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Saturday night at the Speedway: class, race, gender and a 'lynching'

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This paper will reflect on some contemporary re-enactments of whiteness by a white subaltern crowd attending an oval track speedway meeting in central South Africa in 2017. It will also consider my role as ethnographer/observer, this latter aspect positioning the paper as a kind of 'gonzo-ethnography'. I tracked several individuals including an 'organic comedian', a number of women and some children through what turned out to be a key event at the night's sport, an act of crowd violence directed at three Bangladeshi men. This episode was spontaneous, populist and bottom-up, with evidence of strong gendered roles. It can best be described as a kind of organized disorder as the three racial outsiders were isolated, humiliated, and stripped of the veneer of common humanity; in other words, it bore the characteristics of a lynching, albeit in symbolic form. This carnival rendering of violence was central to the identity and coherence of the crowd that night. The violence on show was ironically of a kind which the apartheid state itself sought to police and prohibit among subaltern whites from as early as the 1950s, reminding us once again that whiteness, was never homogeneous or without internal tensions and fractures.

I was part of the crowd, a white man. And in my silence, I became a participant. In closing I reflect on the moral problems raised by this gonzo-ethnography, of failing to follow Fanon's example from Martinique and intervening vigorously in an act of racial violence, and on the possibilities and limits of insurgent history-writing.

1. Introduction

Ever since growing up in Durban in the 1970s, I wanted to go and watch oval track speedway racing. Back then, races were held at Hoy Park¹ and the price of admission was low, but my parents refused, one of the very few occasions I recall when their will would not be bent. From the subsidised, sub-economic flats where we lived in bustling 'grey'² Umbilo, speedway had a class base that my parents – at least my mother – wanted to escape and a cultural one that they, as people who had come of age during World War Two, backed away from. For speedway racing was assertively a white working class spectacle, and it belonged to a post-World War Two generation which, to people of my parents' age cohort, was yobby, ducktail, carefree, brash and fast, lacking the frugality and steadfastness of a nostalgically-remembered wartime generation.

It took more than 40 years before I finally got to attend speedway, and it was at Bloemfontein's rather grandly-named Schoeman Park International Speedway Stadium, on April Fool's Day 2017. I went to the races anticipating a spectacle of motor racing and a sensory assault from the noise, the smells, the mesmeric effect of souped-up car racing each other around a tight oval circuit. I was not disappointed. But these events and the adrenalin that they churned were only the backdrop to a more troubling and dangerous spectacle of racial violence which represented an altogether different kind of assault, on my own public morality and understanding of myself as an historian. At the speedway that Saturday night I witnessed what may be described as a 'lynching'. To be sure (and even more, to be grateful), it was not a lynching-to-the-death in the style associated with the lynch murders of African Americans in the Jim Crow American south (see Ward 2016), but as I will argue, it was an act of crowd violence that bore all of the hallmarks of a lynching. The perpetrators were drawn from the white crowd at the speedway and the victims were three Bangladeshi men.

1 http://www.speedway-sa.com/resources/other_pdfs/Inventory%20of%20SA%20Tracks_merged2.pdf. (accessed 25.4.2017)

2 'Grey' areas were those where the lines of segregation drawn by the 1950s Group Areas Act were not quite as precise as apartheid's town planners imagined. In the 1970s, commerce, friendships, commuting and 'passing' made them 'grey' and by the next decade, people had come to quietly flout the restrictions of residential segregation.

As an historian, much of my writing has focused on race, notably how various ways of being white were produced, the kinds of work these diverse identities did in a segregated society and how they connect to the elusive idea of 'whiteness'. In light of my interest, this essay focuses not so much on the lynching, albeit that this event was at the very heart of the story. Rather, I try to fathom out what it tells us about some of ways that racism and white identity operate in contemporary post-apartheid society and also, how these are inextricably bound to histories of class, gender, region and privilege. Contemporary racial identities and racisms incorporate both longer historical continuities and elements that are rooted particularly in post-apartheid society.

