

Horizons of Political/Poetical Contestation: South African Intersectional Perspectives across Disciplines and Languages

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Intersectionality has travelled far and wide, from its origins among African American Black feminist pioneers, including bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Patricia Hill Collins to, among other countries, South Africa. Here, it was adopted by scholars such as Christi van der Westhuizen, Amanda Gouws, Desiree Lewis, Gabeba Baderoon, and many others whose work reveals the rich complexity of identity, oppression, and resilience. With its interwoven histories of race, class, gender and language, the South African landscape offers a unique setting where the intersections of identity are not only academically intriguing but deeply lived and felt. South Africa, as Crain Soudien, Vasu Reddy, and Ingrid Woolard (2019, 6) powerfully put it, contains “the full spectrum of diversities that form the architecture of identities and simultaneously characterise what we currently know about human beings – race, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, sexuality, language, culture, age, place, safety, health and many more [...]. That they all arise and are operative, simultaneously, make the country a special place in the modern world.”

To shed light on the heterogeneous manifestations these can assume, we dedicated the eighth colloquium on Afrikaans and South African studies to South African intersectional perspectives across disciplines and languages. On 20 and 21 November 2024, international scholars from diverse research fields gathered in Ghent (Belgium) to critically reflect on intersectionality in the South African context, both historically and contemporarily. They specialised, among others, in critical whiteness studies, sociology, cultural studies, literature, and film and theatre studies. This theme issue assembles seven of the total eighteen contributions. Although they are all written in English, several articles refer to other South African languages such as Afrikaans. In this sense, the intersectional perspectives across languages we pursued by organising sessions in both languages are to some extent retained.

With the conference and now with this theme issue, we aspire to present new interdisciplinary, transcultural, and transnational insights that are relevant not only to the South African lived experience. After all, in post-apartheid South Africa, but also more broadly on the world stage, intersectionality is more pertinent than ever. As the political philosopher Anna Carastathis (2016, 3) points out, “oppressive power relations have become increasingly mystified, inequalities seemingly more intractable, and institutions seemingly more difficult to transform.” An intersectional lens, both as a critical concept and academic practice, can provide a useful tool to scrutinise power structures in all regions characterised by inequalities. Inspired by Carastathis (141), we also believe that intersectionality should be understood not only on a personal level, but as a “horizon of political contestation,” and we might add of “poetical contestation.” Several authors in this theme issue, among whom Kanya Viljoen, Mathilde Rogez, Maria Paola Guarducci and Francesca Terrenato, overtly explore both dimensions in their articles.

With her opening piece, **Christi van der Westhuizen** (University of the Western Cape), who we were honoured to have as the keynote speaker of our conference, immediately sets the tone. Her article titled “White aspiration in South Africa: The intersectional nexus of *ordentlikheid* and the making of Afrikaner whiteness” reframes intersectionality within the South African context on the macro level. Through the Afrikaans concept of “*ordentlikheid*,” roughly translatable as “respectability,” she examines the processes that underlie the formation of specific forms of whitenesses in the country during the nationalist period, apartheid and its aftermath. She illustrates how these are inextricably linked, not only with race but also with gender, ethnicity, and class. Equally clear is their continued significance, tying in with neo-nationalist strategies and the rhetoric of the current President of the United States, Donald Trump.

The problematic aspects of whitenesses also surface in the article by **Hannelie Marx Knoetze** (University of South Africa), titled “What do we do with the master’s tools?: Whiteness, ‘nice racism’ and the South African tertiary context.” Using Critical Whiteness Studies as a framework, she reveals the inner workings of systemic power structures in South African academia. Despite their intentions to support social justice, white South African academics, especially those who consider themselves progressive, often perpetuate racial harm. Marx Knoetze places these tensions in the context of ongoing decolonisation efforts at South African universities, while acknowledging the colonial legacy of the same institutions. She argues that white academics must actively work against structural oppression, while using “the master’s tools” to dismantle the system.

Almost engaging in a direct conversation with the previous two pieces that raise the issue of white normativity, **Noxolo Matete** (University of KwaZulu-Natal) and **Alude Mahali** (Human Sciences Research Council) shift the focus to the effects of whiteness on access, institutional power, and artistic freedom. In their article “On the margins of cultural policy: Black women stage directors in the White Paper on Arts, Culture and

Heritage,” they point out the systemic erasure of Black women’s artistic agency as well as the structural barriers within cultural state institutions that Black women stage directors are facing. Based on data from both extensive quantitative and qualitative research, Matete and Mahali show how cultural policy in the post-apartheid period actively reproduces the inequalities from the apartheid era by effectively erasing Black women from policy documents.

