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# “The only one who was thought to know the pulse of the people”: Black women’s politics in the era of post-racial discourse

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## Abstract

Theorizing black women’s high level of participation in contemporary South African protests for public water, electricity, and housing requires attention to the long history of women’s rural and urban revolts against apartheid passes and Section Ten laws, which proscribed black women’s mobility and delegitimized their access to public services. Examining the role of *ibandlas* (women’s assemblies/prayer unions/mothers unions) in three literary works: Lauretta Ncgobo’s *And They Didn’t Die*, Sindiwe Magona’s *For My Children’s Children*, and Njabulo Ndebele’s *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, I argue that black women mobilize against enduring conditions of particular vulnerability, as post-racial discourse suppresses the social relations of blackness in the face of the “after-life of apartheid.” Indeed, post-racial discourse misreads the “pulse of the people.”

## Keywords

Black feminist politics, black women and anti-privatization protest, *ibandlas*, post-racial discourse, post-apartheid protest, South Africa, women’s assemblies

## Co-madres and conspirators

The literature on post-apartheid protest for public water, electricity, and housing in South Africa nods to the predominantly black female membership of anti-privatization and anti-globalization campaigns<sup>1</sup> without attending to black feminist thinking on the subject or the long history of black feminist politics.<sup>2</sup> Although “linked to the state through pensions and grants, housing provisions, and other basic service provisions” (Goebel, 2011: 370), black women’s high participation points to their de facto exclusion and the legacies

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of their particular vulnerabilities, what black feminist author Lauretta Ncgobo dubs “the pulse of the people.” It has been quite easy to obscure the long history of black women’s militancy<sup>3</sup> in the Black World because “post-racial” discourse rejects black consciousness as a “source” for collective rebellion (Alexander, 2006: 315; Zegeye and Vambe, 2009). “Black women’s geographies,” memories, knowledges, generations, and bodies have been mortgaged, bonded, and sold as moveable property many times over (Carney, 2001; McKittrick, 2006; Morgan, 2004; Spillers, 1987) making black consciousness a key historical force prompting black women’s politics. Neoliberalism and repression of the black poor in South Africa has occasioned a contradiction with the goals of the anti-apartheid movement and the claims of the new Constitution (Desai, 2002; Oldfield and Stokke, 2006: 112). Activists have been accused of failing to meet *their* responsibilities as citizens by paying for public services. As in other post-emancipation contexts, this accusation reinforces nineteenth-century bourgeois contract theory ideas about the responsibilities of the freed people to their former masters—an “after-life of apartheid” paradigmatically haunting the after-life of slavery (Hartman, 1997; Kunnie, 2000; Wilderson, 2008) and structuring the lives of black women.

Yet “bold expressions of dissidence” and “revolutions of the mind” push through the neoliberal present (Crichlow and Armstrong, 2010: 400) and refute the abridged temporality of pre- and post-apartheid as interruption in the “racial condition in the New World” (Crichlow and Armstrong, 2010: 402). Black feminist and African Gender Studies renderings of the past move beyond “mule-minded binaries” (Traylor, 2005: xv) and perceive the “gathering of congregations” (Traylor, 2005: xv) and “spirit work” (Alexander, 2006) available in the quotidian practices of intergenerational political conscientization, women’s religious assemblies, and the creativity of mothers making do in a system designed to undermine human dignity. Women’s assemblies teach how to “survive above ground while ... living underground by fire” (Kitsimba in Alexander, 2006: 314–315)<sup>4</sup> through communion acts which revoke law and its capacity for enunciation and demarcation (Crichlow and Armstrong, 2010: 407). Black feminist politics demonstrate that black communities “do ... organise around race and gender in political struggles over material resources” (Perry, 2004: 813). By highlighting “critical consciousness with regard to race and gender” and how black women “negotiate and contest dominant discourses on race and gender,” scholars have identified racialized and gendered subjectivities and political ideologies in political essays, speeches, print journalism, *and* life histories, personal narratives, and experimental fictional works (Caldwell, 2007: 15). As the lifeblood of black nationalism (Gore, Theoharis and Woodard 2009; James, 1999) radical black feminism traces the unparalleled integrity, autonomy, and egalitarianism which addressed the multiple dimensions of material and psychic black suffering. Nomboniso Gasa (2007) explains that the social relations of black women “are best understood as an ongoing journey ... textured by historical interruption, but continuing nonetheless” (p. 132). I introduce here a genealogical methodology using three creative works which figure labor migration and pass laws as racialized and gendered geographies of detention and criminalization. Chosen for genre diversity, experimental approaches, and for their significance to global black feminist audiences, Lauretta Ncgobo’s *And They Didn’t Die* ([1990] 1999), Sindiwe Magona’s *To My Children’s Children* ([1990] 2006), and Njabulo Ndebele’s *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2004)

