A Town Called Nobody: Violence, Nationalism, and Witch-burning

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Summary

A decade ago, when South Africa was undergoing dramatic political, cultural, and social changes, newspapers began to print stories on a curious phenomenon – the burning of so-called witches in rural areas. Although this trend had probably been on the rise since the mid-1980s, this particular moment was riddled with issues that found resonance in the witch-burnings. Complex intersections of new politics, old customs, and extreme violence formed the basis for the press reports, which often attempted to draw clear lines between modern and traditional, legal and unauthorised, and secular and sacred, despite their overlaps.

This paper seeks to investigate the phenomenon of witch-burning and its representations. The very discourse of witchcraft, with its simultaneous resonances of atavistic witch doctors and historical witch trials, demands interrogation. Discussions of witch-burning emphasise the historical moment of the early 1990s – the last death throes of apartheid and the emotional transition into a new South Africa. Within this historical flash point of social, cultural, and political uncertainty, discourses around witchcraft become attempts to reinstate definitive boundaries and witchcraft itself becomes a contested act.

The witch-burning debate also has larger, global implications. Experienced as a crisis of multinational investment, the changes in South Africa pose a threat of uncertainty. The instabilities already built into modernity – the necessary migrations of a mobile labour force, for instance – also undermine a belief in stability and certainty. As workers cross and recross national borders, they provoke an epistemological crisis of knowable space so that economic, political, and cultural conflicts all become questions of mappable and definitive boundaries. Threats to the national form get displaced onto liminal subjects and marginalised activities in an attempt to chart out geographies of belief. Under South Africa's transition from apartheid the comfortable distinctions between foreign and familiar, modern and traditional, and home and abroad previously held sacred are undone, and witchcraft becomes visible in the interstices.

Opsomming

'n Dekade gelede, toe Suid-Afrika dramatiese politieke, kuturele en sosiale veranderinge ondergaan het, het koerante begin om berigte te publiseer oor 'n eienaardige verskynsel – die verbranding van sogenaamde hekse in landelike gebiede. Alhoewel hierdie tendens waarskynlik sedert die mid -1980s begin toeneem het, was hierdie spesifieke periode deurtrek met kwessies wat weerklank gevind het in die verbranding van hekse. Komplekse snypunte van nuwe politiek, ou gebruike, en ekstreme geweld, het die basis gevorm van persberigte wat dikwels gepoog het om

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duidelike onderskeid te maak tussen modern en tradisioneel, wettig en onwettig, en sekulêr en gewyd, ten spyte van die oorvleueling.

Hierdie artikel poog om die verskynsel van die verbranding van hekse en die voorstelling daarvan, te ondersoek. Die blote diskoers van heksery en die gelyktydige resonansies van atavistiese toordokters en historiese verhore van hekse, eis interrogasie. Bespreking van die verbranding van hekse beklemtoon die historiese moment van die vroeë 1990s – die laaste doodsnikke van apartheid en die oorgang na 'n nuwe Suid-Afrika. Binne hierdie historiese brandpunt van sosiale, kulturele, en politieke onsekerheid, word diskoerse rondom heksery pogings om beslissende afbakenings te herstel en word heksery op sigself 'n omstrede daad.

Die debat oor die verbranding van hekse het ook groter, globale implikasies. Waar dit as 'n krisis van multinasionale belang ervaar word, hou die veranderings in Suid-Afrika die gevaar van onsekerheid in. Die onstabiliteite wat reeds in modernitiet ingebou is – die noodsaaklike migrasies van 'n mobiele arbeidsmag,byvoorbeeld – ondermyn ook die vertroue in stabiliteit en sekerheid. Wanneer werkers nasionale grense oorsteek en heroorsteek provokeer hulle 'n epistemologiese krisis van kenbare spasie sodat politieke en kulturele konflikte vrae oor karteerbare en beslissende afbakening word. Bedreigings vir die nasionale vorm word misplaas op liminale subjekte en gemarginaliseerde aktiwiteite in 'n poging om geografieë van opvattings uit te stip. Die gemaklike onderskeidings tussen vreemd en bekend, modern en tradisioneel, en inheems en uitheems, wat voorheen onskendbaar was, word tot niet gemaak in Suid-Afrika se oorgang van apartheid, en heksery word sigbaar in die tussenruimte.

Burning Down the House

In the early 1990s, when South Africa was undergoing dramatic political, cultural, and social changes, newspapers began to print stories on a curious phenomenon – the burning of so-called witches in rural South Africa.[1] Although the witch-burning trend had probably been on the rise since the mid-1980s, this particular moment was riddled with issues that found resonance in the burnings. Complex intersections of new politics, old customs, and extreme violence formed the basis for the reports, which often attempted to draw clear lines between modern and traditional, legal and illegal, and rational and irrational. They show the strain of a discourse struggling to encompass two nationalisms, the old and the new, and the violence of asserting difference through the painful production of belongings and exclusions.

In the fall of 1994, *The New York Times* published a prominent story entitled “Apartheid’s Grisly Aftermath: ‘Witch-burning’”. Written from a dateline of Nobody, South Africa, the piece expressively captures the media’s fascination with the witch-burning phenomenon, and its more general attraction to graphic violence. The article opens with a characteristic gesture, the illustrative case study:

> On the April Sunday when South Africa was counting the votes of its first free elections, residents of this town with the self-effacing name accosted Sinna Mankwane in front of her home and pinioned her arms with three gasoline-

> splashed tires.
>
> According to witnesses' accounts compiled by the police and local officials, the mob summoned her husband, Johannes, from the house, and handed him a box of matches. With the couple's son and daughter looking on, Johannes was forced to burn his wife alive.
>
> After watching her agony, the neighbours dispersed, but the next Tuesday they were back. They doused Johannes with gasoline and set him aflame inside his house. They stoned and tortured the 21-year-old daughter, Martha, before incinerating her, then hunted down the 17-year-old son, Frank, and finished him off.
>
> (Keller 1994: A3)

In these opening paragraphs alone, the *Times* touches on a range of issues reiterated throughout the reportage – it places sweeping political change alongside personal violence, it pits the community against the individual, it raises the question of competing accounts of events, and it devotes particular energy to a detailed description of the violent deaths. These themes arise almost predictably, and themselves reflect a concern with the buttressing of community, nation, and certain economies of representation and production.

