

BOOK REVIEW

Premesh Lalu. *Undoing Apartheid*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023. 202 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$24.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-509-55283-2.

Premesh Lalu's *Undoing Apartheid* overviews how contemporary South African cultural workers have dealt with the legacies of the system. It is rooted in attention to concepts of myth and imagined facts that undergirded the system and continue to undergird South African concepts of race and identity as fixed. Moving from Greek theater to Faust, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and contemporary work, *Undoing Apartheid* ambitiously—yet succinctly!—situates the apartheid system within both real and imagined paradigms.

Lalu narrates the process through six chapters, aiming to show how apartheid became part of South Africa's core identity and explaining why it remains there today. The introductory first chapter, "Apartheid's Double-binds," of course lays this out. Lalu begins by examining what he calls apartheid's "mythic core," that which has cemented the system in the country's memory and identity. He then leads to a discussion of how the book focuses on "benign" petty apartheid, which impacted everyday lives more but which receives less scholarly attention than grand apartheid. This paradigm brings about methodological paradigms, Lalu tells us, because petty apartheid is "mostly unavailable as a trace in the archive." Through the lens of Richard Rives's novel *Emergency Continued*, readers encounter the trojan horse concept, thinking about ways in which petty apartheid affected people as an outcome of grand apartheid and in which, due to this unavailability in the archive, cultural work becomes a necessary lens. He concludes the chapter by thinking about literary theory and art critiques as mechanisms for better understanding the day-to-day lives and impacts of the system.

Chapter Two, "Apartheid's Mythic Precursors," asks readers to rethink the paradigm of apartheid as a natural outcome of South African history. Rebutting scholars such as Leonard Thompson, who argued that Calvinism is key to understanding Afrikaner nationalism, Lalu argues that myth represents a more significant container. Apartheid, he argues, basically constitutes an imagined set of facts related to race and social regulation. He situates the ability to imagine apartheid precisely within its early twentieth-century context. Thinking about technological anxieties and/or global war as core parts of bringing about the system, Lalu leads us to ask whether this need for social control and myths built to surround it are products of the *deus ex machina* environment in which the system was born and thrived. Chapter Three, "The Return of Faust," brings us then more deeply into conversations about apartheid. Introducing cultural products ranging from William Kentridge's play on Faust, to Goethe, to wondering whether Marx viewed colonialism as a discourse on technological futurity or

on nature, Lalu moves through a range of direct and appropriate allegories to understand the system. “Would apartheid’s end signal a concomitant finalization of colonial forms of objectification that proved definitive of an order of race that took shape in the aftermath of slavery?” he asks on page 67 as the chapter begins. This question permeates the rest of the work.

Chapter Four, “Woyzeck and the Secret Life of Apartheid’s Things” continues the discussion of how apartheid paradigms fit into wider contexts, arguing that apartheid is derived from indirect rule elsewhere in Africa. It is not just an intentional disconnect between state and citizens that began in the twentieth century. This chapter also discusses ways in which the system permeated South Africans’ identities into the present, speaking about “despair about the national spirit.” This comes, Lalu argues, from Hendrik Verwoerd’s propensity as academic and administrator to divide apartheid into smaller parts, forming the personal control that came to define the system. Much of the movement out of apartheid, then, may come from reappropriating personal control and feelings. Chapter Five, “Post-Apartheid Slapstick,” narrates ways in which South Africans have dealt with the uncertainty of not knowing whether to laugh or cry about the system and its legacies. Apartheid may have been based on myth, Lalu argues, but these imagined categories became and remain very real. Postapartheid structures such as the TRC seemed to make violence legal, and absurdism in art makes it more personal and relatable.

In his sixth and final chapter, “The Double Futures of Post-Apartheid Freedom,” Lalu brings readers back to the Trojan Horse Massacre of the 1980s and the connections between Greek tragedy and apartheid. This underscores the ways in which petty apartheid and its everyday indignities served as a template for implementing grand apartheid, and it also speaks to the significance of cultural production as a means of processing this system.

Overall, this latter point is what makes *Undoing Apartheid* such a significant book. It is a welcome addition to conversations about how apartheid most significantly affected people’s personal lives, and as its discussion centres on reactions to culture, it does not seem unnecessarily invasive or appropriative of individual pain. It served even as a reminder for this reviewer of the importance of immersing oneself further in cultural work, rather than being tempted to view the system as largely a product of the political past.

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