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Turning to the Ordinary: Spectacular Death and Everyday Life in South Africa

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Abstract

Given the prominence and centrality of certain interrelated categories (specifically spectacle and everyday life, agency and experience) within the discipline of history, it is important to interrogate how they have informed our understandings of the practice of history in postapartheid South Africa and beyond. This article attempts to do so by tracing a conceptual history of spectacular death and everyday life in South Africa through three distinct but interrelated fields: literature, historiography, and funerary and memorial practices. It suggests that debates about the spectacle of political and social life in the 1980s and 1990s offer one route through which to understand categorical tensions and slippages between family and nation, the private and public spheres, the monumental and quotidian and the un/seen of history. First, it provides an account of debates about spectacle and everyday life, drawing from Njabulo Ndebele's collection of essays in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, which was notable for eschewing what Ndebele referred to as 'the hegemony of spectacle'. I argue that reading Ndebele in relation to his roots in Black Consciousness philosophy, opens his turn to the ordinary to debates that move beyond textuality. Second, I place this debate into conversation with political funerals and memorial practices, suggesting that tensions at these memorial occasions complicate our understandings of everyday life and its conceptual underpinnings. Third, I consider how these tensions might inform our understandings of similar debates within historiography in postapartheid South Africa, including methods associated with social history which were in many ways developed in response to historical spectacle and historians' preoccupations with the lives of Great Men. Finally, I suggest a different idea of the everyday, demonstrating how this might have offered Ndebele a method through which to produce a sense of experience, agency and difference that was not dictated by apartheid.

Keywords

Spectacle, everyday life, the ordinary, experience, agency, literature, violence, history.

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Introduction

> Everything in South Africa has been mind-bogglingly spectacular: the monstrous war machine developed over the years; the random massive pass raids; mass shootings and killings; mass economic exploitation the ultimate symbol of which is the mining industry; the mass removals of people; the spate of draconian laws passed with the spectacle of parliamentary promulgations; the luxurious life-style of whites: servants, all encompassing privilege, swimming pools, and high commodity consumption; the sprawling monotony of architecture in African locations, which are the very picture of poverty and oppression.[1]

This article traces a conceptual history of spectacular death and everyday life in South Africa. It begins with an important debate which occurred within the mass liberation movement regarding the role of protest literature in the struggle against apartheid, and the importance of aesthetics vis-à-vis politics.[2] Specifically, this debate was concerned with the role and relevance of literature as a weapon of struggle deployed to document the circumstances and character of oppression in South Africa, and to expose the moral bankruptcy of apartheid. It reached a culmination in 1991 with the publication of 'Preparing Ourselves for Freedom' by Albie Sachs, which called for an embargo on the phrase 'culture as weapon', and for greater freedom for artists to explore ambiguity and contradiction within the struggle.[3]

Among the many other contributions to this debate were a series of crucial interventions in the 1980s by theorist and essayist, Njabulo Ndebele, who sought to push back against reformist currents in South Africa at the time, while developing modes of critique capable of intervening in the changing geo-political landscape of 1980s and 1990s South Africa. Later published in 1991 as *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*, Ndebele argued for a re-evaluation of what was considered protest literature. According to him, since the student uprisings in 1976, a 'socially entrenched manner of thinking about the South African reality' as a 'total polarity of absolutes' articulated through race, had become hegemonic.[4] Although in many ways understandable ('South Africa *is* a highly polarised society')[5] this tendency ran the risk of dulling literature's critical edge, rendering life under apartheid as a 'predictable drama' that both 'trapped' the oppressed as perpetual victims, and elided critical analysis in favour of the 'rhetoric of protest'.[6] In seeking

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1 N. Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (Durban, University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 1991), 31.

2 In this article protest literature refers to forms of writing such as fiction and poetry which were put in service of anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles. Envisaged as a weapon or tool for transforming society, protest literature can, alongwith People's History, be understood in relation to People's Education, a political project that sought to develop an alternative education and critical epistemologies appropriate to a postapartheid South Africa. See: L. Witz, G. Minkley and C. Rassool, 'Oral History in South Africa: A Country Report', in L. Witz, G. Minkley and C. Rassool, *Unsettled History: Making South African Public Pasts,* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2017), 27-51.

3 A. O'Brien, *Against Normalization: Writing Radical Democracy in South Africa* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2001).

4 N. Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, 55.

5 Ibid. 56.

6 Ibid. 55-61.

alternatives to this moralising frame which was 'tragically impotent in the face of economic laws that do not recognise its intrinsic validity', Ndebele urged for a turn toward the ordinary.

Alongwith *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, Ndebele's literary works from the 1980s (most notably *Fools and Other Stories*[7] and 'Death of a Son'), touch on several themes which inform this article. These include questions of visuality, memory and memorialisation, and the ways in which death, violence, agency and experience have been perceived and treated in South African historiography. In many ways, I attempt to build upon debates instituted in the 1990s at the University of the Western Cape, most notably Premesh Lalu's interrogation of the ways in which post-apartheid historiography has reproduced and reified apartheid's laws of perception.[8] I also owe much to Patricia Hayes's engagement with political funerals and the work of South African photographer, Santu Mofokeng, a contemporary of Ndebele.[9] As Hayes points out, one recurring theme in Mofokeng's practice was his refusal of 'sharp realist images of unassailable clarity' and explicit treatments of violence under apartheid. By placing Mofokeng's photography alongside Ndebele's literary criticism, it is not my intention to conflate what were two distinct practices and mediums, or two approaches to the questions of history, representation and violence. But I do want to suggest that by challenging dominant forms of writing (one in the conventional sense, the other in a photographic sense) Mofokeng and Ndebele were, among others, following a similar impulse that was emerging as a counter-force to what the latter called the 'hegemony of spectacle' during the latter years of apartheid.

