COSMOPOLITAN FREEDOMS

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What do the contributors to this volume of The Johannesburg Salon think of the present state of the world? What is, or could be, the social role of intellectuals concerned to increase global levels of justice and equality? One response, suggests Lara Allen, is a growing quest for equal access to 'cosmopolitan freedoms' for people across the planet.

Embarking on the process of editing a volume of *The Johannesburg Salon* is an act of faith based on an assumption. The assumption is that there exists a global community interested in the notion of analysis from a 'southern perspective'; the faith is that the articles submitted will speak to each other; will share concerns; that the whole will be of greater value than the sum of the individual parts. *The Johannesburg Salon's* very free policy with regard to content makes the editorial process rather like the composition of 'chance music', a 1950s genre of western art music considered very avant-garde in the: composers like John Cage set up the venue, invited the audience, designated the beginning and end times of the piece, and then waited. Whatever happened between these designated points was the music. I wonder whether Cage ever woke up in a cold sweat the night before, afraid that nothing meaningful would happen; that there would be no music? There certainly is a period, when the first submissions for a volume start coming in, when I wonder about the project's coherence. Each time, however, my doubt is proven unfounded.

In this volume, although the contributions vary considerably in style and content, there exists a strong current of concern that repeats in the foundation of many of the pieces. At the most fundamental level this current is constituted of anger at injustice, inequality, and lack of freedom in the world, accompanied by a desire to envision alternatives.

One of the most recurrent themes in this volume is the social role of the intellectual, of the writer, of Ideas. Read together, the articles raise two trajectories of possibility: the relationships between Ideas, Leaders and achieving the Good; and ethical use of the capacities and opportunities that being a critic or writer affords.

One of the most powerful interstices between ideas and the social sphere occur when visionary leaders evolve or promote theories directed at creating a better, more just society. Three pieces in this volume engage the legacies of past leaders, and discuss the contemporary relevance of the visions they advocated. The black ecclesiastical leaders and intellectuals Martin Luther King and Jean-Mark Ela were (as shown in articles by Damien Marassa and Jane I. Guyer respectively) fundamentally concerned about social and political inequality and injustice in this world, particularly as it affected impoverished black people. For them promises of a better life in the next were not enough: "It's all right to talk about 'streets flowing with milk and honey,'" King asserted, "but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day." Conversely, as Mark Gevisser reveals, ex-South African president Thabo

Extract from 3b by Cicilie
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Mbeki – a leader who became 'past' without dying – faced significant criticism for not ensuring the fulfillment of the promise of 'a better life for all'.

For Achille Mbembe, "the task of critique is to witness". What matters when attempting "to reimagine the political and ethical realms", he suggests, "is to think ethically, sincerely and responsibly". Rising to this challenge is, however, not always an easy task. For instance, the articles in this volume likely to be most contested (Saree Makdisi's piece

on Israeli apartheid, Mark Gevisser's assessment of Thabo Mbeki's legacy in South Africa, and the analysis of xenophobia in Europe by Dominic Thomas) are those that present widely disavowed perspectives. The issues these writers address regularly generate blind, irrational fury and denial. Why? Partially because powerful people and interest groups stand to gain or retain power and privilege through the perpetuation of particular myths, and therefore have well trained media battalions in place to defend their advantage. And partially – perhaps mostly – because these instances generate a mechanism for the projection of victimhood in which many people are emotionally and psychologically deeply invested. This makes it difficult to consider that such feelings may not be appropriately placed, or that to reiterate trauma is to propagate injustice and evil. One pragmatic way in which writers and intellectuals can make a real impact in the world, then, is to expose widely believed untruths: to analyze and explain what the layers of untruth are – precisely – and how these forge the mechanisms whereby some (usually the few), cause harm to others (usually the many), and what is in it for the rest to overlook such injustice, and in so doing become implicated in its perpetuation.

A second theme that recurs through many of the articles is anger about being 'othered'. This is not a new problem, or a new anger. It is a principle concern in much postcolonial and black critical thought. But its iteration here raises two points and a possible solution.

The first point, expressed most cogently by Syned Mthatiwa, Yara El-Ghadban and Clare Loveday, is that the capacity to represent – in this case to speak for and about the other – often depends more on access to social and financial capital, than it does on knowledge or expertise. This is why writers from better connected, richer African countries get more attention than writers from their less well-endowed neighbours; why a white, educated, foreign visitor gets his selection of African literature published as representative of the continent's spirit; why composers from Europe were commissioned to write pieces inspired by a one month sojourn in various southern, melting-pot cities, while composers from those places struggle to get their works performed.

