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Between nostalgia and apocalypse

White nationalist remembrance of the past and fear of the future in post-apartheid South Africa

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Introduction

On 29 May 2024, South Africa's democratic elections occurred amidst an increasing climate of rising authoritarian and right-wing politics. In a context of growing economic insecurity, political and social instability and contestations over the national identity of a transitioned society, it is perhaps not altogether surprising that a climate of nationalist populism, which incorporates dimensions of xenophobic sentiment, has taken over much of the political and collective imaginaries of the new South Africa. For example, in 2018, the leader of the political party ActionSA, Herman Mashaba, publicly apologised following criticism of his remarks against an undocumented informal trader in the city of Johannesburg, in which he made references to the spread of ebola (South African Human Rights Commission 2018). Other political groups, such as the Patriotic Alliance party, have also incorporated dimensions of anti-immigrant sentiment as part of their mobilisation. The rise of the self-styled vigilante group, Operation Dudula[1] further signalled the rising tide of anti-immigrant sentiment in the country.

These different political and social movements embody strands of right-wing populism that organize around an affective mobilisation of fear, hate and disgust to construct what Fanon has described as "the phobogenic other[2]" (Fanon 1967,

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1 *Dudula*, which is an isiZulu word meaning 'to force out' or 'knock down', refers to the group's objective of expelling immigrants from the country.

2 The phobogenic other is a person or object that induces fear. Phobogenic othering is often interwoven with racial and/or gender/sexual stereotypes.

151). Yet, they are distinct from the kind of social organizing that white populist mobilizations in the country have traditionally deployed. This distinction is rooted in the recourse to nostalgic forms of galvanizing that emphasise an idealised past. Such idealisations often take the form of remembrance of forgotten or lost periods due to social and political upheaval. White nationalist politics in post-apartheid South Africa is further distinct from other global resurgences of populism in the sense that it takes place within a context of white minority status.

This paper explores mobilisations framed around remembrance in white nationalist movements in post-apartheid South Africa in the past ten years, with a particular focus on the AfriForum. Our analysis of the rhetoric presented here draws on a range of critical theoretical and affect theory literature. These frameworks help us address the challenges of transitional justice in a society emerging from the tumultuous and violent histories of colonialism and apartheid. We engage with Svetlana Boym (2001) and Michael Titlestad's (2016) concepts of "restorative nostalgia" and "apocalyptic anticipation", which highlight the role of white anxiety and nostalgia in shaping white populist ideological movements. This positioning has fuelled opposition to policies aimed at redressing past inequalities, often relying on racial stereotypes, fear, and, at times, hatred to mobilize supporters. After situating the emergence of AfriForum and other white nationalist movements in South Africa's national project of remembrance, the subsequent analysis focuses on several prominent public issues: 1) debates surrounding the old national flag, 2) controversies over a historic struggle song perceived by some as inciting hate against whites, 3) the complex discourse around land redistribution, and 4) challenges related to affirmative action policies.

The place of white nostalgia in South Africa's national project of remembrance

In post-apartheid South Africa, the national project of remembrance is embedded in various forms of commemoration and memorialization. These include national public holidays, monuments, museums, the act of renaming public institutions and landmarks, and other formal events. Particularly prominent in the late 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, this memorialization project has not been without tension or conflict. For instance, some have regarded it as too costly, given the co untry's pressing economic challenges. But the most sustained critique of South Africa's efforts to deal with its past is rooted in the construct of white loss, which often conflicts with key constitutional and redistributive gains made in the country's new democracy. This tension is evident in the activities of white-centric organizations such as AfriForum and Solidarity Movement.

AfriForum, founded in 2006 following public consultations on its charter and closely affiliated with the Solidarity trade union, is a non-governmental organization primarily focused on defending the interests of the Afrikaner population. While the organization and its leadership have positioned themselves as a civil rights group committed to protecting citizens from government corruption, this self-characterization has not been widely accepted (see du Toit 2017; du Preez 2018; van der Westhuizen 2018). Critics like du Toit (2017) describe AfriForum and Solidarity Movement's extensive reach as akin to being a "state within a state", pointing to their establishment of a university, welfare organizations focused on white poverty, news media, and other civic institutions. AfriForum's influence permeates nearly every facet of Afrikaner civic life, from education and legal affairs to media and culture, reinforcing its support base. With a membership exceeding 200,000, driven in part by populist campaigns against affirmative action, transformation policies, cultural rights issues, and

concerns over security and crime, du Preez (2018) contends that AfriForum is likely the wealthiest non-governmental organization on the continent.