Read through the media accounts, the witch-burnings come to play a key role in consolidating the norms of a community under attack by exposing the fissures between community and state, and by confounding nationally sponsored sources of authority in favour of local knowledge. At the same time, witchcraft practices unsettle the location of belief in old customs. Even though, as we shall see, the reportage locates a break between traditional belief and modern rationality, the witch-burnings undo that dichotomy. As a result, customary belief gets used as a weapon against modernity's rational, state-sponsored structures of power and knowledge, and comes to reside in the very seat of power. Witchcraft accusations – whether they be against petty bureaucrats, older women, or migrant workers – thus abet the emergence of a counternationalism when the state itself is in a state of emergency. Reingard Nethersole comments on the emergent always present in the emergency. She relates the State of Emergency to the development of an emergent literature that serves the interests of an emerging state, that is: "A state ... in the process of securing for itself legal, constitutional, and usually economic autonomy, by asserting itself against the vestiges of a previous colonial regime or against the dependence on the power, protection and economic support of its neighbours" (Nethersole 1990: 28). Extending this definition beyond literature, it is possible to talk about activities like witch-burnings as part of this process of assertion in a crisis of power. If witchcraft accusations reflect "a popular desire to be part of the new nation being forged in South Africa" (Koch 1990), as one article suggestively titled "South Africa: Apartheid Throws Up Ritual Murders in Venda" claimed, they help to undo the false structures of the repressive state and to create a new national form. Even as they result in the burning of real people and their homes, they are also one way of burning down the old house of the apartheid nation, tearing down institutions like the "independent" homelands, and forcefully inserting previously excluded territories, groups, and beliefs into the new national body.[2]

This essay seeks to investigate the phenomenon of witch-burning and its representations by looking primarily at newspaper articles from South Africa and the United States from the early to mid-1990s.[3] The very discourse of witchcraft, with its simultaneous resonances of atavistic witch doctors and historical witch trials, demands interrogation. As one letter to the editor said, "[The author] should not write about an issue that he is ignorant of: his view that indigenous peoples are influenced by 'witchdoctors' illustrates his utter ignorance. He must learn to distinguish between a witch (moloi) and a doctor (ngaka), and should also learn that there is no such thing as a 'witchdoctor'" (Mooki 1996).[4] While acknowledging the vexed activity of "putting witches into words" (Comaroff 1993: xxvi),[5] this essay attempts to show how others have tried to do just that, both for explanatory value and for the purpose of containing the unknown within a familiar, rationalised discourse. Witch-burning articulates spatial and temporal doubt with shocking clarity, and unquestionably acts as a mechanism for first expressing and then containing ambivalence and uncertainty. More problematically, the discussions around witch-burning regularly present it as a binary opposition between modernity and tradition, a figuration that does not allow for their mutual imbrication and complication.

Discussions of witch-burning emphasise the historical moment of the early 1990s – the last death throes of apartheid and the emotional transition into a new South Africa. Within this historical flash point of social, cultural, and political uncertainty, discourses around witchcraft become attempts to reinstate definitive boundaries and witchcraft itself becomes a contested act.

The Present Past

The reports of witch-burnings, whether domestic or international, resemble each other thematically and structurally. They invariably offer a dramatic, encapsulated case study, propose a predetermined set of possible causes, and reflect a need to assert a continuity of experience in order to make sense of the phenomenon. Thus some coverage places South African witch-burnings along a continuum of magical and exotic practices, as in the case of the article "Voodoo Leaves Path of Mutilation in South Africa" (Erasmus 1992), while other reports place the burnings along a continuum of witchcraft in history, as in "A wave of witch hunts reminiscent of 17th-century Salem, Mass., is sweeping through parts of rural South Africa" (Shapiro 1991: Lifestyle 3). The former type imagines racial links across space where voodoo and witch-burning are two versions of a literal "black magic" ("Witchcraft in South Africa" 1995: 85). The latter extrapolates gendered links across time, since the majority of witch-hunt victims are women, whether they are in Salem or South Africa. Both elide presence and absence, and assume common intersections of the axes of violence, race, and gender, creating historically and geographically disjunctive equivalencies.

While these historical reference points provide a sense of familiarity, they simultaneously erect a structure of difference that suggests an atavistic past persisting in the present. Explicit historical references aside, the heavily-laden language favoured by the reportage portrays a desire to force a division between a violent, archaic past and a pacific, modern present. For instance, one article in the *Los Angeles Times* entitled "Witch Hunts: The Fatal Price of Fear" not only describes "the gruesome reports of trial by fire" but also quotes a police spokesperson on "this barbaric scourge" (Drogin 1994: A1+). This kind of strongly connotative discourse plays on a stereotypical web of primitivism and violence that can be traced back to a colonial tradition of imagining absolute difference. Not infrequently, articles manage to combine references and mix metaphors: "From Duiwelskloof – the home of the great Rain Queen, Rider Haggard's 'She' – to Moria, the focus of cult worship for the millions of the Zionist Christian Church, the province is awash with formalized superstition" (Beresford 1996: 13). Here, fiction and fallacy combine to provide a lens through which to examine events. Together, they funnel general, homogenising references into a specific locality marked by excess – an excess which in turn justifies the generalisations.

Traditional Belief and Modern Ways

The media representations subsume not just the violent activity of witch-burning but also its social and political framework into a dialectic of past versus present. As a result, they depict witch-burning against a backdrop of duelling orthodoxies – traditional witchcraft beliefs and the modern nation-state. This apparently intractable split reinforces belief in their fundamental difference: "But the deaths have been an unsettling reminder that one of South Africa's deepest divisions is between traditional beliefs and modern ways" (Drogin 1994: A1+). Presented this way, modernity becomes the location of law and order while tradition becomes the location of belief. But the break extends further – a division between community and nation corresponds to the tradition/modernity divide: "Communities nurse their beliefs, looking for solutions to their poverty and manage the transition from disparate, superstitious tribal entities into a nation that respects the rule of law" (Williams 1996: s.p.). Even the origins of the breakdown of tradition are located in tradition itself – rather than in the violent restructurings of modernity: "The origins of the breakdown in the traditional order are not clear. Where the burning of bodies – dead or alive – is concerned, some tribesmen date it back to the killing of alleged witches in the rural areas, fire being used to obliterate all traces of the evil one" (Beresford 1993: 13). This sense of a "traditional order" frozen in the present and only recently broken into shards ignores the necessary production and invention of that tradition and its fragmentation. There is a longing in the reportage to trace definitive origins for this violent activity, but a theory of separate origins skips over the long-term effects of the institutionally and culturally sanctioned violence of the apartheid regime.