Albert Grundlingh (1994), a well-known South African historian, describes how, under apartheid, attendance at provincial rugby matches by whites provided an arena for the development of racial nationalism, types of white solidarity that often ran along regional or provincial lines, and masculinity. With the advent of democracy in 1994 and particularly as South Africa's national side, the Springboks, played in and won the 1995 Rugby World Cup on home soil, rugby seemed to animate a moment of broader national unity. But rugby as an unlikely unguent of the 'Mandela spirit' soon lost its new-South Africa sheen as a spectator sport, sliding back from 'redemption to recidivism' (Grundlingh 1998: 67). In 1996, for instance, white Springbok supporters at a test match in Bloemfontein chose to defiantly flout the old South African flag, widely associated with apartheid South Africa. Writing in 1998 Grundlingh concluded that rugby was neither fully redeemed, nor had it fallen completely back on old ways (1998: 84). Nearly two decades later, his conclusion holds. And as he predicted, the advent of the professional game after 1995 meant that rugby was likely to be dominated increasingly by commercial interests.

For those whites in the lower strata of the working classes and those self-employed in small entrepreneurial enterprises, professional rugby no longer fulfills this function; it no longer provides a stage for a white crowd to assemble in quite the way it did under apartheid. It is highly corporatised, and expensive. Tickets are costly and food, drink and alcohol are 'as brutal as a tackle' ("Late to the game: football stadiums aim for better food", *The New York Times*, 30 June 2017). The connectedness of the stadium crowd has been riven by the proliferation of corporate hospitality suites, effectively dividing spectators according to a two-tier hierarchy. And, significantly, matches are televised, there are strict conditions for entry (at the Free State stadium in Bloemfontein these include a prohibition on racist or xenophobic material – code words for the old South African flag) and stadia are patrolled by neon-clad security guards. Modern rugby stadia in South Africa no longer provide much room for the performances of ethno-nationalism described by Grundlingh, and in the Free State, crowd attendance at professional rugby matches has dwindled.

Oval track racing, it seemed to me, is the new rugby. Within the anthropology of performance, the idea of carnival is well-established. Writing about the annual carnival in Rio, Victor Turner described it as 'that denizen of a place where there is no place and a time which is in no time' (1983: 103). During carnival places become the reverse of their daily selves and we see society in its mood of fantasising, its playful mood (Turner 1983: 104).

Speedway provides a stage for a carnival performance by white members of the Free State working class and elements of small, local business where, through grotesqueries and exaggeration and exuberance, they could re-imagine and re-work class, race and gender identities. As Turner pointed out, the way people play is perhaps more revealing than the way they work (Turner 1983: 104). He also notes that carnival is the 'creative anti-structure of a moment' and at the speedway that night, the performances on display suggested some antagonism not only to the project of social transformation writ large, but also other, equally alienating ways of being white. The ways these people played also revealed a more sinister side to at least some currents of whiteness or the right-to-culture claims of some white Afrikaner nationalist groups in present day South Africa, like *Afriforum*³.

I was interested in the spectators' performance during the carnival of speedway which, that night, culminated in the drama of 'lynching'. Social historian George Rude's idea of the crowd offers a useful bottom-up angle on to such dramatic events, to the extent that it directs attention to those who energise them, riots and revolutions in Rude's case, a kind of lynching in this one. Rude sought to dismantle the fiction that those who participated in the French revolution were a great evil mass of people bent on the destruction of order. As he put it, 'those who took to the streets were ordinary, sober citizens, not half crazed animals, not criminals' (Charlesworth 1990: 28). So too with the crowd at the speedway. These are people, neglected by most observers of South African society, who may yet re-shape some of the easy knowledge about historical and contemporary race-making in South Africa, and also some of the social theory which undergirds this. What logics, passions and social processes drove them? As important, what do their behaviour and dispositions tell us about social phenomena like race-making, privilege and its dilution, nostalgia, violence and change in post-apartheid South Africa? I also take up Ranajit Guha's point that an ethnography which picks individuals from the crowd may be illuminating. Thus, I tracked several individuals, including an 'organic comedian', a number of women, and some children through what turned out to be the stand-out event of the night's sport, the act of crowd violence directed at the three Bangladeshi men.