Considering the persistence and centrality of these categories in postapartheid public life and historiography, I believe that this impulse and debate remains as relevant today as it was in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly because it might have a bearing on how we understand the making of postapartheid pasts and nationhood. As others in this special issue attest, postapartheid nationhood has been shaped by what Hayes, in a different context, has called 'violent, unjust death',[10] but also reshaped through national funerals and memorial projects which have attempted to rehumanise the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid dead. These memorial projects are meant to work against acts of violence, disappearance and unjust burial ('funerals banned or disrupted, bodies treated callously or just missing')[11] that the apartheid state regularly practised, and affirm 'a rights bearing citizen, a recognition of which is seen to embody the promise of never again'.[12] Memorial occasions such as those held

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7 N. Ndebele, *Fools and Other Stories* (Johannesburg, Raven Press, 1983).

8 See for example, P. Lalu, *The Deaths of Hintsa: Postapartheid South Africa and the Shape of Recurring Pasts* (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2009); P. Lalu, 'When was South African history Ever Postcolonial?', *Kronos*, 34, Making Histories, November 2008.

9 See for example: P. Hayes, 'Santu Mofokeng, Photographs: "The Violence is in the knowing"', *History and Theory*, 48 (December 2009), 34-51; P. Hayes, 'Political Funerals in South Africa: Photography, History, and the Refusal of Light (1960s–80s)', in G. Arunima, P. Hayes and P. Lalu (eds), *Love and Revolution in the Twentieth-Century Colonial and Postcolonial World: Perspectives from South Asia and Southern Africa* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2021).

10 P. Hayes, 'Political Funerals in South Africa', 291.

11 N. Rousseau, 'Identification, Politics, Disciplines: Missing Persons and Colonial Skeletons in South Africa', in E. Anstett and J.M. Dreyfus (eds), *Human Remains and Identification: Mass Violence, Genocide, and the "Forensic Turn"* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015), 176.

12 Ibid. 178.

at Freedom Park in Johannesburg attest to the importance of acts of reburial and re-commemoration that affirm the role of the anti-apartheid dead in liberating the nation from apartheid. Combining the ideas of the 'modern memorial complex and the tomb of the Unknown Soldier', with 'indigenous practices of remembering the dead', Freedom Park works to situate freedom fighters as ancestors to the nation, whose collective deaths became symbolic of the foundations of the 'new' South Africa.[13]

Having said this, processes of burial, exhumation, recovery, and return are unsettled in character, and have been framed through competing understandings of the past, as well as how the nation decides who is worthy of mourning and remembrance. Among these contests has been the tendency to privilege the lives of Great Men, the spectacle of reconciliation, encapusulated during South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and narratives that seek to 'legitimise the *raison d'etre* of the democratic state'.[14] In this regard, an attunement to the ordinary and the everyday has been seen as offering an antidote to histories that designate a unitary and linear story of progress through history, and through which to challenge the primacy of Great Men by attending to the lives of ordinary people. It has also been employed to foster 'alternative modes of remembrance and future-facing memory-work'.[15] But as a number of scholars from different fields have pointed out, the everyday and the ordinary should not be simply considered a site of refuge that offers an escape from modern industrial life.[16] Nor is it a space or time where authentic experience, agency and subjectivity can be easily located. It is instead itself a deeply stratified and in most cases a highly gendered concept. As Rita Felski summarises, everyday life is an 'object of critical reflection and representation in literature and art' and is 'marked by a rich history of hostility, envy and desire, expressing both nostalgia for the concrete and disdain for a life lacking in critical self-reflection.'[17]

Given the prominence of these concepts, namely spectacle and everyday life, agency and experience within postapartheid historiography, as well as what could be described as the oversaturation of political and social spectacle in our current conjuncture, it might be useful to further interrogate their conceptual and categorical foundations. In this article I want to begin to do so by tracing how these debates, concepts and categories have been understood through distinct but interrelated disciplines or fields (literature, historiography, and funerary and memorial practices) and how they might inform interdisciplinary understandings of the practice of history in this conjuncture. To do so, I place seemingly disconnected disciplines and practices into conversation, so as to begin to draw out perspectives that might trouble

13 C. Rassool, 'Human Remains, the Disciplines of the Dead, and the South African Memorial Complex', in D. R. Peterson, K. Gavua and C. Rassool (eds), *The Politics of Heritage in Africa: Economies, Histories, and Infrastructures* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015), 133-156.

14 H. Grunebaum, 'Debates on Memory Politics and Counter-Memory Practices in South Africa in the 1990s', *Education as Change,* 22, 2, 2018, 10.

15 Ibid. 12.

16 See for example: R. Felski, 'The Invention of Everyday Life', *New Formations,* 39 (Winter 1999-2000), 15-31; H. Grunebaum, *Memorializing the Past: Everyday Life in South Africa after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 2011); P. Hayes, 'Santu Mofokeng, Photographs', 34-51.

