INEQUALITY, THE DISAVOWAL OF MUTUALITY

Lara Allen
(University of the Witwatersrand,
Johannesburg)

What do The Salon's contributors propose are the reasons-for-being of public intellectual thought and creativity? To defamiliarise received realities and expose what the powerful wish to hide; to make disavowal difficult; to name social dis-ease and shame comfortable ignorance; to conceptualise, acknowledge, and facilitate mutuality. Inevitably, suggests Lara Allen, such projects entail blurring of the lines between art, criticism and political activism.

Initially the bi-line mooted to brand the city of Johannesburg ahead of the FIFA World Cup was: "A World Class African City for All." Unfortunately, as Christa Kuljian points out, "the 'for all' was dropped from the City's letterhead and from every banner and billboard throughout the World Cup and therefore from the City's consciousness." Interested as I am in complexity theory and notions of self-organisation and emergence, I find the coalescence of themes amongst contributions to *The Salon* fascinating. While conversations materialize on common themes shared between groups of articles, there is one issue that emerges in every piece: a concern about the lack of consciousness of – let alone commitment to addressing – the ethical ramifications of those two words 'for all'.

Some contributors are primarily concerned with the fact of inequality and the injustices that result, particularly the extreme life conditions of those at the losing end: the bottom billion of the world's population who live in poverty, and the subsection of these who are the victims of natural and politically-engineered disasters. Other writers are concerned about the relationships between all people, particularly how to conceptualise, acknowledge, and finally facilitate positive enactment of 'mutuality'.

Joburg
a world class African city

A world class African city
Flickr: Maneno

A connecting thread running through these investigations is acknowledgement of the privileged analytical position of the intellectual critic and creative artist, and the responsibility such privilege entails to discern and reveal the energy fueling the power of a society not well with itself. The challenge is, without avoiding complexity and contradiction, to defamiliarise banal reality and expose what the powerful wish to hide; to make disavowal difficult; to name social dis-ease; to shame comfortable ignorance. This is akin to Helen Douglas's call to find the courage to understand what we know, and directly to face the consequences of conclusions that must then be drawn. In this way art-making and criticism become curiously loaded. Revealing the workings of power becomes advocacy, and the lines between art, criticism and political activism become blurred.

to find the courage to understand what we know, and directly to face the consequences of conclusions that must then be drawn

Such blurring is evident in the four articles in this Volume that explore the inter connections between South African and Jewish politics, art, and intellectual thought, both radical and conservative. For Helen Douglas the approach of Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is pertinent to deepening the positive power of the South African concept of *ubuntu*, a valency for his thought that, Douglas notes, Levinas himself is unlikely to have recognized.

Neelika Jayawardane's discussions with David Goldblatt reveal the importance of his Jewish middle class identity in allowing him the ex-centric perspective with regard to his working class Afrikaner photographic subjects that Jean Comaroff proposes is often key in effective critical analysis. However, as Kavita Philip demonstrates in his examination of two popular representations of India by western commentators, insight does not necessarily derive from the fact of 'outsiderness': writing about 'the other' without the analytical armature of estrangement risks producing exoticist misunderstandings that reveal more about the fears and anxieties of the writer than about the subjects. As Comaroff emphasizes, it is the adoption of a defamiliarising stance that provides a privileged ex-centric analytical vantage point.

Two writers respond to Saree Makdisi's Volume 2 article in which he discusses the congruencies and departures between the manifestations of apartheid in Israel and South Africa. In a direct engagement with Makdisi, Ran Greenstein proposes that in Israel/Palestine there exists ‘apartheid of a special type’, and that resistance should be based on bi-nationalism and discourses of democracy, justice, equality and human rights. Louise Bethlehem, a South African literary critic who has made Israel her home for twenty five years, discusses the complexities and insights that her biographical trajectory brings to the question. Significantly, in a quest for examples of effective resistance to the denialism Makdisi foregrounds, Bethlehem turns to art. Specifically she examines a video installation by Israeli artist Oded Shimshon, which defamiliarizes a familiar landscape in order to contest the invisibility of the Palestinian past and present. Activist art, suggests Bethlehem, makes it possible to access certain occluded forms of knowledge and practices of resistance.