So even as belief in modernity and tradition lives on, the false dichotomy between them is unsustainable. The perception of a clear division generates its own crises, as Jean and John Comaroff invaluably observe in *Modernity and its Malcontents*: "It is in this fissure between assertive rationalities and perceived magicalities that malcontent gathers" (Comaroff 1993: xxx). Interestingly, even the prehistory of the tradition/modernity opposition reveals its instability. Mary Douglas, in her ground-breaking anthropological work on witchcraft, sketches canonical explanations for rises in witchcraft:

> Starting from a homeostatic model of society in which witchcraft beliefs help to maintain the system, the natural way to account for witchcraft accusations getting out of control was by reference to a general breakdown of the society. Curiously, the link between European and African witchcraft was made by reference to the Industrial Revolution In the case of Africa it is the break-up of the small face-to-face community with the advent of missionaries, wage-labour, and town life that produces an unbalanced increase in witchcraft fears and accusations.
>
> (Douglas 1970: xix)

Despite the prevalence of theories that depend on this kind of systems clash, Douglas simply and unequivocally confounds them by observing that "[t]he general proposition that an increase of witchcraft accusations occurs as a symptom of disorder and moral collapse was superbly untestable" (Douglas 1970: xx). This, in turn, diminishes the validity of contemporary explanations like the following:

> Academic observers believe the resurgence of these practices is caused partly by rapidly changing social circumstances coupled with the assertion of a set of popular beliefs that had been suppressed in the apartheid era. The common explanation is that witch burnings are a "strain gauge", an expression of collective anxiety caused by the kinds of changes that have pulsed through

> communities since the April elections.
>
> (Koch 1995: s.p.)

While such explanations may be empirically weak, however, they continue to hold tremendous cultural currency. They also unintentionally offer an alternative reading of the situation: instead of assuming an increase in witchcraft because of social change, one might assume that because South Africa is changing, witchcraft has become visible.

In keeping with this recovery of witchcraft as something other than a failed tradition in conflict with a singular modernity, it is possible, as Arjun Appadurai suggests in *Modernity at Large* (1996), to posit instead a modernity along diverse and dynamic, multiple and multidirectional lines. This diversified modernity is not just the holding of a Western rational world-view, but of all its contemporaries. Ideally, it would not assign belief elsewhere, but would be able to acknowledge "the extent to which modernity – itself always an imaginary construction of the present in terms of a mythic past – has it own magicalities, its own enchantment" (Comaroff 1993: xiv). Once modernity and tradition are regarded as mutually dependent beliefs, the oppositions and overlaps between them can be acknowledged.

As a specific case study in late nationalism, South Africa shows up the unavoidable, cumulative violence of nation-building. Ernest Renan's foundational essay, "What is a Nation?" ([1882]1990) continues to inform our understanding of the structuring brutality of nationalism. He argues not only that nations come about through violence, but that forgetting violence is a necessary component of successful nation-building:

> Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial. Unity is always effected by means of brutality.
>
> (Renan [1882]1990: 11)

This insistence on historical amnesia lets us imagine witch-burning as a means for the state to sublimate its own violence. The much more impossible heritage of violence condoned by law and order gets elided by the apparently understandable violence of uncontrollable passions and localised traditions. Renan's statement also allows for the possibility of an uncomfortable origin – or, better yet, multiple origins – for the new nation-state in that it does not necessarily demand an easy link between political formations and the brutality involved in nation-building. In other words, brutality always plays a part but is not always vertically imposed. As a violence of uncertain origin – both vertically and laterally produced – witchcraft troubles a dualistic, hierarchical orthodoxy which would distinguish between modern and traditional, state and masses, and forgetting and remembering.

We Only Know One Person Who is a Witch and That Is Apartheid

Some conversations around witchcraft deny a connection with tradition in order to distinguish new excesses from old order. This type of representation depicts witchcraft as a purely political phenomenon, and traces its genealogy from the struggle against apartheid, rather than from custom. *The New York Times* piece, mentioned earlier, continues:

> The mood may seem a relic of the Dark Ages but in fact it appears to be very much a byproduct of South Africa's liberation. For the surprising thing about these killings is that in most cases the mobs are led not by tribal elders upholding ancient tradition, but by young militants – "comrades" in the South African vernacular – steeped in vigilante passions by the struggle against white rule .... Even the rituals of modern witch killing come not from tradition but from the struggle. The burning is often preceded by a chanting toyi-toyi, the war dance of political protest, and carried out with the gasoline-filled tire – the "necklace" – that was the trademark method of executing political enemies.
>
> (Keller 1994: A3)

Witchcraft as a solely modern phenomenon not only does not allow for community sanction, but falls back on the stereotypical threat of young Black men acting in consort: "[A researcher] identified the main perpetrators of witch-hunts as unemployed, militant youths participating in 'a revolt against a society that is no longer able to support them'" (Van Niekerk 1990: 5). Reports play on free associations of youth, mob action, and lawlessness: "'They don't know what is meant by the new South Africa', added Gabriel Ramothiba, a police officer who tends the refugees at Matlala police station. 'They thought if President Mandela takes over, then there will be no policemen and there will be no law'" (Keller 1994: A3).[6] It is important to forestall this sense of extraordinary violence, and to place the witch-burnings within a continuum of state-sponsored, politically triggered violence.

At the same time, it is precisely because they appear excessive that the burnings become a focal point in which we can clearly see the meeting of masculinity, political violence, and ritual in the female body. Significantly, the effects of a modern, global economy appear not just in witchcraft phenomena but on its victims as well. Witchcraft violence is particularly gendered, and political and ritual violence intersect in the (more often than not) female body of the witch. These real, felt, gender differences are reproduced in the metaphorical gender differences of the modernity/tradition divide: "[t]he ideologies associated with the concomitant rise of 'modernity' grouped their counterimages under feminised signs: the rural, the preindustrial, the ritualistic, the irrational, the primitive" (Comaroff 1993: xxviii). The excess of extreme violence consolidates power by constituting a kind of "masculine 'imagined community'" (Auslander 1993: 185) in reaction to the state's own violence and to an imagined, feminised past.

