Despite the relative decline of the initial post-apartheid social movements, popular unrest throughout the country has anything but subsided. The continued boom in protest—albeit largely outside the confines of many formal groups with a name, decision-making body, and organizational platform—has led sociologist Peter Alexander to term this second period of post-apartheid unrest unfolding since 2004 “a massive rebellion of the poor” (2010, 2012). Gillian Hart has named this period beyond the formal organization of struggle a ‘movement beyond movements,’ and it is indeed an apt term to describe much of the unrest (2014). But there have also been important examples of formal movements, operating under an organized structure, that have emerged during this second period of upheaval. Abahlali baseMjondolo, a movement of shack dwellers primarily located in Durban, is one such group that emerged in 2005, and will be examined further in this essay. The debate around South African movements over the past decade has thus revealed a series of important questions regarding an insufficiently radical content of the movements (Sinwell 2011), their inability to scale up to the national level (Bond and Mottiar 2013) versus the primacy of the local as a universal but often-times fleeting ground from which all struggles spring (Pithouse 2013), and the necessity for bridging social movement and labor union struggles (Friedman 2012, Naidoo and Veriava 2004). In contributing to these important debates, I would like to emphasize a wider conceptualization of South African struggles within a global conjuncture. While much productive work has taken the first round of post-apartheid struggles’ highlighting of neoliberalism as a platform to critique what the movements are fighting against on a
global scale, less work has been done to compare the internal dynamics of movements at a similarly global level of analysis.¹

Such a project has become all the more important since 2011 with the emergence of the Arab Uprisings, Occupy Wall Street, European anti-austerity movements and other similar struggles. A blossoming of movements (and their corresponding repression) has characterized much of the global conjuncture over the past years. My approach therefore takes a cue from the work of James Ferguson, who argued that “the assessment of the political situation in Africa must move beyond the state-centered framework entirely” (2006: 86). While the relationship between movement and state remains important, an excessive focus on these dynamics can occlude other aspects of movements operating at a variety of scales. Echoing the recent work of Richard Pithouse (2013), Ferguson argues that “many of the most important political processes on the continent are occurring, as I have suggested, at subnational and transnational levels. The local institutions and grassroots social movements referred to earlier must be taken seriously and understood not as regression or throwbacks, but as potentially formidable political responses to contemporary realities” (2006: 86).

Ferguson believes that a re-scaled, horizontal topography of power can add something to movement struggles that is currently lacking. “It is possible, too, that a better understanding of these movements will contribute to the crucial tactical goal of forging links and alliances among them, suggesting a beginning to a real alternative form of ‘governance’ (87).” While this should undoubtedly be one goal of intellectual

¹ This critique should not be taken to mean that South African theorists fail to situate the dynamics of South African capitalism within a broader global context. My argument, rather, is that the conversation around South African movements is rarely presented within a broader global conversation of internal movement dynamics. This does not entail merely suggesting that all movements are struggling against a global neoliberalism, but rather requires an exploration of the dynamics of class composition within each struggle.
reflection on movements, it should not take the place of actual dialogue between movements themselves. Ferguson’s analysis thus risks occluding the fact that South African struggles such as the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign and Abahlali baseMjondolo have consistently situated themselves as intervening in part within a necessarily global scale of struggle, reading about struggles around the world, welcoming activists to the country, and traveling abroad to gatherings in Latin America, Palestine, the United States, Europe, and the rest of the African continent. The transnational context of South African movements became immediately apparent to me in my own discussions with activists who have played a central role in the past decade-plus of movement mobilization within these organizations. Both Ashraf Cassiem and S’bu Zikode (Interview Cassiem June 2011; Interview Zikode August 2013) cite models such as the Argentinean Unemployed Workers Movement and Popular Neighborhood Assemblies, Brazil’s Landless Movement (MST), and the Zapatistas of Mexico as struggles they have been in constant dialogue with, whether indirectly or directly. The overlaps in experience between South Africa and many other parts of the world is correctly identified by Gillian Hart in her most recent study of the ongoing post-apartheid crisis.

