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Victoria J. Collis-Buthelezi

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# The Case for Black Studies in South Africa

VICTORIA J. COLLIS-BUTHELEZI

In a recent workshop on decolonizing curricula,<sup>1</sup> a colleague asked the panel that I was on: “Why must we use the term ‘black’ when describing work that we do on, for instance, the South African working class etc when the majority of this country’s residents are black?”<sup>2</sup> Her question highlights some of the ways in which many intellectuals and academics in post-apartheid South Africa deem a Black Studies approach out of joint with the lived experience of today’s South Africans. Tied up in this response is the country’s demographics: if the country’s population of roughly 52 million is 79.2 percent black African, 8.9 percent Coloured<sup>3</sup>, 2.5 percent Indian and only 8.9 percent white, regardless of the definition of black—black African or all peoples of color—with which one works, then the majority of the country is black.<sup>4</sup> Most of the research done on South Africa or South Africans is, by default, research on *black experiences* in South Africa. Yet, historically, “the black,” as an object of study in the South African academy, was typically parceled out to the field of Bantu Studies, often in lockstep with the political and administrative appellation of Native (Bantu from 1960) Affairs<sup>5</sup> and its program of “re-tribalization”<sup>6</sup> and then separate development under segregationist and apartheid regimes. Given, then, that the majority of the country is black, and the history of pejorative racialization of the study of peoples of color in South Africa

frequently in aid of their oppression, would the emergence and codification of Black Studies in South Africa as a field of scholarship not similarly provincialize, if not re-tribalize, blackness in a majority black country, alienating black experience from South African experience such that black people in South Africa are re-relegated to non- or partial citizenship, making Black Studies a twenty-first-century handmaiden to re-tribalization as Bantu Studies was for much of the twentieth century?

Despite programs and policies such as BEE/BBBEE (Black Economic Empowerment/Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment), for much of the past 20-odd years of full democracy the political, social, economic and intellectual ethos driving post-apartheid life has been *non-racialism*. As David Everatt points out, “from the 1955 Freedom Charter to the 1996 Constitution non-racialism has featured significantly in the canon of *all* anti-apartheid organisations”<sup>7</sup> and, I would add, most South African universities. In 1962, from the dock of the Rivonia Treason Trial, Nelson Mandela articulated non-racialism as the belief “that all people, irrespective of the colour of their skins, all people whose home is South Africa and who believe in the principles of democracy and of equality of men should be treated as Africans ... all South Africans are entitled to live a free life on the basis of fullest equality of the rights and opportunities ... of full democratic rights, with a direct say in the affairs of the government.”<sup>8</sup> Non-racialism is enshrined in chapter 1 of the constitution of democratic South Africa as one of the founding values of this democracy<sup>9</sup>; its wording taken almost verbatim from the preamble of the 1955 Freedom Charter.

But what precisely is non-racialism, and how to attain it, remains a vexed question since the first fully democratic elections of 1994. In the years since Nelson Mandela's death, the soft buzz of query after the immediate euphoria of political democracy engendered by his prison release and the birth of another rainbow nation has given rise to a cacophony that includes widespread and persistent unrest on university campuses across South Africa, which may be understood as a watershed in higher education; student, staff and worker protests continue to voice dis-ease with the current knowledge dispensation, questioning non-racialism and the absence of black-authored and -centered thought from the current epistemic landscape. Recent campus unrest is also a sign of larger questions around what freedom means and what it should look like more than 20 years after democracy. It is perhaps crude to cast non-racialism as the opposite of Black Studies. It seems to me that non-racialism, at its best, is more indicative of a future time at which we have yet to arrive; a time in which it is possible to shed race as a category of experience or study. While others may perceive it as a mode of travel or work to get us to that time, I wonder if Christina Sharpe's notion of Black Studies as "wake work," put forth a few years ago in an issue of this journal on "The State of Black Studies in the Academy," is not what we need in order to get us to that future time. Sharpe understands wakes as "processes through [which] we think about the dead and about our relations to them" and in which we can recognize "black lives [in the present as] still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic

that were entrenched centuries ago... skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment."<sup>10</sup> In this way, Black Studies as wake

would inhabit this knowledge as the ground from which we theorize; would work from the positions of knowledge and belief of the existence of what [Sylvia] Wynter terms "rules which govern the ways in which humans can and do know the social reality of which they are always already socialized subjects (Wynter 1994, 68)."<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, similar to Sharpe, several scholars in South Africa<sup>12</sup> have turned to Sylvia Wynter's work on man, the human and humanism precisely to access the human for blackness; with Wynter also sitting on the reading list of student activists. As we sit with the faltering dream of democratic South Africa, it seems that a Black Studies approach (as wake) may be necessary to help us reckon with South Africa's past and present in a global "racial calculus" of which it is both a progenitor and an inheritor toward enacting a new future of racial equity.

I take this Special Issue as an invitation to think through what the stakes and uses of a "Black Studies as wake work" in universities in contemporary South Africa might be. I endeavor here to consider why and how Black Studies can promulgate the radical remaking of universities in South Africa such that they not only reflect the society, but help fashion a fully free South Africa that can contribute to a global project of racial, gender, social, and economic justice.