3 See <https://www.afriforum.co.za/home>. (accessed 24.7.2017)

As a white man, I became, by definition, part of the crowd, making this essay more gonzo (McQueen: 2007) than conventional ethnography.⁴ And in my silence, a participant. In closing I reflect on the moral problems raised by this ethnography, of failing to follow Fanon's example from Martinique and intervening vigorously in an act of racial violence, and on the possibilities and limits of insurgent history-writing.

2. Of whites and whiteness

Much has been written about whites and what it means to be white in modern South Africa, but this analysis has never cohered as a major focus in South African historiography. For the purposes of this essay, I shall try to pick out some major trends, highlighting what they offer to understand that carnival performance of a white identity on 1 April, what lacunae they leave.⁵

As the mining industry transformed South African economy and society in the 19th and early 20th Centuries, it was not only blacks but also some whites who suffered the inevitable ravages of capitalist development. These 'poor whites' were mainly Afrikaners and they attracted the attention of clerics and secular intellectuals close to the Dutch Reformed Church, who were troubled by the spectre of a mass of indigent whites, landless and squatting in town or countryside, without education or skill to enter wage labour. There were moral, social and dimensions to what became known by these elites as the 'poor white problem', not least that poor white people might threaten the structure of segregated society that was gathering coherence as South Africa's modernity developed. Writing in the 1930s, when the dimensions of the poor white problem were already well-known, JR Albertyn, a clergyman, expressed what was probably the major cause for anxiety among white politicians, theologians and moral reformers about the persistence of poor whiteism: 'If the more privileged European grudges and refuses the poor his patronage, the latter will associate with non-Europeans if he finds no member of his race to consort with.' The apogee of this genre, which situated whites adrift from the land or the more comfortable reaches of wage labour as a 'problem', came with the publication in 1932 of the five-volume *Carnegie Commission of Investigation into the Poor White Question in South Africa*.

By World War Two 'poor whiteism' had more or less ended as growing numbers of whites found their way into jobs or rural livelihoods – often heavily subsidised.

4 A style of narrating without any claims to objectivity, often using the first person, and with the author as a participant. 'Gonzo' was first used to describe the style of journalist Hunter S. Thompson (McKeen 2007).

5 Much of the following is drawn from a review essay published in 2016. See Roos (2016).

With white poverty on the decline as a pressing social and political concern, it slipped from the attention of contemporary intellectuals. At the time, historians were more occupied with the Big Questions of the day, either the progress of Afrikaner nationalism or the struggle for a more 'liberal' (or at least, imperial) dispensation in South Africa. In these marches of ideas and ideology, people like the poor whites and, for that matter, 'ordinary' whites, those distant from the levers of political power, played little role.

Two historians, WM MacMillan (1919; 1930) and C de Kiewiet (1941), did retain an interest in these people and significantly, while writing about white workers, rural tenants and the unemployed, they both insisted that it was impossible to separate the histories of the white from the black poor. Both elucidated textured, complex layers of white everyday life, and De Kiewiet was quite ahead of his time when he accounted for not only the structural, but also the affective factors inhibiting new Afrikaner immigrants from establishing themselves in cities. While convinced that being white entitled them to certain status and comfort based on their race, they could not afford a 'white' urban lifestyle. Lacking the necessary skills and dispositions, they were largely limited to unskilled manual labour which, for the white poor, was synonymous with degrading 'kaffir work'. They were unwilling to 'reduce' themselves to this and consequently remained unemployed. Despite their richness and sophistication, the work of these scholars is seldom referenced by contemporary analysts of South African society; all the more reason to cite them by name.