Similar to the Freedom Front Plus (FFP), a political party that advocates for the preservation and protection of white, primarily Afrikaner, interests, AfriForum has faced significant backlash. One notable example occurred in 2016, when AfriForum contested street name changes that replaced apartheid-era figures. Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng, presiding over the case, criticized AfriForum as "divisive, somewhat selfish, and without much regard for the centuries of deprivation black people had to endure" (City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality v AfriForum and Another 2016, 26). However, unlike the FFP, which explicitly frames its politics around Afrikaner identity and interests, AfriForum presents itself as a "pro-minorities" group, focused on protecting the rights and interests of various minorities in South Africa. AfriForum's CEO, Kallie Kriel, has stated that the organization seeks to redefine Afrikaner identity by distancing it from its racist past and separating itself from far-right movements (Powell 2019).

Yet, this narrative has been met with scepticism: critics argue that AfriForum's selective activism and predominantly white Afrikaner membership undermine the country's broader nation-building and redress efforts. For instance, van der Westhuizen (2018) argues that AfriForum has "become the face of white denial about the past and defiance of the need for redress in the most unequal country in the world". The organization, van der Westhuizen notes, has successfully channelled growing resentment over the loss of Afrikaner control of the state into a political project. In 2018, Kallie Kriel again ignited public fury and debate in his declaration that apartheid was not a crime against humanity precisely because not enough people were killed during that period to justify the description.

The Solidarity Movement (parent body to AfriForum) is another emergent social movement that attends to Afrikaner minority interests in post-apartheid South Africa. Originally founded in 1902 as the whites-only Mineworkers' Union (MWU), the union rebranded as the Solidarity Movement in 2015. According to van Zyl-Hermann (2018, 2) "the Solidarity Movement is driving a national populist reinvigoration of ethnic and racial identity politics". In contrast to claims of a white disidentification and fragmentation (see Blaser 2012), van Zyl-Hermann argues that white Afrikaner identity has galvanized around new forms of defensiveness in the post-apartheid context. Against a background of increasing state failure and corruption, the movement has mobilised around protection of white interests and security: "faced with a government 'concentrating on blacks', the movement undertook to put whites first" (van Zyl-Hermann 2018, 2).

As part of its rebrand, the Solidarity Movement sought to separate itself from the racist apartheid history within which it had originally flourished. Instead, part of its reinvention presented an Afrikaner social group that was victimized and isolated by the governing state, but also triumphant in its resilience against this victimization and isolation. In a book titled *Basta! Ons voetspore is in Afrika* ("Enough! Our footprints are in Africa"), the Deputy CEO of the movement, Dirk Hermann, writes a letter to his daughters, which includes the following passage: "I want to free you from the myth that, because of privilege and exploitation, we carry 350 years' worth of guilt. I want to free you from the tyranny of the majority-led representation of the past. Daddy is writing this letter because you are my children of Africa; you are free Afrikaners. Live this freedom." (cited in van Zyl-Hermann 2018, 8–9).

In a similar vein, Kallie Kriel speaks to a presently perceived disenfranchised white Afrikaner populace, alluding to a sense of loss and reclamation that is possible in the present transition: "We need to show people that all is not lost, we need to give people hope and show that you can take things into your own hands. There needs to be cooperation between the state and civil society … if it's not there, however, then we have to step in" (cited in du Toit 2017). Both Solidarity Movement and AfriForum's self-stylisations as being for all South Africans has included instances where both Coloured[3] and black South Africans were assisted in legal battles on an affirmative action and illegal land claim battle, respectively (du Toit 2017). Nonetheless, their dominant domain of focus as organisations is in service of Afrikaner rights in the new South Africa. As du Toit argues, "even though AfriForum says it fights for the rights of 'minorities', its mission statement declares that it focuses on the creation of an environment within which Afrikaners can lead a sustainable existence 'in peace with other communities'. That is, separate and alongside other 'communities' within broader society" (du Toit 2017).

