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Reconciling Racial Revelations in Post-Apartheid South African Literature

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ABSTRACT

Offering a reading of Mongane Wally Serote's *Revelations* (2010) alongside other recent novels by black South African writers, this essay answers calls for more careful analyses of the roles that race plays within post-apartheid literature and culture. As it questions the shift away from a concern with institutional racism and white supremacy that is evident in much contemporary South African criticism, the essay contends that post-apartheid literature is not only racially marked, but also continues to produce knowledge on racial inequality, racial ideology, and resistance. In the process, it illustrates that grappling with colorblindness challenges pervasive understandings of nonracialism, reconciliation, and post-1994 literature. *Revelations* portrays nonracialism and reconciliation as necessary and inevitable, yet shows that the discourses are in conflict with demands for equality and justice. Concurrently veiling and revealing paradoxes inherent in South Africa's dominant racial discourses from within, Serote's novel demonstrates that enforcing colorblindness is an act of epistemic violence: not even at the diegetic level is nonracialism achievable.

... I realised that all of us at this table had been
devastated by history, by time, by the West, by the
whites. Here we all were, far apart in so many respects,
yet bound now by a common, a terrible reality.

—OTSILE

They tell us that the situation is a class struggle rather
than a racial one. . . . We believe we know what the
problem is, and we will stick by our findings.

—STEVE BIKO, "BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE QUEST FOR A TRUE HUMANITY"

In Mongane Wally Serote's novel *Revelations*, the traditional healer Ngaka compares nonracialism to "the washing of the spears," a Zulu ritual historically performed after a war (213). Former enemies "would exchange the spears they'd used against each other, and then wash them: wash off the blood, the deaths, and let these be swept away by the flow of the river. It was this that helped adversaries to negotiate" (212). The novel creates a parallel between the postwar cleansing ritual and South Africa's transition to democracy, which witnessed negotiations between the African National Congress (ANC) and the governing National Party (NP). Yet the cleansing ritual presupposes that two factions employed the spears "against each other," while during apartheid the position of black South Africans was not equivalent to that of whites. In intimating a correspondence between unequal parties, *Revelations* obfuscates the workings of racial power and reproduces colorblind logics.¹ At the same time, the novel makes white privilege visible. When Mandela took power, the narrator Otsile says, he "went over to the opposition leaders" (213) and embraced them. Unlike the reciprocal washing of the spears, Mandela's movement toward white people is unidirectional, signaling that reconciliation is a one-way street in South Africa. As Serote's novel concurrently veils and reveals paradoxes inherent in South Africa's dominant discourses of nonracialism and reconciliation from within, it demonstrates that enforcing colorblindness is an act of epistemic violence: not even at the diegetic level is nonracialism achievable. In doing so, it invites us to rethink the shift away from a concern with institutional racism and white supremacy that is evident in much post-apartheid criticism.

Natasha Distiller and Melissa Steyn have argued that the "question of 'race' in South African culture is an urgent one which is not being comprehensively or carefully enough addressed" (3). Echoing these concerns, Ronit Frenkel and Craig MacKenzie invite scholars to take on the following pressing questions: "[I]s current South African literature racially marked? Has class supplanted race as a formative of identities and cultural practices? Has the ideology of current social movements, such as the 'Y-generation' (Nuttall) aesthetics or service delivery protests, displaced more conventional manifestations of political resistance?" (5). Offering a reading of *Revelations* alongside other recent novels by black South African writers, this essay argues that post-apartheid literature is not only "racially marked," but also continues to produce knowledge on racial inequality, racial ideology, and resistance.

Revelations engages the official discourses of nonracialism and reconciliation in greater depth than arguably any other novel in English by a black South African writer. As such, it is likely to become a classic of post-transitional literature, regardless or precisely because of the hegemonic ideologies that shape it.² Frenkel explains that the term post-transitional "is, and is not, a temporal marker, as it does refer to something moving but does not claim that the issues involved in the transition have been resolved" (27). Although theorizations of post-transitional aesthetics acknowledge that the past shapes the present, they rarely examine how white domination, structural racism, and hegemonic racial ideologies continue to impact South African literary imaginaries. Contending with these categories nevertheless provides crucial insights into post-apartheid literature and its criticism.

One of South Africa's most prominent authors, Serote is the recipient of the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa, South Africa's Order of Ikhamanga in

Silver, Chile's Pablo Neruda Award, and is one of only two African poets alongside Léopold Senghor to have received the prestigious Golden Wreath Award. The only member of the Soweto Poets who still writes today (Foley 127), Serote has increasingly turned to fiction, a genre that better captures the sensibilities of a democratic society and is now also privileged by other literary giants of the old generation, most noticeably playwright and novelist Zakes Mda. Moses Mudzwiti has called *Revelations* "one book you have to read" and "a gem of a story that reads like poetry in motion." But neither *Revelations* nor *Rumours*, Serote's intriguing 2013 novel, have received any critical attention beyond occasional reviews. While unfortunate, this critical void is not an anomaly.

Shaun de Waal wrote in 2000 that he had "grown very tired of hearing the question inevitably posed by visiting foreign journalist trawling for information about South African literature: Where are the new young black writers?" The days in which K. Sello Duiker and Phaswane Mpe might have been the only noticeable young black novelists on the South African literary scene are decidedly over. Several novels by black writers have since won literary prizes or garnered international attention; for example, Fred Khumalo's *Bitches' Brew*, Songeziwe Mahlangu's *Penumbra*, Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut*, Niq Mhlongo's *Dog Eat Dog*, Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* and *The Book of the Dead*, Sifiso Mzobe's *Young Blood*, Zukiswa Wanner's *London, Cape Town, Joburg*, and others. As many young novelists compellingly and imaginatively capture the hustle and bustle of everyday life in post-apartheid cities and villages, black writers of the old and new generation alike also take their readers on exciting journeys outside South African borders, as in C. A. David's *The Blacks of Cape Town*, Zakes Mda's *Cion*, Thando Mgqolozana's *Hear Me Alone*, Wanner's *London, Cape Town, Joburg*, or Serote's *Revelations* and *Rumours*. Even so, criticism continues to focus predominantly on white writers, perhaps because, as Michael Chapman contends, "literary studies in South Africa remain largely a white, metropolitan-inflected affair" ("Postcolonial" 60). In the meantime, the engagement with institutional racism and white dominance has taken a backseat in post-apartheid criticism.