comment on black women's associations, extending the new body of critical theory and ethnographic research on black women's political lives across the Black World. These particular works examine women's assemblies, norms of "mutual obligation and reciprocity" (Brooks, 2007: 66), and militant motherhood as a means by which black women intervened in the construction of labor migrancy and ideologies about rural and urban spaces (Bank, 2001; Beinart 1987; Bundy 1987; James, 2001). The story of black women and the migrant labor system has been told in two ways: women abandoned and "waiting behind" eking out a living; or, rural women complicit reproducers of the reserve labor force that assured poverty wages and bare life. Both characterizations of migration undertheorize the linkages between rural and urban spaces for resource pooling, child rearing, securing land tenancy, and financing of housing (Bank, 2001; Ndinda and Uzodike, 2008)—all sustained by African women. Ifi Amadiume calls these social relations "social matriarchy" to capture women's deliberate shaping of the political and social consciousness of their families and communities (2005). I link the large number of black women engaged in contemporary protests by "poor people, rate payers, and shack dwellers"<sup>5</sup> to the complex social relations of black women's lives through fiction.

## Neoliberal public services and black women in racial capitalism

The wealth generated through black women's productive and reproductive capacity has been directed away from the women themselves (Adkins, 1993; Morgan, 2004). They were encouraged to embrace racist and sexist ideologies about "good for nothing husbands" and "aunties who expect a pension handout" as a cover for their position in racial capitalism. Yet they reasserted an ethical set of propositions about wealth and pooling of resources in the face of 1960s capitalist "protection" (Farred, 1993; Ncgobo, [1990] 1999) and 2000s capitalist "environmentalism" (De Wet, 2011; Dugard, 2011). Both moments reveal black women's particular vulnerabilities as racially detained commodities under the law (Frescura, 2001; Meer, 1991) marking the world of the human as that which black women do not occupy.

In the 2000s, cities have implemented neoliberal pro-growth development schemes to compensate for state mandated but unfunded principles like the Free Basic Water Policy (6 kL/month), a central platform in the reconstruction and development plan agenda. Apartheid was a racial-economic system in which the white minority was guaranteed public services and infrastructure paid for by exorbitant taxes, fines, fees on the black majority (Beall, 2005; Van Onselen, 2001). People were told that Free Basic Water would require the largest water consumer firms, mines, farms, and luxury residential households to subsidize the cost of water for the poor. Instead, industrial water customers use more water for less money. The City of Johannesburg perfected this strategy of limiting water access through the installation of prepayment water meters marketed as a city-led water conservation project. In the wealthier parts of Johannesburg where conventional water meters exist, standing policies make it almost impossible to disconnect wealthy people from water. In the poorest areas of Johannesburg, people must reload prepaid meters as they shut off when the credit is exhausted, often as soon as they become customers (Dugard, 2011). Government and international companies launched this so-called

green innovation, prepay water meters, in the poorer areas. In a city whose mansions have swimming pools, the constitutional provision of Free Basic Water serves as a disingenuous proxy for social justice. By treating water delivery as a commodity that the poor must pay more for, government perpetuates an arrangement of hyper-extraction of fees from the black poor to benefit other groups—a classic feature of apartheid (Van Onselen, 2001).

The residents of the Johannesburg district, Phiri, along with the socialist Anti-Privatization Forum and the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee launched large-scale direct action protests during the installation of the prepayment meters and filed a legal case known as the Mazibuko Water Rights Case following the militant and discerning leadership of an unemployed single black mother. In March 2004, a city employee told Phiri township resident Lindiwe Mazibuko that her old water pipes were a hazard in order to dupe her into accepting a prepayment meter. When Mazibuko protested, her water was disconnected. In October 2004, Mazibuko and other Phiri protesters agreed to the installation of prepayment meters and their water service was connected.

Residents protested using direct action and “physical resistance despite arrests, fines, intimidation and threats” and a court case was decided in their favor but later overturned by the Constitutional Court in October 2009 (Dugard, 2011: 71). They drew on the resistance strategies of the 1980s township uprisings in which women’s, civic, and grassroots organizations of all types “focused on housing and living conditions, rent and service charges, electricity and sewerage provision ... [and were led by the] older women who were responsible for households and bore the burden of poor service provision” (Cherry, 2007: 287). Mazibuko’s cramped housing and lack of access to water fit the profile of the socioeconomic vulnerability characteristic of the apartheid era. In the present, black people still have to choose between water for drinking, bathing, flushing toilets, and stopping the spread of fire. Women like Lindiwe Mazibuko come from somewhere. They were raised and made in communities that have a century of militant protest against the starvation and theft<sup>6</sup> that accompanied making South Africa a wealthy industrial envy of the world. In the next section, I describe some of the many ways since the 1990s that historians and creative writers have sought to remember the people and ethics that created Lindiwe Mazibuko.