For these white nationalist movements, a key feature of engaging the past includes challenging dominant narrative accounts of violence during apartheid rule. For example, in *Tainted Heroes,* a 2016 joint Solidarity Movement and AfriForum documentary production, the focus turns to the violence perpetuated by the African National Congress (ANC) in its struggles against the apartheid regime between 1976 and 1994. It was received with mixed reactions in the country, with some critics dismissing it as a racist populist move on Solidarity Movement and AfriForum's part, whilst others lauded its attempt to showcase a different narrative account of violence during the apartheid period that was not always the exclusive domain of whites against blacks. The apartheid struggle and its multiple narratives of violence remain deeply contentious for many reasons that are beyond the scope of this paper. What is certain, and as evidenced in the country's post-transition Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) accounts, the violence committed during apartheid and in the immediate period of transition to democracy, by the different factions, attests to a nation at war with itself–even as it attempts to rebuild and reimagine its identity. The following sections explore how AfriForum employs a selective interpretation of the past to reinforce its identity, beginning with its nostalgic attachment to the old South African flag.

The old South African flag and nostalgia

Flags serve as powerful symbols of national identity. As Cornelius Castoriadis (1987) points out, flags are not just pieces of cloth, but also "symbols of nationhood and identity, which become a rallying point that one must show loyalty and allegiance to" (8). In South Africa's history, the flag before 1994 represented the minority white population who enjoyed privilege and power under apartheid. With the transition to democracy in 1994, South Africa adopted a new flag, featuring the colours red, yellow, blue, black, green, and white. The new flag symbolized the country's break from apartheid and its commitment to create a nation where all its citizens could live in peace and harmony, regardless of race (Burgers 2008).

3 An apartheid racial classification category used to refer to peoples (multiracial ethnic populations) not black or white or Indian. We acknowledge that these classification categories have been contested by some members of these black, Coloured and Indian groups in the post-apartheid context.

For others, the different colours of the South African flag represented the diverse population of the country, which has been referred to as the “rainbow nation” (Baines 1998; Bornman 2006). The concept of the “rainbow nation” gained popularity in South Africa during its first decade of democratic transition, promoted by prominent figures such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who used the term during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to describe a post-apartheid vision of unity and peace in the country. The new flag became a powerful symbol of national unity and pride during national sporting events, where the flag was prominently displayed during the Springboks’ Rugby World Cup victory in 1995 and the national soccer team’s 1996 African Nations Cup win. During this period, the sport was spoken about as a powerful catalyst for social cohesion, as both white and black players represented the country, fostering a sense of unity and national pride amongst fans of all races. However, there was also a critique of this “rainbow nation” concept as creating a false sense of unity and racial harmony.

On 30 October 2017, a group of white South Africans staged a protest over farm murders, carrying the old South African flag that was in use during the apartheid era from 1928 to 1994. This use of the apartheid-era flag was widely condemned as a symbol of racism and white supremacy and heightened racial tensions in the country. The Nelson Mandela Foundation Trust responded to the use of the apartheid-era flag by filing an application in the Equality Court to have the display of the flag declared as hate speech, unfair discrimination, and harassment on the grounds of race. The former Chief Executive of the Nelson Mandela Trust, Sello Hatang, filed an affidavit with the Equality Court in which he explained that as a black person, he felt hurt by the display of the old flag. To him, the old flag represented nothing other than the inhumane system of racial segregation and subjugation that governed South Africa before 27 April 1994. As part of his defense, Advocate Mojapelo argued that: “to hear that the old flag has been displayed gratuitously in 2017, more than a generation after apartheid had been abolished, reminded me that some South Africans still see me and other blacks as ‘other’, and would deny us the opportunity to be human” (Nelson Mandela Foundation Trust & Another v Afriforum NPC and Others 2019).