By the late 1980s Marxist-inclined social history, inspired by British and north American Marxists like EP Thompson and Eugene Genovese, began to make inroads into local humanities circles. Many of those drawn to Marxist analysis were committed intellectually and politically to the overthrow of apartheid and saw their writing as a mobilising tool in the popular struggles of the 1980s. Their agenda led them to concentrate on the everyday, and sometimes heroic, lives of blacks, with the consequence that there was not much attention paid to the history of whites. There were of course exceptions, historians who explored the complexity of white society – it is noteworthy though that few extended their interest through to the apartheid years. They took on topics ranging from the economic struggles of poor whites to white working class housing (Lange: 2003), to crime (van Onselen: 1982) and social histories of the 1922 Rand Revolt (Krikler: 2005). Generally absent, however, was a broader account of how these histories related to the production, organisation and maintenance of a racist society. While particular variants of racial and class identity were described in great detail, these were seldom connected to the racism of society. In fact, the close empirical focus of these studies did perhaps make it difficult for their authors to see their subjects not only as workers or the urban and rural poor, but also as elites, bound to segregated society by privileges of race.

We do not only an injustice but miss substantial perspectives if we presume it was only white intellectuals who described the history and everyday lives of whites. For there are long traditions of black commentary, unsurprisingly much of it from outside the academy. For instance, in the early 1970s writer and founder of the Black Consciousness Movement Steve Biko (2004) identified an essential unity among whites, even those who professed to be 'liberal'.

So, in a sense the writing of these commentators was a kind of mirror image of the histories produced by their white social historian compatriots. While white writers teased out the divisions of white society, black writers emphasised its cohesion. Both points are equally valid and equally potent, and a convincing account of South African whites, in the past and in contemporary times, must incorporate both.

From about the 1990s there emerged globally what David Roediger (2001) calls the 'putatively new' scholarship of whiteness – 'putatively' because black intellectuals had been writing about 'whiteness' for more than a century. In its early days the new field included critical historical accounts of white race-making, sociological explanations of how whiteness operates as a measure of exclusion and privilege in contemporary society, as well as literary studies that dissected how whiteness featured in various ranges of fiction and film genres.

Whiteness studies has been subject to strong criticism that it evolved into a 'distinct and novel enterprise separate from ethnic studies' and that it re-centres whiteness (Roediger 2001). This critique probably targeted those histories that simply ignored black people or the production of race and rode on the trendy 'whiteness' bandwagon without much concern for its historical genealogies, how it was differentiated, how various strands operated and how these interacted with different kinds of 'blackness', or for that matter, different versions of power and identity.

In South Africa there were some historians who undertook critical histories of whites but whiteness studies were largely the province of sociology, where Melissa Steyn wrote the first full-length book on South African whiteness (2001). Many good case studies were written but oddly, the category itself was seldom interrogated: so whiteness begot whiteness. Writing about whites and whiteness, whether historical or contemporary, needs to avoid these imperious sweeps, analytic tautology and lack of engagement, real engagement, with the past. History matters. Or to be more precise, in the case of race, racism and racial identity, social history matters.

3. Of violence

For me, the most horrifying, shocking – and riveting – moment of the speedway meeting on April Fool's Day was the white crowd's act of collective violence against the three Bangladeshi men. Any black commentator would surely confirm that violence was part of the DNA of colonial, segregationist, apartheid and, arguably, post-apartheid South Africa. The murderous acts of apartheid's death squads and assassins like 'Prime Evil' Eugene de Kock and 'Dr Death' Wouter Basson are well documented. But aside from these extreme acts of murder and torture there has been surprisingly little written about other types of apartheid violence, state ideologies of violence, or popular violence undertaken by whites, including forms that attracted official sanction.

One noteworthy exception is a book written by sociologist Ivan Evans (2009) in which he compared lynching and racial killing in South Africa and the American South. In his sections on South Africa, Evans devotes much attention to state violence. Evans connects racial violence in both industrialising South Africa and the post-bellum American South to changing capitalist relations which in turn threatened to upset race and gender relations. And in both societies, he identifies common psycho-sexual origins of racial violence rooted in gendered notions of 'the weakness of some' [white women] and retribution against the 'black beast rapist'. In South Africa, dominant Calvinist theological beliefs along with histories of state formation (from 1910, at least, there was a strong central state, and even the earlier Boer republics and British colonies permitted little local devolution of power, for whites) saw racial violence being vested in the state. And ultimately the law of the state as it developed after 1910 served the interests of 'repressive justice' where, for instance, by far the majority of those subject to judicial execution were black men (Turrell 2004). Evans hovers tantalisingly above the structural, ideological and moral conditions for racial violence in South Africa without really touching on popular violence, that which occurred beyond the state. His discussion of the American South does however go some way as a parable for instances of popular white violence in post-apartheid society: in the South, patterns of violence served to seize mastery of 'a world turned upside down by the end of slavery'.

