



Julius Malema and the post-apartheid public sphere

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Julius Malema has been one of the most prominent and controversial public figures in post-apartheid South Africa. This article examines his impact within the post-apartheid public sphere as a space of spectacle. Working with a notion of the public sphere as constituted through a hybrid of rational and affective modes of communication, the article shows how a politics of spectacle articulated commercial and cultural changes in the country's mass media after 1994. This confluence shaped Malema's public persona and impact on the terms of public debate during his tenure as president of the ANC Youth League. The angry, unruly bad boy of post-apartheid politics, Malema's racial populism provoked garrulous public talk, often with far more heat than light, and traversed by racist invective that the earlier years of public dialogue had largely held at bay; yet he also exposed the force of old and emergent fault lines in the new social order more directly and acutely than many others have done. I argue that, symbolically, Malema entered the public sphere as a counterpoint to Nelson Mandela—unsettling the iconography of non-racialism, reasserting an angry and confrontational version of race that reinstated the spectre of violent conflagration that Mandela's 'miracle' held at bay.

Staged transgression has been Julius Malema's political oeuvre. And it has made him one of the most prominent public figures in South Africa post-apartheid. His accession to the presidency of the ANC Youth League in 2008 gave him instant prominence, and with remarkable rapidity, he became a ubiquitous presence in the national mass media, provoking emotive commentary and analysis in the press, on television and radio, and many a heated exchange in the blogosphere. As commentator Sean Jacobs observed, writing in July 2011,

“after spending time with South Africa’s mass media, online social networks or its blogosphere, any casual observer would conclude that the country’s politics mostly revolves around Julius Malema” (Jacobs 2011). In 2012, the National Press Club declared him Newsmaker of the Year (along with Thuli Madonsela). His prominence has almost always been linked to controversy, making him one of the most provocative and hyperbolic characters in post-apartheid public life. Few have reacted mildly to the man; he has been embraced and spurned, adored and despised. If heroic for some in the ways he flouted received political wisdom, allegations of rampant corruption, incitement to popular violence and his hubristic extravagances while Youth League president have led others to loathe and fear him, as an unscrupulous populist demagogue. In this article, I reflect on the spectacle of Julius Malema’s presidency of the ANC Youth League and its impact within the post-apartheid public sphere.¹

The concept of the public sphere is widely and variously used; so it is appropriate to begin with a brief specification of how I understand the term. Much of its contemporary proliferation is prompted by the work of Habermas, and there is much in his characterisation that remains useful and suggestive. Following Habermas, I understand the term to refer to “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed [...] A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body” (Habermas 1974: 49). I understand this to entail that the public sphere is both spatially and temporally fluid, rather than a fixed empirical entity: it is convened by acts of public assembly and exchange (see also Evans 2012). In the main, it is the mass media that initiate and oversee these processes, but the notion of the public sphere includes face-to-face and communal forums of debate. Implicit in this conceptualisation too is the possibility – or the inevitability – that the public sphere is plural, somewhat fragmented and dissonant, with fluctuating energies and modalities of talk. In other words, the notion of a single public sphere in this sense of the term is consistent with the existence of multiple publics: variously constituted assemblages of people party to varying modes of public conversation, with uneven effects.² The degree of openness and inclusiveness in the public sphere is thus an empirical question, subject to the workings of the mass media in relation to the wider political milieu,

1 There seems to be rather little by way of scholarly writing on Malema’s public impact. To my knowledge, there are two published articles focusing on media coverage of Malema (Hyde Clarke 2011, Kotze 2012); Fiona Forde’s informative book *An inconvenient youth*, is a journalistic political biography.

2 This point has been made in one or other way by many parties to debate about Habermas’ work: see, for example, Eley 1992, Calhoun 1992, Warner 2010, Fraser 1992, Gilmartin 1994, Dahlberg 2005.

the occasion of public assembly and the character of the public/s party to it. I also begin from the assumption that the public sphere is a space of both reason and affect, with the latter not necessarily to the detriment of the former. For several critics, Habermas' original normative formulation of the public sphere as a space of 'rational-critical debate' tended to evacuate the productive power of affect in the public sphere, as though the emotive suffusion of public argument was a measure of the dilution of its deliberative reason (see, for example, Dahlberg 2005: 113-4). More recently too, Habermas has expressed his suspicion of "any rhetoric of the high or the deep" along with "any aestheticisation of politics" (Habermas 1998: 4, 12). This has provoked considerable debate, with a variety of critiques asserting the salience of multiple ways of communicating – some more passionate and rhetorical than others, some more covert and understated than others³ – a theoretical adjunct, in many ways, to the notion of multiple publics. I align myself with a notion of reason as more complexly articulated with non-rational modes of expression than the original Habermasian conception would have it. Likewise, important and powerful public communication can be produced in the shadows or on the margins of explicit and open debate; there are many ways of talking, with different repertoires of silence, imprecision and ambiguity along with clarity.

This notion of the public sphere informs my analysis in the paper of the prominence of spectacle⁴ in the post-apartheid public sphere. The apartheid era too had its repertoires of spectacle – not least in the aestheticisation of power and violence;⁵ and this articulated with modes of representation in the mass media, from state television through to the popular press, as well as in literature of the time.⁶ The production of public spectacle in the post-apartheid milieu draws on these lineages, but in tandem with an important reconfiguration of the terms

3 See, for example, Fraser 1992, Young 1987, Warner 2010. Dahlberg (2005: 116) offers a reading of Habermas' more recent writing as consistent with the proposition that "we must embrace the aesthetic affective modes of communication in order to advance democratic culture".