The associational strategies which animated the Anti-Privatization organizing led by Lindiwe Mazibuko were deployed at least a century prior. In the 1890s, South African provinces began to introduce pass laws, a passport-like surveillance document that was used by the state to restrict black movement.<sup>7</sup> Weekly, daily, and monthly passes and the fees for renewing them along with local White bureaucratic manipulation *de facto* barred black women from the informal economy: manufacture of beer, the laundry trade, and selling fruits and vegetables (Bradford, 1987). Excluded by law, black women were paradigmatically bound to these sectors of the informal economy. Militant, multiclass, multirace antipass campaigns used tactics ranging from petitions drives, sending delegations to officials, protest marches, to public pass burnings. With these protests, African and colored women launched multigenerational rolling strikes across wide swaths of the South African countryside: “Senekal, Kroonstad, Potchefstroom, and the Rand” (Gasa, 2007: 138). By 1913, there were 13 different types of very expensive permits and passes imposed upon black women that were being used to extort them and create an extra

taxation and funding stream for local government and White citizen beneficiaries. These passes included “stand permits, residential passes, visitor’s passes, seeking work passes, employment registration certificates, permits to reside on employers’ premises and entertainment permits” (Gasa, 2007: 137). The larger white community viewed black women as human possessions of the larger White community, and this relation called black women’s humanity into question. Pass laws precipitated the land theft legislated by the 1913 Native Land Act<sup>8</sup> by transforming an independent African peasantry into poor farm laborers (Brooks, 2007: 81–83) through a racialized gendered system of domination.

Examination of the historical forces that prompt black women’s participation emerges from sources watered by official state memory and creative rememory such as these novels. Although erased in studies of contemporary protests and disavowed in post-racial discourse, black women’s associations track the after-life of apartheid and the long struggle to sabotage racial political order.

### *And they didn’t die*

Set in a Zulu community, Laretta Ncgobo’s novel outlines the life of a young wife of a migrant worker, Jezile. Ncgobo offers two depictions of motherhood: risk-taking familial motherhood and the women’s assemblies. Upbraided for not producing an heir and tired of being mistreated by her in-laws, Jezile begins the process of asking for permission from the local white Native Affairs bureaucrat for a pass to go visit her husband without consulting her in-laws. There will be no housing when she arrives at his hostel and unwelcoming conditions of public exclusion. But determined to be a person of autonomy, to care for her relationship, and to seek medical help for her miscarriages, she leaves the rural areas.

Jezile’s willingness to break the law illustrates the social relations of black womanhood and the *ibandla* which creates the space for her rebellion. Known by many names,<sup>9</sup> these religio-political meeting spaces were central to the associational life of rearing and gendering females as protesting women (Gaitskell, 2002).<sup>10</sup> In *ibandlas*, women created a space to express their feelings, to raise their consciousness, and to become indigenous healers and diviners (Sibisi, 1977). As forms of social matriarchy—these organizations buffered and mobilized the families, spouses, children, and elders that depended on working age women’s livelihood strategies. Women organized rotating credit associations and burial societies oftentimes through cross-cutting ties initiated in *ibandlas* across the geography of rural-migrant-city dweller identity to navigate precarity and gendered hardships (Lee, 2009; Ndinda and Uzodike, 2008). Ncgobo explains that such women’s assemblies had been engaged in militant rolling nationwide strikes against cattle dipping, cattle-culling, and passes: laws that restricted women’s mobility and criminalized their livelihoods, for generations (Bundy 1987; interview with Ncgobo in Hunter and MacKenzie, 1993: 102–116).

Racial capitalism devalues critical reproductive livelihood strategies in order to starve people and so the politicization that occurred in *ibandlas* was critical. Since racial capitalism endures as a legacy of “conquest and slavery, along with the postcolonial apparatus of raciality, produce places and persons marked by a debt (*endless capacity*) that ... cannot be settled even with death” (Chakravarty and Ferreira da Silva, 2012: 369), black

women's excluded presence was the debt upon which the cities were made. These "abandoned black women" and their particular vulnerabilities were central to the economic dynamism of industrial racial capitalism. Their capacity to create new survival strategies in the midst of one of the most aggressive forms of racial capitalism guaranteed economic survival for their families but also constituted a means by which even greater wealth could be skimmed from the black community. Women's religious assemblies, burial societies, and rotating credit associations provided and still provide long-term ties to the rural sending communities, provided an alternative geography of meaning and place for women and allowed them to survive the volatility and misery of unemployment and economic precariousness (Bank, 2001).