The second point has two parts. First, there is a frustration with the fact that so often it is relatively ill-informed outsiders who get to represent Africa and other postcolonial places. Or, even worse, such external perspectives are taken on and perpetuated from within the continent. Acknowledging the rich Africanist literature that addresses the issue, Ainehi Edoro theorises this tendency as a 'discourse of contingency', in which the definition and validation of Africa is contingent on something else: "call it modernity, call it colonial encounter, call it the European world".

Second, there is a frustration with the fact that the continent's identity seems still to be stuck with an image constructed by colonials at the point of contact. Thus visiting composers seek only 'traditional African music' in urban Johannesburg, arguably the centre of the subcontinent's popular music industry. (On a different continent Isabel Hofmeyr offers a cameo that in its role-reversal aptly reveals the insult and the ridiculousness that the narrow perspective of the presently powerful so often entails: "In 2005, the Archeological Survey of India which oversees the St Paul's graveyard reported 'discovering' the Boer POW graves.") Further, Edoro points out that African intellectuals who counter the 'discourse of contingency' with a 'discourse of continuity' (which proposes a return to a pre-colonial past in search of an originary moment) are missing something vital about the present and the future: for many contemporary Africans seeking both opportunities for a better life, and an identity that fits their aspirations, tradition is a cul-de-sac.

It is Edoro who most directly points to a possible solution: an opening out to a form of cosmopolitanism, which she articulates using the Mbembian term 'worldliness'.

For me the notion that cosmopolitanism might be worth investing is also suggested in other contributions to this volume, mainly via the convoluted route of revealing the dangers of its opposite, nationalism. Here I take the term 'nation' in its broadest and most malleable sense: the sense in which it is used to define the identity of a people, which often is not concurrent with the boundaries of existing nation states: the Jewish nation, the African nation, the Zulu nation, for instance.

In several articles the material as well as intellectual and ethical dangers of identity politics is revealed. Apartheid – separate development – whether in South Africa, Israel or anywhere else, consists of categorizing people according to particular identities, separating those of different identities, and perpetuating inequality and injustice to the disadvantage of one identity group. Xenophobia is a form of identity politics taken to extremes, with severe consequences. The specter of the greatest communal crime in Europe's recent past looms in Dominic Thomas' description of ongoing arbitrary *rafles* (round-ups) in France of those without papers, and their internment in 'camps' throughout Europe. And

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Kim Berman's images of the camps set up by the United Nations in the wake of xenophobic violence in South Africa speak stark volumes in their sterile, post-human emptiness.

The issue is that identity is not just a soft, 'belonging' thing, although it is also that. In many instances a particular identity imparts or removes access to basic attributes of a decent life: access to safety, security, general wellbeing, economic opportunity and, in certain extreme instances, even to life itself. In other words, all too often identity, as the theoretical mechanism used to categorize humans as different from each other, is used to perpetuate unequal access to resources, power and privilege; to obtain and retain advantage for those humans considered like oneself, the 'us', and to block access to advantage for those considered 'them' or 'other'.

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It is in the promise that it offers an alternative to the inequalities and injustices perpetuated through the identity politics of the nation that the notion of cosmopolitanism becomes attractive. However, while in theory any national could adopt a cosmopolitan identity and become a citizen of the world, in reality this is not the case. The practice of cosmopolitanism is restricted to relatively well off people from powerful countries. For instance, the holder of a British passport may travel to many places in the world without a visa; the holder of a Zimbabwean passport may not. Most of the world's population is, to all intents and purposes, debarred from what I would like to term 'cosmopolitan freedoms'.

By cosmopolitan freedoms I mean both the freedom to be cosmopolitan, and access to the freedoms that cosmopolitans are believed to enjoy. Specifically the term signals freedom from being classified according to identities based on race, ethnicity, religion, place of birth and so on. And for such identities not to restrict one's freedom of movement, freedom of association, and freedom of opportunity – to try to make a better life in a country not of one's birth, for instance.

Importantly, however, cosmopolitan freedoms are not restricted to the economic and political domains. Their non material attributes are as cogent. These constitute freedom of consciousness and aesthetic choice; freedom to dream, to aspire, to become someone different from that seemingly determined by one's circumstances. Furthermore, the generative power of cosmopolitan freedoms depends fundamentally on the two way relationship between these material and non material sets of attributes.