By no means is the international press the only provenance of the tradition/ modernity divide. Rather, testimony from the accusers – often young black men – strongly suggests that they, too, subscribe to such a split, and recognise themselves to be within modernity. They therefore identify witchcraft with an outmoded past, one that threatens their resistance to apartheid and the furtherance of the struggle. In 1982, one editorial proclaimed:

> For too long those sangomas with a lust for blood and easy money have goaded us into becoming beasts. For too long we have paid blind allegiance to the sadistic obsession of ritual murder. For too long we have led innocents to the slaughter in the crazy belief that profits will be increased, that crops will be more abundant, that luck will be on our side. Not even the death sentence, which is handed down with regular monotony, has deterred the believers, or protected the innocents. How many more infants, mothers, grandfathers will die slow and agonising deaths before we come to our senses and realise that ritual murder is an act of superstitious savagery that has no place in our society?
> ("Mr Drum" quoted in Minnaar, Offring & Payze 1992: 20)

Here, even though witchcraft accusations are politically expedient, there is no clean break between politics and belief. Instead, it is often a belief in witchcraft that inspires its suppression. One informant was thus able to contradict himself in the same interview, saying first, "You must understand that what led people into taking such vicious actions is that, when you are bewitched ... it differs from ordinary exploitation. It is [a] harsh and fearsome thing" (Koch 1996: s.p.) and then, "[t]he belief is that the police are trying to promote witchcraft by interfering in the action of the youth" (Koch 1996: s.p.). What resolves the apparent contradiction is an overlapping anxiety about ambiguous, lurking threats, whether from witches, the police, or the apartheid regime in general: "[T]o Masapha – a student at the University of Venda – people who kill witches are 'agents provocateurs planted by the Venda administration to whip up hysteria and discredit anti-apartheid organizations. We only know one person who is a witch and that is apartheid. Witchcraft is meant to divide the people'" (Koch 1990: s.p.). Confronted with the uncontrollable, youths reclaim control over something known, familiar, and tangible: "A popular slogan in the area at the time was ‘freedom means freedom from witches’” (Sly 1994: C15). The slogan labels the state illegitimate, but reduces a systemic charge to the level of the personal. Thus this generalised urge to “purify their communities of apartheid, capitalism and witchcraft” (Van Niekerk 1990: 5) filters down to accusations against the bureaucratic elite installed under apartheid of using ritual murder and magic to entrench their power and privilege (Koch 1990: s.p.).

The shifting nature of witchcraft – and its confessions, accusations, and punishments – exceeds any fixity ascribed to it. Instead of being caught within the indelible outlines of tradition, it plays a functional role, and responds with fluidity and creativity to change. The perception of a tradition contaminated by the modern does not allow for this understanding of witchcraft as an adaptable tool, (for example, “[t]he multiple use of a corrupted form of an ancient Venda tradition explains the unprecedented levels of collected terror that grips the minds of people” (Koch 1990: s.p.)), but it is possible to imagine witchcraft as “a situated moral discourse” (Comaroff 1993: xviii) whose logic has been disrupted. In other words, witchcraft is a local, relative belief system that changes as it encounters newness. It provides a site for the resistant possibilities of mobility, instability, and orality. The use of necklacing, in this schema, thus becomes not the disruption of tradition by political violence, but a coopted form of resistance.[7]

Constituting Communities

Perhaps the most comprehensive – though not altogether savoury and sometimes contradictory[8] – treatment of the witch-burning trend is a report put out by South Africa’s Human Sciences Research Council. It sees a shift in punitive action against witches, from exile to death, that corresponds to the increase in youthful accusers:

> Prior to the 1980s alleged witches were most often exiled from a village if their witchcraft crimes were accepted or proved in the village court. In 1990 this did not happen since many of the witchhunts were spontaneous or the youth simply ignored the village court. Youth groups in almost every village or town in Venda had begun to dominate community structures, relegating those in traditional authority to the fringes.
>
> (Minnaar et al. 1992: 38)

Once more, this emphasis on “traditional authority” subsumes a tradition of oppression under a tradition of community. Scholarly investigations into witchcraft frequently emphasise the question of “community structures”, using the working hypothesis that witchcraft is a boundary-making mechanism, and that community structures are imaginatively, if not materially, reinforced by the violent expulsion of the offending body. Within this structural approach, witchcraft "would be the anti-social psychic power with which persons in relatively unstructured areas of society are credited, the accusation being a means of exerting control where practical forms of control are difficult. Witchcraft, then, is found in the non-structure" (Douglas 1966: 102). In other words, witchcraft is a structuring response to an unstructured situation. Douglas sees a clear pattern in this disorder: "Accusations clustered in areas of ambiguous social relations" (Douglas 1970: xvii). In South Africa, where communities are said to have been "seized by a passion for witch burning" (Keller 1994: A3), passion is an important marker not just of emotional excess, but also in Jean-Luc Nancy's sense of an "unleashing of passions" that is of the order of contagion or communication (Nancy 1991: 32). The opposite of rational containment, passion, spills over in the presence of the other and confounds clear boundaries much in the same way pollution does for Douglas. In the face of such threats, communities continually reconstitute themselves through mechanisms such as witchcraft: "For witchcraft beliefs are essentially a means of clarifying and affirming social definitions" (Douglas 1970: xxv). Significantly, this desire manifests itself spatially. In the 1991 South African court case of State versus Sanah Nedopota, expulsion expresses the urge to physically mark the boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, community and strangers:

> It is our view, that the intention of the crowd initially was simply to expel him or to get rid of what they considered to be his evil influence, by placing enough distance between himself and them. It reminds one of the old procedure which apparently had fallen into disuse, of issuing a *trekpass*, where the community simply decides that this was an undesirable person who was practising witchcraft, and he was then accompanied outside the boundaries of the area by the whole village.
>
> (Quoted in Minnaar et al. 1992: 63)

Interestingly, this legal discourse associates expulsion with the *trekpass*, thus unwittingly linking witchcraft practices and the state's practice of forced removals. As a result, both become questions of coerced mobility.