Many South African scholars today stigmatize and delegitimize the study of racism, including by arguing that studies grounded in racialized materiality reproduce colonial structures of domination.³ For example, scholarship that maintains the binary categories *colonizer* and *colonized* or *oppressor* and *oppressed* and understands these in racial terms is described as "neo-colonial rather than counterdiscursive" (Jolly 20) or termed "segregated theory" (Nuttall 31). Post-apartheid criticism also frequently celebrates "blendings, interconnections, hybridities and ambiguities" (Frenkel and MacKenzie 5) in ways that mystify the workings of racial power. Scholarship that silences structural racism and reinscribes color-blindness exists across disciplines and national contexts.⁴ Given that whiteness is "built into our disciplines, our institutions, our professions . . . and in our methods as researchers" (Steyn and Conway 286), it is important to consider how *race* itself is constructed within academic scholarship.

For example, Melissa Tandiwe Myambo mentions that South African works that are popular outside the country "tend to focus on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and race relations," while literature read in South Africa often deals with "'local' issues like crime, AIDS, and poverty" (116). However, as Myambo's study also suggests, crime, AIDS, and poverty are intimately tied to

"race relations." In South Africa, crime cannot be explained without considering poverty, which predominantly affects black people, and poverty cannot be understood without considering wealth, which whites disproportionately control despite the growth of the black middle class. Statistics from 2008 also show that HIV affected 13 percent of the black population, but only 0.3 percent of the white population. Scholarship that disaggregates poverty, HIV, or xenophobia from institutional racism reinscribes colorblindness, although it may do so unwittingly. In order to understand the weight of this argument, it is necessary to more fully map out racial politics in South Africa, a country in which, "as hard as one might strive for healing and reconstruction, the past stubbornly manifests itself" (Attwell and Harlow 2). I will thus briefly turn to the entanglement between *now* and *then* that defines race relations in the contemporary moment.

In an event that speaks to striking continuities between the colonial past and the postcolonial present, South African police killed thirty-four miners who were demanding living wages at the Lonmin Platinum mine in August 2012 and injured at least seventy-eight others. The Marikana massacre conjured the specter of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, which also occurred in Gauteng after a protest that challenged the racist status quo.⁵ More than three years later, unanswered questions about culpability and redress attest to the tenuous nature of justice in the post-apartheid era. Shifting away blame, Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa, who in 2012 was a non-executive director and shareholder at Lonmin, told the Marikana Commission of Inquiry that responsibility for the massacre "has to be collective" (Kings). In a more compassionate gesture, North West Premier Supra Mahumapelo launched a Reconciliation, Healing, and Renewal Programme. While symbolically meaningful, this response is superficial as Marikana victims, just like the apartheid victims who testified in front of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), continue to await reparations promised by the government. Economic reparations alone, of course, cannot rectify collective dispossession in a context in which neoliberal capitalism and colorblind racism systematically reproduce racial inequality.

Notions of reconciliation and forgiveness in post-apartheid South Africa, as Bhekizwe Peterson has argued, rely on a series of "repressions" that reproduce "abuse, poverty, injustice and alienation" (214). In the final report of the TRC, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu famously appealed to all South Africans, "black and white together to close the chapter on our past and to strive for this beautiful and blessed land as the rainbow people of God" (23). Nevertheless, today it is mainly black people who are forgiving and reconciling. The TRC's promotion of "national unity and reconciliation" (23) was contingent on reinscribing nonracialism as a dominant discourse, noticeable in Tutu's premature calls for closure. Tutu's rainbow metaphor, which references South Africa's multiethnic society, ironically and aptly evokes racial segregation. As Myambo explains, "the ultimate limits of the Rainbow Nation are precisely at the points where multiculturalism as an ideology fails to address . . . social justice, social equality" (116). Contemporary appeals to nonracialism uphold white advantage, which is reproduced also through spatial segregation.

During the anti-apartheid struggle nonracialism represented a useful anti-racist strategy that encouraged unity across racial lines while advancing black people's decolonial agenda. But nonracialism hinders the achievement of racial

equality today. Providing valuable insights on this issue, Achille Mbembe writes, "Reactionary and conservative forces have co-opted nonracialism, which they now equate with colour-blindness. They use nonracialism as a weapon to discredit any attempt to deracialise property, institutions and structures inherited from an odious past." Although nonracialism is grounded in an ANC history of antiracist struggle, it is now coterminous with colorblindness, a technology of silencing that supports white dominance globally. The discourse of colorblindness contends, for example, that institutional racism no longer significantly shapes life opportunities, that economic inequality is merely a consequence of class disparities rather than ongoing institutional racism, that wealth and poverty can be explained through individual merit and personal responsibility, and that racial categories should preferably *not* be employed. Colorblindness has serious material consequences within and beyond South African borders—from Australia to Brazil and from Cuba to the United States, countries in which racial inequality remains pervasive.⁶

In South Africa, poverty has worsened since the democratic dispensation (Moran 110), but not everybody has fared poorly. White people, less than 9 percent of the population, continue to collectively own over 80 percent of the land and economy. The differential life expectancy of less than fifty years for black people and over seventy years for white people also speaks to the expendability of black life in the present. Accounting for the steady expansion of the black middle class and considering the ethnic diversity that informs both blackness and whiteness in the South African context does not manage to neutralize racial inequality.⁷ As racial disparities persist and the state continues to violently suppress demands for equality, the commitment to nonracialism coupled with neoliberalism supports white dominance today.

