Race and/as the rainbow nation nightmare

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In the lead up to 27 April 1994, the African National Congress election campaign material included a poster of smiling Nelson Mandela in a black, brown and gold shirt surrounded by children of different skin and hair colours, themselves clothed in vibrant colours. The children look relaxed and some have the recognisable 'photo smile' that many young children often adopt. A green banner with white writing at the top promises 'A better life for all'. Running horizontally across the bottom are four squares, one each for the letters ANC, the ANC flag, a passport photograph of a smiling Mandela in dark jacket, white shirt and grey tie, and a giant X. The bottom is a strip from an election ballot.

The poster connects voting for the ANC to creating a better life for all South Africans. The banners visually frame the smiling, reconciliatory Mandela – eliding the terrorist Mandela around whom swaartgevaar coalesced and absenting Mandela, the beloved revolutionary on the island. We can remember his prison experience only for the longing he had for children, his own and others[1].

Yet both Mandela as terrorist and revolutionary Mandela are remembered by the electorate. The contrast between the grey smiling Mandela and the bright eyed children also speaks to a future. If children are the face of the new South Africa that we have to imagine in early 1994, the relationship to our past is not entirely clear. We have to think of *race as colour* (superficial difference) but not of *race as power* (i.e., the racism of the past and present). It is the future that matters,[2] a co-created future that rests on innocence, innocence from racism as institutional violence too, which is to say an invisibilisation of racism. The poster suggests a future where quality of life transcends *race as power*, even as it evokes *race as colour*, in its visual vocabulary.

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[1] The poster is his promised delivery from this decades' old yearning However, the metaphor does not hold. He cannot be compensated for the loss of time with his children, as individual narratives from his various children will remind us before and after we vote.

[2] In a longer version of this essay, I spend more time on the conflicting ways in which this and other visual text from the same archive work. Time constraints limit what is possible to discuss here, given the focus of this essay.

The ‘better life’ rests on the bright faces of the children around Mandela and on the voters prioritising them and the future, muting the past. It requires that we believe a future free of institutionalised white supremacy is possible if we vote ANC. It is discursively compelling and visually arresting. But many of us will vote for revolutionary Mandela because of the very past and present of white supremacist wounding that the poster avoids. Our memory will exceed the call to aspiration.

That was March 1994.

I write this in March 2015, a few weeks away from the anniversary of the first South African election. Anniversaries are not just cause for celebration; they can also be moments to pause and reflect. I was twenty one years old, four months into my second degree when I voted in 1994. Much ink has been spilt on what this moment meant for many of who could vote legally for the first time. The snaking voting queues have become as iconic as pictures of Mandela with children, beyond that first one. We have been told repeatedly of how virtually no violent crimes were reported on that day and we imagine optimistically that none were committed that day. Given the constant onslaught that apartheid was on the body and psyche, and with these kinds of narratives and visual prompts, it is understandable why aspirational tags such as the ‘miracle’ or ‘dream’ transition gained currency.

Escape.

Newness.

Relief.

Possibility.

Rising to the occasion, Archbishop Tutu would dub us ‘the rainbow children of God’. Later still, we would be invited to aspire to ‘unity in diversity’.

Yet, even as we voted on 27 April 1994, many Black people deliberately withheld their votes in painful, principled refusal to accept the negotiated settlement. At the risk of being seen as the misguided renegades who would not come to the celebratory table, they insisted that real power was not transferring hands, that too much had been compromised at the negotiating table, that the nightmare that was apartheid would continue in different guise. They resisted the nation mythmaking, kept their eyes firmly on *race as power* and rejected *race as colour* as alibi for injustice. Many years later some of their children,

along with many children of willing voters, 'born-frees', deferred their own first vote. Race and racism had everything to do with this refusal on both counts. It is unsurprising that the refusal to vote by increasing numbers of eligible South Africans is readily dismissed across media and political parties as 'apathy' or the 'sign of a maturing democracy' resonant of voting patterns in some global North countries. This too is a refusal to confront the failure of the reconciliation myth.

In the Black public sphere, public intellectuals dubbed the national narrative 'reCONciliation'. Lizeka Mda and Christine Qunta published remarkably similar critiques of the violence and injustice of the reconciliation and rainbow nation motifs in 1996. Several senior Black journalists (many of whom have subsequently changed course) received tongue lashings from then Deputy President Mbeki for their critical distance from the official narrative, and many did not mince their words in response to him in various editorials as well as on the pages of *Tribute*. Later in the same decade, Xolela Mangcu cautioned against the projection of apartheid racism on generals, colonels and select politicians, reminding us of the everydayness of racial violence under apartheid. Such insistences on taking *race as power* were as unfashionable in media and academia then as they are today.

These early detractors from the rainbow nation mythology underlined the value of linking race to justice as the way to undo the legacy of race. They required an interrogation of white power, recognising that pontificating on the social constructedness of race does not mitigate white supremacist violence. Such statements very often invisibilise racism, stressing the need to focus on accent and nuance at the expense of pattern.

Today, it is not hard to recognise that rather than transcend race, white supremacist violence is gaining ground. Knowing that race is not 'real' is no protection against racial harassment. White epistemic and economic power is entrenched in the economy, land ownership, language dominance and academy. Outside of government, the most powerful institutions in corporate and higher education have remained stubbornly resistant to transformation of culture or numbers.

The return of white supremacist violence to the sphere of the spectacular is everywhere evident from the reversion to older notions of race, once again taking a grip on the popular imagination. The peers of the children around Mandela continue to live highly raced lives. A group of young white men who were either babies or not yet born in 1994

forced Black labourers to consume urine on camera at an institution of higher learning in the Free State, while another group at the same institution assaulted a Black fellow student a few months later; at a different institution white students raped a Black student who has a white mother at a school in the Northern Cape. Closer to home, teachers separate students into Black groups and white groups for teaching in a school in Gauteng; Black parents have to go to court to force transformation of the governing body at an Eastern Cape private school and to ensure the teaching of isiXhosa at the same institution. At Wits, the campus newspaper reports that young white women racially harassed and threatened to assault a student who questioned their mocking of a Black academic's pronunciation. In the Western Cape a domestic worker is assaulted in the suburb in which she works because the white man who assaults her 'mistakes her for a prostitute' and 'snapped [...] as a result of having these people in our area'. Perhaps, the neighbourhood watch crew that has issued labourers in one suburb with green access cards in order to keep out those who do not belong there has the same idea. In the same province, a vice chancellor of a prestigious South African university defends his institution's failure to hire significant numbers of Black staff and its negligible numbers of senior Black academics through statements so baffling it is not clear how they are to elicit sympathy for the institutional choices. 'We' had one African woman professor two years ago but she left. It takes an average of twenty years from PhD to full professorship. 'We' are not the only ones.

It is an exhausting list even as it is the proverbial tip of the iceberg. The dream of a miraculous democracy has turned into a nightmare. It is unlikely to be moved by the rhetoric of social construction, ubuntu and further mythologisation of diversity under the guise of *race as colour*. In the official public political sphere, we are beginning to see the emergence of a new grammar of resisting racial terror, one that disrespects the regimented conventions of academic and parliamentary protocol. As one 'born-free', Model C educated, Black radical with two Wits degrees pointed out in a conversation on everyday racism and investor confidence recently "if the country has to collapse first for us to own it, then let so be it. It may be a mess we need to build from scratch, but let it be". Another similarly located Black radical challenged "you keep telling us that we are worlds away from apartheid, so tell those of us who were not alive in the 70s and 80s, how is different? Why are you not angrier?"