Emotional comfort and nurturance aside, the goal of such organizations was never merely to keep body and soul alive or to alert other people to one's misery and thereby find solutions to immediate problems. Rather, the women's assembly was always a place where oaths and political commitments were taken and where news of what women and men were doing around the country and region were doing could be shared and debated and discussed. Ncgobo provides the quintessential example of the embedded role of *ibandlas* in the coping strategies of rural women and the networks and political principles they carried with them when they inevitably moved to the cities, again and again. Although racial capitalism figures women like the ones in *And They Didn't Die* as merely abandoned reproducers of labor, their associational life indicates that their survival strategies produced subjectivities that could not be easily marshaled by apartheid society or its post-apartheid neoliberal twin but could be most effectively dealt with through erasure.

In a critical opening scene, Ncgobo caricatures the blustering rage of a White male bureaucrat attempting to aestheticize class rule, patriarchy, and race war. Rebellious rural Zulu women have again dumped the chemical mix left for dipping their cattle to prevent the spread of a public health crisis. Mr Pienaar deems the women who have sabotaged the government cattle dip female brutes: a nod by Ncgobo to the process through which black women's labor was pathologized in the colonial period, was said to be an indicator of their personal ugliness, and was said to be an indicator of the ugliness of black society which they birthed (Farred, 1993; Magubane, 2004: 28, 35). Pienaar knows nothing about the lives of the women in his agricultural jurisdiction though he is empowered to make decisions about critical resources. Ncgobo creates wayward<sup>11</sup> organized black female state charges (inmates) of the Bureau of Native Affairs who disabuse readers of such presumptions of "knowing the pulse of the people" in the face of the authoritarian onslaught of carceral anti-blackness. Lauretta Ncgobo makes a laughingstock of Pienaar, and the apartheid state that he represents, to redirect and concentrate readers' attention on the debates held in the rural women's *ibandlas*.

When scholars have described the damage the migrant labor system wrought upon black families, most often they have focused on the freighted feelings of abandonment, the helplessness associated with the carceral design of the reserves and bantustans, and the humiliating interactions with local White bureaucrats. They do not give as much attention to the affiliations and consciousness created by the experience with labor migrancy—women whose husbands and brothers and fathers were gone, women who lined up day after day to appeal for permission to leave the reserves, women who arrived in cities and wandered trying to find their family members, women in the cities legally

and illegally who lined up at government offices to register their presence and the presence of their children, and women arrested for pass law violations that numbered in the millions between 1968 and the mid-1980s. Black women's associations made such collective rebellion possible.

It was a risk to go to the city for any African woman because cities were deeply politicized places designed as spaces of White provenance, White authority, and white majority, and criminalized black majorities. Influx control and pass laws be damned, most black women followed in the footsteps of their husbands and were pulled to the cities in the hope of securing some kind of meager income or livelihood in the formal or informal economy for those still left behind in the bantustans, people made to deliberately starve to death. Ngcobo's Jezile and the millions of women like her took their leaves of the detention facilities said to be their ancient ethnic homelands to build families, to sustain family ties, and to confound a social structure which benefited by the birth of each new black person, a potential labor unit, a "prospect" for "speculation" and "investment" (Morgan, 2004). In such a context, motherhood was a risk: constrained by the body of laws that automatically criminalized black women's presence and by the fact that the master race in South African society was sure to capitalize on the materiality of her reproductive labor in ways that would all the more devalue her humanity. Black women could survive this inextricable matrix of domination and condemn it through the political conscientization that occurred in their own women's assemblies. Accounts of contemporary protests peopled by massive numbers of impoverished black women in South Africa that neglect to address black women's associational lives diminish their profound investments in gendered racial consciousness, something anathema to the racial logic of post-racial discourse.

### *To my children's children*

Sindiwe Magona's memoir, *To My Children's Children* ([1990] 2006), portrays the harsh conditions in the townships for the generation raised in the 1930s while characterizing the mesmerizing experience of proximity to city. From her churchgoing mothers smooth evasion of police during regular liquor raids of their home to descriptions of her fellow domestics redistributing the cast-off comic books, nightgowns, shoes, broken textbooks, and other symbols of their employers wealth, to her careful recreation of domestics' stories of grievance and comeuppance in their daily bus rides to and from the township, Magona foregrounds the risk-taking associated with the material and social roles of mothering. Using detailed illustrations of older women who serve to initiate her into the next stages of her life, Magona examines the significance of intergenerational support and family support that bridges urban rural divides. For Magona the social relations of black womanhood involves structures and practices that invoke communal capacities to invoke ties, that give dignity to rearing autonomous black youngsters, and that give attention to black domestic workers and food vendors as well as black women professionals.