While in the post-apartheid era socioeconomic conditions remain unchanged for most South Africans, a noticeable shift has occurred in literary productions.⁸ During apartheid, black writers saw it as their call to challenge injustice, an impulse epitomized by Mothobi Mutloatse's famous 1981 statement that "any writing which ignores the urgency of political events will be irrelevant" (qtd. in Ndebele 24). Finally unconstrained by the tacit obligation to document racial oppression, black fiction has abandoned its propensity for what Njabulo Ndebele called a "numbing sensationalism" (16). Concurrently, as Lesibana Rafapa has shown, a significant body of contemporary fiction displays continuities with black writing from the 1950s. The continuity with the past tellingly also defines white writing, as Leon de Kock has demonstrated. Rather than being "freed from the past" as many critics contend, de Kock writes, "postapartheid literature is inescapably bound to the time of before" (57). This is nowhere as true as in the case of black fiction, which often maintains characteristics of apartheid-era works, such as "literary realism, moral earnestness" (Frenkel and MacKenzie 2) and a concern with racial inequality. Its commitment to literary realism, explicit engagement with racism, and tendency toward didacticism place *Revelations* within a tradition with deep roots in apartheid writing. However, even as black writers remain more concerned with white supremacy than critics have noticed, the incisive anti-establishment critique that characterized most apartheid literature by black writers can no longer be taken for granted.

Serote's post-apartheid works are a case in point. Once an outspoken critic of the apartheid regime, Serote, who was until recently a member of parliament and is the CEO of Pretoria's Freedom Park, has been described as a "poetic apologist for the ANC government" (Foley 127). While it is true that *Revelations* and *Rumours* largely reproduce the party line, they also deliver profound and contradictory messages about South African race relations and global racial justice and cannot be dismissed as mere propaganda. Most importantly, the racial politics articulated in the novels are symptomatic of a larger phenomenon. In an essay tellingly titled "Silenced by Freedom?," Ileana Dimitriu shows that Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer also refrained from critiquing the status quo in her post-apartheid works. Andile Mngxitama contends that the commitment to nonracialism has had various "tragic consequences" in South Africa, an important one being "the retreat of radical scholarship from theorizing the post-94 state" ("Blacks Can't Be Racist" 12). South African literature and its criticism often reflect the hegemony of nonracialism.

Attending to the complex racial politics that inform much contemporary fiction by black writers does not imply calling for a return to a "rhetoric of urgency" (Bethlehem 365). Neither does it mean demanding the "subjection of aesthetic choices to political imperatives" (Grzęda 156). While my reading of literature is diagnostic rather than prescriptive, I aim to show that contending with "categories of race difference" (Nuttall 31) remains crucial for understanding South African literature and that reading post-apartheid literary productions through a critical race lens and in light of the writings of black radical thinkers provides insights into the workings of racial power within and beyond the realm of fiction. In interrogating the relevance of racial ideology for present-day cultural productions I heed Chapman's call for analyses of South African literature that remain firmly anchored in their local context. Contending with nonracialism and reconciliation in the study of South African imaginaries means precisely focusing "on specifics" (Chapman, "Postcolonial" 67). It also entails recognizing that, as Kimberlé Crenshaw writes, the "belief in color-blindness and equal process . . . make[s] no sense at all in a society in which identifiable groups [have] actually been treated differently historically and in which the effects of this difference in treatment continues into the present" (106). As it concurrently challenges and reinscribes colorblindness, *Revelations* shows that nonracialism and reconciliation are entangled with the reproduction of racial oppression and white privilege.

READING RACIAL REVELATIONS

Otsile, the narrator and protagonist of *Revelations*, is a former member of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC, which suspended its operations during the transition that culminated in the 1994 elections. Otsile's involvement in armed resistance still gives him great pride but times have changed as South Africa is "on a path to reconciliation" (78). Having substituted his gun with a camera, a new instrument, Otsile now spends much of his time accompanying his senior friend Bra Shope, whose paintings are exhibited around the world. During Bra Shope's art shows in Maputo, Santiago, Cape Town, Gweru, and Johannesburg, Otsile partakes in stimulating conversations about the nature of justice and

reconciliation in South Africa and abroad. In Santiago, Otsile attends *Revelations*, the masterpiece about slavery by the African American company Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, fictionalized as Avin Ikes Dance Theatre in the novel. The performance teaches Otsile about “the whip, the deaths, the ships” of the Middle Passage as well as “the trauma, the pain and the burden on the descendants of those slaves” (40). The epiphany that Otsile experiences while watching *Revelations* indicates that cultural productions represent important venues for potentially learning about history and its enduring implications. Serote’s choice to title the novel *Revelations* also suggests that literature can perform relevant political work in the post-apartheid era. In connecting the histories of colonized people across historical and national boundaries, the novel prompts us to consider how colonial structures of power are reproduced in our time on a global scale. As the novel tends to displace critiques of racial power onto the past and foreign contexts, it also evinces the significance of colorblindness ideology for contemporary South African imaginaries.