4 I understand this to refer to performances, representations and practices with deliberately heightened, sensationalizing impact, involving both excess or hyperbole, and dramatic simplification; as Ndebele puts it, 'highly dramatic, highly performative' (1986: 143).

5 See e.g. Njabulo Ndebele's seminal essay (1986) on the preponderance of spectacle in black South African writing, along with the spectacle of 'obscene social exhibitionism' within apartheid society more widely; Rosalind Morris (2010) on representations of the *tsotsi* in magazines, film and other popular media, and within state discourses; Posel (1991) on the televised depictions of political violence during the 1980s.

6 In his fine analysis of the history of the black press from 1945 to 1963, Irwin Manoim (1983) demonstrates the extent to which its commercialization was closely associated with the sensationalism of content, and correspondingly emotive styles of representation.

of public debate beginning with the release of Nelson Mandela – inaugurating the spectacle of the ‘new’ South Africa. As I see it, Malema’s public impact was profoundly shaped by the articulation of spectacular politics (in this case, of an openly and cacophonously fractious ANC and its unruly Youth League) and the sensationalist predilections of the mass media irresistibly drawn to his repertoire of charismatic provocation. I suggest that Malema’s hyperbolic prominence (with all its melodramatic hype and simplistic *précis*) was the condition, rather than the negation, of his propensity to provoke sometimes thoughtful – if fragmented, angry and incomplete – argument, in respect of critical issues of the times. The result was a volatile and uneven configuration of public conversation – both ephemeral and profound, in a mix of sensationalism and substance, in repertoires of talk that were both explicit and implicit, overt and surreptitious. I conclude by suggesting that juxtaposing the spectacular public life of Julius Malema during his ANC Youth League years with that of Nelson Mandela draws attention to what Avery Gordon calls the ‘haunting’ presence of the past: “those apparitions, those ghosts that tie present subjects to past histories” (Gordon 2008: viii) as reminders of unfinished business that the progress of history seeks to lay to rest. If the mythic Mandela championed the project of ‘national reconciliation’ – his symbolic powers put to the work of performing ‘non-racialism’ – Malema emerged as the symbolic counterpoint, marking the limits of this project: a ghostly reminder of the abiding racial wounds that have endured, on the one hand, and of the power of violent anger to command political attention, on the other.

Malema unleashed his considerable powers to shock and unsettle public conversation into a public sphere shaped by significant changes in the character of the mass media that accompanied the transition from apartheid. A full account is beyond the scope of this article; what follows is a brief survey of salient features for the purposes of discussing Malema’s public impact and the character of public talk it produced. A new democratic constitution guaranteed freedom of expression and abolished long-standing apartheid modes of censorship. Yet soon after 1994, much of the alternative independent press collapsed (Hadland 2007: 68). And the mainstream press experienced a more or less immediate decline in readership (albeit picking up to a degree after 2000), at the same time as a tabloid press emerged with greater numbers and new constituencies of readers (Hadland 2007: 17). By 2006, the top-selling daily newspaper in the country was the tabloid *Daily Sun*, with a largely Black, lower middle-class and working-class, readership. At this time, approximately 450,000 copies were sold daily – comparable to sales of the weekly *Sunday Times*, but far in excess of the 191,322 copies of the mainstream daily *The Star* sold in 1994, then the biggest selling newspaper in the country (Hadland 2007: 17). As Herman Wasserman (2010) argues, the tabloid sector should not be dismissed as altogether politically

disengaged or intellectually lightweight. Yet its ascendancy does signal a striking shift in the mode in which information has been publicly transmitted and received: in highly sensationalised, typically personalised, stories, scant on detail and intellectual complexity. “Instead of sharing the mainstream’s preoccupation with the tumultuous post-liberation politics on the big stage, the tabloids turned their attention to sensational events concerning everyday people in small towns, informal settlements and townships” (Wasserman 2010: 175), and with a hyperbolic style of reporting saturated with emotional hype, be it horror or awe. At the same time, the tendencies to personalised hype and sensation-seeking infiltrated the mainstream press, unsettling the previously more rigid boundary between ‘highbrow’ and ‘low brow’ news-making. According to Jane Duncan, the appetite for investigative journalism in the mainstream newspapers persisted, with some noteworthy “upswings” (Duncan 2011: 15); but in some of the papers with the largest circulations – notably, the *Sunday Times* – cost-cutting measures depleted the pool of investigative skill, with the resultant tendencies for “stories [to be] re-written and ‘sexed up’ into front page ‘splashes’, leading to sensationalisation and the introduction of inaccuracies” (Duncan 2011: 17).

A penchant for newsy stories framed by leading personalities (rather than impersonal analysis) was also a feature of the burgeoning magazine sector, much of its growth accounted for by niche magazines, often with a “blurring of advertising material and editorial content” (Hadland 2007: 16). By 2005, Adrian Hadland (2007: 16) claims, there were 350 audited magazine titles, with as many as 20 million copies sold in the country each month. According to one estimate, mass consumer magazines – with relatively scant text eclipsed by panoplies of glossy photographs – accounted for about two thirds of these sales.⁷ As manuals of upward mobility and consumer aspiration, these publications have had powerful social and cultural effects, not least in promoting a cult of personality, celebrating the public figures whose lives perform and amplify popular preoccupations with status and desires to consume (Laden 2001).