## The State of Higher Education in South Africa

Despite its formal end in 1994, apartheid has bequeathed us consciously divergent systems of higher education. There is not so much a singular “system” of higher education in South Africa<sup>13</sup> as there is one in the making; as such, the contemporary South African university<sup>14</sup> may be said to come in five “types” that have been brought together to reflect the differentiated tiers inherited from apartheid:

- (1) Formerly white and English (also referred to as open or “liberal”)<sup>15</sup> universities, started between 1829 and 1904 (the Universities of Cape Town, South Africa and the Witwatersrand<sup>16</sup> and Rhodes University);
- (2) Formerly white, Afrikaans universities, founded between 1866 and 1908 (Universities of Pretoria and the Free State and Stellenbosch University);
- (3) What were sometimes referred to as “bush” universities, each largely intended for a particular black ethnic/racial group and often located in the homeland or Bantustan designated for that group. These emerged from 1959 through the 1970s (the Universities of the Western Cape, Venda, and Zululand and Fort Hare<sup>17</sup> and Mangosuthu University of Technology);
- (4) Universities that amalgamated two or more of the previous three types in the 1990s through “mergers” (the Universities of Johannesburg, KwaZulu-Natal, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Walter Sisulu University, Tshwane University of

Technology and Vaal University of Technology); and

- (5) Universities formed post-apartheid, largely in the 2000s (Universities of Limpopo and Mpumalanga, Sol Plaatje University, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Durban Institute of Technology and Tshwane University of Technology).

To understand each type of South African university, one needs to understand it in relation to its others.<sup>18</sup> Like white English and Afrikaans schools, under apartheid white English and Afrikaans universities were intentionally better resourced than those intended for black South Africans. Higher education has been a key site in the state’s efforts to undo the inequity materialized through colonial, segregationist and apartheid logic. If the non-racialism now enshrined in the constitution was to become real for “all who live in” South Africa, along with the health system and the R-12 education system,<sup>19</sup> tertiary education had to be made equitable.

One of the main objectives of the government after 1994 (and the legal end of apartheid it brought) was to right the disparities across the education sector. The 1997 Higher Education Act made it clear that while institutional autonomy and freedom were vital cornerstones of higher education in the new South Africa, the state was committed to “ESTABLISH[ing] a single co-ordinated higher education system” that spoke to the needs of the entire country with an emphasis on “redress” through more representative staff and student bodies.<sup>20</sup> Teacher and nurse training colleges were closed, FET (Further Education Training) colleges were

born; several former white universities were merged with former black ones; the NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme) was unrolled. An affirmative action policy was put in place to facilitate the diversification of staff and students at universities around gender, sexual orientation, ability, ethnicity and race. Each of these were highly contested in differing ways and for different reasons, but all were indicative of the post-apartheid state's desire to level the playing field, to equalize access to resources (money, equipment, books, space, etc.) as well as to undo the hierarchization of tertiary institutions along racial and ethnic lines upon which apartheid thrived. All of this may be understood by the term "Transformation." Put another way, Transformation was meant to make tangible the ethos of non-racialism.

But, as I have argued elsewhere, the uprisings on South Africa's university campuses of 2015–16 "have put up for debate the particularly South African euphemism for righting racial, gender, economic and other inequities in higher education, both in terms of access to university and curriculum content—Transformation, a fixture of higher education rhetoric in South Africa for over two decades now."<sup>21</sup> Transformation has become indivisible from neo-liberalism. Tabled alongside the felt need to urgently reform NSFAS such that not only do students receive their funding in time to register, secure accommodation and purchase books, but also to ensure that institutions sitting on smaller or no surpluses (often historically black universities) can avoid defaulting on payments of debts, salaries and much more, were demands for a fully free and reconstructed higher education system that could yield graduates equipped to

solve the problems of post-apartheid South Africa and engender a free and fair society.

Often understood as having to do with racial, social, and gender inequity, institutional Transformation emerged as many universities were neo-liberalized. This meant that support work—cleaning, groundskeeping, security, catering—was outsourced to independent contracting companies. Academic and administrative work remained in-house, but with radically overhauled benefit schemes (pensions, health insurance, housing schemes, etc.). So 2015, the grumblings around the efficacy of the constitution, the negotiated settlement that birthed it, the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) and the neo-liberalization of universities that occurred in the 1990s, which surfaced periodically over the previous decade, rose to a crescendo.<sup>22</sup>

On March 9, 2015—the day of the now infamous "poo protest"<sup>23</sup>—the question of how to do higher education anew in South Africa was posed. Protests erupted on university campuses across South Africa. Similar protests have erupted in India, across the continent of Africa, in the United Kingdom and in the United States. To be sure, this was not the first time that question was asked in this country (or elsewhere); nor was it the first time university campuses were sites of protest. Rather, what we saw in 2015 was a critical mass and fairly organized network of university stakeholders (students, workers and academics) of a global kind, perhaps last seen in the 1960s. Between March and December, across South Africa, students occupied university administrative buildings. And while each protest and movement is reflective of its local context, they also suggest a global conjuncture that calls for

new epistemic and structural turns in our systems of knowledge production particularly around power, identity, and inequality. On one hand, then, we in South Africa must attend to the particularities of our society and its questions; on the other, we have to own that, particular as our conditions are, they are not unrelated to elsewhere. The demand emanating from here and elsewhere is: reinvent our universities and reanimate our knowledge projects to meet this moment and contribute to freer and fairer societies. In other words, this is a fight for the soul of universities, but the fight is not about rarified, ivory towers in and of themselves, but under the claim that universities reflect the contexts in which they exist and to change our contexts we must change our universities.