Living a comfortable middle-class life in the Joburg suburbs, Otsile has already gone through a divorce and raises two children with his partner Teresa, a lawyer who will be initiated as a *ngaka* (traditional healer) as the novel progresses. As a former freedom fighter with a “great sense of responsibility” (145), devoted ANC member, and well-travelled narrator, Otsile has much to teach the reader, a fact that contributes to the didactic nature of several dialogues. Frantz Fanon’s description of national leaders in recently liberated postcolonial societies in part captures Otsile’s unspoken role within the narrative:

He comes to the aid of the bourgeois caste and hides his maneuvers from the people. . . . Every time he speaks to the people he calls to mind his often heroic life, the struggles he has led in the name of the people and the victories in their name he has achieved, thereby intimating clearly to the masses that they ought to go on putting their confidence in him. (168)

Like the political party he embodies, Otsile dwells on past glories. While the gun represented a means to achieve freedom during apartheid, Otsile does not feel the need to put his camera to good use beyond recording the present for posterity. Photography in *Revelations* is not about focus, then, but rather the lack thereof as it helps Otsile leapfrog the present. That the former MK cadre is preoccupied with poverty and the position of women in society, but displays little critical awareness of his own class and male privilege, is one of many paradoxes in the novel that call for an examination of racial, gender, and class politics.

What does the novel reveal about the relationship between nonracialism, reconciliation, and racial power in the post-apartheid era? Otsile argues that “Black people in the new South Africa have political power, but the whites have the economic power” (120). In *Revelations*, segregation and white privilege are alive and well as many black people continue to live in locations such as Joburg’s Alexandra, which houses “some of the poorest people in the world” (195). By contrast, “the restaurants, the gym, the places of pleasure, of learning, of heritage, . . . national parks, museums and monuments” (70) remain predominantly white spaces in Cape Town. Experiencing much discomfort in the city despite the picturesque surroundings, Bra Shope adds, “We’re in a hostile city, depending on who you are,

how dark-skinned you are. The memory and the evidence of this are related" (70). Tellingly, the racialized spatial imaginary of *Revelations* resembles that of other twenty-first-century South African novels.

In examining the politics of place in South African literature, Rita Barnard describes apartheid as "an extreme and therefore starkly illuminating instance of the territorialization of power" (5). Even as the boundaries imposed by apartheid have been officially lifted, the "territorialization of power" still defines both the physical and the literary South African landscape.⁹ The Cape Town of K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* or Thando Mgqolozana's *A Man Who is Not a Man* is a segregated city that is inhospitable for black people and so is the Joburg of Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* or Perfect Hlongwane's *Jozi*. In Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207*, the narrator Noko and his housemates struggle to leave Hillbrow, a neighborhood in which living conditions are simply "inhuman" (197). In a rural municipality described in Serote's *Rumours*, "the English side of town is drastically different from the Sesotho side. One side is rich and the other poor. The poor side is dry as dust, just shacks without trees or water, and far from any facilities like schools, clinics, courts and government departments" (223). Revealing the reaches of white dominance, God himself is "white" and "either English or Afrikaans" (182) in Niq Mhlongo's *Dog Eat Dog*, while Otsile acknowledges that it is "still dangerous to be black in the world" (14) in *Revelations*. A solid middle-class status does not prevent the young protagonist of Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* from experiencing alienation in her predominantly white neighborhood, school, and social circles. As they depict differential spatial and affective locations for black and white characters, these novels demonstrate that black writers continue to address racial oppression. While this essay is concerned with novels, the denunciation of racial inequality is certainly not confined to fiction. Malaika wa Azania argues in *Memoirs of a Born Free* that black people are still "living in the boiling fire of white supremacy" (5), while many poems by Vonani Bila, Seithlamo Motsapi, Lesego Rampolokeng, and other black poets are equally preoccupied with racism, poverty, and marginalization.

Similar to other post-apartheid novels, *Revelations* includes a homeless character who demands the protagonists' attention. Since Bra Shope ignores homeless people in Cape Town, a stranger complains to Otsile, "Tell your stingy friend . . . soon he'll join us, the homeless. Tell him I'm waiting!" (72). In the last chapter of *Dog Eat Dog*, Stomachache interrupts Dingz and his friends who gathered to celebrate the end of the academic year. The presence of Stomachache, a former Wits University student who was financially excluded and ended up living on the streets, reminds the friends that "life is a matter of dog eat dog" (218). Comparably, the homeless man Justice warns the protagonist of *Room 207* that "*Life is a treacherous quicksand with no guarantees . . .*" (32). Homeless characters enter these narratives like specters: they remind the protagonists that their conditions could be worse, but also that soon it could be their turn. After losing his job, the protagonist of Serote's *Rumours* experiences the downfall into destitution first hand: "Keke was almost homeless himself now. It was too easy to become homeless. Just owe some rich white people, and they'd soon carve you up and leave no flesh on your bones" (24). The threat of homelessness that haunts these literary landscapes signals the precariousness of black life in present-day South Africa.

Revelations goes well beyond reflecting on the nature of race relations in Serote's country. That racial domination represents a *global* reality is one of the central revelations of the novel. In Santiago, Bra Shope and Otsile meet Sarah, an indigenous Chilean scholar who is writing a dictionary of Mapuche, her native language. Not unlike in South Africa and the United States, colonial history continues to structure racial dynamics in Chile, which is "filled with the bones of its indigenous people" (22). Bra Shope and Otsile also meet Dimakatso (Melba) and Bill, two African American performers touring with Avin Ikes Dance Theatre. After Bra Shope's exhibition *In Truth We Reconcile*, the characters embark on the novel's first dialogue on reconciliation. It is 1998 and the ground is ripe for such debates as Chileans are "about to reach for each other's throats" (20) while former dictator Augusto Pinochet is held in England. Within this context, discussions about racism are not merely intellectual endeavors but a means to work through traumatic histories and lived experiences of oppression.