17 R. Felski, 'The Invention of Everyday Life', 17.

the closed epistemological systems that we inherit from and through history. I also explore the relationship and tension between the hyper-visible, spectacular event and what has been called everyday life, those histories that function more like a 'blurred speck at the edge of one's vision that disappears when looked at directly.'[18]

Rediscovering the Ordinary: 'Protest literature' and the hegemony of spectacle

> How do we free ourselves from notions of culture that are tied to the ethos of oppression?[19]

> [t]he greatest challenge of the South African revolution is in the search for new ways of thinking, ways of perception, that will help to break down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression. The challenge is to free the entire social imagination of the oppressed from the laws of perception that have characterised apartheid society. For writers this means freeing the creative process itself from those very laws.... The operative principle of composition in post-protest literature is that it should ... reveal new worlds where it was thought they did not exist, and reveal process and movement where they were hidden.[20]

The above passages encapsulate what for Ndebele constituted the problem space of 1980s literature in South Africa, and offer one route through which to engage a debate that was occuring within the mass liberation movement at the time. This debate was concerned with the historic role fulfilled by protest literature, and art and culture more generally, during the anti-apartheid struggle. Although effective in mobilising broad based support against apartheid, the general thrust of Ndebele's intervention was that the act of indicting apartheid, of making visible the conditions of life during apartheid through the moral rhetoric of protest, tended to render South African reality in terms of 'surface symbols': the sell-outs, the *baases*, madams, policemen and perpetrators on the one hand, and the *tsotsis*, convicts, beggars and victims on the other.[21]

For Ndebele this reproduced 'the very negation that it [sought] to transcend', rendering reality as 'a total polarity of absolutes' that ultimately returned criticism of apartheid to the conceptual, discursive and ideological terrain that made the system of oppression possible in the first place.[22] By reproducing the laws of perception (polarisation, segregation, and racialisation) that apartheid wished to accomplish, 'protest literature' in other words found itself caught in the 'paradoxical collusion

18 Ibid. 15.
19 N. Ndebele, 'Towards Progressive Cultural Planning', in R. Gibbons (ed.) *Writers from South Africa: Culture, Politics and Literary Theory and Activity in South Africa Today* (Evanston, Triquarterly Books, 1994), 80-97.
20 N. Ndebele, 'Beyond "Protest": New Directions in South African Literature', in K. H. Petersen (ed.), *Criticism and Ideology: Second African Writers' Conference, Stockholm 1986* (Uppsala, Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988), 205-216.
21 N. Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary,* 15.
22 Ibid. 55.

of writing against apartheid with apartheid',[23] and ran the risk of reifying and naturalising differences produced through and by the 'structures of white supremacist biopower'.[24] In seeking to understand the 'concrete social and political details of oppression', Ndebele urged a turn toward the ordinary and everyday life which he saw as offering routes through which to 'transcend an apartheid discourse fixated on essentialised categories of blackness and whiteness'.[25]

Ndebele's work has been extensively written about and debated within literary and cultural spheres since the 1980s. Michael Vaughan for example has argued that Ndebele owes as much to European, realist traditions of fiction writing as he does African traditions.[26] Whereas in other circles, Ndebele has been compared to Frantz Fanon's insurgent politics, criticised alongside Sach's 'Preparing Ourselves for Freedom' for his liberal and reformist impulses,[27] and praised for his implicit embrace of black feminist thought and its shifting of 'the terrain of power from State and mine and battlefield to "day-to-day lives" – the personal as political.'[28] In the spirit of contributing to these debates, I want to suggest that when read alongside his roots in Black Consciousness philosophy, Ndebele's interventions can also be understood in terms of what Steve Biko called 'the quest for a true humanity'. This involved an 'inward looking process' through which to reject the 'obvious lie' about the 'inferiority of the Black Man' and to 'restore to the Black man in general the great stress we used to lay on human relationships, the high regard for people, their property and for life in general'.[29]

Put differently, Ndebele's preoccupations with the hegemony of spectacle within literature and culture can be understood as oriented toward an object of critique (race and difference) rather than merely a literary form. It seems to me that when read through this lens, his intervention should not be considered merely as 'a return to liberal aesthetics' or a depoliticised understanding of the role of art and poetry.[30] Indeed, much of his criticism was concerned with the ways in which liberal literary traditions and their institutions had overdetermined what could and could not be said about apartheid. In calling for a shift in literary practices, Ndebele was concerned with breaking from epistemological standards eminating from reformist

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23 J. Geertsema, 'Ndebele, Fanon, Agency and Irony', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30, 4, Special Issue: Writing in Transition in South Africa: Fiction, History, Biography (December 2004), 751.

24 A. O'Brien, 'Review: Literature in Another South Africa: Njabulo Ndebele's Theory of Emergent Culture', *Diacritics*, 22, 1 (Spring, 1992), 73.

25 Ibid. 749.

26 M. Vaughan, 'Writer and Community: Theory and Practice in the Work of Njabulo Ndebele', paper presented at The History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 6-10 February 1990).

27 For a full discussion see A. O'Brien, *Against Normalization*.

28 A. O'Brien, 'Review: Literature in Another South Africa', 78.

29 In outlining the central tenents of Black Consciousness philosophy, Biko marked the limits of moral indignation: 'As long as we go to Whitey begging cap in hand for our own emancipation, we are giving him further sanction to continue with his racist and oppressive system. We must realise that our situation is not a mistake on the part of Whites but a deliberate act and that no amount of moral lectures will persuade the White man to "correct" the situation.' See: S. Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Johannesburg, Picador Africa, 2010).