The year 2015 was not the first time since the end of apartheid that South African university campuses were sites of protest. From 2009 to 2014, annual student protests and university shutdowns transpired at the Universities of Limpopo, Pretoria, the Witwatersrand, Zululand, the Western Cape and Johannesburg, as well as at Walter Sisulu University, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Mangosuthu University of Technology, Tshwane University of Technology, Durban University of Technology and Stellenbosch University. However, the following factors seem to set 2015 apart:

- (1) Under banners like #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall,<sup>24</sup> there was an element of cross-campus coordination and discussions about what the shared concerns of students are;
- (2) Historically white liberal institutions like Rhodes University and the University of

- Cape Town now joined the fray, therein challenging the widely held assumptions about this type of institution as “healthy”;
- (3) The neo-liberal restructuring of the 1990s (such as outsourcing) was articulated as a key problem of current university; and
- (4) The demand for the financial restructuring of the South African university (fees and outsourcing) was deemed inextricably linked to epistemic questions of *what* is taught and *who* teaches it, with calls made for universities in South Africa to become African universities. Put another way, the protests implicitly and explicitly articulated the limits of the project of Transformation, or at least the form it had hitherto taken, in terms of epistemic shifts.

The case can be made, and indeed has been made, that the entering into the fray of historically white institutions unduly biased media coverage and made #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall important only because of their “proximity to whiteness.”<sup>25</sup> My interest is not so much in disproving that, as it seems apparent that part of the anxiety around unrest on historically white campuses was tied to concerns about the loss of “standards.” Rather I want to focus here on the ways in which the emergence of student protests at such institutions meant that one could no longer speak of only certain “types” of South African universities as in need of interventions. Without minimizing the real and material crisis of financing higher education, key to this moment are also epistemic concerns—*who* teaches and *what* they teach. In this way the question is not only, nor even primarily, whether Transformation has been

successful in moving South Africa toward full freedom (read as future), but what full freedom looks like. And was non-racialism even the most efficacious label by which to identify that full freedom?

### **“Wena ufana noMina”<sup>26</sup>**

In the years following the Marikana Massacre on Thursday, August 16, 2012, scholars have attempted to make sense of this post-apartheid tragedy.<sup>27</sup> Many asked: What does Marikana tell us about the post-apartheid state? What is the current relationship between capital and the state in the democratic dispensation? These are not new questions to scholars of South Africa. Whether in history, sociology, anthropology, education, psychology, literature and more, the primacy of the mines and broader capital and labor relations in social and individual subject formation in South Africa has been well documented and puzzled over.<sup>28</sup> Yet Marikana posed something of a special kind of crisis, as this was a largely black state using its police force to resolve a labor dispute between mine-owners/employers and mineworkers; Andries Motlapula Ntsenyeho’s appeal (from which this section’s title comes) to a blackness that should unite miners and police could not quite break through to Mpembe, the police captain to whom he spoke it. Whoever Mpembe was on the phone with wanted the miners disarmed; that was he imperative Mpembe had to follow, despite Ntsenyeho’s appeal.<sup>29</sup> Mpembe is unsure at first; but once he receives a call in which he is presumably told there will be no negotiating about the matter, he tells the miners that they must relinquish their arms (mostly *pangas* or

machetes). The moment could easily be read as evidence that race is not the main site of struggle in South Africa, or that blackness does not yield solidarity that can prevent such a tragedy.

While there is no question that many scholars based in South Africa have considered the conditions under which black lives are lived in South Africa, many are highly uncomfortable with giving race primacy. The reasons are as multiple as they are sometimes largely born of a deep and abiding love for what South Africa can be—a plural democracy in which all can find a place, dare I say a meritocracy in which where one comes from, race and ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation are irrelevant. Race talk is deemed dangerous speech that will scupper the hard-won victories of the negotiated settlement. Race talk is a slap in the face to the father of the nation and struggle leaders who ushered in the peaceful transition. Many stalwart leftist South African academics/activists who came of intellectual age in the 1970s and 1980s argue that “to speak of race now [post-apartheid] is tantamount to the retention and promulgation of old apartheid classificatory categories.”<sup>30</sup>

Intellectual giants such as Njabulo Ndebele challenged the efficacy of the rhetoric of blackness after Marikana, primarily on the grounds that we live in a majority black country with a black-led state. In his 2014 African Literature Association keynote, entitled “To Be or Not To Be, No Longer At Ease,” he said that he “once was [‘a Black’], but no more.”<sup>31</sup> Rather than be “in persistent pursuit of ‘blackness,’” the South African black should take “the historic opportunity to be the new human standard” and

emphatically discard “[t]he human standard they once sought to replace ... ‘the horror’ of a world in which high yield returns were manufactured out of used and discarded ‘black’ humanity for the prosperity of the ‘white’ standard bearers of that world.”<sup>32</sup> For Ndebele, blackness as a discursive cry for building a South Africa has passed its expiry date (along with comradeship).<sup>33</sup> What must take its place is a strive toward the human, toward a universal.