*To My Children's Children* begins with an abiding concern with impressing upon the narrator's future grandchildren the story of her life and the traditions of memory work and self-awareness that she was raised with. Staged as a time capsule for her grandchildren, the memoirist explains that certain ethical precepts only occur through the daily,



careful, and deliberate process of shaping the consciousness of one's grandchildren's generation through nurturing them on a daily basis. Magona explains that her grandparents main lesson "belonging," opposed the anti-blackness conveyed by apartheid. The girlhood experienced by women in 1920s and 1930s South Africa was shaped far more by principles, ethics, and values instilled by parents, extended family members, and communities than by the structure of apartheid. Pamela Brooks (2007) characterizes girlhood this period in Johannesburg and Alabama as one marked by (1) "prosperity accomplished via ... help and cooperation of relatives, neighbors, and friends ... an understanding of mutual obligation and reciprocity" (p. 66), (2) pride of heritage and ties to specific people in their grandparents and great grandparents generation, (3) "pride of place and of principle" (p. 66), (4) daily life organized around strenuous labor and work parties (*matsema*) that contributed to that communal prosperity and served to socialize children, (5) school and church as chances "to get away from the fields ... be freed from ignorance and exploitation ... collective worship ... to knit together the soul of a hard-pressed community" (p. 73), (6) women's careful rearing of children's specific artisanal skills, (7) women and men's socializing children to be autonomous, thinking subjects who would resist abuse and White supremacy, and (9) rites of passage such as initiation ceremonies and confirmation that facilitated consciousness of the extraordinary value of their bodies and sexuality—to themselves.

Black women in this period of landed peasants with economic self-sufficiency witnessed the transition to being less economically autonomous and more dependent on the wage economy. Thus, their memories of childhood provided the measure against which they organized politically against economic misery. Pamela Brooks (2008) life histories of women in 1930s Johannesburg and Alabama finds that "As the worsening economic conditions of the 1930s continued to plague Black farming families, rural daughters were forced to leave the farms for more lucrative employment in the cities" (p. 72). Despite a surrounding structure of white supremacy, these black communities had the capacity to train their own artisanal class, to provide effective social and moral education, delay child rearing and marriage while cultivating sexual awareness and autonomous gender identities, and to raise their children with an enviable freedom from want. Constantly met with the message that they were unwanted, black people in the transition period taught their children that they were the human resource from which apartheid extracted surplus, wealth, and White human value. So while White supremacy was always a threatening feature of their worlds and was the key undeveloping logic of the imposed transition from free peasants to poor laborers, it was not the only thing that decided who and what they became.

Magona's writing means to convey this period in time without sentiment and nostalgia but instead with a kind of accounting for the social and collective significance of black women's lives so often obscured in contemporary writings about antiprivatization and antiglobalization campaigns which they mount and sustain.

### *The cry of Winnie Mandela*

Set in an *ibandla*, in which women debate Winnie Mandela's controversial will to power and willingness to use violence to enforce power and participation in campaigns and

boycotts, Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2004) conceals how common such actions were among women militants. The participants invite an imaginary Winnie as a foil to narrate their own lives and cross-examine how she could have made such brutal decisions, so unlike those of her husband, made saintly by his long detention and maleness. In an important scene, Ndebele's Manette explains both the dire situation she faced when she realized that her husband was not going to be able to contribute anything monetary and her sense of achievement at figuring out ways to generate income and feed her children. As Manette described,

I said to myself, "You have to be your own pillar." My children and I! We became a little army of survival. God blessed all five of them with intelligence. I only needed to put a patch of clothing on their backs and a bit of food in their hands, and they took themselves through school and university. (Ndebele, 2004: 100)

Because Manette appreciates the material value and social worth that white capital extracted from black people, her self-satisfied testimony reinserts her actions and those of her children in the racial capitalism which structures society. She refuses to be forgotten. Boasting: "Look at me now, my children ... They, and children of other mothers, come to you now not as miners, but as bankers, civil servants, chief executive officers, lawyers, doctors, and professors" (Ndebele, 2004: 100). Manette's Protestant Ethic success story is uttered in the *ibandla*, black women's own space for consensus and conflict about labor migrancy and the criminalization of women, making it resilient to easy incorporation by neoliberal progress narratives.