AfriForum opposed the Nelson Mandela Foundation Trust’s application, arguing that the display of the flag was protected as a form of freedom of expression under South Africa’s constitution. Further, AfriForum argued that only words can amount to hate speech but not symbols such as the old flag. However, the court rejected this argument, finding that hate speech must be interpreted to be wide enough to include the expression of ideas such as the waving of a flag. The court concluded that the gratuitous display of the old flag of South Africa constituted hate speech against black people (Nelson Mandela Foundation Trust & Another v Afriforum NPC and Others 2019). Deputy Judge President Phineas Mojapelo stated that “the display of the old flag is extremely hurtful and dehumanizing to those who suffered under apartheid.” It is important to note that the judgment does not amount to a total ban of the old flag, which may be displayed for purposes of genuine artistic, academic or journalistic expression that is in the public interest. AfriForum’s discontent with the Equality Court’s ruling resulted in an appeal at the Supreme Court of Appeal, which upheld the Equality Court’s decision. Judge Schippers reiterated that the public display of “the old flag is an awful reminder of the anguish suffered by millions of people under apartheid South Africa” (South African Supreme Court of Appeal, AfriForum v Nelson Mandela Foundation 2023, 18).

The raising of the old flag can be interpreted as an act of restorative nostalgia, which can be described as an "imperfect process of remembrance that engages in anti-modern myth-making of history by returning to national symbols and myths" (Boym 2001, 41). It is not coincidental that the old flag was displayed during protests over farm murders. This act was driven by sentimental reasons, harkening back to the "good old days" when farmers felt safe under the apartheid government. In this context, the past is glorified, idealized, romanticized and mythologized as a golden era (free from violence) that many members of these organisations yearn to return to. However, Boym (2001) asserts that the problem with restorative nostalgia is that it does not recognize itself as nostalgia, but rather as uncontested truth and tradition. Restorative nostalgia overlooks the structural and political violence that created a sense of safety for the white minority in apartheid South Africa, while making everyday life nearly impossible for the majority of black, Indian, and Coloured populations. These contradictions become more apparent when the same white Afrikaners defend the use of the old flag as part of their historical heritage while being offended when black people sing the "Kill the Boer" song, which they in turn defend as part of their struggle heritage against apartheid rule.

Political songs and racialized crime: "Dubul'ibhunu" (Kill the Boer)

The struggle against apartheid saw South African activists using songs as powerful tools in their fight for freedom. Protest songs served not only to criticize the oppressive regime but also to celebrate anti-apartheid leaders. For example, Brenda Fassie's "Black President", released in the 1980s, was a tribute to Nelson Mandela. Other songs critical of the apartheid regime and its brutalities include "Ndodemnyama we Verwoerd" ("Watch Out, Verwoerd"), "uDr. Malan Unomthetho Onzima" ("Dr. Malan's Government is Harsh"), "Wathint' Abafazi, Wathint' Imbokodo, Uza Kufa" ("Now That You Have Touched the Women, You Have Struck a Rock"), and "Senzeni Na" ("What Have We Done?") (Le Roux-Kemp 2014; Mahlasela 2020; Vershbow 2010). These songs conveyed both a defiance of apartheid and a deep yearning for a better future for black South Africans, echoing Thompson and Ramhurry's (2014) observation that songs are shaped by human experiences and historical events within which they are composed. Therefore, it is important to understand the meaning of the "Kill the Boer" song within its specific historical context, rather than interpreting it literally.

In 1993, anti-apartheid activist Chris Hani was assassinated by Janusz Walus and Clive Derby-Lewis, members of a white right-wing group. In response, Peter Mokaba wrote the song "Kill the Boer", which became a powerful expression of the anger and pain felt by many black South Africans towards the apartheid regime. In 2010, Julius Malema, then leader of the ANC Youth League (ANCYL)[4], sang the song at a public event. This led to legal action by AfriForum, which accused Malema of hate speech. In the first case, the court ruled in favour of AfriForum, finding that the lyrics did indeed constitute hate speech. However, in 2022, Malema sang the song again, prompting AfriForum to take him to court for a second time. This time, the Equality Court found that, while the song was provocative, it did not constitute hate speech (AfriForum v. Economic Freedom Fighters and Others 2022).

4 The ANCYL is the youth wing of the African National Congress. As set out in its constitution, the ANC Youth League is led by a National Executive Committee and a National Working Committee and was founded in 1944. Its original founding members include Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu, Anton Lembede, Ashby Peter Solomzi Mda.