This is a universal that is grounded in the modern African literary tradition that takes Achebe as its forefather. Ndebele references Achebe explicitly with his address’s title, borrowed from Achebe’s 1960 novel, but also references the Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah’s 1968 novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, in which a postcolonial African state is rife with corruption. It is toward the human that Ndebele looks when he relinquishes the “pursuit of blackness,” but “the human” grounded in an African humanism.

But what to do with the persistence of identity, whether racial or ethnic? How do we answer the unanswered question of our time—that prospects in South Africa remain racially skewed and even when we live in the same suburbs or are identified as middle class we do not occupy them in the same way, our middle class-ness is not equal (some more precarious than others), and cultural whiteness is still a requirement to access many spaces? Let us think here of the recent encounter between a white woman, who has experienced a “smash-and-grab,”<sup>34</sup> and the black and white police officers attempting to assist her—she referred to the black officer as a “kaffir,”<sup>35</sup> screaming “I am not prepared to deal with useless kaffirs ... If

I see a black person I will drive over them.”<sup>36</sup> We can think too of a white KwaZulu-Natal bed-and-breakfast owner’s claim to a black journalist that “You are classified in the Bible as an animal, you are not homosapien.”<sup>37</sup> Violence (in speech and in act) against black people *because* they are black has not abated. As Vilashini Cooppan cautions:

[n]ot to speak of race and ethnicity, however, is to risk elision of apartheid’s legacies; it is to commit that very error of ... the premature announcement of the end of a system of domination and the erasure of its contemporary traces. The strange place of the idea of race in an emergent non-racial state, where it is at once deeply and structurally embedded and for some citizens politically and ideologically unthinkable, captures some of what is unique or “special” about South Africa’s present state ...<sup>38</sup>

In other words, while South Africa may dream a non-racialist future, it resides in a racist present. How to live in a present that assumes the ethics of a not-yet-realized future? For those of us in the South African academy, put upon by funding crises and urgent pressure from “below,” what is our calling? I agree with Cooppan that “[n]ot to speak of race and ethnicity” is to erase “apartheid’s legacies” as well as those of the segregationist state, the colonial and the precolonial states before it. But the debates to which Cooppan refers need not only have been between a materialist historical analytic mode and postcolonial and cultural studies,<sup>39</sup> though this itself can sometimes be a false divide. Present in South Africa was also a



model/models of Black Studies that is often ignored. 2015 saw a critical mass return to black consciousness, the unfinished business of race and the legacies of a highly racialized society. The twenty-first year of South Africa's full democracy, 2015, may be the year that we will recall as South Africa's turning-point. From the future, 2015 may look like the year that marked the rupture of the rainbow in the country's popular imagination; 2015 may be the year that separates the Transition years from whatever is next.

What Ndebele points to is perhaps better understood through what Michelle M. Wright identifies as the "epiphenomenal time" of blackness in her 2015 *The Physics of Blackness*. "Epiphenomenal' time," Wright contends,

denotes the current moment, a moment that is not directly borne out of another (i.e., causally created) ... however, Epiphenomenal time does not preclude any and all causality: only a direct, or linear, causality ... the current moment, or "now," can certainly correlate with other moments, but one cannot argue that it is always already the effect of a specific, previous moment. Read together, they underscore the depth and breadth with which these notions of space-time pervade Western expressions of collective identity, most especially Blackness. Even further, they underscore that while the linear progress narrative is an invaluable tool for locating Blackness, when used alone its very spatiotemporal properties preclude a wholly inclusive definition of Blackness, yielding one that is necessarily inaccurate. By contrast, Epiphenomenal time enables a wholly inclusive definition

(appropriate to any moment at which one is defining Blackness).<sup>40</sup>

In other words, blackness is neither fixed over time nor does it follow a linear progression narrative from type A to type B; blackness in the here and "now" can be linked to blackness in the there and then, but these links can be tangential, almost ephemeral. If each performance or definition of blackness transpires in its own epiphenomenal time, each such instance has its own "problem-space," or set of questions and concerns that give rise to it.<sup>41</sup>

Thus while Ndebele's essay identifies that there is need for something new, I argue that the new need not involve denouncing blackness in order to attain the (African) universal or stop South Africa's slide into a post-apartheid, racist abyss. Moving forward need not require disowning blackness, rather it must entail reckoning with the phenomenology of blackness that renders us in a new epiphenomenal time that does not traffic in the past of black political exclusion, but contends with the present of a democratic dispensation and a cultural and economic order that continues to shape black experience as disparate and unequal.