As David Goldblatt’s photographic oeuvre demonstrates, in contexts characterized by censorship and political oppression, images can constitute a particularly powerful mechanism to say the unsayable; their efficacy often lying in the subtlety and complexity with which they are able to access what Jacques Lacan calls ‘the Real’. The apartheid era taboos that Goldblatt’s photographs disclose are the bonds of intimacy – if fraught with unequal power relations and mutual fear – between black people and poor Afrikaners, and the indifference to – if not disavowal of – racial and economic inequality on the part of middle class, probably liberal, white South Africans. It is understanding the complexity of these two scandals – the reality of intimacy and the disavowal of connection between South Africans theoretically separated by race and class – that is at the heart of Sarah Nuttall’s project. Ultimately she comes to theorize the acknowledged and unacknowledged mutual relations between South Africans as ‘entanglement’.

images can constitute a particularly powerful mechanism to say the unsayable

Through philosophy, writing, and urban design, Douglas, Nuttall, Calburn and Mbembe seek pathways to mutuality in the context of seemingly unbridgeable social divides. Like Nuttall, Douglas is interested in what philosophy and critical theory can bring to the project of living with understanding in post-apartheid South Africa, a place where white and black Africans are caught up in an intrigue of proximity and responsibility. In their discussion about the spaciality of contemporary Johannesburg, Sarah Calburn and Achille Mbembe envision a city in which founding notions of commonality and mutuality are embodied in the structural fabric of the built environment to create a connective urban commonality. This, asserts Calburn, requires that outmoded forms of ‘urban planning’ (which maintain separate development along economic lines, entrenching historical spatial and societal divisions) be replaced with radically imaginative ‘urban design’ that frames and nurtures a vibrant, diverse society in a safe, all-inclusive public domain.

The gentrification of an area in downtown Johannesburg between the Central Methodist Church and the High Court was, arguably, an attempt at what Calburn calls for: a specially constructed ‘point of contact’, an endeavour by urban planners to create a physical common space where members of the public could interact safely. It was, however, a venture that went horribly wrong. As Christa Kuljian reveals, the skirmish for control of this public space (and the Church at its nucleus) turned into a low-grade, ongoing war, with running battles in every domain possible: within and between the courts, the media, the police, the Church, the government, the civil service, civil society, and individual citizens and non-citizens. As with all conflict it is difficult to tell exactly what drives it, for conflict is complex. But at base I would argue that the confounding tension is similar to the foundational theme that has cohered in this Volume: a struggle between those who wish to name, understand and address the injustices and suffering wrought by inequality, and those who don’t.

a struggle between those who wish to name, understand and address the injustices and suffering wrought by inequality, and those who don’t

One of products of global inequality is superfluous people; those surplus to requirement; those whose presence, if not their existence, fills less abject people with resentment and fear. The challenge of superfluity, particularly with regard to human populations, stalks this Volume.

Kavita Philip argues that in the 1970s, “a growing US fear of the Third World expressed itself in a technoscientific anxiety over population growth”. The 1990s, he suggests, brought an apparent reversal, at least with regard to Western representations of India; an about-turn also couched in a technoscientific rationale. Suddenly, thanks to economic liberalization and computer technology, the entire population of India was no longer considered superfluous and disposable. There emerged an ideal Indian: an

Bangalore, India
Flikr: David

“equal citizen in the age of globalization”, a neoliberalized individual who produced and consumed commodities, who earned “subjectivity under the sign of the brand”. What this rhetoric occludes is the continued existence of those without such subjecthood; those who suffer from ‘under development’, who live beyond the ‘digital divide’. Philip calls for more complex, multi-valenced critical theorization of the situation, stressing the need to “push harder on the assertion of a putative incommensurability between the ‘high-tech’ and the ‘primitive’”. I think this is well accomplished in *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, who has been described as a contemporary Indian Dickens. In this novel Adiga provides a biting exposé of the realities of life in digital and non-digital India (which he calls ‘the Darkness’), and the inescapable ‘entanglements’ between the people of the Darkness and those who wield pre- and postcolonial, local and global, forms of power.