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a populist left-wing party that Malema had founded, argued that the song was a symbolic expression of resistance against white oppression, rather than a call for actual violence. According to Thompson and Ramhurry (2014, 41) this perspective supports "the argument that the term 'boer' functions metaphorically, suggesting the idea of killing the system of apartheid rather than specific individuals". In this way, the song serves as a form of protest, conveying a specific political message. Thompson and Ramhurry (2014) have argued that politics play a significant role in AfriForum's reaction to the song, raising the question: is the controversy really about the song itself, or about who sang it? Julius Malema, a figure described by some as a populist leader advocating violence, embodies suspicion in his excavation of the struggle song. For Malema, singing this song is part of a broader political strategy to mobilize his supporters—a strategy that many white people perceive as expressing anti-white sentiment.

In an interview following the court ruling, Kallie Kriel, the CEO of AfriForum, was asked whether there was any evidence directly linking the deaths of farmers to the singing of the song "Kill the Boer". He responded, "of course one will never have that evidence" (Kriel and Tamb 2022). Despite this lack of direct evidence, AfriForum continues to argue that the song contributes to an increase in attacks against farmers and their workers. However, research conducted by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) found no direct correlation between the song and violence against farmers. The ISS reported that the murder rate statistics on farms was consistent with the overall high levels of violent crime in South Africa, with no evidence to suggest that white farmers were specifically targeted due to their race (Burger 2018).

Despite these findings, AfriForum continues to assert that white farmers were being disproportionately targeted in violent attacks. In an interview with Tucker Carlson on Fox News in the United States, AfriForum's Deputy CEO, Ernst Roets, claimed that white farmers were being killed at disproportionate rates and that the South African government was not doing enough to address the issue. This trip to the United States was part of AfriForum's efforts to connect with like-minded think tanks and globalize right-wing movements focused on protecting the rights of white minorities, particularly Afrikaners. At that time, in 2018, former U.S. President Donald Trump tweeted that he had asked U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to "closely study the South Africa land and farm seizures and expropriation and the large-scale killing of farmers", a response that sparked angry response from the South African government (Wilson 2018).

Many white South Africans continue to "racialize" the problem of crime, arguing that they are disproportionately the victims of violent crime at the hands of black perpetrators (Lemanski 2004; Silber and Geffen 2009). For instance, Steve Hofmeyr, a well-known Afrikaans singer, was quoted in the media claiming that "white people are being killed like flies in South Africa at the hands of black criminals" (Brodie 2013). In March of 2015, a group of white farmers submitted a report entitled "Stop White Genocide" to the United Nations Committee on Minority Rights, accusing the ANC-led government of failing to protect white South Africans from violent crime perpetrated by black South Africans. This has led to the re-emergence of the *"swaart gevaar"* (black people are dangerous) discourse historically used under apartheid to justify the killing of black people by apartheid forces. In the context of the new democracy, this discourse has shifted to portray black people as murderers and attackers, conjuring up the stereotypical images of blacks as "immoral, savage, violent and driven by dark satanic impulses" (Modiri 2013, 287). Public assertions by AfriForum often reinforce racist discourses, positioning white people as victims despite their economic wealth in a context

where they benefited from the apartheid regime and continue to enjoy its privileges. In their attempts to reshape the collective memory expressed in songs, white Afrikaners aim to reassert their position of power, particularly through their refusal to engage with the critical issue of land redistribution, as discussed in the subsequent section.

Land expropriation and historical forgetting

The South African Natives Land Act of 1913 led to the seizure of land owned by black people, allocating 87 % of the land to white people and restricting black ownership to just 13 % (weNkosi 2023). In the post-apartheid era, the debate over land restitution remains a highly contentious issue in South Africa. On one side, black South Africans demand the return of their ancestral lands or compensation for land that was taken from them. On the other side, groups like AfriForum argue that land should not be expropriated from current white owners. This disagreement has caused significant tension between the two groups.