### "White Facts about Blacks"<sup>42</sup> versus Black Studies

In many ways, the key debates of 1990s South Africa to which Cooppan returns us were culture wars of a kind<sup>43</sup> and have shaped our current academic terrain significantly; but they remain largely between historical materialism and postcolonialism, leaving

little room for robust engagements with race and racial experience. As I intimated in my opening paragraphs, there has been a significant body of knowledge in and around South Africa that we might call “(White) Facts about Blacks” that were complicit in colonial, segregationist, and apartheid management of various black populations resident in South Africa. Such ways of understanding blackness made possible the 1953 Bantu Education Act and the establishment of separate departments for Native (black African), Coloured and Indian affairs.

One of the founding myths of European settlement and expansion in the region was that of the “empty land” myth, first recorded in W.C. Holden’s book, *The Past and Future of the Kaffir Races* (1866), and then in George McCall Theal’s volumes on South African history, including the *Compendium of South African History and Geography* (1876), published when Theal taught at Lovedale Mission School. The “empty land” myth justified the expropriation of land from black people because black people were not “here first,” but arrived the same time as Europeans. This is a “fact about Blacks”—fact here not necessarily with a truth claim, but a received belief that constituted whiteness in relation to blackness; such that by 1930 it was widely accepted in white circles not only that white people owned more land than black in South Africa simply because they knew how to care for the land and produce food on it, but also that it had been a fair fight between two groups, neither with pre-existing land tenure, and the white side had won.

In the face of Holden and Theal’s “empty land” myth were periodicals, pamphlets and

other genres of text by black South Africans and blacks from elsewhere on the black experience in South Africa, the African continent and its diaspora. This included the work of I. Bud M’belle, who produced the *Kafir Scholar’s Companion* in 1903; Allan Kirkland Soga’s periodical, *Izwi Labantu* (Voice of the People/Nation); and the Jabavus’ *Imvo Zabantsundu Bomzantsi Afrika* (South African Native Opinion). Included too are collections like *The African Yearly Register: An Illustrated National Biographical Dictionary (Who’s Who) of Black Folks in Africa* (1930), edited by T.D. Mweliso-Skota with contributions by Sol T. Plaatje and H.I.E. Dhlomo; it was meant to appear each year, but only saw one edition. Counted too should be Plaatje’s own *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), a response to the devastation brought on by loss of land tenure with the 1913 Native Land Act (1914). Most were deemed part of the New African Movement—coined from Pixley ka Isaka Seme’s award-winning speech, “The Regeneration of Africa.”<sup>44</sup> Such examples of knowledge and counter-knowledge—the dance between white “facts” of blackness and black-authored and -centered scholarship about black life, experience and thought—are not isolated; any historicization of black-led scholarship on black experience would have to concede that while there were consistent attempts to engender black sites of excellence during the colonial, segregationist and apartheid eras, some periods witnessed more activity than others. Elsewhere, I have written on black print culture in South Africa at the start of the twentieth century and the significance of the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union of Africa.<sup>45</sup> The 1940s, 1950s and

1960s were equally rich with the revival of the ANC (African National Congress), armed struggle and the Non-European Unity Movement, born out of a deep commitment to non-racialism.<sup>46</sup> But of interest to me is the emergence in the 1970s of a desire for another genre of platform through which to produce counter-knowledges of blackness precisely under the appellation of Black Studies; to institutionalize such sites of knowledge gathering and dissemination. That is, the demand for black-run institutions of knowledge production. Why was there a felt need for them, and what was the work they were meant to do? How can we engage these institutions in order to animate our present and attend our epiphenomenal time of blackness?

In 1972, Fatima Meer established the Institute for Black Research (IBR) in Durban. In 1975, the Institute of Black Studies (IBS), which “started its life as The Black Studies Association,” was founded.<sup>47</sup> In canvassing the country as it came into formation, IBS documents from 1976 (before the uprisings of June 1976) suggest that organizations like IBR planned to amalgamate under IBS and Black Community programs proposed that IBS “take over from them the task of compiling the *Black Review*.”<sup>48</sup> The *Black Review* was meant to document black experiences from around the country.

Notably, IBS was constituted in the face of the consolidation and “entrench[ment of] white privilege.”<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, the rise of Black Studies in other places was in response to “white privilege,” which often continued even when the bald laws of white supremacy were removed. Throughout the institute’s documents, it is stressed repeatedly that the

institute must have and maintain “academic integrity.”<sup>50</sup> It had to be understood as an academic institution in the first instance—a producer, not only disseminator, of knowledge. It had four objectives:

- (1) To foster and encourage the development of a Black perspective based on the recognition of the validity of Black experience and the legitimacy of Black identity.<sup>51</sup>
- (2) To provide a forum to explore Black thought and to bring a Black perspective to bear on issues affecting Blacks.
- (3) To examine and reassess the standards, values and prejudices by which we live and to make an informed contribution to the analysis, interpretation and understanding of the issues facing our country in the most critical period of its history.<sup>52</sup>
- (4) To stimulate thinking, writing, art, drama and research on Black issues.<sup>53</sup>

Most likely written at least a week before the student uprising of June 16,<sup>54</sup> the institute’s objectives were toward creating an academic and intellectual space in which knowledge about black people could be produced from a “Black perspective” that recognized “Black experience”; it was meant to be a research center. From its inception (or at least the earliest document of it), IBS was committed to a journal of Black Studies in South Africa, seminars, and conferences; already in 1975 it alluded to its inaugural conference. Meant to be held between “the 14–18 July 1976,”<sup>55</sup> the conference was delayed by history and only occurred in August/September 1976. It was the occasion for the first return home, after 38 years, of Es’kia

Mphahlele, founder of the African literature department at the University of the Witwatersrand and proponent of “African humanism.” Fatima Meer presented there too, only to be banned thereafter.