Radio – long since the medium with the widest popular reach – also changed significantly after 1994 (Coplan 2011, Bosch 2011). National public radio diversified, while changes in broadcasting legislation allowed for an increase in the number of independent channels, as well as local community radio stations. Public talk featured prominently across the board. Two independent radio channels (Radio 702, as of 1988 and Cape Talk, which began in 1997) have been devoted entirely to talk shows. In many other instances, portions of the daily or weekly radio schedule have been allocated to phone-in opportunities for listeners to engage

7 <http://www.sagoodnews.co.za/fast_facts/sas_magazine_industry_2_8.html>

with each other and/or the radio anchor and invited presenter. As David Coplan (2011: 148) puts it, “in a kind of self-generating meta-communication, statements made by journalists, public commentators, experts, officials and politicians on the air then become subjects of dialogic discourse and criticism” – often with more heat than light, but as regular and animated popular fare. State-owned and independent television channels likewise have created programmes devoted to public talk, with panels of invited speakers in conversation with each other, and members of studio audiences and/or listeners phoning in or e-mailing their questions and comments. Radio and television talk shows have, in turn, often stimulated on-line conversations on dedicated blog sites or by way of facebook or twitter exchanges.

The overall result was a far more inclusive public sphere than that of the apartheid era, with a massive expansion of public exchange. Its character varied between different publics, but significantly shaped by the effects of the mass media in the late modern world more widely: prioritising human interest and celebrity stories over issue-driven analysis and commentary; encouraging repertoires of self-disclosure and the authentication of opinion on the strength of personal experience; giving primacy to the visual image over the written word, and producing modes of conversation saturated with affect (Conboy 2008).

If these are tendencies associated with the transformations of the mass media in late capitalism more widely, they take root in particular places, to varying degrees and in particular ways, depending on local histories and political conjunctures. In the case of post-apartheid South Africa, what some might call a degree of ‘tabloidisation’ in the mass media articulated in striking ways with the *political* logic of spectacle that accompanied the demise of apartheid, and perhaps most dramatically with the political ascendancy of Nelson Mandela as global icon of liberation. South Africa’s transition from apartheid was, after all, a spectacular process in many ways, and the manner of public debate about it was powerfully shaped from the start by modes of media coverage that helped to choreograph and celebrate a sense of rising national euphoria, borne of living in extraordinary times. This notion did not exclude or wholly marginalise the more sober and deliberative versions of the issues of the day, but politics-as-spectacle arguably emerged as the dominant popular imaginary of political life in the ‘new’ South Africa, and sensation-seeking media were well attuned to capturing and amplifying it. Indeed, key political moments were defined and constituted by hyperbolic media events.

It began with the globally heralded release of Mandela: comprehensively televised with emotive commentary, and often re-played, to the extent that images of Mandela’s triumphant appearance, hand in hand with his then wife

Winnie, became iconic of an excited new beginning for the country as much as for Mandela himself. The political story was also a human drama, as the mythic Mandela was inflected first and foremost as “an exemplary human being” (as Susan Sontag put it), to whom a violent and conflict-ridden world could look for ethical guidance and succor (Posel 2014). The first democratic elections were similarly a profound media spectacle, as South Africans watched images of long queues of people, White and Black, patiently – often euphorically – waiting to vote. Then there was the inauguration of Mandela as the first president of the ‘new’ democratic South Africa in 1994, where giant television screens reflected the surprise and excitement of huge, racially mixed, crowds joyously assembled to mark the palpably extraordinary historical moment. And South Africa’s triumph in the 1995 Rugby World Cup again performed an ecstatic nationhood, heralded on television in dramatic vein.⁸ These were heady and intensely emotional times, replete with hyperbolic invocations of ‘magic’ and ‘miracle’, associated quintessentially with the charisma and joyous power of Mandela himself. To a remarkable extent, Mandela’s personal biography became a symbolic précis of the national project itself. And as a man, his global stature and alluring presence gave him a ubiquitous media presence, as the subject of widespread popular adoration. Any number of popular blogs, radio phone-ins along with letters written to Mandela (now archived in the Mandela Foundation’s Centre for Memory) attested to his heroic elevation in the public imagination – to the extent that it was difficult to hear public critiques of the man’s political judgements and interventions, or skepticism about the imperatives of reconciliation and non-racialism (Posel 2014).

Central to this symbolic politics were the ways in which Mandela’s blackness was figured, as one of the sites of his personal transformation through his experience of twenty-seven years in prison. No longer the angry revolutionary, he emerged from prison as a champion of racial reconciliation, a wisely controlled, yet still commanding, presence. Careful attention was paid to how to depict this visually, not least in the course of the ANC’s election campaign in the early months of 1994. As Eve Bertelson (1994: 10) has shown, the images with which the ANC’s campaign culminated foregrounded the ‘new’ Mandela: the wise, yet vulnerable, sage; the strong, commanding and visionary statesman with gravitas and experience, rather than younger firebrand.

8 There were other aspects of this spectacularisation of politics that I cannot go into in this instance including the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, inaugurated in 1996, which was also pre eminently a public spectacle, that contributed powerfully to the production of a public sphere saturated with affect. See Posel 2008.