In this volume it is the articles about the arts in which the struggle for cosmopolitan freedoms is most clearly expressed. Moreover, it is over inequalities that regularly occur regarding what Arjun Appadurai describes as the 'circulation of forms' that the battle is most acute. While, as Pamela Allara relates, Kim Berman's visual meditations on xenophobia were engaged in the United States, Yara El-Ghadban and Clare Loveday discuss the struggles for recognition in the metropole of compositions from the periphery; and Syned Mthatiwa is despairing about the circulation of literature by unknown African writers. It is, however, in the pieces by Joni Brenner and David Bunn about Brenner's oeuvre as a fine artist that the complexity of the circulation of an avowedly western cultural form – the portrait – becomes most apparent. As Brenner faces the personal tragedy of the death of the individual who is the face in all her work, she revisits her long-held claim that her project is to make essential or universal portraits. Brenner's struggle to relate the individual to the universal mirrors a core tension in the cosmopolitan ideal: it is fundamentally universalist and humanist in impulse but is driven by the desire of individuals to follow their own trajectories.

Through his analysis of the massive intensification in the circulation of forms, along with the extreme proliferation of forms of circulation that characterizes 21st century life across the developed world, Arjun Appadurai offers an incisive explanation of the mechanisms that drive contemporary cosmopolitanism. This is particularly the case with regard

Zonsopkomst winter 2007 Observatorium Robert Morris
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to new digital forms of circulation, specifically those relating to the World Wide Web. Around the globe internet users participate in daily conversations on email, Skype and on social networking sites such as Facebook; they exchange images, music, video clips and web links using various platforms.

These interactions constitute both the desire for, and practice of, particular cosmopolitan freedoms. For many of these – mostly young – people, the old fundamental identity categories (race, nation and ethnicity, for instance) have little purchase. Instead they have become accustomed to being able to personalize their identity options, select items for their basket, and proceed to checkout. Furthermore, while old lines of economic and political power are firmly entrenched on the web, there also exist new online communities and networks that carefully guard their domains against global capital and big politics. Examples include the Creative Commons movement, wikis, file-sharing sites, and civil society networks such as online petition organizations that face those in power with the unsolicited results of what might be considered a type of referendum.

In these ways fundamental cosmopolitan freedoms are being claimed: they are being enacted, and practiced even though the new cosmopolitants may not ever have travelled physically very far from their place of birth. Arguably, then, the internet is enabling new forms of cosmopolitan identities, practices and freedoms that are becoming an influential manifestation of what Appadurai describes as a 'global discursive flow'.

Cosmopolitan freedoms could also be seen as a second-order elaboration of universal human rights. If human rights as presently conceived were to be universally achieved, the world would be well advanced in the quest for global, as opposed to national, citizenship – with equal rights that such citizenship would bestow. If all humans were equal global citizens, then there would not be any 'others' denied rights, freedoms and opportunities.

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Of course none of this would work – practically or ethically – unless it was accompanied by an unyielding commitment to cosmopolitan responsibilities, particularly with regard to consumption. That there are not enough resources for everyone on the planet to consume at the present Euro-North American rate is a well rehearsed fact. The goal would have to be sufficiency for all as opposed to excess for some. It is probably this fact more than any other that makes the notion of cosmopolitan freedoms seem unrealizable – preposterous even.

This pessimistic conclusion returns me to the foundational concerns that run throughout this volume: the widespread injustice, inequality, and lack of freedom in the world, and the role that writers and intellectuals might play in addressing this situation.

Contributors to this volume seem, in different ways, to be calling for renewed focus, in thought and action, on working towards the Good: Marassa hears King's challenge as "an ancestral voice singing across the landscape of half a century", whether or not it is couched in utopian or dystopian terminology; Thomas reveals the shame of Europe's internment centers, while Makdisi points more directly to the importance of civil society protest; Allara suggests that if Berman's artworks do not yet herald the desired transcendence from a troubled present, they do constitute an emotive call to action; Orrantia relates how Antanas Mockus reshaped the public sphere in Bogotá, making it a safer city, and wonders what Mockus would do in Johannesburg; Mbembe seeks if not a resurrection, at least a politics of possibility; Edoro calls for a Badiouan 'event' to enable a cosmopolitan world, and I suggest that making cosmopolitan freedoms equally available to all people would make the world a more just place. A ridiculous utopian fantasy many (perhaps most) will cry. But just because Martin Luther King was shot for having had a dream; just because Thabo Mbeki was removed from office for deferring his; does this mean that one should stop trying to envision 'a better life for all'? I think this volume suggests not.