Witchcraft works primarily as a spatialising force – a function most plainly visible in the practice of exile. Exile establishes a discrete, local space against the fluidity of larger, national structures in flux, and against the punitive fixity of territorial boundaries drawn by the apartheid regime. Either way, exile claims power over space and rewrites the rules of inclusion and exclusion. This work needs reiteration and elaboration to command authority, however, and communities continually labour to establish their geographic boundaries by generating liminal spaces in opposition to the centre, which is, of course, itself uncertain in a time of upheaval.

Witchcraft frequently targets marginal subjects like women and refugees, and creates a new margin of its own. This is a necessary but dangerous activity, since: "[t]o have been in the margins is to have been in contact with danger, to have been at a source of power" (Douglas 1966: 97). Thus communal renewal is always at the mercy of recontamination from those on the horizon, who must be held at a proximate distance. Michel Foucault, discussing the banishment of madmen in the Middle Ages, describes their place as geographically separate yet still within sight: "In one sense, it simply develops, across a half-real, half-imaginary geography, the madman's *liminal* position on the horizon of medieval concern [I]f he cannot and must not have another *prison* than the *threshold* itself, he is kept at the point of passage. He is put in the interior of the exterior, and inversely" (Foucault 1965: 11).[9] This complication of being simultaneously inside and outside means that exile remains a remem- bered act, and that the exiled remain visible on the outskirts of the community.

The remarkable by-products of this process of expulsion include the creation of new sites of abjection, villages populated entirely by named witches:

> Scores of accused witches and their families now live in Witches Hill, a kind of refugee camp for the damned, in a police-sponsored witches protection program. It is an eerie place. Slithering lizards, gnarled cactus and razor-sharp thorn bushes line the sun-seared slope. Dust devils twirl in a bone-dry wind.
>
> (Drogin 1994: A1)

More than one description conflates witches with their surroundings, so that their uncertain status emerges as a characteristic of the uncanny landscape. In a world characterised by productivity versus excess, the reports' language disturbingly places these communities in the order of social excess. Phrases like "a particularly ugly dumping ground" (Beresford 1996: 1), also used to talk about villages of witches, uncomfortably mimic language used for modernity's surpluses of pharmaceuticals and weapons. Equally ambiguous sites include camps of accused witches that crop up around police stations and find themselves balanced on an unstable line between punishment and protection.

> Venda, a black homeland in the northeastern corner of South Africa, has one of the world's strangest refugee communities. More than 80 "witches" and their families are camped at the police station in Thohoyandou, the capital, and there are smaller communities at stations throughout the homeland.
>
> (Van Niekerk 1990: 5)

The police station is an exceptional space – identified with the nation and yet removed from it. By living here, the accused skirt the edges of the community's normalised boundaries. This sort of marginality – that plays on being above, beyond, and within the nation all at the same time – might be particularly modern. The refugee witches expose not a temporary instability, but a permanent condition of modernity. Arjun Appadurai discusses flows of movement in these terms:

> What we cannot see therefore is that refugee camps, refugee bureaucracies, refugee-relief movements, refugee-oriented departments of nation-states, and refugee-oriented transnational philanthropies all constitute one part of the *permanent* framework of the emergent, post-national order.
>
> (Appadurai 1996: 167)

Numerous suggestions that permanent, separate villages for accused witches be established support this theory, for instance:

> The refugee village of Helena Trust, outside Pietersburg, got a substantial part of the press coverage: "In what must be one of the most bizarre communities in South Africa, about 200 people, victims of superstition, jealously or mere rumour, live in what rates in terms of cleanliness and orderliness as a model village".
>
> (Shapshak 1996)

These suggestions indicate that South Africa's crisis is not just a crisis of one nation-state giving way to the next, but a crisis of emergence into a post-national order.

Law and Order

Witches represent the inappropriate and the misplaced. Their often involuntary confessions are unmistakably legible to the communal sensory system, which "sniffs out" (Drogin 1994: A8) witches methodically. Value is placed on the body as an indicator of truth, and as the site of a subsequent extraction of a narrative of truth. Put simply, witchcraft is written on the body:

> As a signifying economy, then, witchcraft is broad and supple in its conceptual scope. But its signs work by rooting expansive moral meanings in the naturalising ground of human bodies. The latter are made to speak disturbingly, viscerally, about ultimate values: about life, death, wealth, power, misappropriation, domination, and so on.
>
> (Comaroff 1993: xxvi)

This idea of being made to speak is central to witchcraft's status as an embodied offence. Moreover, a transgression need not have occurred for punishment to take place. Instead, accusations generate and then contain excess: "The accusation is itself a weapon for clarifying and strengthening the structure. It enables guilt to be pinned on the source of confusion and ambiguity" (Douglas 1966: 107).

Naming witches classifies and contains their imagined threat for both communities and authorities. But the trajectory of naming is not unidirectional – naming moves from the institution to the individual as an identifying and categorising mechanism, but it can also move in the other direction as a challenge to authority. This threat is reminiscent of abjection's menace as described and defined by Julia Kristeva:

> It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, position, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject ....
>
> (Kristeva 1982: 4)

Witchcraft repeatedly threatens to become a kind of excess that escapes containment, and thus demands evermore stringent efforts at policing the line, an imperative voiced by one policeman: "The moment there is no policing in the [rural] areas, it'll start all over again" (Shapshak 1996). Invariably, official recognition of an illicit activity goes hand-in-hand with a punitive capacity: "Northern Province safety and security spokesman Serobi Maja warned recently that his department would not hesitate to deploy security forces at the slightest hint of witchcraft-related violence and ritual killings" (Shapshak 1996).

The law thus establishes itself at the imagined boundary between modernity and tradition in order to keep them separated and to encode a rationalised belief in their difference. Rational belief turns out to be a key element in the proposals for curing communities of witch-burning too: suggestions include, among others, education, democratic reform, and even lessons in dialectical materialism. All proposed solutions depend on either disciplinary or institutionalising action. For instance, in 1996 a witchcraft commission proposed the registration and regulation of all medical practitioners:

> The report contains detailed proposals for a professional body that will register all healers and enforce standards and a code of ethics for all traditional doctors in the province. The proposal is likely to generate controversy ... because it provides benefits of official recognition but also punishment for misconduct.
>
> (Koch 1996: 10)

It is through such measures of containment that orthodoxy tries to curb its opposition.