The mythic Mandela was arguably the condition and counterpoint of Malema's public persona, in both overt and more tacit ways. Malema too has been an actor in a public drama of political spectacle and sensation – in his case, the spectacle of open conflict and cacophony within the ANC, and its wider reverberations within the public sphere. And like Mandela, he has played a powerful role in shaping his script. As with Mandela, Malema's public impact emerged at the confluence of political and cultural factors: an articulation of a politics of spectacle with mass media primed for spectacular modes of communication and argument. Like Mandela, Malema has entered the public sphere as an extraordinary individual – but with their differences writ large, and as the tacit grammar of Malema's symbolic meanings. If Mandela was the national archetype of adult wisdom, the Black man willing to reconcile and embrace fellow White citizens, Malema styled himself as the quintessentially angry Black man: youthful militant refusing to cow-tow to his political elders, masculinist 'revolutionary', avowedly confrontational on racial issues, disinclined to compromise. In the closer analysis given below of the ways in which these meanings were produced, I will focus on the national conversations conducted in English, which no doubt limits the scope of the argument; however, given the range and frequency with which Malema resorted to English, as well as the prolific public argument that he provoked among first and second English-language speakers, this represents a significant chunk of the impact he made.

Malema's public prominence began with his installation as President of the ANC Youth League in 2008, a time of angry and divisive argument within the ANC. Malema's political capital was closely tied to the political favour and fortunes of Jacob Zuma. In 2007, at the Polokwane conference that had unseated Thabo Mbeki as president of the ANC, Malema had strenuously aligned himself with Zuma's bid for power, and was centrally instrumental in delivering Zuma the crucial support of ANC youth.

With Zuma's presidency of the ANC itself openly and publicly fraught with conflict, Malema's accession to power in the ANC Youth League was also controversial. The national conference that elected him was chaotic and cacophonous, setting the tone for many aspects of the Youth League's organisational life in the years to come. The first attempt at electing a leadership was cancelled as fights erupted between competing factions; amidst rumours of vote-rigging, an ongoing fracas led to the closure of the conference and its resumption a few months later after some of the dust had settled. Still, not shy of aggressive and intimidatory tactics, Malema took the reins of the ANC Youth League with gusto, weighing in heavily from the start in public argument about corruption allegations against Zuma. His rhetoric was violent. "Any force in our way we will eliminate. We are on a mission here. We will crush you. It doesn't

matter who you are, even if you are in the ANC”, he was quoted as saying (Bauer 2011). It was not long before Malema dominated the airwaves, speaking out boldly on matters of ANC policy and intra-party conflicts, and rapidly attaining what was arguably the high point of the Youth League’s influence and prominence within the ANC and the polity at large since the unbanning of the ANC Youth League in 1990.

In this endeavour, Malema and his allies built on a longer history in which the Youth League had positioned itself as the parent body’s *enfant terrible*. Established in 1944 under the leadership of Anton Lembede – with the famed trio of Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo as influential founding members – the Youth League had set out to challenge what it saw as the unduly timid tactics that had marked the ANC’s struggle against White supremacy. Espousing mass struggles focused on the grievances and humiliations that scarred the daily lives of Black South Africans – rather than the established political repertoire of written memoranda and disciplined deputations – the Youth League also positioned itself at some ideological distance from the ANC’s mainstream. The Youth League’s Basic Policy Document of 1948 makes no mention of ‘non-racialism’ (at the heart of the ANC’s policy position), invoking ‘African nationalism’ as its ideological driving force and declaring the Youth League as its vanguard within the ANC (ANC Youth League 1948).

The Youth League was banned, along with the ANC, in 1960, and formally resuscitated in 1990, as the merger of the South African Youth Congress (established within the country during the 1980s) and the ANC Youth Section that had operated in exile. The new Youth League resumed the role of ideological provocateur – and again, particularly in respect of the issue of race – nationally as much as within the ANC, its political tactics informed by the macho politics of the street that had dominated the anti-apartheid struggles of Black youth during the 1980s. Confronting a militarised and brutal state apparatus, young ‘comrades’ had committed themselves militantly to a strategy of rendering the townships ‘ungovernable’, their rhetoric one of war, ‘a peoples’ war’. At the forefront of violent clashes with police on the streets of the townships, it was mainly young men who had taken the lead, their macho bravado also the site of controversy among the ranks of older generations of township residents disapproving of what they saw as a generational usurpation of authority and discipline.⁹

Peter Mokaba, the first president of the new Youth League, set the tone for its post-apartheid style and impact. Revitalising the original commitment to

9 This is discussed in more detail in Posel 2013: 61–3.

'African Nationalism', he once again framed the Youth League's politics in terms of a militant and assertively Black activism. He soon unsettled the emergent rapprochement post-1990 between the ANC and the National Party that undergirded the constitutional negotiation process. At a youthful rally to protest the assassination of powerful and popular ANC leader Chris Hani by White right-wingers in 1993, Mokaba provocatively revived an old struggle song, *dubula ibhunu* (shoot the boer). In the ensuing public controversy, as White political leaders objected to the perceived racial assault, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu weighed in, rebuking Mokaba for jeopardising the fragile project of 'national reconciliation'. When Malema took over the reins of the Youth League as its fifth post-apartheid president, it was with Mokaba as his avowed role model (Forde 2011: 140).