Serote's novel both denounces racial oppression and mystifies institutional racism in the contemporary moment. Bill tells Otsile that many young black men in the United States get trapped by the justice system and "disappear from the radar screen of life" (28). Why do so many black men end up in jail? Possibly projecting South African crime figures onto the US context, Bill mentions theft, murder, and hijacking as possible reasons, but fails to contextualize mass incarceration as the product of racist US laws and campaigns such as the War on Drugs. This should not surprise us, as Otsile, who employs the obsolete term "Afro-Americans," seems to know remarkably little about the experiences and struggles of black people in the United States. In the meantime, the novel also silences the racialization of the justice system and prison population in South Africa, which is increasingly resorting to US-style super-maximum security prisons. In this regard, Angela Davis calls attention to "the apparent ease with which the most repressive version of the U.S. prison has established itself in a country that has just recently initiated the project of building a democratic, non-racist, and nonsexist society" (102). Unconcerned with the authoritarianism that informs post-apartheid racial relations, Serote's novel depicts the South African justice system as efficient and the police as trustworthy.

Revelations nevertheless shows that colonialism continues to impact the lives of African Americans and black South Africans alike. As a way to symbolically strengthen his bond with the African continent, Bra Shope gives Bill an isiZulu name: Musa, which means *mercy*. Bra Shope explains his name choice as follows: "Yes, you know, we have to make a conscious effort not to always wail about what happened to us" (26). The invitation "not to always wail" locates racism in the past: racism is "what happened," not what is happening. Bra Shope's solicitation to "start the movement going forward" (27) also resembles colorblind rhetorics that brand demands for racial redress as a nuisance. Otsile relatedly contends that moving forward from the past is "the basis of reconciliation" (78). The novel thus both reproduces colorblind rhetorics and reveals the hegemonic dimension of reconciliation. Bra Shope's interpretation of mercy as deliberate forgetting and Otsile's failure to engage redress indicate that reconciliation in South Africa depends on a silencing of racism and abdication of justice.

But what is justice? During his exhibit *In Truth We Reconcile*, Bra Shope asks precisely this question but fails to take a clear stance on the issue: "What is justice? . . . Is it punishment? Is it truth and reconciliation, truth and forgiving, or truth and compromise?" (34). Charles Mills contends that evasion and self-deception represent "the epistemic norm" (96) in discourses that enforce colorblindness. In posing key questions about racial power while refusing to answer them, *Revelations* reproduces a narrative of evasion. Otsile is a naive character who seems to have no knowledge about the entanglement between US imperialism, neoliberalism, and the upholding of racialized privileges in Africa, Latin America, and beyond. Having argued that Salvador Allende died "at the hands of his own citizens" (12), Otsile continues, "Who had killed Allende? Like Lumumba and Machel, Allende was a dreamer" (13). The novel silences the US-backed overthrow of Allende's government and the devastating consequences of Operation Condor. Neither does it suggest that Belgium and the United States had much to do with the murder of Patrice Lumumba.

Revelations takes on Bra Shope's open-ended questions about justice through the inclusion of a traditional trial. The defendant, Thuso, attracts the ire of community members who accuse him of being a wizard and demand that he be burnt alive. But Thuso is merely a traditional healer in a village of intolerant Christians. He is also affected by disabilities, which further accounts for his marginalization. Although Thuso is innocent, he apologizes to his fellow villagers "for causing pain" and with "great humility" (123) asks them to let him go. It is striking that in a novel about reconciliation the only character who apologizes publicly for his wrongdoings is a victim of injustice. Thuso's trial blurs the boundaries between justice and malice and turns the meaning of forgiveness on its head. In doing so, it evinces the contradictory nature of forgiveness in South Africa, where reconciliation demands much from the victims and little from the perpetrators.

In *Revelations*, wisdom rests with the ancestors and the elders, who embody traditional law. "The old people," Otsile affirms, "made rules for everyone. They sought the best for the human being" (49). Traditional leaders and practices are bearers of culture and history. They resolve conflict, create unity, ground people within a community, and provide them with instruments to fight oppression. While they serve as moral fortresses people can fall back on in the face of injustice, the novel idealizes traditional institutions and customs as necessarily serving a higher good, thereby ignoring the fact that practices such as polygamy can potentially reproduce gender inequality. In what could be read as the projection of a masculinist fantasy, Teresa herself requests that Otsile take a second wife.

Margaret von Klemperer argues that "Serote's novel ultimately makes a profound and impassioned appeal for the restitution of traditional values as the only way to free the spirit of Africa." The novel aims to valorize African traditions and institutions, but ironically evades the root of the problem: white people continue to largely control the resources that make these possible. The institutions that *Revelations* portrays as central to decolonization and nation building are dependent on "cattle, land and communal family on which communities were built" (150). Landlessness stands in the way of their very survival. While the novel emphasizes the importance of upholding African cultural value systems, it assumes that these can be salvaged without addressing redistribution. Bra Shope hopes that his exhibition

The Truth about Truth and Reconciliation will prompt Africans to ask themselves "Who are you?" (127). The novel's recurrent concern with "African identity" as a solution to black people's problems sidesteps white people's economic, social, and cultural dominance, which hinders self-determination in the first place.

Making this dominance visible, the novel portrays reconciliation as synonymous with assimilation into a higher order. In a conversation about customary and official law, Otsile argues that democracy is *not* superior to traditional systems, while Nkoko asserts that it is important to consider how modern and traditional practices can improve one another. Otsile agrees that this would be a step forward for South Africa and the African continent at large since this way "more people would cease to be ignorant and illiterate. They could move to centre stage and become active" (88). That the traditional leaders *Revelations* so highly praises for their wisdom might be illiterate must have escaped Serote. Despite the novel's emphasis on the equivalence or superiority of traditional institutions, Otsile suggests that initiation has more to learn from official schooling than the other way around.