Hardly a black feminist rendering of the *ibandla labafazi abalindile* (gathering of waiting women), Ndebele's setting and pronouncements about Mandela's supposed moral failings echo the stakes of cyclical intergenerational dislocation, a legacy of apartheid. Neoliberal development has forced young people to endure apartheid era forms of vulnerability (Samara, 2011; Zegeye and Maxted, 2003). While supposedly at greatest immediate risk to HIV/AIDS, gangs and unemployment, black feminists engagements note that young people inhabit township homes as "safe spaces" that are also "wounds," places "with no life" (Motsemme, 2007: 63). Claiming their history and memory through their own bodies and intimate relationships, post-apartheid allows no escape from repeated losses and gendered natal alienation.

## Post-racial discourse and the limits of human rights

As Samara explains, the primary victims of crime are young black men, yet they are deemed pathological, predatory, and utterly removable. "Quarantining the poor" legitimates the call for world class cities where tourists, residents, and businesses can experience the memory of apartheid through neoliberal narratives of post-racial progress and development. Even the protest mantra of the contemporary era can be folded into narratives of progress and development as long as the water, electricity, and housing rights have nothing to do with anti-blackness and black women's racial consciousness. During apartheid, the expropriation of the productive capacity of black workers (birthing, domestic labor, mining, manufacturing, etc.), was well served by pass law and strategies

to keep women in rural areas. In post-apartheid, global capitalism has added another dimension to this expropriation: the privatization of public services and the criminalization of protest.

“Influx control” policies such as the 1950 Population Registration Act, the 1952 Natives (Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents) Act, the 1952 Native (Urban Areas) Amendment Act, the 1955 Colored Labor Preference Act, and the 1964 Bantu Laws shaped South African women’s experiences of migration to urban areas. These laws prohibited African women from establishing households and criminalized their presence in apartheid cities because African women’s migration into cities was deemed “a worrying indicator of the growing urbanization of the African population as a whole” (Lee, 2009: 17). Taken together these laws, and the evictions, forced removals, arrests, and incarcerations that they justified, guaranteed the exclusion by law of African women in urban areas under the so-called Section Ten policies. African women had the right to be in, build in, rent or purchase land or homes in South African cities only under the following conditions: if they were born in the city, if they had lived in the city for 15 years, if they had worked for the same person for 10 years, or if they were the dependent of a qualified person. The police used surveillance and raids to target the entire urban black female population so that few women could meet the criteria of legal residence. The primary means for African women to resist during this time period was to keep coming back to cities and sustaining their *ibandlas*. They built intergenerational female-headed households, built gardens and businesses, and renovated barn-like municipal housing built without floors and ceilings.

Black women sustained forms of social organization throughout the process of migration which constitute a critical genealogy for understanding the present and a litmus test for the efficacy of prevailing racial paradigms and theories. The criminalizing conditions that shaped black women’s precarious access to housing, livelihoods, and rootedness still obtain, although the laws have changed. These conditions shed light on how and why black women constitute 8/10 of the personnel of the nonprofit and nongovernmental sector (MacFarlane, 2002; Quaker Peace Network, 2002.; Steinman and van Rooij, 2012). Sustained analysis of the meanings which they attach to the making of the rural and the urban provides a view into the inadvertent consequences, disorderly outcomes, and “relational histories” that populate what has come to be designated as the post-racial era. Post-racial discourse insists that systemic anti-black laws and policies are no longer politically salient.

Critics of post-racial discourse are most disturbed by the claim that blackness has been deemed irrelevant (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Sexton, 2008; Magubane, 2004; Noguera, 2003) and dangerous having unleashed a political apparatus that suppresses new social identities and movements. Suppressing calls for racial justice for black people in order to center other forms of dispossession is distinct from studying intersecting historical structures of dispossession that articulate with anti-blackness. Post-racial discourse takes advantage of the fact that black political thought has an established history of self-critique from its revolutionary wings<sup>12</sup> and a dizzying array of improvised survival philosophies. Thus, the mechanism most often available as the rallying cry for resistance for non-black people—do not treat us like slaves—has often has been used to perform the trick of displacing black peoples’ embodied, social, and psychic existence as the marker