Even more strikingly than his predecessors', Malema's relationship with the parent body developed ambiguously and precariously. On the one hand, Malema was widely perceived as a weapon in Zuma's arsenal, militant and uncompromising in support of his overlord (until such time as their relationship soured and Malema emphatically turned against him in 2012). For example, in 2008, with public attention keenly focused on corruption charges against Jacob Zuma, Malema declared himself and his followers in the Youth League willing to 'kill for Zuma'. And in 2009, in the midst of the public furore that attended Zuma's rape trial and subsequent acquittal, Malema contemptuously denigrated Zuma's accuser by disputing the plausibility of her rape claim. On the other hand, it was equally clear that Malema was his own man: if Zuma's personal rottweiler, Zuma was not holding the leash. As the *Daily Sun* put it, "Julius Malema – the controversial leader of the African National Congress Youth League – says NOBODY can tell him what to do [...] And, up to a point, HE'S RIGHT!" (Matekane 2008). Thus, in April 2010, during a visit to Zimbabwe, Malema lauded Mugabe for the violent seizure of land from White farmers and called for comparable strategies in South Africa, *contra* ANC policy. And in the same month, Malema unleashed a public outcry during a heated confrontation with BBC journalist Jonah Fisher during a televised press conference – furiously berating Fisher's alleged "white tendency [...] of undermining blacks" (cited in Forde 2011: 190) – which embarrassed the South African government. For these and other breaches of ANC policy and national decorum, Malema was then charged by the party for bringing it into public disrepute. According to the *Sunday Times*, the charge list included "promoting racism, sexism, tribal chauvinism, religious and political intolerance" (Trapido 2010). Yet apparently undeterred, in August the following year, Malema committed the Youth League to an attack on the 'puppet regime' of Botswana's President Ian Khama – wholly at odds with ANC policy and the South African government's allegiances within SADC (Chauke 2011). Notwithstanding

some discomfort within the mainstream of the ANC, Malema had clearly asserted his power to push the envelope of public discourse. As he put it, with wry understatement, “we sometimes say things that old people are afraid to say” (quoted in Du Preez & Roussouw 2009: 75).

Within the context of mass media with a now established repertoire of sensationalist communication, and therefore entranced by this drama of charismatic personality and the *frisson* of political confrontation, Malema offered irresistibly rich pickings for versions of news as spectacle. His mode of politics was inherently and deliberately sensationalising – which ensured maximum publicity. Not one inclined to careful or systematic exposition of ideas or policies, Malema’s political messages were akin to slogans – populist précis – perfectly suited to media repertoires of punchy sound-bites, and irresistible material for emotional exchanges of views aired repeatedly on any number of talk shows. The Youth League’s position in the internecine conflicts within the ANC, along with its ideological stances on divisive issues, were seldom argued; more typically, they were emphatically stated, with unambiguous conviction and certitude – a repertoire reproduced in much of the popular debate it provoked. Increasingly, Malema stood in for the Youth League as a whole, and became a public celebrity, the focus of tabloidesque fascination. What he said, what he wore, what cars he drove, where he went, with whom, as well as what ructions he caused, were all regular fare across the spectrum of the mass media, and the focus of public reaction. The public nickname ‘Juju’ reflected a process of public appropriation – disdainful or adoring, but either way in recognition of the extent of public and polarising preoccupation with the man. Among his detractors, Malema’s inferior education (his matriculation certificate showing very low grades was published in the national press in 2008 and widely circulated on-line) became the centrepiece of satire and send-up. “He is not the sharpest tool in the box”, as one blogger put it.¹⁰ With its finger on this pulse of public talk, Nando’s (the chicken restaurant chain) put out an advert in 2009 showing a simple-minded model of Malema foolishly confounded by simple arithmetic,¹¹ which also circulated widely on Youtube. To his fans, his unsophisticated bluntness was heroic; “I’m so in love with Juju, he’s so entertaining hahahah! Akancengi uJulius! He calls a spade a spade”, wrote one blogger.¹² But if initially the butt of public jokes in many quarters – many of them tacitly or explicitly racist – it was the more militant and menacing facets of Malema’s public persona that came increasingly to the fore. Again, public reactions were mixed. The dominant depictions of Malema in

10 <http://www.tvsa.co.za/default.asp?blogname_3rd_degree_episode_summaries&ArticleID_13296To>

11 <www.youtube.com/watch?v_L8Aq042KPSg>

12 <http://www.tvsa.co.za/default.asp?blogname_3rd_degree_episode_summaries&ArticleID_13296>

the mainstream press were of an emerging demagogue, with headlines referring to him as 'Mister Nasty', 'depraved', 'delinquent', 'unschooled thug' and a 'bigot' (Hyde-Clark 2011: 47), while in some Black circles – particularly within the youthful *kwaito* party circuit – Malema was becoming something of a cultural icon, his political bravado musically celebrated. A popular *kwaito* musician released a praise song, '*gcwala ngoJulius*' ('I'm crazy about Julius'), two musical remixes of Malema's notorious attack on Jonah Fisher became popular and also circulated on Youtube, and other popular black musicians sang of their support for the ANC Youth League, including at the seventeenth annual South African Music Awards (Posel 2013: 71).