James Sey engages a darker approach to dealing with superfluous people than their white-out from public consciousness through clever re-branding and triumphalist neo-liberal spin. Mobilising Giorgio Agamben’s notion of a ‘state of exception’ Sey analyses the disgrace of the encarceral conditions borne by black psychiatric patients under apartheid. However, like Jayawardane, who notes waves of discomfort in the audience at the opening of a retrospective exhibition of David Goldblatt’s high apartheid photographs, Sey does not allow comfortable dismissal of apartheid iniquities as the bygones of history. Apart from the fact that conditions in some South African psychiatric institutions are not necessarily very different today, what is of broader concern is that the state of exception, and resulting ‘bare life’ he describes is generalized and globalised: it produces the condition suffered by refugees and displaced peoples all over the world, what Agamben terms *homo sacer*, the ‘living dead’.

Christa Kuljian returns such considerations to South Africa with her description of the living conditions of those who take refuge in Johannesburg’s Central Methodist Church. Here Kuljian reveals the inconvenient truth that poverty can induce a bare life very close to that brought about by war, violence and despotic regimes. While many of the abject inhabitants of Central Methodist are political and economic refugees from Zimbabwe, a significant portion are indigent South Africans with nowhere else to go, no one else to turn to. The shocking fact is that extreme poverty produces a carceral form of bare life where the internment fence is not literal: it is constituted through denial by everyone else. It is this denial that generates living dead.

> poverty can induce a ‘bare life’ very close to that brought about by war, violence and despotic regimes

Widespread denial of exploitation and injustice also occurs in other situations. In her investigative internet artwork *New Coal*, Tegan Bristow focuses the spotlight on a sector that has been extraordinarily effective in avoiding critical attention from intellectuals, activists, artists and the media: mining. Thanks to a small but active global network of grassroots activist organizations, it is possible to find out what the extractive industries are up to, but it’s not a particularly easy exercise. The only thing more remarkable and shocking than the extent of the environmental destruction and depth of human rights abuses that the mining sector wreaks all over the world, is the silence about it.

> The only thing more remarkable and shocking than the extent of the environmental destruction and depth of human rights abuses the mining sector wreaks all over the world, is the silence about it.

Who, or what, is to blame for denial that is so ubiquitous and entrenched that it becomes societal disavowal? The collusion of governments and Big Capital, certainly. But individuals who consume with ignore-ance are also implicated. It is not only diamonds that are bloody: the short history of coltan extraction makes the use of mobile phones and other electronic goods questionable for anyone with ethical sensibilities. Presently it is almost impossible to live a consumer lifestyle without being implicated in the funding of extreme exploitation of peoples and places. Is this an acceptable situation?

Coltan, the means
Flikr: The Advocacy Project, Photo: Walter Y. James

Coltan, the end
Flikr: Matthijs Rouw

Coltan, the cost
‘Fleeing the conflict, Masisi’
Flickr: Julien Harneis

Those people who find themselves situated between a mineral and the wealth its exploitation makes for a few become superfluous, disposable; their habitat expendable. Too often the physical, social and cultural environment of such people becomes so degraded that it can support little more than bare life. Too often resource extraction and any notion of ‘for all’ are mutually incompatible. Bristow examines the effects of coal mining in the Rhur Valley in Germany, and asks whether such effects are desirable in the Mapungubwe Valley in South Africa.

Significantly, given the illuminating power attributed to visual art in other articles, the only artwork (as opposed to discussion of art) in this Volume swings the tables: Bristow uses ‘pre formatted text’ that exists elsewhere on the web – textual information, analysis, journalism, advocacy – as a medium to ‘paint’ with.

Bristow’s art work is not finished. She invites web browsers to collaborate in her investigative creation and contribute links. Like *The Salon* itself as a project, *New Coal* is an invitation to self-conscientization, to public commentary, to ongoing dialogue …