30 A. O'Brien, *Against Normalization,* 65.

institutions,[31] which reduced apartheid to a moral and ethical problem that could simply be overcome by the removal of Afrikaner political power.[32]

Written at a crucial turning point in the struggle against apartheid, Ndebele's *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* can otherwise be read as future oriented, concerned with the conjunctural task of developing modes of critique capable of intervening in the changing geo-political landscape of 1980s and 1990s South Africa.[33] As he cautioned in 1984, '[e]very convention will outlive its validity … We all know how … South Africa was always going to be free in the next five years: a prediction that is the very essence of the culture of spectacle.'[34] As such, it is possible to decipher in his writing a sensibility attuned to the times, one that perhaps had Frantz Fanon's 'On National Culture' in mind when he warned against the exchange of 'radical hopes for a process of normalization, modernization, and democratization.'[35] Hence, Ndebele's re-evaluation of protest literature was not divorced from 'the circumstances, the events, the physical spaces' that made writing possible.[36] Instead, his writing during this time can be understood as discerning the critical task of developing new modes of critique in a world that sold dreams 'at the very moment that death pervaded the land.'[37]

The Personal and the Political: Monumentality, visuality, nation

Although *Fools and Other Stories* (1983) is Ndebele's best-known literary work from the 1980s, his turn to the ordinary was perhaps most notable in 'Death of a Son', a short story originally published in 1987.[38] It crystalises what Nadine Gordimer, following Antonio Gramsci, marked as the particularities of the interregnum of 1980s and 1990s South Africa.[39] Written between the dream of a postapartheid future and the realities of life in transition, 'Death of a Son' asks the reader to reckon with the human cost of apartheid, but in ways that loosened the imaginative frames through which violence, agency, and experience were treated and understood. Rather than focusing on hyper-visible scenes of violence which at the time were reproduced on a daily basis for local and international media, Ndebele centered the internal dialogue of a mother and journalist attempting to come to terms with losing her two-year old son to a bullet fired from a police *Casspir,* without necessarily reconciling this earth-shattering event. Two passages strike me as particularly important:

> I wanted him to be free from fear. Wasn't there greater strength that way? Had he ever lived with his own feelings? And the stress of life in this land: Didn't it call out for men to be heroes? And should they live up to

31 Although critical of apartheid, these institutions and traditions have been accused of being 'Eurocentric in their conceptual orientation' and of researching 'African experiences of apartheid from a vantage point outside that experience.' See: M. Vaughan, 'Writer and Community'.
32 N. Ndebele, 'South African Literature and the Construction of Nationhood', *Staffrider*, 10, 4 (1992), 23-40.
33 Ibid.
34 N. Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, 42.
35 A. O'Brien, *Against Normalization,* 78.
36 E. W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London, Faber and Faber Ltd, 1984), 4.
37 N. Ndebele, 'Death of a Son', *TriQuarterly: Fiction of the Eighties,* 69. Spring, 1987.
38 Ibid.
39 N. Gordimer, 'Living in the Interregnum', *The New York Review of Books*, 20 January 1983.

it even though the details of the war to be fought may often be blurred? They should.

Dreams! It is amazing how the horrible findings of my newspaper reports often vanished before the glossy magazines of our dreams, how I easily forgot that the glossy images were concocted out of the keys of typewriters, made by writers whose business was to sell dreams at the very moment that death pervaded the land. So powerful are words and images that even their makers believe them.[40]

Of the many acts of political violence that occurred during the latter years of apartheid, the assassination of Chris Hani (10 April 1993) was perhaps the most high-profile, so much so that it has often been understood in biblical proportions: as a miracle (whether bloody or otherwise),[41] or what Slavoj Žižek might refer to as the 'pure' Christian Fall, 'the starting point which creates the conditions for Salvation in the first place'.[42] Hani's significance was evidenced at his funeral, which was held at the FNB Stadium in Soweto on 19 April 1993, and attended by approximately one hundred thousand people, a figure comparative to the number who attended Nelson Mandela's first speech in Cape Town after his release from Victor Verster Prison just three years earlier (11 February 1990). It marked a turning point where funerary practices in South Africa shifted from 'defiance and mobilisation' toward 'a more sombre and official funeral of a state to come'[43] Nicky Rousseau explains that for 'the first time, apartheid police rather than facing off with an enemy, escorted and protected mourners, a powerful symbolic moment marking an official, if reluctant, recognition that those regarded as "bare life", were now citizens worthy of protection', and of mourning.[44] As such, Hani's funeral became a node through which a different type of remembrance and memorialisation was inaugurated and re-inscripted into the fabric of the nation. It has therefore become an important touchstone for understanding the transition from apartheid to democracy and the becoming of a postapartheid memorial complex.

Having said this, it is equally important to recognise Hani's significance beyond the metahistory of South African transition, nation-building, and even revolution. In her memoir, *Being Chris Hani's Daughter,* Lindiwe Hani, recalled that on 18 April 1993, eight days after her father's assassination and one day before his funeral:

There was a memorial for Daddy … when his body lay in state so that mourners could have a chance to see him before the big funeral at FNB stadium on Monday. I have a single snapshot memory of Khwezi [Lindiwe's

40 N. Ndebele, 'Death of a Son'.
41 See for example: 'The Bloody Miracle', eNCA films, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qp3jtJzf7Q and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6VBQp7668K1.
42 S. Žižek, *Event* (London, Penguin Books, 2014), 44.
43 N. Rousseau, 'Identification, Politics, Disciplines', 182
44 Ibid. 182.