It was exactly this tabloid persona, of the fascinatingly – or alarmingly – angry, unmannered, bad boy of post-apartheid politics, that gave Malema the power to hone in on uncomfortable political issues, without any concessions to either tolerant or measured debate, and with the confidence that the media would amplify his declarations with saturation coverage. His most provocative interventions were proffered under the rubric of waging 'economic war'. In defiance of declared ANC policy, Malema decried the ANC government's failure to transcend apartheid strictures on land ownership, and brazenly called for land seizures by the poor. The echoes of Zanu-PF policy in Zimbabwe were unmistakable; indeed, during Malema's unauthorised and highly publicised visit to Mugabe, he heralded Mugabe as a political mentor and role model. Similarly defiantly and provocatively, Malema called for the nationalisation of South African mines, as the bastion of abiding White economic supremacy. A sensitive issue from the early days of South Africa's democratic transition, the ANC – wary of alienating foreign investment and unsettling its emerging understanding with captains of industry – had retreated from the commitment to a version of nationalisation articulated in the 1955 Freedom Charter. Malema, however, weighed in, fully mindful of the volcanic reaction his intervention would ignite.

As had been the case with the original Youth League, Malema was not shy to unsettle the ANC's commitment to 'non-racialism'; indeed, it was the issue of race that marked his ideological interventions most stridently. The rhetoric of 'economic war', at its most explicit and provocative in 2011, was explicitly racialised. Speaking at the Youth League's sixty-seventh anniversary celebrations in 2011, Malema named the enemy as "the white minority" (Bosch 2011) – as he did when addressing Youth League supporters in an informal settlement, nominating himself to the category of "fearless leaders who will tell these whites that we are putting our people here for free. We have to buy land from whites when they did not even buy land from us. This is confirmation that we must get the land for free" (cited in Molatlhwa 2011). Having convened a 'economic freedom march' from Johannesburg to Pretoria, with throngs of journalists in attendance, Malema

addressed the assembled marchers in English so as to ensure that his provocation reached the White publics to which it was partly addressed: "When they ask you why you are marching, you must say you are marching because you want to be like whites. Everything whites have, we also want it" (cited in Mngxitama 2011). The 'economic war' was a matter of racial expropriation and compensation: "We must restore our dignity. We must have everything that white people have. Everything they have in town we want the same where we stay, better services" (cited in Mabuza & Sapa 2011).

Since Malema's utterances, the question of the need for 'economic revolution' – the 'economic liberation' of South Africa's Black population that the 'political revolution' of 1994 had failed to produce – has gained further traction. If Malema's own contributions tended to be sloganistic rather than reasoned, they have triggered a debate that has since deepened in other sectors, including within the ANC, about the need for a 'second transition' to effect more far-reaching economic transformation. From the standpoint of the more tabloidesque of the public media, however, Malema's refusal to respect the 'non-racial' etiquette of post-apartheid public debate detonated heated exchanges, much of it among digital publics within which blogging was often the electronic equivalent of graffiti, replete with crude racist diatribes – apparently from both Black and White bloggers – that breached the more polite norms of debate in more mainstream public forums. They serve as reminders of the extent to which an aggressive rhetoric of racial stereotyping and prejudice has lingered beyond the apartheid era and continues to shape public communication in more marginal media: the residues of apartheid racism and its new post-apartheid forms that the dominant registers of public discourse post-1994 have largely silenced.

In other respects, Malema's sensationalising of the issue of race in post-apartheid has opened up one of the most contentious – and hitherto largely unspoken – issues of the manner of the 'new' South Africa, namely the politics of conspicuous consumption. One of Malema's most sustained exposures of the racial raw nerve of the post-apartheid body derived from his conspicuous embrace of 'bling'. Predictably, the media made a meal of it, relishing his penchant for designer labels, fancy cars, expensive champagne and lavish partying, which were typically photographed and described in great detail, and typically with obvious distaste for its unsubtle excess. His Breitling watch – estimated to cost in the region of R250.000 – prominently displayed on his wrist, became a symbolic précis of his lust for expensive stuff, regularly revisited in any number of debates and critiques. Malema, in turn, made no secret of his tastes – declaring them a mark of distinction, and attributing their acquisition to what he learnt from the ANC itself. Campaigning at the University of Limpopo (with a largely Black student body) prior to the national election in April 2009, he was characteristically blunt

in underscoring and embracing the new politics of Black upward social mobility in post-apartheid South Africa,

The ANC changes lives. It can change you from a hobo into some one very important. This ANC has taught those who are insulting it today¹³ to use fork and knife, to taste red wine, to wear expensive suits (Ncana 2009).

Nor was Malema alone in such predilections; many Youth League leaders became known for their similarly prominent consumerist extravagances. Some of it occurred in leisure time – as in a highly publicised ‘mega-wedding’ of one of Malema’s friends in Mauritius; but expensive gear was also a political style, and part of a public rhetoric of racial accomplishment. Consumerist affluence was also the sign of a blurring of politics and entertainment that characterised the Youth League’s public appearances during these years. ‘Big bashes’ hosted and funded by the Youth League or the ANC became venues for attracting youthful political support. With ANC leaders often in attendance, along with social celebrities and other high flyers, these occasions brought young Black supporters of the Youth League into social contact with the Black *nouveau riche* – their affluence and material sophistication a mark of aspiration for those lower down the rungs of upward mobility (see Posel 2013: 70–2).

As Malema’s opulence grew more assertive, so too did the public critique – often in tandem with suspicions about how he supported this extravagant lifestyle. With many insisting that his relatively modest salary as a Youth League official could not sustain it, allegations proliferated about corrupt business dealings – the product of preferential access to governmental tenders as a consequence of his political networks (see Kriel 2011). The accusations, in turn, produced counter-accusations from the Youth League and its supporters, of efforts to criminalise Malema’s lifestyle to “settle narrow political scores” (Mabuza 2011).