of human degradation, human creaturehood, human property, and a marker of what human being can survive. Black survival inspires guilt, resentment, sloppy imitation, unsolicited, and often dangerous offerings of guidance (i.e. invitations to “run off with my stuff” a la Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls*, [1975] 2010) from deeply unqualified quarters. “Friendly” post-racial discourse considers forms of social and historical misery experienced only by non-black people to delegitimize black consciousness. This plagiarism of the self-critique articulated by the “renegade back intelligentsia” in their struggle with the black radical tradition masquerades as innovation (Robinson, 2000; Willoughby-Herard, 2013). “Hostile” post-racial discourse flattens all identities, ways of being, and histories of rejecting domination into sophisticated improvements over black resistance making strange bedfellows with colonialism (a la colonial feminism, imperialist trade unionism, eugenic development policies, individualist and consumerist green movements, ahistorical contract-based and meritocracy-infused immigrant rights movements, multicultural neoliberalism, multicultural militarism, etc.). Thus, in post-racial discourse state, juridical, and capital forces incorporate “everyone else” (always erroneously dubbed as non-black and thus more politically mature) and enduring black suffering reflects the “‘truth’ of prevailing constructions of Blacks’ and Latino/as’ racial (moral and intellectual traits), on the certainty that they lack in ‘creditworthiness’ and are ‘untrustworthy’ debtors” (Chakravartty and Ferreira da Silva, 2012: 364). Being debt constitutes the embodied mythology of property, authority, and contracts for which racial regimes are mounted. Telling people that they have no reason to value their memories/testimonies or that their memories/testimonies are only valuable as objects of scopic fascination and surveillance in need of discipline is a signature feature of the post-racial moment and a chilling reminder of racial chattel slavery and racial colonialism (Rassool and Hayes, 2002; Woodward, 2002).

From laws that prohibited black women from residing in cities and criminalized their presence to laws that promised less caloric intake for black people to laws which designated black people to be noncitizens, we see that the new South Africa entered the world hamstrung by having made its black population amoral debtors—not citizens (Cock 1989). Having magically reduced through the law and its significations the black presence—its only essential ingredient—to that of freeloaders, South African society presented itself to the world as pro-human rights. In the post-apartheid era, that magic, that presence and all of its meanings, would somehow simply vanish—and if the meanings that black people had given to themselves in the pre-apartheid and apartheid eras had been made to vanish, then certainly the meanings which black people had given to themselves could be made to vanish again. Presto, post-racialism!

## Conclusion

In contemporary South African protests for public water, electricity, and housing, participants draw on an extensive history of women’s rural and urban revolts against passes and Section Ten laws. In my work and through this methodology of tracing the after-life of apartheid and the legacy of black women deploying long-standing methods of organization and protest, I highlight the conditions of particular vulnerability and exclusion that still persist. I have argued that critical black feminist, African feminist, and African

Gender Studies scholarship is the proper analytical framework for contextualizing anti-globalization campaigns in South Africa. In the era of post-racial discourse, black women's enduring roles as criminalized, abandoned, and yet deeply embedded in the making of racial capitalism and the consolidation of the state has been suppressed. Accused of not holding up their end of the bargain of a negotiated settlement by absorbing the costs of privatization of public services, they must rely on militant protest genealogies and networks of their own making.

While antiglobalization organizations have tapped into the long-standing politics of black women's assemblies, rotating credit associations, prayer unions, and *ibandlas*, they lack the theoretical resources to examine the conditions of possibility that launched these political mobilizations. Coupling works of fiction that highlight the origins of black women's political authority and decision making with traditions of struggle helps us understand the militancy, risk-taking, and principles of ethical pooling of resources that animate the present. And while post-racial discourse counsels us to seek out new and improved bandwagons, I am humble to accept that "as an African woman ... answers come from a different source" (Mama Lola in Alexander, 2006: 316). None of us need be so grand that we ignore the inheritance of black women's survival strategies of institutional memory and associational life. That such black women steeped in the reality of black futures already mortgaged, bonded, sold, and conveyed organized their lives to insist: that we belong, that we were worthy of their imaginations before we were born, and that our future-present was fed and watered by them.

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### Notes

1. Contributors to the Social Movements in the Global South: Dispossession, Development, and Resistance (2011) and *Voices of Protest: Social Movements in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (2006) comment on the presence of black women but do not take up African Gender Studies, black feminist, or "black woman worker" frameworks, while anthologies on women's activism do not spend time on water, electricity, and housing. Sheila Meintjes co-edited *Women's Activism in South Africa* (2009) and contributed to "Basus'iimbokodo, bawel'imilambo/They remove boulders and cross rivers: Women in South African History" (2007), which is a notable exception blending both the historical stakes of criminalizing black women's presence in the city and black feminist approaches to post-apartheid housing struggles. Other useful texts taking up black feminist thinking include journals such as *Feminist Africa*, *Wagadu*, and *Agenda*.
2. Taken together radical and revolutionary black feminisms, African feminisms, and African gender studies deploy concepts and terms that problematize kinship by including the living and the dead, the material and the invisible (Alexander, 2006), and those dispossessed by

being used as “people of the body” (Bhattacharyya, 1998), as “flesh” (Spillers, 1987), and those forced to “bear and make generations” without memory (Sharpe, 2010). Black feminist scholarship points to the “multiple systems of domination that place them in a subordinate social and/or political space” (Jordan-Zachery, 2009: 5) and

qualified linked fate whereby not every black person in crisis is seen as ... essential to the survival of the community, as ... a representative proxy of our own individual interests, and thus, as ... worthy of political support by other African Americans. (Cohen, 1999: xi)