While there is a huge literature on lynching in the American South, recent writing on violence against Muslims and Dalits in India helps us understand when ructions of violence constitute a lynching; and the contemporary urgency of this writing demands that these acts of violence be situated in a spectrum of political morality.

Commenting on murders by mobs in Kashmir and Haryana, Samar Halkarnkar (2017) observes that the spark for racial violence is often fairly trivial – an argument over seats in a train; taunts for being beef-eaters. Escalating from mundane beginnings, crowds travelling on a train, congregating on a street or wherever turn violent, and the victims targeted for elimination are always some kind of minority. Some might be saved. In a recent essay ‘Lynching of a Nation’, Manash Firaq Bhattacharjee (2017) quotes Sartre: ‘Fascism is defined not by the number of victims, but by the way it kills them.’ Restating slightly Sartre’s powerful observation, it is the style of violence rather than the outcome which characterises a ‘lynching’. As Bhattacharjee writes, the very denial of personhood is a key element of ‘lynching’. ‘The body of the victim is denied any moral essence, deprived of its rights, easily reduced to the body of a vulnerable animal.’ There is a mob, embracing a modern form of tribalism, and a victim, stripped of agency. The typology of racial and ethnic violence that Bhattacharjee plots, and the moral and political crisis which it represents, should be kept in mind as we return to the Schoeman Park International Speedway Stadium, April Fool’s evening.

4. Saturday night

By the late 1920s dirt track oval racing was being staged in at least five venues across the Union of South Africa although, like elsewhere, the onset of the Great Depression virtually brought an end to the sport in this country (www.speedway-sa.com). Oval track racing revived after World War Two and reached a peak in South Africa between about 1947 and 1958, with at least 10 venues operating nationally. From the 1960s it again declined although with the exception of the years between 1974 and 1979 when petrol restrictions put paid to most motorsport, it continued intermittently at venues across the country.

Speedway came to Bloemfontein in the boom years after World War Two. The first meetings were held at the railway grounds and Schoeman Park in 1949. Eclipsed by the railway grounds as a venue, Schoeman Park only hosted one season of racing during the 1940s, although it did re-open in the 1970s and again in 2015. And a meeting was advertised for Saturday 1 April. Not on Facebook. Not on a webpage – there isn’t one for the Schoeman Park Stadium. Nor on the local radio or in the local newspapers, but on a hand-painted sign placed on the back of a pick-up truck which was parked at a busy intersection in the city’s southern suburbs.

In light of my long-held wish to attend speedway, I decided to attend. I didn’t know the price of admission but I arrived well after the night’s races had begun, and by that stage, the ticket booth was abandoned. On entering the stadium and parking my car in a grassy lot next to the oval, my first impression was that

this was not Speedway Inc. There was no line-up of franchised food outlets. No tunnels of advertising hoarding. Few billboards around the track. Instead there were several rickety caravans, mom-and-pop affairs selling the kind of delicious down-home *boerekos* favoured by white Afrikaners when they attend sporting and cultural events: *pannekoek*, *jaffels*, *boerewors* rolls. Another feature now entirely absent in the corporate sporting arena: spectators bringing their own food and alcohol, *braaing*⁶ close to where they parked their cars or sat.

I walked up the grass embankment surrounding the oval. Between the grandstands (itself a rather grandiose description of what are pretty skeletal rises of seating, the kind seen sometimes at amateur football or rugby clubs) spectators had set up deck chairs with cooler boxes. And the crowd was all white. With the exception of three men, who were Bangladeshi, as they explained to their neighbours.

As it was in Durban in the 1970s, oval track racing in Bloemfontein is rooted in the social world of sections of the post-apartheid white working class, although this now includes representatives of small Afrikaner capital. This was nowhere more apparent than in the sponsors' logos on the race cars: Dup's panel beating, Nick's roofing, and with the exception of car products like Castrol oil, none sported the names of any national or multinational brands. And if we take subalternity to mean a condition rather than a category, then these people, as we shall see, are subaltern whites.