The consumerist spectacle that attached to Malema’s public persona was all the more controversial for his simultaneous self-positioning as a champion of the poor and unemployed, fighting for the ‘economic liberation’ of the masses. Many – including his detractors in the ANC – were quick to point to the apparent contradiction of one so demonstrably opulent and self-enriching claiming to represent the interests of those languishing on the economic margins. For Malema and his supporters, however, there was no such contradiction. For, as suggested earlier, this ‘economic war’ was pre-eminently a racial struggle,

13 Malema was referring, in this instance, to Sam Shilowa, erstwhile senior member of the ANC who left to form a new party, COPE.

in which solidarity of the Black rich and poor was the necessary and effective weapon against the tenacious economic domination of the 'White minority'. As he put it, "We [in the Youth League] are the elite that has been deliberately produced by the ANC as part of its policy to close the gap between whites and blacks in this country" (Du Preez & Roussouw 2009: 23). Black material affluence became a form of racial achievement; conspicuous material displays by Black leaders made a quintessentially political point. In Malema's words, responding directly to critics of his and the Youth League leaders' posh lifestyles,

If we are going to refuse the youth [of the Youth League] to drive these [fancy] cars, it means they are only good for white youth. Ours will never drive those cars. So we must sit and appreciate the good things by whites and not by one of our own. That's what we are trying to break (quoted in Du Preez & Roussouw 2009: 23).

This racial politics of conspicuous consumption scripted perhaps the most controversial public spat about Black bling during Malema's term of office in the Youth League. These were the so-called 'naked sushi parties' held by his friend, political ally and sponsor, Kenny Kunene on October 2010 in Johannesburg and then again in Cape Town in February 2011, with which Malema was closely associated. A one-time prisoner with humble beginnings turned successful businessman, Kunene was wont to splash his cash around with bold and provocative largesse – including offering open financial support for Malema's Youth League. The first of the notorious parties – a celebration of Kunene's fortieth birthday – was held at an up-market club that he had acquired as one of his recent spoils, and was clearly intended to be in the public eye, staged as an on-screen performance. With prominent socialites, entertainers and political figures in attendance including – pre-eminently, Julius Malema – Kunene lavished expensive French champagne on his guests, who were led into the venue on a red carpet in the full glare of national and international media presumably assembled there at Kunene's invitation. What guaranteed both parties their volcanic public impact was the arrangement of semi-naked women as 'plates' of sushi from which the guests proceeded to eat – again in full visibility of the compliant journalists. The sexual innuendos were obvious and transgressive, so too was the hubristic excess of it all – in the case of the Cape Town event, summarised by the figure of R700.000 as the grandiose cost of it all (according to Kunene), which featured prominently in all the ubiquitous commentary and argument that immediately attended the event.

Unsurprisingly, the occasions received saturation media coverage for weeks thereafter. Much of it was wholly sensationalising, replete with the thrill of scandal and satisfying public relish for photographs of local black paparazzi

decked out in designer outfits in the midst of other young things behaving badly. But other responses recognised more serious registers of argument – to the point that, as the *Mail and Guardian* (2011) observed, the event “triggered a national debate [...] Images of [Kunene] eating sushi off half-naked young women [...] came to symbolize the alleged excesses of South Africa’s new black elite”. In the words of *New York Times* journalist Celia Dugger (2013) “the Kunene story [...] crystallised a recurring question about life in post-apartheid South Africa: is the accumulation and exhibition of such wealth a sign that blacks have finally arrived after an era when whites hogged the high life, or is it evidence of a moral decay undermining Nelson Mandela’s once great liberation movement?”.

Black South Africans were themselves deeply divided on the issue, with feminists lambasting the ‘commodification’ of the women as plates and a range of NGOs, individual citizens, political and social commentators deploring the garish hyperbole of it all. Zwelinzima Vavi, secretary general of COSATU, the trade union federation closely aligned with the ANC, expressed intense disgust: “It is the sight of these parties where the elite display their wealth, often secured in questionable methods, that turns my stomach [...] This spitting on the face of the poor and insulting their integrity [...] makes me sick” (quoted in Plantive 2011). While Zuma himself remained loudly silent, other elders of the ANC deemed the whole affair ‘unrevolutionary’, focusing their critique largely on the diminution of women: “the act is defamatory, insensitive and undermining of woman’s integrity”, said ANC secretary general Gwede Mantashe – avoiding the question of flamboyant excess.

Others were quick to defend Kunene’s right to spend his money as he pleased and lauded his accomplishment as a Black man who had come from nowhere to hit the spotlight. As journalist Charlotte Plantive (2011) put it,

The criticism of South Africa’s black nouveau riche [took] [...] a racial turn, with supporters of the bling lifestyle questioning why white extravagance was hardly criticised. Kunene’s business partner, Gayton McKenzie, pointed to American billionaire Preston Haskell’s 12 million rand New Year’s Eve party at his Cape Town mansion, saying the host was never the target of a public back lash. ‘If Kunene was merely spitting in the face of the poor with a 700,000 rand party, then a 12 million rand one must have been a bomb blast on their heads’, said McKenzie. ‘It seems we blacks must still know our place’, he added.