Because modernity must recognise tradition in order to counteract it, modernity becomes imbricated in a system of naming witches even as it suppresses the possibility of their existence. Unable to name witchcraft, the law makes naming witches a crime. The Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957 "forbids any person to practise witchcraft or accuse another of doing so. It does not, however, give a definition of exactly what witchcraft entails" (quoted in Minnaar, Offringa & Payze 1992: 13). Specifically, the Act targets "any person who imputes to any other person the causing, by supernatural means, of any disease in or injury or damage to any person or thing, or who names or indicates any other person as a wizard" (p. 57). This structuring contradiction generates another set of ambivalences and ambiguities in which the law simultaneously undermines and underwrites witchcraft.

Within South African law, it is not necessarily the belief in witchcraft that is criminal, but the articulation of that belief. The 1957 Act, still in force, holds culpable any person who "professes a knowledge of witchcraft", that is, who makes a public expression of belief. At a 1996 summit on witchcraft held in the Northern Province, one delegate summed up the dangers of articulation when he asked, "But what do we do with people who confess they are witches?" (Beresford 1996: 13). At the same time, belief is a mitigating factor for punishment. The South African Criminal Law Reports for 1990 state:

> Mitigating factors: belief in witchcraft. Although the reasonable man does not believe in witchcraft, a subjective belief therein may be a factor which may, depending on the circumstances, have a material bearing on accused's blameworthiness ... held to be a relevant factor in mitigation of sentence for culpable homicide where belief in witchcraft offered the only explanation for accused's killing of deceased.
>
> (Quoted in Minnaar et al. 1992: 14-15)

In 1996, a proposal was made for the replacement of the 1957 law, but while the draft legislation "recognizes witchcraft" (Koch 1996: 10), it will continue to

> punish people who "sniff out" and attack people accused of witchcraft but also those who carry out "any act which creates a reasonable suspicion that he is engaged in the practice of witchcraft" or who "profess a knowledge of witchcraft, or the use of charms, and advise any person how to bewitch, injure or damage any person or thing".
>
> (Koch 1996: 10)[10]

Unruly Bodies

The action *en masse* of burning witches attempts to reinforce the boundaries of the remembered community that has been dismembered by change. In the eyes of the media and the law, the community acts as a single body politic:

> In most instances, by the time police arrive at the scene of a witch burning, the only evidence is a charred body, a burned house and a community that claims it saw, heard and knows nothing. Everyone is suspect and no one will talk, usually because it is the entire community that participates in the killing.
>
> (Sly 1994: C15)

Thus the community consolidates itself not just in opposition to the accused witch, but also in opposition to the authorities. Significant here is the threat of withholding, the refusal to confess, and the subsequent disruption of official narratives, which can no longer assert definitive explanations. This refusal to cooperate forces the law into addressing the community as a whole. For instance, one court document reports: "No-one is prepared to tell the police what happened, so they decide to arrest virtually the whole village" (State versus Nedopota quoted in Minnaar et al. 1992: 62). Community coalescence occurs even through the returned, regretful gaze of the accused: "We were expelled by the community" (Drogin 1994: A8), said one banished woman.

Although it appears that body politic is made whole by the expulsion of the threatening part, excessive violence tears this wholeness, and the communal body gets refigured as a disfigured body. As one earlier observer noted:

> We all feel that a society that gives excessive prominence to witchcraft must be a sick society, rather as a witch-ridden personality is a sick personality. This is confirmed by anthropological studies which in several cases have shown an increase in witch-phenomena in communities undergoing social breakdown. The native peoples in South Africa during the difficult phase of urbanisation provide several cases in point.
>
> (Mayer quoted in Douglas 1970: xx)

A more modern account carries echoes of this pathologising discourse, as well as of the dangers of pollution:

> It is almost as if township residents are again using fire in a frustrated attempt to cleanse themselves of a miasma of evil, in the form of the violence which surrounds them. The legend of the "Third Force" – the mysterious organisation widely blamed for the seemingly endless township massacres by unidentified

> gunmen – has taken on an almost superstitious dimension, in the same way that witches were invented to explain the inexplicable in rural society, such as droughts and crop failures.
>
> (Beresford 1993: 13)

Although this article deals somewhat dismissively with the possibility that the Third Force and witches are real phenomena, it does draw a useful correspondence between politics and passion. Here, the community reconstitutes itself in similar ways when threatened with uncertainty and violence in any form. Like witches, who pollute community structures from within, the notion of a Third Force encapsulates concerns about the blurring of inside/outside. Both ideas arise in order to confront multiple, invisible threats of unknown origin. The author goes on to say that the Third Force

> is perhaps better used as a generic term, to describe the collective contribution to township violence by forces operating from outside their boundaries – whether policemen acting on their own initiative, security force units out of control, or rightwing extremists on the rampage.
>
> (Beresford 1993: 13)

Fundamentally instrumental, witchcraft serves as an organising tactic, to confront forces operating from outside its boundaries. The vague and inchoate nature of those forces makes witchcraft itself a necessarily ambiguous, protean activity.

Unruly bodies are excessive, out of control, fundamentally unruleable. The coincidence of spatial and bodily boundaries reflects the use-value of the witch's body as a way of clarifying the inside and outside of the body politic: "The symbols of the attack by witchcraft tend to make the body of the victim into an image of the betrayed community" (Douglas 1970: xxvii). Excessive, offensive, and surplus bodies are expelled because they threaten the community's intactness. In brief, a crisis of temporal change produces a spatial response which is embodied in the figure of the outcast.

Mary Douglas asks us to "consider beliefs about persons in a marginal state. These are people who are somehow left out in the patterning of society, who are placeless. They may be doing nothing morally wrong, but their status is indefinable" (Douglas 1966: 95). Responding to this anxiety about uncertainty, the physical act of witch-burning marks location, context, temporality, and duration. It calls attention to the misplaced body, and to the community as the place of embodiment. By making a spectacle of an unruly body that is seen to deliberately reproach order with chaos, the community is able to contain and control her and her threat.