In response to the failure of the "willing-seller, willing-buyer" policy, some political parties, notably the Economic Freedom Fighters, began advocating for land expropriation without compensation (LEWC) as a solution to the issue of land redistribution. Kgotso Morapela, then EFF Provincial Chairman in the Free State, argued in a public presentation that "the land question in South Africa relates to the reversal of a centuries-old systematic and structural process of land dispossession through which African people were dispossessed of their land for the benefit of a tiny minority of white people" (Morapela n.d.). For the EFF, expropriation of land is seen as a means to redress colonial and apartheid injustices by returning the land to its original owners. However, it has been argued that LEWC is not feasible due to the new South African constitution, which includes provisions for land reform that respect existing property rights. This has led to a sense among many young black South Africans that political leaders, including Nelson Mandela, failed to achieve a just and equitable resolution to the issue of land reform by agreeing to uphold property rights. These views gained traction during the #FeesMustFall protest movements, which saw university students across South Africa take to the streets in 2015 and 2016 to demand an end to high tuition fees. One of the issues that protesting students aimed to address was the land question, as part of a broader effort to empower black people (Maringira et al. 2022).

The proposal for LEWC has faced significant opposition from AfriForum, which has argued that LEWC would lead to economic collapse and infringe on the constitutional rights of white landowners. In 2019, AfriForum published a policy document titled "Expropriation without Compensation: A Disaster in Waiting", which contends that LEWC would undermine property rights and threaten the country's stability. AfriForum argues that LEWC is based on a distorted perception of history, claiming that no land was dispossessed from Africans. This assertion persists despite clear evidence of people being forcibly removed from their land both before and after 1912—a history that AfriForum vehemently denies. Between 1960 and 1994 alone, the apartheid government forcibly removed more than

3.5-million black South Africans from their homes and livelihoods, moving them into the Bantustan[5], where they were plunged into poverty (SA History Online 2019). In the context of memory studies, AfriForum's denial of this history can be linked to the concepts of collective forgetting and historical amnesia, where a group deliberately forgets certain events or chooses to remember them in a way that aligns with their ideology (Casey 2000; Couperus, Tortola and Rensmann 2023). This selective memory by AfriForum seeks to delegitimize any land claims, framing them as based on a misinterpretation of history. It is part of "self-repair requiring some creative remembering, reinterpreting, re-spinning the mythology that shaped the meaning of Afrikanerdom into the material for a recontextualized, reinvented identity" (Steyn 2004, 154).

Moreover, AfriForum views the proposed policy as a potential economic disaster, warning that it could threaten food security if farmers, who they claim are vital to the country's food supply, lose their land. Through such apocalyptic warnings, affective economies characterised by fear and suspicion further muddy the ongoing dialogues about redistributive justice. There is a simultaneous juxtaposing of restorative nostalgic framings of an ideal past where the land was put to good use for the good of all, and an apocalyptic future where the land is laid to waste due to irrational land compensation policies. Fairbanks (2022) documents an insightful contrast between white and black farming practice in the new South Africa that is a remnant of what farming looked like during the Separate Development era of Apartheid. Fairbanks is worth quoting at length here:

> "As segregation deepened throughout the 20th century, much of the fertile, rain-washed land had been given to white people, while the barren peaks and hot, dry, malaria-ridden lowlands were given to black tribal leaders […]. Different patterns of habitation had emerged: in black South Africa, regularly placed little metal-roofed homes dotted the dun-colored earth. White-owned areas were large sweeps of unbroken pasture or cropland […] Intensive farming had been a pride and a fixation for white South Africans. The degree to which they made the land yield harvest was supposed to be their justification for keeping it. The apartheid government not only stripped black South Africans of the right to privately buy land, but poured massive amounts of money into assistance programmes for white farmers. From the air, the country looked as if a child had cut up travel-magazine pictures of some pastoral English fantasy and spliced them with pictures of the Sahel desert to make a collage."

In *White belongings: Race, land, and property in post-apartheid South Africa* (2022) Scott Burnett has argued that whilst many white South Africans have abandoned notions of a white possession of the nation since the advent of the 1994 democratic transition, there still largely remains an entitlement to the land and economy that tends to present in narratives of loss and anxiety about the future. As mentioned, this has been reflected in the reactionary roles that Solidarity Movement and AfriForum have played in processes of transformation within different contexts. For Burnett, it is also evident in the apocalyptic accounts of present and future states whereby not only are white Afrikaner culture and language lost, but there is also a demise of a people in terms of physical safety and material resources.

