Sanders’s *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid* 1–18.

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