Motivated by Ngaka's suggestion that Christians need to communicate with traditional leaders, Otsile argues that initiation "should talk to education; traditional leaders should talk to members of parliament; indigenous knowledge should talk to science; Sesotho to Afrikaans; African languages to English; extended family to the single unit family; customary law to judicial law" (218). Embedded in the one-sided direction of these conversations is a hierarchy of values. Sanctioning the legitimacy of white privilege, Otsile silences the fact that African languages are *already* talking "to English," or rather talking in English. Although the South African Constitution states that all eleven official languages "must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably," English and Afrikaans remain the languages of power in South Africa ("Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996"). Dingz affirms in Mhlongo's *Dog Eat Dog*, "It also seemed to me that English and Afrikaans are God's languages. Mastering those two languages in our country had since [the end of apartheid] become the only way to avoid the poverty of twilight zones like Soweto" (182). It is possible to graduate from college and become a member of the elite speaking only English in South Africa, but speaking only Sesotho does not carry the same advantages.

The novel's most incisive dialogue about the land question does not take place in South Africa but during Bra Shope's exhibition *The Truth about Truth and Reconciliation* in Gweru, Zimbabwe. The artist embarks on a heated debate about land redistribution with Peter, a visitor described as a white Englishman. Bra Shope argues that the farmers whose land was stolen by British colonizers should be compensated. Peter dismisses Bra Shope's assertion contending that Mugabe's government is plagued by corruption and therefore redistribution is illegitimate. The debate and its abrupt ending evince a lack of genuine dialogue and the currency of colorblind rhetorics in arguments against redistribution. Conveniently confined to the Zimbabwean context, the debate also illuminates Serote's unwillingness to tackle the land question in South Africa with the same force.

The following dialogue between Otsile and his father illustrates how the novel silences demands for redress in the South African context and turns them into occasions for political propaganda:

"And when are you going to give us back our land and property and do away with this crowded hell called Alexandra? Why is our freedom like this?"

"It will happen," I said. "We'll get the land back."

"When?"

"It'll happen," I said again. He looked at me briefly, and looked away.

"Mandela's a good leader. But what about Thabo [Mbeki]?"

"He's a good leader too," I said. (197)

In the only dialogue that addresses at some length land restitution in South Africa, the father's urgent questions are answered with a vague "It will happen." Otsile, who acts a spokesperson for the ANC, projects the end to land dispossession and poverty into an indefinite but certain future. The reality is much less encouraging than Otsile suggests. Nearly 90 percent of South Africa's farmable land was in white hands in 1994. Although the ANC government pledged to redistribute 30 percent of the land by 2014, black land ownership had increased only around 8 percent by 2010.¹⁰

The dialogue between Otsile and his father is emblematic of the ideological work that the novel performs. Having established the wisdom and trustworthiness of the elders, *Revelations* appropriates their authoritative voices to endorse the ruling party. Nkoko, who was a young woman during the Anglo-Boer war, praises Mandela for "looking after us so well" (51) and prophesizes, "Thabo [Mbeki] will take over. He must know that it's the *badimo* who allow him to take over" (52). Mbeki's presidency is sanctioned by the *badimo* (ancestors) themselves. Depicted as essentially laudable and efficient, the ANC is referred to as "the movement" throughout the novel in a gesture that highlights its role in the liberation struggle. In arguing that the ANC government is "moving full speed" (178), lawmakers spend "sleepless nights" (196) trying to fix poverty, and it is merely a question of *time* until things will change in South Africa, the novel reproduces the myth that inequality persists because apartheid was abolished *recently*. This way it mystifies the ANC's neoliberal agenda, which protects white wealth and perpetuates black poverty and exploitation.¹³

In the meantime, *Revelations* articulates a strong critique of South African media, described as "foreign to everything South African, southern African or even African" (110). This negative appraisal is intensified in *Rumours*, in which the character Mandla has to force himself "to stop thinking about the South African media" (9). *Rumours* immediately leads the reader into a diatribe about the country's newspapers, radio, and television, arguing that, apart from Mandela, "all other leaders of the Movement had been concertedly and relentlessly attacked by the media" (5–6). The media spread "rumours that the Movement [is] in trouble" (76) and "unleash an endless volley against the government as if they're an opposition party" (253). During a 2011 discussion on *Revelations*, Serote himself stated, "it is a pain for me to read South African media."¹³ The delegitimization of the media that informs both *Revelations* and *Rumours* further strengthens the celebratory depiction of the ANC.

Revelations tends to dismiss ANC critics as illegitimate. These are described as white opposition members who employ a "heavy vocabulary of racism" (164) or liberals whose agenda is also "based on white domination" (178). Overt racism and racial polarization certainly persist in South Africa, but these are not the

only forms that anti-establishment critique takes.¹³ Serote himself conceded that “the ANC might have . . . shifted away from the masses” (qtd. in Schneider). The depiction of ANC critics as essentially white suppresses black opposition and the growing estrangement between the poor, who remain overwhelmingly black, and the black political elite. Thinkers grounded in a Black Consciousness (BC) tradition continue to have a different vision for the New South Africa than the one espoused by the ruling party, but nowhere does *Revelations* indicate that black radical critique and leadership persist.

The novel also silences BC’s important contributions to the liberation struggle. Otsile states that his ex-wife Nomazwi was “the product of June 16th, 1976” (58), a reference to the Soweto uprising, which was inspired by the Black Consciousness Movement. Otsile contends that he belongs to a proud generation of liberators, while Nomazwi belongs to the generation of *Siyanyomfa*. Since *siyanyomfa* means “we are overeating” in isiZulu, one wonders if Serote meant *Siyanyova* (“we will destroy”), which refers to an apartheid protest song that incited the destruction of public property (Parks). The possible identification of BC with gorging or rioting provides a distorted picture of the movement, to say the least. This seems especially troubling given that Serote himself had ties with BC during his youth. In an interview with de Kock, Serote argued that “everything about the struggle had been obliterated when Mandela . . . was arrested” (qtd. in Schneider). Yet this period witnessed precisely the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement.