> sister] standing next to Daddy's coffin the entire time, refusing to sit down, as a stream of people walked past to view his body. Years earlier I had stood beside our father in Moscow, holding onto his big warm hand, staring at the body of Lenin. Now it was he who was in the coffin.[45]

Nomakhwezi Hani's refusal to leave the side of her father and to give him up to the other mourners, reveals tensions between family and the nation, the private and the public spheres, the monumental and the quotidian, the spectacular and the everyday. For his daughters, Hani was 'just Daddy',[46] but at a metahistorical scale their father appears as Lenin, the revolutionary hero who had been embalmed and housed in Moscow's Kremlin for display to the world. It also points toward a crucial (if artificial) distinction that has been drawn between funerary occasions as sites of activism, movement, action and collective struggle on the one hand, and as sites of personal grief, stasis, and mourning the individual on the other. Under apartheid, political meetings, organisations and individuals were subject to strict banning orders, and religious and cultural events were often one of the only ways in which people could legally gather. As such, political funerals constituted 'protean spaces' through which different cultures of resistance and militarism intersected with religious forms of mourning, and spaces where the anti-apartheid dead were remembered and conscripted in complex ways.[47] At these funerary occasions, the anti-apartheid dead became a central means through which notions of collective struggle and protest were conceptualised, and one through which the system and ideology of apartheid could itself be challenged. In death, the fallen anti-apartheid activist became a symbol of national sacrifice but was also rehumanised as a political subject who, through being remembered by the living as part of a collective that aimed to 'transcend the ethnic and racial identities imposed by apartheid', became a symbol of the 'refusal to be … categorised and named'.[48] Continued struggle therefore involved conscripting the movement's (and the dead's) energies toward the systemic violence of apartheid and subsuming the individual dead into collective struggles to come.

Because of this potential, embodied and channelled through the dead anti-apartheid activist, the apartheid authorities went to great lengths to control the ways in which activists would be remembered and memorialised. In the case of lawyer and leader of the South African Communist Party, Bram Fischer, the apartheid government curtailed any attempts to politicise his dead body after he died. In 1975, the Security Police were at pains to stipulate that 'the family could have Bram's body for a funeral, provided that it was held in Bloemfontein, that it was held within a week, and that his ashes, if there were a cremation, would be returned to the Department of Prisons.'[49] As Stephen Clingman's biography of Fischer elaborated:

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45 L. Hani and M. Ferguson, *Being Chris Hani's Daughter* (Johannesburg: MF Books, 2017), 61.
46 Ibid. 25.
47 P. Hayes, 'Political Funerals in South Africa', 298.
48 N. Rousseau, C. Rassool and R. Moosage, 'Missing and Missed: Rehumanisation, Nation and Missing-ness', *Kronos*, Vol. 44, (November 2018), 24.
49 Fischer was diagnosed with cancer whilst in prison and was under house arrest in Bloemfontein when he passed away. See: S. Clingmam, *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2013), 401.

> Bram's ashes were never recovered. When the new democratic parliament first met, official questions were asked, but the answers were obscure. The most likely suggestion was that a chaplain had scattered his ashes in the Garden of Remembrance in Bloemfontein in the presence of a prison official. For the first time [however,] Ruth and Ilse [Fischer's children] also learnt that in the same garden a plaque for Bram had been installed, among the rows of many such items. It was the simplest of tablets, marking the date of his birth with a star and that of his death with a cross. There was no other memorial.[50]

In other, more public settings, the apartheid authorities attempted to disrupt and prevent gatherings around the fallen anti-apartheid activist, often by firing live rounds at mourners which resulted in further deaths and funerals.[51] In addition, organisations with different political affiliations competed for political and hegemonic dominance over the dead body. Although under these circumstances the liberation movement often 'became in effect the family that mourned its dead', the hegemony of political movements at funerals was never clear and definite.[52] Certainly in public the family was often overshadowed by mass-based politics, and in certain cases, people who had died from causes not directly attributed to the struggle against apartheid were conscripted in service of different liberation movements. But privately, the family still held importance, particularly during the night vigil which often took place in the family home and, unlike the masculinist ceremonies of political struggle, was predominatly held by mothers, wives, and daughters.[53]

Felski tells us that the family home has been rendered synonymous with everyday life which itself is usually understood as demarcating 'the essential, taken-for-granted continuum of mundane activities' that is distinguished from 'heroic deeds' of men who court risk, danger and violence.[54] Everyday life can, in other words, be understood as a highly gendered concept, typically associated with domesticity, women, children and 'ordinary' working class life, as well as informal economies and politics that operate beyond the purview of historical events. In being distinguished 'from the exceptional moment' – 'the battle, the catastrophe, the extraordinary deed' – everyday life is often rendered negatively as a repetitive zone to be transcended by 'exemplary individuals able to escape the quotidian through philosophy, high art or heroism.' For this reason, the monumental typically evacuates the everyday which has the potential to impede the state's progress through time, and its attempts to fix the past and future as predicated on the centrality and hegemony of the state. This is partly because of everyday life's perceived connection with time-forms and rhythms that do not necessarily synchronise with the linear time of modern industrial societies, as well as the progressivist conviction that greater freedom is an inevitable outcome

50 Ibid. 415-416.
51 N. Rousseau, 'Identification, Politics, Disciplines', 182.
52 P. Hayes, 'Political Funerals in South Africa', 300.
53 Ibid. 315.
54 R. Felski, 'The Invention of Everyday Life', 15-31

waiting for us at some unspecified date. It is also for this reason that the monumental tends to eschew ambiguity and irony which troubles the sovereign territorial state's attempts to maintain the limits of post-apartheid nationhood, and how past, present and future struggle is remembered and perceived.