Death is a response of excessive boundary-marking. However, this attempt at containment itself produces the uncontainable. Kristeva, who draws deeply on Douglas, uses the corpse to advance her argument about abjection: "the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything" (Kristeva 1982: 3). Abjection is a spatial issue: It has to do with "an exorbitant outside or inside" and with "an elsewhere;" it "places the one haunted by it literally beside himself" (p. 1). The corpse, as "the utmost of abjection" (p. 4), confuses space and indicates the calamity of being borderless. "I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders" (p. 4), Kristeva declares.

Local communities and the state see the burnings as an affront to an established moral order. If indeed, as the media would have it, witch-burning incidents have accelerated, then it is no longer possible to describe witchcraft, as it has traditionally been described, as a rite that inverts the normative in carefully bounded moments of parodic licence (Gluckman quoted in Comaroff 1993); now it must be seen as unbounded and licentious.

The Body in Parts

Many of the stories on witch-burning also address the phenomenon that has come to be known as medicine murder. These accounts equal, and sometimes surpass, the enthralled detail with which the burnings are described:

> In the latest bizarre incident, a local radio station reported this week that a young woman was abducted by a gang of "cannibals", kept as a sex-slave in an underground cavern in the township east of Johannesburg, and forced to eat the organs of victims murdered for "muti" (magic) purposes. Although the teenager is mentally disturbed, a psychologist who interviewed her says the allegations are credible because the victim does not have the "cognitive capacity to have concocted the account".
>
> (Koch 1995: s.p.)

As this quotation makes clear, the articles that mention medicine murder linger on an underground economy that deals in body parts. This fragmentation of bodies and their illegal sale brutally undermine a capitalist market in medico-pharmaceutical goods and the systemic belief in a certain moral and scientific order. In these bodies, exchange value and moral value cross. One article from *The Economist* pits muti against the multinational pharmaceutical corps, asking "[d]oes any of this have a legal place in a country grappling with the desire to modernize while respecting African tradition?", and privileging the incorporation (literally: making corporate) of muti into modern medicine over their coexistence ("Witchcraft in South Africa" 1995: 85).

All this begs the question: how did this corporeal fragmentation come to be imagined? Rather than posit "barbaric practices" ("Witchcraft in South Africa" 1995: 85) as the violent origin, one might suggest a dehumanising social process of family breakdown and personal dispensability.[11] In *Race, Nation, Class,* Etienne Balibar talks about how mechanised physical work involves a physical and symbolic violence without immediate precedent (Balibar [1988]1991: 211). He says,

> This process modifies the status of the human body (the human status of the body): it creates *body-men*, men whose body is a machine-body, that is fragmented and dominated, and used to perform one isolable function or gesture, being both destroyed in its integrity *and* fetishised, atrophied *and* hypertrophied in its useful organs.
>
> (Balibar1991: 211)

This tendency towards fragmentation and mechanisation is already established in the social order of capitalist apartheid with its migrant labour system, and heightened and deepened by apartheid's extreme forms of racism. It is noteworthy that Balibar already connects this process to the "*institutional racialization of manual labour*" (p. 210). In fact, Bessie Head uses the same language as Balibar in her short story, "The Collector of Treasures," in which she describes how, under "[t]he colonial era and the period of migratory mining labour to South Africa," the Botswana man "became 'the boy' of the white man and a machine-tool of the South African mines" (Head 1977: 92).

In so-called medicine murders, potent human body parts are removed for various medicinal and magical purposes. Popular representations code this practice as a symptom of the unbreachable barrier between tradition and modernity. However, what appear to be conflicting values placed on bodies actually arise out of modernity's own economies of detachable, mobile commodities and labouring body parts as much as they emerge from ancestral custom. If the witch is the community's abject object, a social nobody, these fragmented bodies and body parts have been purged from a modern economy: "Witches are modernity's prototypical malcontents. They provide – like the grotesques of a previous age – disconcertingly full-bodied images of a world in which humans seem in constant danger of turning into commodities, of losing their life blood to the market and to the destructive desires it evokes" (Comaroff 1993: xxix). For Susan Stewart (1993), the grotesque body is the body in parts, representing disorder and dismemberment. Interestingly, Kristeva's discourse on the abject seems to place it precisely at this juncture of insidious incision, exchangeable parts, and compromised relationships: "Abjection ... is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you ...” (Kristeva 1982: 4).

Mines, Migrancy, Movement

In South Africa’s long history of male migration to the mines, generations of women have been left behind to guard the outlines of a community already dissipated. Equated with the space of the community, but also considered a threat to its maintenance, these women are prime targets for suspicion and blame. What Rob Nixon calls “the multiple origins of violence” that is, “chaotic urbanization, epidemic unemployment, economic recession, generational conflict, the legacy of migrant labour, and the attendant crisis in masculinity” (Nixon 1994: 244), must be acknowledged as organising features of a phenomenon that revolves around uncertainty. Rather than identifying a break between the modern and traditional, witchcraft shows how, in a climate of transnational mobility and fragmentation, the local takes on enormous meaning for the national and the global and vice versa:

> In its late-twentieth-century guise ... witchcraft is a finely calibrated gauge of the impact of global cultural and economic forces on local relations, on perceptions of money and markets, on the abstraction and alienation of “indigenous” values and meanings.
>
> (Comaroff 1993: xxviii-xxix)

According to Mark Auslander

> [m]odern witch finding movements are, among other things, ritualized attempts to work upon these inchoate, partially apprehended “maps”, to distill and transform structural relations between the local and the global, between rural households and metropolitan sites of production and state power.
>
> (Auslander 1993: 170)

Not coincidentally, the borders erected between tradition and modernity correspond with apartheid’s geographic borders. When witchcraft spills over the borders of apartheid’s old homelands, it remakes the logic of modernity’s economies. This conforms to Isabel Hofmyer’s theory of a “rigid ‘grammar’” of “political ‘literacy’” (Hofmeyr1990: 87)[12] written on the landscape by boundary-marking fences, and opposed by a resistant orality. Hofmeyr’s history of fence-building in the Transvaal reveals the ways in which oral resistance can contaminate literate institutions (p. 71). Many of those inherited strategies – delay, discussion, deliberate error – are in use today, mobilised by workers to control their own labour (p. 84).[13] Add witch accusations to the list, and the degree to which witchcraft contaminates modernity's institutions begins to emerge:

> The Zoeknog coffee plantation near Acornhoek was the site of a novel labour dispute late last year. After a driver died in a motor vehicle accident, the 150-strong workforce went on strike and demanded rights to consult a sangoma and sniff out the witches among them who had caused the death. Management reportedly refused, at first, to accept "superstitious and unfounded" accusations as a valid cause for dismissal but submitted to the demands after the workers staged go-slows, demonstrations and threats of industrial action.
>
> (Koch & Khoza 1996)

Perhaps most significantly, witchcraft captures the ambiguities of modernity's migrations and displacements. With an enormous influx of refugees and migrant workers from neighbouring states, South Africa feels threatened from beyond its national borders. The potential for witchcraft attaches itself to these foreign bodies whose economies of circulation mirror society's: "[V]illagers believe local witches are importing evil spells and dangerous concoctions from neighbouring countries" (Williams 1996: s.p.). Accusations accumulate around already-liminal sites, such as refugee camps, and already-present tensions, such as local politics. As Douglas says, "The witch is an outsider, and the use of magic a mere extension of normal political aggression" (Douglas 1970: xxviii). Global, as well as local, concerns about economic and political stability coagulate around high-profile issues like witch-burning. A cautionary editorial from the rabidly conservative *New York Post* ("Witch-burning in South Africa" 26 September, p. 20)[14] shows up the ways in which economics shape perceptions and vice versa: "But we hope American institutions considering large-scale investment in the new South Africa take careful note: A nation that tolerates witch-burning is probably not a place where foreign capital is likely to be put to productive use" ("Witch-burning in South Africa" 1994: 20). Experienced as a crisis of multinational investment, the changes in South Africa pose a global threat of uncertainty. The instabilities already built into modernity – such as the necessary migrations of a mobile labour force – also undermine a belief in stability and certainty. As workers cross and recross national borders, they provoke an epistemological crisis of knowable space so that economic, political, and cultural conflicts all become questions of mappable and definitive boundaries. Threats to the national form get displaced onto liminal subjects and marginalised activities in an attempt to chart out geographies of belief systems. Under South Africa's transition from apartheid the comfortable distinctions between foreign and familiar, modern and traditional, and home and abroad previously held sacred are undone, and witchcraft becomes visible in the interstices, alongside doubt: “Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable” (Douglas 1966: 96).

Notes

1. The bulk of the newspaper reports discuss witch-burnings in the Northern Transvaal (Gauteng Province) and the former homelands of Venda and Lebowa.

2. Kwame Anthony Appiah, in his book *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (1991), uses the trope of the house as a nodal point for making sense of a network of multiple affinities – to the continent, the nation, the neighbourhood. This raises interesting questions about how the discourse of house or home constructs a gendered space for national identity. For Appiah, the nation is the father’s house and yet with the nation imagined as a domestic space, women are invoked as national reproducers, reiterating borders from within.

3. Between 1990 and 1995 more than five hundred people were accused of witchcraft and killed in the Northern Province. Only one has been killed since 1997 (Singer 2000).

4. The letter, titled “Learn Which Witches are Which”, was a response to an article by David Beresford, “Spectre of Witchcraft Haunts South Africa” (*The Weekly Mail & Guardian*, June 21-27, 1996). The writer accuses Beresford of “othering” the “supposed traditions of indigenous peoples in this country”.

5. This paper provisionally uses the dominant terminology of witches, witch-burnings, and medicine murders in order to respond to it, although these borrowed and imprecise terms are clearly problematic.

6. See Posel (1990: 154-171) on representations of mob violence. Another approach might be to examine the phenomenon in terms of youth culture and resistance, drawing on relevant theory from the Birmingham School. See, for example, Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige, and Angela McRobbie.

7. Mark Auslander’s piece offers intriguing insights into witchcraft as a creative response to modernity’s uncertainties in the Zambian instance.

8. The report is compromised by its final valuation of one belief system over another and by its suggested use of force to reinforce that hierarchy:

   > The conclusion drawn is that the belief in magic and witchcraft is at the root of the problem and is so deeply ingrained that it will not easily be replaced by Christian values. In the meantime, the police, courts and law enforcers should act in a way that places themselves above suspicion and they should

> attempt to curb this evil to the best of their abilities.
> (Minnaar, Offringa & Payze 1992: 47)

The report also contradicts its own evidence when, despite delineating abuses of power by the government, it immediately goes on to suggest that "the security of the traditional social order" (p. 41) had been disrupted.

9. There is an institutional as well as a linguistic connection here – witchcraft has historically been rewritten as madness by colonial authorities, and asylums were dumping grounds for surplus people and pharmaceuticals. Assumptions of insanity (whether individual or societal) persist. In the case of one man accused of witchcraft, the civic association called in a psychiatrist from a nearby hospital to check if he was schizophrenic (Koch, Ritchken & Khoza 1995).

10. As of 2000, the House of Traditional Leaders was still writing a new law that would ban both the practice and accusations of witchcraft (Singer 2000).

11. There is no need to rehearse the familiar litany of rules and regulations, from pass laws to homeland creation, that apartheid practised to control and coerce its labour force. For a timeline, see Thompson (1995).

12. It might be instructive to juxtapose Hofmeyr's "rigid grammar" with Kwame Anthony Appiah's "shallow penetration" (Appiah 1992: 7) of colonial culture in Africa. For Appiah, the lines drawn between and around things turn out only to be perforations, not punctures. However, even as he shows how identities are invented, he also shows how they have been made real. He says, "[T]he course of cultural nationalism in Africa has been to make real the imaginary identities to which Europe has subjected us" (p. 62).

13. Compare Douglas on inarticulate powers: "[W]here the social system is well-articulated, I look for articulate powers vested in the points of authority; where the social system is ill-articulated, I look for inarticulate powers vested in those who are a source of disorder" (Douglas 1966: 99).

14. The editorial appeared, in a wild coalescence of racially loaded references, alongside a political cartoon depicting Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide ("So, you're stuck with me, you satanic capitalist pig! ...") in bed with US President Bill Clinton ("Anything for a vote, you Marxist necklacing barbarian! ...") and an article called "Return of the Race People", on race relations in New York City.

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