In the months preceding June 16, not only was a case for Black Studies in South Africa made, it came with a call for one rooted in South Africa and the black South African experience. It was a call for robust Black Studies with *institutional* capacity. Interestingly, it seems, implied at that time was that this was a finite project; it was meant to speak to “the most critical period of [South Africa’s] history,” but what does such a project mean today? How does the black South African relinquish her (or his) blackness today in pursuit of the universal when the universal itself requires deconstruction?

The use of a Black Studies approach, a Black Studies as wake that can unpack the lived reality of contemporary South Africans, cognizant of the past as well as other “nows” of blackness, may provide what we need to plot a new course. Such an approach would bring together the sites across the country within and outside of the university in which Black Studies scholarship is being read and theorized; it would compile an archive of institutions like the IBS and IBR as well as the *Black Review*, black consciousness, black feminism, black queer activism; these are not alien to South Africa, but have occurred since South Africa has existed. Such an approach, Black Studies as wake, is neither nativist nor pessimistic, nor is it antithetical to a pursuit of humanism; for the praxis of the human is precisely what student protests and eruptions such as Mari-kana have been.<sup>56</sup>

Wright’s notion of epiphenomenal time is part of her larger attempt to not only make visible the multiplicity of black pasts and presents (beyond hetero- and phallogocentric leader-hero narratives), but also to contend with the real crisis of being black in America when the black population continues to diversify as a result of immigration of blacks from elsewhere. It is also about being black in the age of Obama—himself part of the narrative of African immigration to the United States (his father is Kenyan)—whose presidency, as the first black US president, did something to the performance of blackness, as well as its perception.<sup>57</sup> What was blackness if a black man was president, giving blackness state-sanctioned power? If we think back to Ndebele, writing from a different context, this is perhaps part of his concern; what does it mean to pursue blackness when blackness is in power?

But Wright’s turn to “epiphenomenal time” is also about undoing the presumptions of linear temporality(ies) that continue to dominate the humanities and social sciences, but specifically Black Studies scholarship (largely in the US) as well as critiques of the field.<sup>58</sup> The notion that black numerical majority and political power means anti-black racism is no more, or is now denuded of its power, has yet to prove true. As the age of Trump dawns in America and the ANC’s electoral majority wanes in South Africa, the reality remains that however we do the math, blackness remains discursively and numerically in the minority at the centers of power in the South African academy.<sup>59</sup> We cannot continue in the belief that the end of apartheid meant Black Studies would no longer be

necessary. If only to make plain the death of apartheid and white supremacy and privilege, we must commence the mourning of the black lives they took and continue to take, the ones it reshaped beyond recognition, and the future with which it has left us.

## Endnotes

1. Held May 13–14, 2016 by the Black Academic Caucus Curricula Collective based at the University of Cape Town.

2. Held May 13–14, 2016 by the Black Academic Caucus Curricula Collective based at the University of Cape Town; Zuleiga Adams (UCT) posed the question.

3. I use the South African spelling to signal the specifically South African definition of the term as a racial category. Coloured, in the contemporary South African context, refers to peoples of San descent and the descendants of those enslaved in South Africa from across the Indian Ocean (slavery ended here the same time it did in other parts of the British Empire in 1833/4), also included are those mixed with black African and European ancestry (particularly before the end of apartheid).

4. “Census 2011,” [http://www.statssa.gov.za/census/census\\_2011/census\\_products/Census\\_2011\\_Census\\_in\\_brief.pdf](http://www.statssa.gov.za/census/census_2011/census_products/Census_2011_Census_in_brief.pdf).

5. Native and Bantu Studies and Affairs have a complex and long history in the South African academy, as well as government administration that stretches back to the colonial period; white nationalists (like J.B.M. Hertzog and Louis Botha) and liberals (such as John David Rheinalt Jones) were both instrumental. Elizabeth le Roux offers an interesting study on the deeply imbricated relationship between university presses in South Africa and Native/Bantu Studies and Affairs. See Elizabeth le Roux, *A Social History of the University Presses in Apartheid South*

*Africa* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2016). Further black intellectuals and leaders—some traditionalists and chiefs, others Pan-Africanists and “modernizers” (like Allan Kirkland Soga, who worked in Native Affairs under Cecil John Rhodes)—championed the institutionalization of such departments both at universities and in the state with various and often divergent motives and desired outcomes. In a recent article on empire and early twentieth-century black thought, I explore further the work of figures like Soga. See Victoria J. Collis-Buthelezi, “Under the Aegis of Empire: Cape Town, Victorianism, and Early-Twentieth-Century Black Thought,” *Callaloo* 39, no. 1 (2016): 115–32.