Between races members of the crowd listened to Afrikaans pop music, and they demonstrated their appreciation of the announcer's banter, some of it clearly running on from previous race meetings, and his in-jokes. They seemed to know, or at least be familiar with, vocal members of the peanut gallery. This was a white working class crowd out for a *jol*⁷ amid the roar of engines, the grit of the track and the smell of *braai*. But it had a far darker side than the appearance of a benign white crowd out for an evening of harmless fun and nostalgic yearning for a past that's gone. For versions of this past were central to this crowd's identity, its very coherence and energy.

If Rude's crowd was an assembly of 'nonentities', then so too was this crowd of subaltern whites. Let us identify some of the individuals in the crowd. We have already encountered the three Bangladeshi men who, I gathered, had not been to the speedway before, and were eager to experience something of the city's public life. I am not sure if they knew beforehand quite how white the crowd would be, or what that 'whiteness' would mean. They asked a supersized man sitting close

6 'Braai' means barbeque.

7 Roughly translated, a *jol* means 'merry-making'.

to them a question. With his antennae fine-tuned for sport, this joker, an organic comedian of sorts, started some rather crude banter with them. He played on the Bangladeshis' inability to understand Afrikaans and his – and the crowd's – insider knowledge of the oval track scene. My heart sank, as in the past I have seen the Afrikaans language deployed in this cruel way to humiliate and insult those from outside the language community – and usually outside of the racial one too. I witnessed an exchange of this sort at a Middle Eastern airport, some white South African expatriate construction workers badmouthing in Afrikaans an elderly Asian man. And I presumed that this kind of bullying, where only one side really gets the joke, is more common outside the country than at home, where the likelihood of the victim understanding Afrikaans and not playing their assigned role (or retaliating) is greater.

But this was not a few recidivists acting up while out of the country. This was a large crowd, a sports crowd, in a South African city. And they lapped it up as the comedian led on the three Bangladeshis. At this point more individuals, and clusters of people, emerge from the crowd. Much like the Robertson women in American tv show *Duck Dynasty*⁸, women in the crowd egged on the joker, and were in fact his most vocal and attentive audience. The evening's events reached a crescendo when the joker bellowed '*ek is 'n poes*' (I am a cunt). The crowd roared. The Bangladeshi men, bewildered but aware that they were at the sharp edge of a savage joke, and probably also aware that they were trapped inside this crowd, played along and yelled back '*ek is 'n poes*'.

I looked around to see if there were some left discomfited by this display of bullying, of crudity, of racism and violence. In vain. Women were digging their husbands in the ribs to 'look'. Teens and tweens were taking videos with their phones. Little children were clutching hands before their mouths in glee. This was mean. And at that point the three Bangladeshi men, racial outsiders, were isolated, humiliated, stripped of the veneer of common humanity that bound them to the crowd. And at that moment, caught in the wash of the crowd, they could not leave. In its fundamental violence, its populist character, its logic and progression which could only be understood as a kind of quickening disorder, this episode was a lynching.

There was an encore. After the taunting had subsided and the passions of the crowd lowered, the three victims approached their tormentor for a selfie, which he seemed delighted to honour. Meaty arms around the Bangladeshi men, he jovially posed for many photographs. Emboldened or rash, one of the Bangladeshi men then moved over to the white man's wife, sat next to her and began to

8 <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2229907/>

ask for a photograph – who knows, perhaps he apprehended the crowd's racial and gender sensitivities and was, in a sense, talking back. The white man's mood changed in a flash. Before the Bangladeshi had even completed his request, he stormed over, grabbed the Bangladeshi by the front of the shirt, shoved him and ordered him to 'fuck off'. Note the recurrence of an image of the white woman 'at risk', common in racial violence and race 'lynching'.

And me? Well I sat high on the rickety grandstand, quietly watching. Then I got up and left, before the end of the evening's racing, and without having said a word to anyone.