The silencing of a black radical tradition has important implications for the novel’s construction of nonracialism as equivalent to colorblindness. Otsile asserts, “Everybody in my country now spoke about nonracialism, nonsexism and democracy. But that was what MK had been fighting for as its strategic objective, and not everybody had been MK” (62). Representing nonracialism as endorsed by “everybody” ignores the fact that its very meaning remains contested. Mngxitama writes that the dominant discourse of nonracialism “crowds out and delegitimises talking about difference and as a result white privilege continues unabated” (“Why Biko” 17). Otsile nevertheless mobilizes the voice of the traditional healer Ngaka to further establish the correctness of nonracialism:

Ngaka once told me that there were white farmers who occasionally consulted him. He said there would be more in the future, which is why the movement’s nonracialism was correct. The new generation of *dingaka* [traditional healers] would have to track down white ancestors who had black heritage. Nonracialism, he said, was the washing of the spears. There would be white *dingaka*. (213)

In an earlier passage, Ngaka states that the ANC’s espousal of nonracialism is correct because he offers his services to blacks and whites alike; he discriminates “against no one” (211). Rather than nonracism or antiracism, here the opposite of nonracialism is discrimination against white people. Ngaka’s interpretation of nonracialism coincides with colorblind rhetorics that brand race-based redress measures as discriminatory. Meanwhile, his arguments about white ancestors reinscribe a problematic racial essentialism as well as resemble transnational discourses of racial hybridity that white elites often invoke to delegitimize claims to reparations made by people of color (Lund xv). The example of Brazil, which has

both white leaders in traditional religions such as Candomblé and rampant racial inequality, shows that white people's partaking in Afrocentric cultural practices does not ameliorate the conditions of black people. Instead, it can be exploited to mystify inequality and cultural imperialism. Through the washing of the spears analogy the novel brings together nonracialism and reconciliation in ways that illustrate their affinity with colorblindness.

Revelations conceals racial hierarchies by constructing a moral equivalence between black and white people. Otsile argues that he has much in common with Nel, an Afrikaner driver and former member of the South African Defence Force (SADF), because their "business was similar" (75). In his testimony to the TRC, traditional leader D. K. Koka affirmed that "the guilt of the oppressor and the oppressed shall never be the same and faced from the same angle. . . . [Let] me remark that for the last 500 years, the black community, African people in particular, have been subjected or have been fully engaged in a programme of self defence and self-preservation. . . ." Otsile nonetheless insists that members of the SADF were "both black and white" (79), thereby further drawing apartheid and anti-apartheid soldiers together.

When he learns that neither Bra Shope nor Teresa enjoys interacting with Nel, Otsile tells Bra Shope, "You and Teresa need to remember that this country's on a path to reconciliation. . . . If you don't, you'll become racist" (78). This warning mystifies the institutional dimensions of racism and gives ammunition to the white discourse of "reverse racism," a powerful technique of silencing. Otsile conflates racism and prejudice. Bra Shope and Teresa might have prejudices against Nel, but this does not make them racist. "Those who know," Steve Biko wrote in 1970, "define racism as discrimination by a group against another for the purposes of subjugation or maintaining subjugation" (25). While the Marikana massacre testifies to the ongoing salience of white supremacy, the 2008 banning of black-only organizations following accusations of "reverse racism" reveals the powerful role that colorblindness plays within post-apartheid politics.¹⁴ As black people's racial privacy has been legally undermined despite ongoing racial inequality, former SADF member Franz Jooste can continue to indoctrinate Afrikaner boys into white supremacist ideologies and train them in the use of weapons in white-only "hate camps" (Van Gelder). Neither Jooste's Kommandokorps nor the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) have been banned.

Although it fails to emphasize that structural change and economic redistribution are fundamental for achieving racial justice, *Revelations* does suggest that transnational solidarity between people of color represents an important strategy for overcoming racialized conditions of existence. Bra Shope argues that countries from the Global South must come together and discuss strategies for social uplift. He also envisions the "possibility of linking our histories—the Khoisan, the Africans, the Mapuche and the Afro-Americans, the long-gone past arching over into the there and now" (28). It makes sense, then, that the final chapter of *Revelations* symbolically brings the present and past together through a gathering of colonized people. Dimakatso and Sarah have now returned to South Africa; the former has been invited to dance, while the latter intends to learn about indigenous knowledge. Together with Otsile and his wives Teresa and Lindiwe, Dimakatso and Sarah visit rock paintings created by the Khoisan people, who in the novel are

referred to as “Bushmen,” a pejorative term that is nevertheless common in South Africa. Otsile describes the group’s reaction to the paintings as follows: “We were from the same generation, each from farflung places on distant continents and each still carrying the terrors of our history and the brutality of fate and destiny. Our silence was the voice of our apprehension” (242). The witnessing of the rock paintings, as in Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light*, indicates a return to the precolonial past and reconnection with the ancestors.

Yet in the closing passage the global context is suddenly forgotten in favor of a return to seemingly more urgent local matters. The novel ends with Teresa intoning a prayer on Bra Shope’s grave: “Now, as a people, we are preparing for Polokwane. Oh ancestors, let this name not be a prophecy. Luthuli, Tambo, Sisulu, Kotane, Mabhida, Sobukwe, Biko . . . counsel our leaders, give them wisdom, save our country” (246). In a final gesture of national myth making, the protection of ANC leaders is made to epitomize the salvation of an entire people. Teresa goes as far as mobilizing Robert Sobukwe, founder of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), and Steve Biko, leader of the Black Consciousness Movement, in support of ANC members who prepare for the 2007 National Conference in Polokwane, which witnessed the election of South Africa’s current president Jacob Zuma as party leader. However, at the 1959 inaugural address of the PAC, Sobukwe expressed a commitment “to a policy guaranteeing the most equitable distribution of wealth” (344), while Biko similarly affirmed in an interview:

I think there is no running away from the fact that now in South Africa there is such an ill distribution of wealth that any form of political freedom which does not touch on the proper distribution of wealth will be meaningless. The whites have locked up within a small minority of themselves the greater proportion of the country’s wealth. If we have a mere change of face of those in governing positions what is likely to happen is that black people will continue to be poor, and you will see a few blacks filtering through into the so-called bourgeoisie. Our society will be run almost as of yesterday. (149)

While his voice is expediently appropriated in *Revelations*, Biko’s words have been prophetic. As the final gathering of “southern countries” (27) is turned into an instrument of consensus production, the novel ironically colludes with “the minority right” (33) that it aims to contest.