Such ongoing systemic violence and the demand for justice also surface in the article by **Kanya Viljoen** (Heidelberg University), titled “‘I don’t want to die with my hands up, or legs open’: Public Protests as Public Potentials.” It sheds light on the #AmINext protest movement, which was spurred on by the brutal rape and murder of Uyinene Mrwetyana that occurred in 2019. Through an intersectional performative lens, Viljoen uncovers the embodied, political, and tragic aspects of these public protests against gender-based violence. Functioning as spaces of remembrance and collective response, these forms of activism can act as public potentials across gender, race, sexuality, age, and culture.

Moving from protest against gendered violence to its representation, **Mathilde Rogez** (Université de Toulouse) examines how gender-based violence, rape, and truth-telling are represented in South African post-apartheid literature and theatre. Her piece “‘In this place, at this time’: staging female bodies and representing reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa” shows how performance and narrative mediate truth, trauma, and reconciliation. The texts by J.M. Coetzee, Craig Higginson, and Mike van Graan she analyses stage female bodies and foreground their embodied experiences using performance-based elements while creating a space where these can be experienced and heard. Rogez argues that transgeneric writing enables readers and audiences to confront and be confronted with the legacies of apartheid, and the ongoing “rape crisis” in South Africa.

Representation and the acknowledgement of women’s voices also form the core of **Maria Paola Guarducci** (Roma Tre University) and **Francesca Terrenato**’s (Sapienza University of Rome) article “‘You remember to excavate, you excavate to remember’: Women poets exposing the shortcomings of the South African archive.” Their analysis of English and Afrikaans poems, by among others Koleka Putuma, Ronelda Kamfer, Malika Ndlovu, and Lynthia Julius, demonstrates how these authors challenge the erasure of Black and coloured women from the official archive. Guided by intersectional and feminist theories, they zoom in on the racialised and gendered experiences of such forgotten historical figures and the agency they are posthumously afforded.

With the closing article by **Memory Mphaphuli** (University of the Western Cape), titled “‘Money talks’: Entrenching a classed heterosexuality through the practice of ilobolo (bridewealth) payments in contemporary South Africa,” we have come full circle. Providing young adults, male and female, from KwaZulu-Natal with a voice, she

examines on the microlevel how intersecting axes determine their relationships. Their focus group discussions reveal how *ilobolo* or bridewealth presents them with serious economic challenges due to its status as the cornerstone of marriage, which reproduces normative Black heterosexuality in classed and gendered ways.

Across the seven articles of this special issue, a shared theoretical horizon emerges where intersectionality is not only used as a theory, but also as a tool that makes structural conditions and inequalities visible and tangible. The authors take us from conceptual frameworks to policy analysis, cultural praxis, and finally to embodied experiences in the personal sphere. Equally diverse are the themes that they address, ranging from the body as a political site (in the articles by Viljoen, Rogez, and Mphaphuli), to the politics of narrative and representation (Guarducci and Terrenato, Rogez, and Matete and Mahali), and institutions as technologies of power (Van der Westhuizen, Matete, Marx Knoetze, and Mphaphuli). Despite this strong heterogeneity in approaches and topics, they illustrate how all these different domains, consisting of bodies, narratives, and institutions, become sites of negotiation and redefinition. Moreover, they clearly convey to us that intersectionality cannot be addressed only within the boundaries of one discipline, nor in isolation, but that it instead demands relational and interdisciplinary thinking. We hope that in creating a vibrant mosaic that reflects the multidimensionality of South African intersectional perspectives, this special issue will evoke the rich dialogues of the conference and provide you with as many insightful discoveries as it did for us.

Acknowledgements

As guest editors, we would like to acknowledge Anastasia de Vries. When planning the conference, we asked her to be one of our two keynote speakers, an invitation which she accepted with great enthusiasm. We terribly regret that her sudden death robbed us of the opportunity to listen to her keynote lecture, “Silences and loss at the intersections of the Afrikaans language, the Roman Catholic Church and history.” Focusing on the marginalised Cape Afrikaans language variety and later on the role of Afrikaans as a language in the Roman Catholic Church, Anastasia de Vries’ research has always been intersectional at its core. She was acutely aware of the necessity to include the axes of race, colour, and religion in Afrikaans language history (de Vries 2022). We applaud her not only for her innovative research but also for the impact she made as a dear colleague, friend, educator, and mentor to many in South Africa and abroad. That is why we wish to dedicate this special issue to her.

Both the conference and this special issue are part of a larger project funded by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO), titled “Challenging crossroads: A critical discourse analysis on the intersections of race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and ensuing discursive counterreactions in female apartheid narratives.” Thanks to their financial support, it was possible to organise both and bring them to a favourable conclusion. We also wish to acknowledge the support of the Scientific Research Committee of Ghent University (CWO), the Africa Platform AUGent, the Ghent Centre

for Afrikaans, and the Study of South Africa. Finally, we thank our valued authors and peer reviewers for their continued efforts to make this special issue see the light of day.

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