In speaking about the nexus between history, visuality and political funerals, Hayes points out that 'South African history and its perceptibility around the world at key moments appear to hinge largely on violent, unjust death'.[55] This has meant that the political economy of South African transition has become oversaturated by a certain type of visual repertoire often described in South African historiography as 'barricades photography'. This focus tends to occlude more ambiguous aspects of the anti-apartheid struggle, such as internal conflicts during the 1980s between organisations aligned with the ideological and political ethos of the Freedom Charter on the one hand, and Pan-Africanist politics on the other. It also occludes categorical and epistemological tensions highlighted above between family and nation, the private and the public sphere, and the seen and unseen of history.

For Hayes, South African photographer Santu Mofokeng exemplified a different impulse or sensibility within photographic circles, focusing instead on what Mofokeng called the 'nonphotographed of apartheid'.[56]

> For many of his [Mofokeng's] 1980s colleagues, famous South African photographers from Afrapix and later the Bang Bang Club, the violence must be seen. That is why the 'truth' genre of photojournalism and documentary became so prevalent. Through its expository, sharp, hyper-positivist structures, it had a direct impact on the eye. But then it became extended to the point of saturation, even fracture, and in this way was exhausted. Visually, the very act of exposure drains things of their alterities. Techniques of cloaking and masking, however, re-evoke these alterities and, by implication, the supernatural world. There is no need for vulgar visibility.[57]

Seeking flashes of light in 'dark times',[58] this type of practice points toward a different historical, philosophical, and political impulse which, like Jacques Derrida's *survivance*, could be described as offering 'a way of exploring the affective power of lingering traces, or a middle category between presence and absence, and of ways of recognizing the strength of survival without framing this survival in a redemptive narrative'.[59] It also resonates with Ndebele's distrust of histories that designated a unitary, illuminating, and linear story of progress through history, as well as his attempt to understand the desires, dreams and potential futures that remain on the edge of vision and of knowledge.

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55 P. Hayes, 'Political Funerals in South Africa', 291.
56 Ibid. 312.
57 P. Hayes, 'Santu Mofokeng, photographs', 50-51.
58 G. Didi-Huberman, *Uprisings* (Paris, Gallimard, 2016), 14.
59 L. Renshaw, 'Unrecovered objects: narratives of dispossession, slow violence and survival in the investigation of mass graves from the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of Material Culture*, Vol.25 No.4, (2020), 428-446.

In one of his more polemical passages dedicated to a critique of Alex La Guma's 'Coffee for the Road', Ndebele described spectacle as that which privileges the visible, as well as

> the complete exteriority of everything … dramatic contrasts all over the story … lack of specificity of place and character so that we have spectacular ritual immediately turned into symbol, with instant meaning (no interpretation here is necessary: seeing is meaning) … Where is causality? Such questions are irrelevant: Subtlety is avoided. What *is* intended is spectacular demonstration at all costs. What matters is what is seen. Thinking is secondary to seeing. Subtlety is secondary to obviousness. What is finally left and what is deeply entrenched in our minds is the spectacular contest between the powerful and the powerless.[60]

It is precisely for this reason that Ndebele sought to explore 'art beyond merely reflecting reality as it was.'[61] Instead, he sought to understand how oppression affected 'people in their day to day lives'. In this sense, the family home – that taken-for-granted space of domesticity and sexual reproduction that had largely been ignored by political science – became a site for understanding the inner workings of the self, but also more importantly, the internal contradictions of apartheid and its laws of perception.

History, Museums, literature, difference.

> History has been largely a foundationalist discourse. By this I mean that its explanations seem to be unthinkable if they do not take for granted some primary premises, categories, or presumptions. These foundations (however varied, whatever they are at a particular moment) are unquestioned and unquestionable; they are considered permanent and transcendent. As such they create a common ground for historians and their objects of study in the past and so authorize and legitimize analysis; indeed, analysis seems not to be able to proceed without them. In the minds of some foundationalists, in fact, nihilism, anarchy, and moral confusion are the sure alternatives to these givens, which have the status (if not the philosophical definition) of eternal truths.[62]

There have of course been attempts in South Africa to employ the ordinary and everyday life for memorial purposes and in museum settings. Steve Biko's and Chris Hani's homes have both been turned into museums dedicated to their legacies, but the Mandela home in Orlando West, Soweto, is perhaps the most obvious example of a home turned museum. Here, the legend and monumental status of Nelson Mandela

60 N. Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, 38.
61 'Appendix: Interview with Njabulo Ndebele' in N. Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, 175.
62 J. W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', 780.

and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela are juxtaposed with the everyday activities of Vilakazi Street's luminaries. These include the Archbishop Desmond Tutu who, before his death, was 'said to take a leisurely stroll around the neighbourhood when he' was around.[63] In order to stress the importance of the Mandela home (making it more than just a home) the museum website explains the following: 'Built in 1945, Mandela house was commissioned as part of a Johannesburg City tender for new houses in Orlando. Whilst tiny in structure (Madiba mentioned that 'the bedroom was so small that a double bed took up almost the entire floor space') its testimony of truth on the family's immense struggles for a free South Africa is indelibly large.'[64]