6. “Retribalization” refers to colonial/segregationist efforts and policies from the early twentieth century to “return” indigenous Africans to older, precolonial modes of living in “tribal” groupings in rural, monoethnic areas rather than in multiethnic and multiracial urban settlements.

7. David Everatt, *The Origins of Non-racialism: White Opposition to Apartheid in the 1950s* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009), 2 (emphasis mine).

8. Nelson Mandela, “Statements in Court,” October 22 and November 7, 1962; in *Challenge and Violence, 1953–1964*, ed. Thomas Karis and Gail M. Gerhardt (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1977), 728–35.

9. Section 1, Chapter 1 of the constitution states that:

The Republic of South Africa is one, sovereign, democratic state founded on the following values:

- (a) Human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms.
- (b) Non-racialism and non-sexism.
- (c) Supremacy of the constitution and the rule of law.

- (d) Universal adult suffrage, a national common voters roll, regular elections and a multi-party system of democratic government, to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness.

10. Christina Sharpe, "Black Studies: In the Wake," *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 60.

11. Ibid, 60. See Sylvia Wynter, "'No Humans Involved': An Open Letter to My Colleagues," *Forum N.H.I.: Knowledge on Trial* 1, no. 1 (1994): 42–73.

12. These include Tendayi Sithole, who is based at the University of South Africa (UNISA) is currently working on a book on Wynter, and Zimitri Erasmus, who is based at the University of the Witwatersrand and has written extensively on Coloured identity and experience in South Africa, among others. Wynter's work from the 2000s is typically the starting-point, namely her 2003 essay for *The New Centennial Review*, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Toward the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument."

13. Thiven Reddy, "Higher Education and Social Transformation: South Africa Case Study," *Council of Higher Education* (2004): 6, [http://www.che.ac.za/media\\_and\\_publications/research/higher-education-and-social-transformation-south-africa-case-study](http://www.che.ac.za/media_and_publications/research/higher-education-and-social-transformation-south-africa-case-study).

14. The higher education sector in South Africa consists of public universities in the main. For the purposes of this paper, I make no distinction between universities of technologies and "traditional" universities. For more on the history of humanities in South Africa see Keith Breckenridge, "Hopeless Entanglement," *American Historical Review* 120, no. 4 (2015): 1253–66.

15. Liberal or "open" here refers to the policy of such historically white institutions to admit black (black African, Indian and Coloured) students,

even if in small numbers or "quotas." See Graeme C. Moodie, "The State and the Liberal Universities in South Africa: 1948–1990," *Higher Education* 27, no. 1 (1994): 1–40.

16. If we see it as first beginning in 1896 with the School of Mines, though it only becomes a university in 1922.

17. The University of Fort Hare, which is included here, has a slightly different history. Connected to the Lovedale mission school, which was founded in 1824, Fort Hare began as the South African Native College in 1916. Largely autonomous and independent until 1959, it then had to submit to apartheid governance and its dictum of bantu education and segregation such that students were taught in line with the Bantu Education Act of 1953 and separated along racial and ethnic lines. Its illustrious alumni includes Nelson Mandela, Mangosuthu Buthelezi and several leaders of newly independent African countries, including but not limited to Julius Nyerere, Seretse Khama, Robert Mugabe, Kenneth Kaunda.

18. Leslie Wits, Black Academic Caucus Curricula Collective Decolonizing Curricula Workshop (May 2016).

19. Or kindergarten through twelfth grade.

20. See "Preamble," Higher Education Act, Act no. 101 of 1997, South Africa.

21. Victoria J. Collis-Buthelezi, "'The Fire Below': Towards a New Study of Literatures and Cultures (in English?). A Letter from a Literary Scholar in a South African University in Transition," *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 15, no. 1 (2016): 67–78.

22. Patrick Bond offers a critique of the negotiated settlement in *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa*, 2nd ed. (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2005). Also see Andile Mngxitama, "Blacks Can't Be Racist," in *New Frank Talk: Critical Essays on the Black Condition*, vol. 3 (Johannesburg: Sankara, 2009).

23. Chumani Maxwele, then a third-year politics student at the University of Cape Town (UCT), threw feces onto the statue of Cecil John Rhodes that once sat in contemplation at the bottom of UCT's Upper Campus.

24. Others include #OpenStellenbosch and #TransformWits.

25. Romeo Gumede (Fort Hare) and Elisha Kunene (University of KwaZulu-Natal) spoke to this during their presentations at the "Fallism Dialogue" hosted by the Nelson Mandela and Steve Biko Foundations.

26. I begin this section with the words of Andries Motlapula Ntsenyeho, one of the strike leaders of the 2012 wildcat strike at Lonmin's Marikana mines that ended in the Marikana Massacre in which 34 mine workers were shot down by the South African Police Service.

27. See Peter Alexander et al., *Marikana: A View from the Mountain and a Case to Answer* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2012) and Asanda Benya, "The Invisible Hands: Women in Marikana," *Review of African Political Economy*, 42, no. 146 (2015): 545–60.