5. Subaltern whites, subaltern violence

The drama at the speedway that Saturday night was an act of racial violence undertaken by a white subaltern crowd. It emphasises the point that different iterations of white identity, different versions of racism, need to be teased and then read in longer histories of class formation and race formation, in this case, among the lower reaches of white society.

As class, race and gender were forged as categories of privilege and exclusion during South Africa's industrial revolution, the advantages that came with these were never allocated equally – we have seen earlier, for example, how some whites were in fact impoverished as capitalism re-shaped economy and society in the region. In the case of working class whites, notably those in the state sector, apartheid consolidated existing privileges that followed lines of race and gender – although the expanding demands of the apartheid state for [white] administrative labour meant that it did create opportunities for white women to enter fairly well-paid administrative work. The apartheid state also created and safeguarded the order necessary for whites to cash in on these privileges, at work, in society at large, and in the home.

With the end of apartheid, the class position of working class whites left them more vulnerable to loss of their privilege in the face of pressing demands for social and economic transformation than other whites more wealthy, more skilled. Put differently, these working folk were less able than other whites to parlay their race privilege into class privilege. It is thus hardly surprising that South African whites negotiated the transition to post-apartheid (but emphatically not post-racial) society in diverse ways. Some fled to shores anew, the so-called 'chicken run'. Some have fled behind the gates of suburban estates. Some learned to get along with their new neighbors. Or combinations of the above. While travelling recently through an exhausted and depressed district on the KwaZulu Natal South

Coast⁹, I saw how black and white people, of fairly moderate means, crafted a uniquely South African response to the desire to mark their status in the fragile new society. Clearly identifying a space in the market, developers had taken over an abandoned road camp. Historically, these camps were made up of rows of prefabricated housing, sometimes with a community hall of sorts, and they were laid out for itinerant white road workers, themselves near the bottom of the white social hierarchy under apartheid. The developers enclosed and gentrified the camp, re-named it an 'estate' and it proved a hit. On making enquiries, I was told that every unit in the 'estate' had sold out in six months.

It is impossible to tell what range of opportunities are available to the crowd at the speedway. We can legitimately argue though that their night at the track provided a carnival setting not just for modified saloon cars and V8s, but for a re-enactment of a subaltern white identity and white masculinity, and the reproduction of the social world in which these thrived, even if only for a few hours. As they cocked a snook at both the 'non-racialism' expected of whites at other sports stadia – like professional rugby – and also more 'respectable' kinds of white behaviours, they shaped an awkward, subaltern 'anti-structure' of the dominant *geists* of contemporary South Africa.

Of course, the symbolic lynching of the three Bangladeshi men could not have been foreordained. But once triggered, the enthusiasm with which the crowd participated, the lack of dissent or even uninterest suggest that this violence was latent to the coherence, energy and identity of this crowd. Their performance represented a strand of popular white violence that the apartheid state had sought to police, eliminate and punish from at least the early 1950s, as it transgressed the kind of 'order' that was emerging as a central feature of the apartheid state – the chimera of separate nations, co-existing according to some rational and regulated framework of lawfulness.

Apartheid's white proletarians, even those dependent most upon state wages and subsidies for their livelihoods, were never mere cyphers for the ideological and bureaucratic imperatives of apartheid state-making. Just as they were part of a bigger, broader apartheid project, they retained traditions of populism and sometimes popular violence forged on the frontier or the mining camps of the late 19th Century, policed but never entirely eliminated. 'Whiteness' and 'white violence' were never singular things, and violence was the preserve of neither the state nor white society's subalterns.

9 Once propped up by a plantation economy and cheap labour, the 'sugar districts', especially those on the south coast of KwaZulu Natal, have suffered an economic slump since the end of apartheid, which coincided with the sugar industry itself becoming leaner.