5 Bantustans were homelands designated to black people along ethnic lines (Shangan, Zulu, Xhosa, Pedi, Tswana, etc.) aimed at reinforcing apartheid policies of racial separation.

The discursive rhetoric of lost futures – whether in the form of white dispossession or environmental losses – should land redistribution take precedence is at the heart of this white apocalyptic futures. We agree with Mitchell and Chaudhury (2020) that often, “apocalyptic narratives embed a series of problematic assumptions which reveal that they are motivated not by a general concern with futures but rather with the task of securing *white* futures” (309, original emphasis). What is often excluded from discussions about redistribution is the ongoing exploitation of farmworkers, the majority of whom are black and often endure long working hours for unfair wages (weNkosi 2023). Additionally, this discourse subtly implies that black people are incapable of owning and successfully managing commercial farms, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and ignoring the potential for equitable land reform. The following section addresses the racial stereotype that black people are perceived as “not good enough” in the context of affirmative action policies. These policies promote the inclusion of black individuals in employment opportunities from which they were historically excluded due to racial discrimination.

Affirmative Action policies: Empowerment of black people or reverse racism against white people?

During the apartheid era, black South Africans were systematically barred from certain jobs, industries, and educational opportunities, leaving them economically marginalized and disadvantaged. This was a direct result of the racist policies that formed the foundation of apartheid, which sought to maintain white supremacy and control over the country’s resources and opportunities. To promote economic inclusivity and address historical injustices, policies such as Affirmative Action (AA) and Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) were implemented by the ANC-led government post 1994. However, these efforts have faced opposition from AfriForum, which labels such policies as “reverse racism” and “discriminatory” against white people.

In her paper *Rehabilitating a Whiteness Disgraced* (2004), Melissa Steyn analysed letters to the editor published in Rapport, a national Afrikaans Sunday newspaper, and identified what she terms “white talk”—the way Afrikaners articulate their position in the new South Africa. This discourse is marked by strong feelings of loss and exclusion, resulting in anger and frustration. Within these narratives, white Afrikaners often position themselves as “victims”, without acknowledging the historical injustices of apartheid. The concern is that this reframing of white identity as disempowered in the context of Affirmative Action and other transformation initiatives tactically recenters white racial identity around a narrative of victimhood. Feelings of disempowerment and victimhood among some white South Africans reflect the significant shift in the identity position of ‘whiteness’ from its previous status of invisibility—where it was the unchallenged norm—to a position of visibility, where it is now critiqued, discussed, debated, and sometimes problematized in the context of transformation and nation-building discourses. Whiteness, as an identity, is no longer taken for granted as it once was, and this shift has brought about a re-examination of what it means to be white in post-apartheid South Africa.

“White talk” also serves to maintain a particular position of power and privilege, characterized by the refusal to acknowledge historical injustices and support meaningful economic empowerment for marginalized communities, thus perpetuating the cycle of inequality with many black people still living below the poverty line. In its report entitled *Racialised Legislation in South Africa,* AfriForum (2023) concludes that “South Africa has a huge systemic racism issue in the form of BEE and the

ANC's growing list of race-based laws. It should not be called 'reverse racism' either; it's just plain racism. Racially discriminatory laws were wrong in the past, and they are wrong in the present. Now that racially discriminatory laws by the government have continued into the 21st century, it is high time for the retirement of this abhorrent practice, and to stop grasping at straws to try to justify it in the present." In this quotation, AfriForum acknowledges that racially discriminatory policies existed under apartheid but quickly argues that these policies should be abolished without addressing their legacies. This stance overlooks the need to rectify historical injustices and the ongoing disparities that continue to affect marginalized communities. By so doing, a racialized reimagination of victimhood and perpetrator is put forward that plays within the affective ambit of apocalyptic futures that exclude whites. For van-Zyl Hermann (2018, 9), this evocation of a nostalgic past through recourse to an alienating present and fearful future further translates into a reframing of the democratic project and transition in negative terms:

> The ethnic nationalist register of this populist framing was flexible enough to also speak in broader racial terms. In contrast to prevailing South African narratives celebrating the end of apartheid, the [Solidarity] Movement represented democratization in distinctly negative terms – a "total change in the political order" which rendered "our people" an "increasingly alienated", "minority in a majority setting".