Black feminist politics insist that black women rejected slavery and have organized to destroy it and the state and other forms of racial social and political order organized to legitimate it across space and time (Gasa, 2007; Gore, 2012; Gore et al., 2009; Gqola, 2010; Hartman, 1997: 102; Higashida, 2011; McDuffie, 2011; McKittrick, 2006; Meer, 1991; Twine, 1997; Woodward, 2002: 78; Young, 2006), and that black women have organized to resist the ubiquitous expectedness of their roles as the mothers of children that are murdered (Grant, 2005: 71; Isoke, 2013). Oyeronke Oyewumi (2004) explains that African gender studies turns to the language of “comrade, compatriot, friend,” and “co-mother, other-mother” (p. 5) denoting political work and negotiations based on shared political interests and “bearing and the mothering of children, and consequently the nurturing of community” that resonate with the “tradition of multiple and nonexclusive mothering” (p. 5). Black feminisms have refuted to the pathological “politics of disgust” which structure the stigmatizing necro-politics of public policy (Hancock, 2004)

to go beyond witnessing ... incorporate outrage and compassion in our work with communities ... we may even invent new languages of pain, suffering and recovery ... (to address and name) the constant deaths occurring in her or his own family as well as those of neighbours. (Motsemme, 2007: 65)

Black feminisms have some 200 years of systematic attempts to distinguish between aestheticized rape/sexualized coercion and force, on the one hand, and sexual pleasure and experimentation, on the other, and the multiple set of contexts which make black women’s sexuality up for grabs in a larger social world.

3. As Joy James (1999) explains,

To recall or reclaim black women who bore arms to defend themselves and other African Americans and females against racial-sexual violence remains an idiosyncratic endeavor in a culture that condemns subaltern physical resistance to political dominance and violence, while supporting the use of weapons in the defense ... of the nation state, individual and family, home and private property. (p. 18)

4. Alexander’s methodology relates how she became a living vessel for communion with the colonial era slave woman, Kitsimba, instead of being an interpreter.

I told her she couldn’t write about me unless she came to know ... what it was like to get up before dawn and implore the protection of the fading dark to move in stealth to do what you had vowed to do in another place, another time, for another reason under different conditions. You could die in stealth and determination to pay the debt you were chosen to pay. (Kitsimba in Alexander, 2006: 314–315)

This echoes Cherry's exploration of re-initiating an "underground" in the liberation movement—a survival strategy from long before.

5. Even the miners' 2012 wildcat strikes might be taken up in this way.
6. See Goebel (2011), Lee (2009), and Magona ([1990] 2006).
7. Gasa (2007) reminds us that such rolling nationwide protests emerged even before the South African War, 1899–1902, giving significant evidence to the claim that the hegemonic historiography of South Africa's political consciousness existed in many ways to suppress the activities of black women.
8. The Native Land Act of 1913 removed over 90% of the black population, confined them to less than 7% of the country, and pushed black people to the cities, restricted black farming, renting, or purchasing of land to these native areas, outlawed black sharecropping and tenancy in four provinces, and compelled black people to give their labor, equipment, and livestock to Boer tenant farmers.
9. Women's assemblies, prayer unions, or mothers' unions.
10. Ncgobo explores the rural-migrant-city dweller politicization of historical figures like Dorothy Nomzansi Nyembe (1931–1988), a Cato Manor African National Congress women's leader and political prisoner.
11. For Frank Wilderson (2010) they are the material facts of the "fundamental antagonism"; for Cedric Robinson (2007), they constitute "something beyond the reach of dominating systems"; for Fred Moten (2003), they magnify a method of "aural improvisation"; for Jacqui Alexander (2006), they "invite the return of the Spirit" and "sacred accompaniment."
12. Many scholars critique power, order, empire, status, colonialism, enslavement, violence, trauma, state violence, legalized theft, and authority through sexual independence, female autonomy, un-gendering/de-gendering and castration of black women, the psyche, culture, nihilism, the body, existence, cognition, suicide, infanticide, haunting, communion and possession, and the refusal to avoid slave ontology. See James (2002), Sharpley-Whiting (1997), Robinson (1993), and Bambara ([1970] 2005).

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