28. Scholars such as Helen Bradford, Liz Gunner, Ari Sitas, Sakhela Buhlungu, Lungisile Ntsebeza, Tim Couzens, Shula Marks, Saths Cooper, and Gillian Hart, to name a few.

29. *Miners Shot Down* DVD, directed by Rehad Desai (Johannesburg: Uhuru Productions, 2014).

30. Vilashini Cooppan, "W(h)ither Post-Colonial Studies? Towards the Transnational Study of Race and Nation," in *Postcolonial Theory and Criticism*, ed. Laura Chrisman and Benita Parry (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 30.

31. Njabulo Ndebele, "To Be or Not to Be, No Longer at Ease," *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 15, no. 1 (2016): 27.

32. Ibid, 26.

33. Ibid, 27.

34. "Smash-and-grab" refers to a common type of theft from automobiles in South Africa in which a

device is placed on a car window and shatters it, allowing a thief to "grab" valuables from the vehicle and run off.

35. Initially taken from Arabic, meaning "unbeliever," it is a derogatory, racial epithet for a black African person, comparable to "nigger."

36. "VIDEO: Woman's racist rant caught on film." eNCA.com. Last modified July 9, 2016, <http://www.enca.com/south-africa/womans-racist-rant-caught-on-film>.

37. Amanda Khoza, "'Blacks are Not People'—Sodwana Bay Guest House Owner Tells Radio Presenter," News24.com. Last modified June 24, 2016, <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/blacks-are-not-people-sodwana-bay-guest-house-owner-tells-radio-presenter-20160624>.

38. Vilashini Cooppan, "W(h)ither Post-Colonial Studies? Towards the Transnational Study of Race and Nation," in *Postcolonial Theory and Criticism*, ed. Laura Chrisman and Benita Parry (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 30.

39. Here Cooppan relies upon Kelwyn Sole's narration of Postcolonial Studies' entrance into the South African academy and its effects. See Kelwyn Sole, "South Africa Passes the Posts," *Alteration* 4, no. 1 (1997): 116–51.

40. Michelle M. Wright, *The Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 4.

41. David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

42. See Desiree Lewis, Sean Lewis, and Kole Omotoso, "It's Not a Simple Matter of Coloured," [mg.co.za](http://mg.co.za/article/1996-04-19-its-not-a-simple-matter-of-coloured). Last modified April 19, 1996, <http://mg.co.za/article/1996-04-19-its-not-a-simple-matter-of-coloured>, in which they refer to "White Facts about Blacks."

43. "Culture wars" has been a commonplace term to refer to a set of debates between US liberals and conservatives in the 1990s around birth control/reproductive rights, curricula, gun control,

etc. See James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991). Also see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

44. Seme gave this speech at Columbia University in 1906 to win the George William Curtis Medal. Seme was one of the founders of the South African Native National Congress, which was renamed the African National Congress in 1923.

45. See Collis-Buthelezi, "Aegis of Empire."

46. See Neville Alexander, "Non-collaboration in the Western Cape, 1943–1963," in *The Angry Divide: Social and Economic History of the Western Cape*, ed. W. James and M. Simons (Cape Town: David Philip, 1989). Also see Baruch Hirson, "A Short History of the Non-European Unity Movement: An Insider's View," *Searchlight South Africa* 3, no. 4 (1994), <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/supplem/hirson/neum.html>.

47. "Institute of Black Studies: Draft Working Paper," 1976, Box 31.21.27, Institute of Black Studies File, South African Council of Churches (SACC) Records 1923–2004, Wits Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand: 2.

48. "Institute of Black Studies: Report for Period December 1975 to May 1976," 1976, Box 31.21.27, Institute of Black Studies File, South African Council of Churches (SACC) Records 1923–2004, Wits Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand: 3.

49. "Institute of Black Studies: Draft Working Paper," 2.

50. *Ibid.*, 5.

51. Emphasis mine.

52. Emphasis mine.

53. "Institute of Black Studies: Report for Period December 1975 to May 1976," 4.

54. There is reference to a vote taken at a meeting on June 4, 1976. See "Institute of Black Studies: Report for Period December 1975 to May 1976," 3.

55. *Ibid.*, 4.

56. See Katherine McKittrick, ed., *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

57. Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 27, 62.

58. *Ibid.*, 4–5.

59. See Helena Barnard, Robin Cowan, Alan Kirman, and Moritz Uller, "Including Excluded GROUPS: The Slow Racial Transformation of the South African University System," Working Paper in the Working Paper Series of UNU-MERIT, BETA and KIT.

**Victoria J. Collis-Buthelezi** is a senior researcher at WiSER/PARI at the University of the Witwatersrand and South African Program director for the Atlantic Fellowship for Racial Equity (AFRE) hosted at the Nelson Mandela Foundation, Johannesburg. Her work has appeared in *Small Axe*, *Callaloo*, and the *UK Journal of Art and the Humanities*. Her book project, *To Empire Bound*, excavates black globalism in Cape Town at the dawn of the twentieth century.