Elsewhere, Robert Sobukwe's 'house' of confinement on Robben Island has been turned into an exhibition that, through the use of photographic archives, shows Sobukwe carrying out domestic activities like ironing and enjoying time with his family, who were allowed to spend time on the island where their father and husband had been imprisoned.[65] Together, these museums have the effect of humanising their subjects, but they also demonstrate that for many South Africans, the family home did not provide an escape from apartheid. Indeed, the home and everyday life was often a place of detention and political isolation denied any form of community. For many there was 'nowhere to run and nowhere to hide: no sanctum of the ordinary that escapes the tentacular grip of later capitalist consumer culture' or, put differently, no escape from apartheid's attempts to control the minutae of everyday life.[66]

A visit to the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum on the other hand, will attest to the reality that workers' hostels were rarely sites of refuge. But they did become sites of sociality and for some home, despite the apartheid state's intention to limit Lwandle to 'nothing more than a series of barrack-like structures, which would accommodate low-paid male labourers in the nearby industries, municipalities and farmlands'.[67] In a different context, Asef Bayat has used the 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' to describe the ways in which the 'urban poor' have developed informal economies to 'acquire the basic necessities of their lives … in a quiet and unassuming illegal fashion'.[68] Rather than understanding the ordinary and the everyday in negative or positivist terms, Bayat's 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' works against developmental study's tendency to render the everyday and the informal as temporally backward (a non-place), and against the romantic impulse to produce the everyday as a site of revolutionary potential, major political upheaval and transformation. Similarly, the realities of everyday life in postapartheid South Africa suggest that the everyday should not be taken-for-granted as a site of refuge and escape, nor should it be considered merely as a space or time where authentic experience and transformative agencies can be easily located and nurtured.

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63 Mandela House, 'About', 2025, https://www.mandelahouse.com/about/#insight
64 Ibid.
65 Robben Island Museum, 'Banishment, 1939-Now', 2025, https://www.robben-island.org.za/banishment-1939-now-3/
66 R. Felski, 'The Invention of Everyday Life', 27.
67 N. Murray and L. Witz, H*ostels, Homes, Museum: Memorialising migrant labour pasts in Lwandle, South Africa* (Cape Town, University of Cape Town Press, 2014), 1.
68 A. Bayat, 'The Quiet Encroachment of the Ordinary', *Chimurenga: Conversations with Poets who Refuse to Speak*, #11 (2007), 8-15.

In light of this unstable ground, what are we to make of Ndebele's turn to the ordinary, particularly during a time dominated by the apartheid state's 'Total Onslaught' and the intensification of the anti-apartheid struggle? Moreover, how are we to understand his use of irony, which is not ordinarily associated with 'committed revolutionary struggle' since it is seen as disabling agency?[69] It is instructive that in a 2001 piece, written in the wake of South Africa's TRC, Ndebele leaned on 'the remarkable scholarship of Charles van Onselen', to make a point about agency and experience.[70] In Van Onselen's canonical text, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894-1985*, Ndebele located 'nooks and crannies' that complicated the epistemological terrain which sustained apartheid, pointing toward difficult histories of 'mutual dependency' between 'master-servant, oppressor-oppressed, superior-inferior, giver-receiver, taker-loser, urban-rural, white-black: the first pole positive, the second negative.'[71] In some ways, Van Onselen and the Wits History Workshop where he was based, were sympathetic to Ndebele's intervention, albeit through a different disciplinary lens. Gaining prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, the History Workshop was invested in grassroots history 'from below' and in the 'common man, the people, the subordinate groups of society, be they factory workers, domestic servants, traders, diggers, the unemployed or the marginal'.[72] Writing against the grain of more conventional historical scholarship (both liberal and Marxist) and employing oral historical methodologies to uncover experiences of the 'underclasses', the History Workshop eschewed a teleological and structuralist approach to history, arguing that everyday life in South Africa could not be reduced to structural factors or subordinated to prominent oppositional organisations. Importantly, it also sought to challenge the apartheid state's laws of perception, demonstrating that difference was often more blurred than the apartheid state claimed. This latter impulse in particular must have resonated with Ndebele, whose 'sense of apartheid oppression was that it was not monolithic or total, without the possibility of any agency towards resistance', even if that was the 'effect it wished to accomplish'.[73] Moreover, as we have seen, the process of first revealing in order to transcend apartheid's organising frame offered Ndebele a way through which to undo the subject positions people under apartheid were inducted to speak from.

It is important to recognise that since the establishment of social history as a dominant paradigm within historiography, it too has been criticised for inverting or even reproducing the essentialist categories it sought to challenge, and for reducing personal memories to collective experiences that are then made to speak through

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69 Geertsema refers to the following passage from Michael Chapman to demonstrate how the supposed opposition between irony and agency 'persists in the criticism of South African literature': 'the expression of the emergency continues to remind us … that, in dangerous times throughout the South African story, many people who in other circumstances would have been less than artists have had to become more than artists. Without the protection of ambiguity, irony or even the expensive package of the literary book, they have had to find the words to speak out boldly against injustice.' See J. Geertsema, 'Ndebele, Fanon, Agency and Irony', 752.

70 N. Ndebele, 'Of Lions and Rabbits: Thoughts on Democracy and Reconciliation', in J. Wilmot and L. Van de Vijver (eds), *After the TRC: Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa (*Athens, Ohio University Press, 2001).

71 Ibid.

72 B. Bozzoli, 'Introduction: Popular History and the Witwatersrand', in B. Bozzoli (ed.), *Labour, Townships and Protest* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1979), 3.