Kunene mounted his own defence in similar terms. Responding to Vavi’s rebuke in an open letter, he was equally acerbic: “You remind me of what it felt like to live under apartheid. You are telling me, a black man, what I can and cannot do with

my life [...] You are narrow-minded and still think that it's a sin for black people to drive sports cars or be millionaires at a young age. You make my stomach turn" (quoted in Plantive 2011).

Kunene soon recanted and apologised, clearly in response to political pressure put on Malema by the ANC. Following disciplinary charges brought against him by the ANC, Malema was expelled from the Youth League and the ANC, and he has since formed a new political party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), eschewing his bling of his Youth League persona and committing anew to the cause of 'economic liberation', differently styled and kitted out. But the issue – cogently summarised in the quotations above – is unlikely to recede. These public arguments about conspicuous consumption were seldom merely concerned with how much stuff any one person needs or should lay claim to; the likes of Malema and Kunene succeeded in exposing the racialised overtones of these arguments, tapping into a far longer history that had politicised peoples' relationships to things. Indeed, the making of the racial order in South Africa was inseparable from regimes of accumulation and consumption; if whiteness implied an entitlement to prosperity, being classified Black was tantamount to being judged unworthy of certain modes of consumption (Posel 2010). As Mehita Iqani (2012: 13) shows, even by the early 1990s, in the dominant White imaginary of South African society, "black South Africans did not drive cars, shop in malls or buy drinks in suburban nightclubs and bars. They used cheap public transport and they consumed their beer in township shebeens". So it comes as no surprise that as Black consumerism became more visible and socially assertive, mainstream media coverage of this phenomenon reflected a habit of White suspicion: "a discursive linking of a taste for luxury goods and lifestyles [on the part of Black people] to a lack of public accountability or a disregard for the poor" (Iqani 2012: 15). At the same time, and in part as a sometimes tacit, sometimes explicit rejoinder to this rhetoric of racial suspicion, the advent of 'freedom' in South Africa has included an assertive, often hedonistic, freedom to consume (Posel 2010). And as the naked sushi controversy highlighted, this has exposed fault-lines within Black publics on the question of Black wealth in a context of stark inequality.

What then, does this add up to by way of a perspective on the post-apartheid public sphere? Since 1994, there has been much that has been 'tabloidesque' in the manner of public talk: emotive hype, a preoccupation with charismatic personality, news as story more than an assemblage of fact. In the early years of the 'new' South Africa, the convergence of a politics of spectacle with commercial and cultural logics thereof served the cause of 'national reconciliation' well: amplifying, indeed partly choreographing the emotional expression of popular consensus that attached to Mandela's iconic leadership as a champion of 'non-

racialism'. Malema's ascendancy to the presidency of the ANC Youth League put repertoires of spectacle to very different political ends, with very different effects in the public sphere: polarising, rather than producing consensus, foregrounding a politics of race that sat uncomfortably with the discourse of non-racialism.

As had been the case in the years of the Mandela presidency, Malema's recourse to emotive rhetoric and hyperbolic précis was neither wholly superficial nor thoughtless. Indeed, in Malema's case, it was exactly this repertoire that enabled him to cut to the chase of lingering and uncomfortable political issues, centred on the abiding concentration of wealth in White hands. Some of the terms of the ensuing argument were clear and explicit, if typically rather stylised and unnuanced. But there are other dimensions of the public conversations that Malema provoked which drew on more tacit and surreptitious registers of meaning – even if these are by definition more difficult to pin down with precision. Recall that the early 1990s were the most politically violent years in the country's history. Expectations of civil war were widespread. A variety of surveys showed rising levels of White fear at the prospect of an escalating violent conflagration – reinstating the longstanding spectre of the angry Black mob: *die swart gevaar*, iconic of the dreaded prospect of Black insurrection against White minority rule that had dominated the White collective imagination since apartheid's inception (Posel 2014: 76-7). In his 1985 ethnography of everyday life among middle class Whites in a small town in the Western Cape, Vincent Crapanzano had captured this habitus of fear as a micro-politics of suspense: confronting a foreboding future that was ill-defined but for “the dread black cloud hanging over us” (Crapanzano 1985: 248). For Black people, the brutalities of the early 1990s portended the spectral tenacity of apartheid, pitting its Black subjects against each other in a self-destructive vortex of ‘Black on Black violence’. Then, ‘miraculously’, the violence ceased and a peaceful settlement was achieved. In the realm of symbolic politics, this was largely Mandela's doing – as the miracle-maker, a ‘man of peace’, champion of reconciliation and racial harmony. Surely Malema's symbolic power – rhetorically violent, angrily confrontational and brazenly racialising – has been to reinstate the spectres of violent conflagration, White versus Black and ‘Black on Black’ – revivifying longstanding fears that the country's racial collisions would inevitably have a cataclysmic end. British journalist David Smith (2010) captured some of this, in characterising Malema as “the nightmare future that haunts white South Africans”. But in the main, these spectres of old stalk the imagination in more blurred and surreptitious ways, seldom explicitly and openly stated. In her book, *Ghostly matters*, Avery Gordon eloquently captures this ghostly quality of the past. “Haunting”, she writes, “is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done

with [...] That which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities” (Gordon 2008: xvi). She directs her argument about the need to take the spectral qualities of past oppression seriously primarily towards a fuller comprehension of the experiential complexities of those who were oppressed; but arguably, a similar case can be made in respect of the oppressors too. If mythically, Mandela was the leader South Africans were hoping for, Malema might be the one we have been waiting for.

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