Between the Solidarity Movement and AfriForum, the circulation of moral panics related to white poverty, crime, loss of culture, language, and loss of land ultimately functions to justify ethnic projects that further disengage white Afrikaners from the nation building project. For Burnett (2022, 105), "Solidarity and AfriForum articulate a myth similar to the *volkseie* [6], but also subtly different, in that its framework is a more libertarian dispensation abstracted from any specific claims about the destiny of the Afrikaner as connected to a specific territory. The territorial ambition here seems to be the spaces in between: to be left alone to pursue racially or ethnically exclusive projects, to operate economically unhindered by AA or BBBEE [7], and most importantly to not be challenged on the existing distribution of property and power, inside their ethnic enclaves".

Concluding remarks

Post-apartheid South Africa is increasingly marked by a turn to populist and nationalist forms of galvanizing that include both black and white nationalisms. In this paper, we explored the different evocations of the past in remembrance discourses deployed by AfriForum and other white nationalist movements over the past decade. We argue that this discursive rhetoric adopts affective forms of mobilization that seek to reframe the past as part of a mobilization against current state attempts at transformation and transitional justice. These mobilizations are indicative of a restorative nostalgia that recalls a harmonious past that should be recovered and an apocalyptic anticipation that paints a fearful future for the white populace. Some of these mobilizations have focused on symbolic registers

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6 "Volkseie" is loosely translated as that which is "peculiar to a particular people". The word "volk" had traditionally been used by Afrikaner nationalists to describe themselves as a group.

7 Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act.

that include language, cultural heritage, and economic security, while others center on current transformation and redress efforts related to access to land and affirmative action policies.
The persistence of white nostalgia and the apocalyptic framing of the future in South Africa raises significant questions about the effectiveness of transitional justice and remembrance work in fostering a truly inclusive society. The re-emergence of white victimhood narratives highlights gaps in transitional justice efforts, where reconciliation has not fully addressed or transformed ingrained racial biases or redistributed economic power equitably. While South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission laid essential groundwork in addressing the injustices of apartheid, the resurgence of nationalist movements signals unresolved tensions that reveal a divided collective memory. This resurgence implies that South Africa's transitional justice efforts, while providing a necessary foundation, may not have been sufficient in ensuring lasting change in social attitudes or economic structures, as they did not fully dismantle the privileges and psychological remnants of apartheid within the white community.

Is the rise of white nostalgia and apocalyptic sentiment described here an inevitable outcome of decolonization and democratization, or could it have been mitigated? Perhaps these sentiments are unavoidable to some extent, as decolonization disrupts longstanding hierarchies, inevitably creating anxiety among those who lose traditional privileges. However, more robust and targeted remembrance work, paired with ongoing, transparent economic redress initiatives, might have reduced the potency of these fears. Greater emphasis on educational and public discourse initiatives that critically engage with colonial and apartheid histories could foster a more comprehensive understanding of South Africa's past, bridging divides in the collective memory.

To address these challenges today, South Africa's project of remembrance might benefit from expanding public education on apartheid's legacies, implementing inclusive storytelling initiatives, and promoting shared narratives that honour diverse experiences. Transitional justice programs could refocus on tangible economic redress for marginalized communities to address grievances surrounding economic exclusion, thus directly tackling a core source of white nationalist anxiety. Furthermore, creating dialogue platforms that allow different communities to voice concerns and hopes for the future in an environment of mutual respect could foster greater empathy and understanding across racial lines. Moving forward, South Africa's remembrance work must address the psychological legacies of apartheid as actively as it does the structural ones, lest restorative nostalgia and apocalyptic narratives continue to undermine efforts at building a unified, equitable nation.

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ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

The Global Learning Hub for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation is a network of organisations from Germany and across the world, initiated by the Berghof Foundation and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development in early 2022. We want to facilitate an inspiring space for dialogue and learning that is driven by solidarity, inclusivity and innovation. By building bridges, generating knowledge and amplifying voices, the Hub seeks to advance the policy and practice of dealing with the past to strengthen peace and justice.

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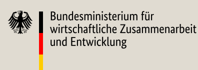

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