73 J. Geertsema, 'Ndebele, Fanon, Agency and Irony', 750.

essentialised categories (the worker, the peasant, the woman, the black).[74] Through this lens, agency and experience 'retain a coherence and confrontational status', which 'frames narratives in terms of coherent and confrontational subjects'.[75] It might therefore be useful to further interrogate everyday life's conceptual and categorical foundations and, to paraphrase Joan W. Scott, to historicise everyday life and the categories it produces. Drawing from Gayatri Spivak's distinction between history and literature, Scott suggests that whereas history 'provides categories that enable us to understand the social and structural positions of people (as workers, subalterns, and so on)', literature 'relatavises the categories history assigns, and exposes the processes that construct and position subjects'.[76] In other words, for Scott and Spivak, literature offers a critical mode through which to reveal and deconstruct the categorical injunctions imposed on people through and by history. In Ndebele's and, I argue our postapartheid context, this would involve the recognition and deconstruction of an 'official discourse of pluralism … according to which all cultural/"racial" positions were not historical constructions inscribed in State apparatus and civil hegemony but simply the received names of the Obvious'.[77] As Ndebele put it in an interview, the 'role of literature will be to make us conscious of the multiplicity and complexity of human experience.'[78]

To further illustrate this claim, I want to draw from Edward Said's *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, in which Said outlined the role of the cultural and literary critic as he saw it:

> In its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds, special interests, imperialised fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind, criticism is most itself and, if the paradox can be tolerated, most unlike itself at the moment it starts turning into organized dogma. 'Ironic' is not a bad word to use along with oppositional. For in the main … criticism must think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse; its social goals are noncoercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom.[79]

Similarly, irony for Ndebele served as 'the literary manifestation of the principle of contradiction'.[80] It harboured the potential to undermine the closed epistemological systems that constituted the discursive and ideological ground which sustained apartheid. Through a process of both revealing and undermining the ways in which apartheid sought to render life as a polarity of absolutes, Ndebele can be understood as offering literature and writing as one way through which to work against

74 See for example, P. Lalu, 'When was South African history ever postcolonial?'; L. Witz, G. Minkley and C. Rassool, 'Oral History in South Africa'.
75 L. Witz, G. Minkley and C. Rassool, 'Oral History in South Africa', 40-42.
76 J. W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', 791.
77 A. O'Brien, 'Review: Literature in Another South Africa', 76.
78 N. Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, 183.
79 E. W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic,* 29.
80 J. Geertsema, 'Ndebele, Fanon, Agency and Irony', 751.

apartheid's modes of control and capture, representation and narration. We might understand this as an attempt to produce a sense of agency that was not dictated by apartheid. Using Geertsema's terms, this can be understood as an attempt to undo the 'paradoxical collusion of writing against apartheid with apartheid', or, to borrow from Hayes, an attempt to complicate processes through which a 'single visual quotation of black life comes to stand in for a totality'.[81] Finally, we might understand Ndebele's turn to the ordinary as inaugurated through 'two inscriptions' which

> articulate both a vision of what the social should be, as well as a mode of defiance: despite the closure of the social along racial lines, this subject will write, will produce its own desire, a desire that plainly and unwaveringly discloses the violence of the social that marks its enunciation while not allowing itself to be limited by that violence.[82]

Ndebele might, in other words, be understood as writing against what Maurits van Bever Donker has named the 'script of Man' which organised the ground through which apartheid would be organised and maintained, but also constituted a critical perspective through which a postcolonial critique of apartheid might be constituted in the wake of the anti-apartheid struggle. This, Premesh Lalu suggests, constitutes the problem space of postapartheid historiography, and offers one route through which to understand and potentially undo history's tendency to reify apartheid's laws of perception. As Lalu put it in 2008, it is important to remember that the disciplines we inherit are 'cut of the same epistemic cloth that defined the subjection of agency' during apartheid.[83]

Conclusion

The ordinary and the everyday have been employed as conceptual and epistemological vehicles through which to challenge the primacy of Great Men as agents of history by attending to the lives of ordinary people and the ways in which they navigate, understand and challenge systems of power, exploitation and patriarchy. In South Africa, social history or history-from-below emerged as a dominant paradigm within historiography during the 1980s. Invested in grass-roots history 'from below', it employed oral-historical methods to reveal the everyday experiences of subordinate groups in society, in an attempt to restore the agency of the oppressed. But as Hayes, Felski, and Scott point out in different ways, the everyday and the ordinary should not be simply considered a site of refuge that offers an escape from modern industrial life. Nor is it a space or time where authentic experience can be easily located. It is instead itself a deeply stratified concept, an 'object of critical reflection and

81 P. Hayes, 'Political Funerals in South Africa', 310.
82 M. van Bever Donker, *Texturing Difference: 'Black Consciousness Philosophy' and the 'Script of Man'* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2025), 3-4.
83 P. Lalu, 'When was South African history ever postcolonial?', 268.

representation in literature and art' which is 'marked by a rich history of hostility, envy and desire, expressing both nostalgia for the concrete and disdain for a life lacking in critical self-reflection.'[84]

The arguments I have made in this article have had less to do with the ontological status of lived experience, than it has to do with how ideas about the spectacular and the everyday inform our understandings of history. In our postapartheid context, the absence of an object of critique such as race and difference, which provided the critical ground through which apartheid could be challenged, means that difference has the potential to return *as* 'race' rather than as a critical interrogation of historical, categorical, and social effects *of* race and racism. It therefore seems important to continue to interrogate the conceptual and categorical foundations of our historical practices, so as not to run the risk of reproducing the effects that apartheid sought to accomplish.

84 R. Felski, 'The Invention of Everyday Life', 17.