Fast forward to the present, and a few observations about the context in which the episodes at the speedway took place. First of all, they took place at a time when whites are subject to less intimate surveillance than they were under apartheid. The state is not that interested in the everyday minutiae of white life, except when these are flagrantly, publicly racist like the 2016 Penny Sparrow debacle, where, in a Facebook post Sparrow described black beachgoers as 'monkeys'.¹⁰ Secondly, there is strident clattering by Afrikaner nationalist groups like *Afriforum* for Afrikaner / white cultural self-determination and the right to private space. And finally, Bangladeshi people, while black, do not command much political capital or sympathy in South Africa. Unable to access work permits, these immigrants to South Africa have tended to open small convenience stores in townships, often financed by family savings in Bangladesh. Their little shops have been regular targets for looting and burning.¹¹ Whether or not these attacks are 'xenophobic' or 'criminal' (as government spokespersons always claim), they do highlight the vulnerability of Bangladeshi people in South Africa. These circumstances all created a niche for the kind of white violence on show that night at the speedway.

The display of white violence that night at the speedway was a story about race and class and in particular, it was a story about a class-based strand of racism. It should moreover serve as a reminder that 'whiteness' should not be viewed simply as an instrument of power in a Manichean world. But this does not minimise the danger represented by symbolic lynching of the three Bangladeshi men, and we should not lose sight of its salient moral lessons. The lynching was not only violent, but it was also a hate crime. In respect to the wave of lynching in India, Bhattacharjee (2017) observes that lynching is indicative of a deeper moral crisis than the coming of a fascist state: 'A society can resist a fascist state. How to resist a fascist society?' Let us be clear, post-apartheid South Africa is not contemporary India menaced by Hindu nationalism, and as historians of ethics warn us, too crude comparisons may be 'inappropriate, even tasteless' (see for instance Lee 2007: 69). Neither South African state nor society are threatened by any likelihood of a turn to 'fascism' but Bhattacharjee's warning about the hazards deep in the weft of society is potent. As events at the speedway revealed, racial violence is immanent to certain types of white identities.

10 <http://city-press.news24.com/News/penny-sparrow-back-in-court-on-criminal-charges-for-racist-comments-20160912>

11 <http://www.latimes.com/world/africa/la-fg-wn-southafrica-xenophobic-looting-20150126-story.html>

6. The historian

My race, gender and working class roots, along with my intellectual immersion in social histories of race, all implicated me in the events of which I have written. And my silence convicted me. Why did I do nothing at the time, and as a historian, what more could I have done? Perhaps I lacked Fanon's courage or, more troubling, his outrage. The second question is arguably easier to address.

As I wrote earlier, South African social history emerged in a very specific historical context, one of anti-apartheid activism. After the end of apartheid however, this nexus ended and its component of intellectual activism was all but decommissioned. With the primary struggle against apartheid won, social historians in particular were left unsure about where the focus of their work ought to be. At about the same time, dominant global concerns in history, anthropology and their adjacent fields shifted from histories and ethnographies of everyday life to the study of ideologies, representation, and the cultural and knowledge components of state power. These developments induced in many left-wing South African social historians a sense of disappointment. That their work was no longer taken seriously in the new moves to cultural studies and anthropologies of power, representation and ideology and more importantly, that their bottom-up approaches, shaped by class, made it difficult to establish clear connections between their work and new styles of mobilisation and protest. Ongoing service delivery protests, xenophobic attacks, unlikely political and social alliances and, closer to home for those intellectuals working at universities, the #feesmustfall protests, all caught historians flat-footed.

As a marker in South Africa's public life, the racial violence at the speedway pales into insignificance, but it does perhaps serve as a rallying call to social historians of race, to those who yearn to write for freedom and emancipation. Social history is well-placed to excavate deep down into the grounds of not only anti-racist struggle but also racist reaction. Identifying the historical genealogies, class forms, gender and popular traditions – including violence – that sustain these might go far in unmasking and unclothing white identities and pinning down racist acts, not only in their historical setting but in contemporary society too. Simultaneously recognising that old ways of doing social history need revision, and acknowledging the valuable angles available from anti-racist, feminist, queer and non-normative perspectives (Heatherton 2017), this would seem a more valuable exercise than manipulating an ahistoricised and generalised 'whiteness' within a set of theoretical abstractions. Following Ileana Rodriguez (2002: 14-15), a member of the Latin American Subaltern Studies group, an approach like this may help to re-assert the alliance between historiography and insurgency. And it may well represent a way of standing up to the crowd at the speedway.

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