CONCLUSION

While much South African criticism has moved away from a concern with institutional racism and white supremacy, reading Serote’s *Revelations* and other recent novels by black writers through a critical race lens shows that post-apartheid literature continues to provide imaginative windows into racial inequality, racial ideology, and the struggle for freedom. Michael Chapman and Margaret Lenta have argued that a “critical concern with difference in the 1990s has shifted to a concern with connection” (viii) in the twenty-first century. Yet contending with “difference” remains crucial for understanding South African literature and its often-contradictory politics. Although *Revelations* depicts nonracialism and reconciliation as necessary and inevitable, it shows that the discourses are in conflict with demands

for equality and justice. In doing so, it calls attention to the power that both white people and the doctrine of colorblindness hold in present-day South Africa.

Reconciliation as it is articulated in Serote's novel is comparable to what Steve Biko described as *artificial integration*. Biko argued that true integration, understood as "the genuine fusion of the life-styles of the various groups" living in South Africa, presupposes "complete freedom of self-determination" and "mutual respect for each other" (20). Far from being based on self-determination and mutual respect, reconciling is a gesture required only from blacks in *Revelations*. Demanded from people who are often already burdened by exploitation, forgiving and reconciling extracts additional labor from poor black people while entrenching the privileges of the white and wealthy. As it illustrates the paradoxes that underlie South Africa's hegemonic racial discourses from within, *Revelations* unwittingly shows that reconciliation and nonracialism are damaging for black people. Black South African literature may no longer be defined by the urge to document atrocious realities of racial domination, yet nonetheless it continues to reveal truths about our racialized world.

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NOTES

1. I borrow the term *racial power* from Claire Jean Kim, who defines it as follows: "Racial power refers to the racial status quo's systemic tendency towards self-reproduction. It finds concrete expression in a wide variety of political, economic, social, and cultural processes that tend cumulatively to perpetuate White dominance over non-Whites. Putatively impersonal forces such as global restructuring and deindustrialization are in fact mediated by racial power so that Whites systematically accrue greater benefits from and suffer fewer burdens from these developments than do non-Whites" (2). Notice that, although this essay is concerned with literature produced by African/indigenous writers (who would have been defined as "Native" during apartheid), in line with its South African usage, here I use the term *black* both to refer exclusively to African/indigenous people (approx. 79.4% of the total South African population) as well as to include other racial groups that collectively did not, and do not, share the material and psychological privileges of whiteness. This does not mean that there are no differences between and among these groups. Black here is thus sometimes used as synonymous with *people of color*, a term more common in the United States than in South Africa. This usage of the term *black* recognizes that African/indigenous people represent the vast majority of the South African population. For racial demographics, see "Mid-Year Population Estimates."

2. On post-transitional aesthetics, see Chapman, "Introduction"; Frenkel; Frenkel and MacKenzie; de Kock; and Samuelson.

3. Vilashini Cooppan provides important insights into this phenomenon, writing, "For many South African intellectuals and activists schooled in the ANC's non-racialist

tradition, to speak of race now is tantamount to the retention and promulgation of old apartheid classificatory categories. Not to speak of race and ethnicity, however, is to risk elision of apartheid's legacies; it is to commit that very error which 'the post-colonial' is so frequently found guilty, namely the premature announcement of the end of a system of domination and the erasure of its contemporary traces" (30).

4. No discipline has a monopoly on the reproduction of hegemonic racial discourse. Beyond literary studies, South African scholarship that enforces colorblindness exists in disciplines as diverse as communication, economics, education, philosophy, psychology, or sociology (see Milazzo, "The Rhetorics of Racial Power").

5. On the Marikana massacre, see Alexander et al.

6. On the historical roots of nonracialism, see Turok; Viljoen. On colorblindness in the South African context, see Ansell; Mngxitama, "Blacks Can't Be Racist"; Steyn and Foster; and Winant.

7. On racial inequality in South Africa, see Bond; Emery; Steyn; and Winant.

8. I examine this shift in "Racial Power and Colorblindness."

9. Melissa Myambo and Tom Penfold have also shown that space continues to be defined by exclusion in post-apartheid literature by black and white writers alike.

10. On the land question, see Ntsebenza; Ntsebenza and Hall.

11. As Paulina Grzęda explains, the "classically nationalist dimension of the ANC's political strategy under apartheid and the party's commitment to redistribution have now been replaced with a package of neoliberal socioeconomic strategies that only strengthen the crisis and deepen inequalities that rank among the worst in the world" (171). Aside from extending the welfare system, the main strategy adopted by the ANC government to reduce racial inequality has been the implementation of market-based policies, such as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), aimed at increasing the number of black people in the middle and upper classes. While these policies have managed to partially de-racialize the wealthier sectors of society, the vast majority of the population is as exploited today as it was during apartheid (Whitehead 57).

12. On October 11, 2011, the Center for Conflict Resolution, Cape Town, organized a public discussion on *Revelations*, which featured Serote alongside other speakers. An audio recording of the event can be found at ccr.org.za/index.php/revelations.

13. On black radical movements and critique, see Gibson; Mngxitama, "Blacks Can't Be Racist."

14. On the banning of black-only organizations, see Mngxitama, "Blacks Can't Be Racist."

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