South Africa is an extreme but far from exceptional embodiment of forces at play in many regions of the world: (1) massive concentrations of wealth alongside the mushrooming of ‘wageless life’ (or what an administrator of the Bundesbank calls ‘populations with no productive function’); (2) oppositional politics that are assuming a multiplicity of forms: the Tea Party in the United States (US), explosive Hindu nationalism in India, widespread anti-Muslim and xenophobic sentiments in much of Euro-America, the re-emergence of fascism in Austria and other parts of Europe on the one hand—and, on the other, the uprisings in the Arab world, the Occupy movement and the anti-austerity movements in Greece, Italy and Spain; and (3) official efforts at containment ranging from liberal biopolitical interventions targeting specific populations (often in the name of security) to increasingly common police brutality (2014: 5).
South African struggles also have a lot to offer the broader global conjuncture of upheaval, unfurling since 2011, in that many of the problems these movements have revealed have arguably been prefigured in South Africa over the past 15 years. A comparative analysis of uprisings can therefore illuminate aspects of the global conjuncture that are common across specific contexts, while creating a dialogue between movements that might help to decenter and de-fetishize the state in the manner that Ferguson encourages. In exploring the particular dynamics of uprisings such as the Arab Spring, European anti-austerity struggles, and Occupy Wall Street, I argue that the common theme of race emerges as a divisive factor contributing to the decomposition of many of the most recent uprisings. As a paradigmatic site of racial divisions, South Africa, both historically and in the purportedly ‘post-apartheid’ present, offers a useful comparison to explore a central but too often ignored element of neoliberal rule in the “threat of race”. The persistence of xenophobic attacks against African migrants is explored through a racialized lens of anti-blackness, alongside the response of Abahlali baseMjondolo to the threat of violence against those deemed as racially and nationally Other in the shack communities of South Africa.

The movements that have defined our global conjuncture since at least 2011 have arguably failed to grapple with this persistence of the threat of race, a constitutive feature of the otherwise commonly recognized neoliberal assault. As a result, many of the struggles that emerged in recent years suffered significant setbacks in the course of their evolution. Others were easily hijacked by conservative forces deploying racism as a divisive, diversionary tool used to bring about a return to the status quo.
Occupy: 99% or the White Middle Class?

So I live in Roxbury, a little bit over that way. And we have a lot of issues, in our community that face black, Latino and Cape Verdean people of Roxbury, Dorchester-Mattapan. We respect the movement that you’ve done, and so far are in agreement with much of what you have to say. But I’d like to ask a question to the crowd. Is this movement a movement for white people? Some of you may know 51 people have been murdered this year, much of which has been happening within a two-mile radius from which I live…I want to talk to you a little bit about the banks. Bank of America, right around the corner. Many people know about Bank of America. How many people know about the slave trading and Bank of America’s involvement and being named in a reparations law-suit, because the Bank of America was one of the banks that directly profited from the slave trade, the trade of my people…I want to expand a little bit about some of the issues this group is talking about…if you look at any of the unemployment rates for white people, it’s double that for black people…Why I come here today, because normally I organize in my community, I wouldn’t attend an event like this. I wouldn’t come and address a group of people that I see, the majority, don’t look like me, may not share some of my personal concerns. I made it a point to come down here to address these issues with you, and encourage you to not only occupy this space, but to occupy other spaces. And one of the reasons that the black movement of working class and poor people has not linked with the movement of white working class and poor people is that often, as black people I can say, we don’t think that white people give a damn about what we’re going through…so I say that what you went through the other night, I give you kudos for that, but I’m telling you it’s a drop in the bucket compared to what my people have been dealing with in this country for far too long…Help us clean up the hood, help us bring attention and energy to the issues that have been long ignored, because when we talk about this 99%, I will submit, that no people have suffered in this country like my people. When I say my people, I mean all people of color (Jamarhl Crawford, speech at Occupy Boston, October 12, 2011).

When the Occupy Wall Street movement emerged in late 2011, its division of the United States into an elite 1% and an exploited 99% was celebrated as a powerful framing device. The idea of a ruling 1% seemed to capture the general disgruntlement with a financial sector that managed to continue turning profits at a time when many ordinary businesses were forced to close their doors. Thousands of people posted ‘selfies’ online while holding a sign that read “I am the 99%” followed by a brief description of personal battles with school debt, exorbitant health care bills, or
unemployment. The commonality of this exploited 99% seemed undeniable in the face of bankers who controlled both the economy and the political system. But very quickly the monolithic nature of the 99% began to run aground as divisions emerged both within the occupy encampments and between those identifying as occupiers and those who never joined the movement but were subject to an extra-economic violence arguably more threatening than debt and unemployment.

Perhaps the most important division that emerged within the Occupy movement was posited as that between ‘legitimate’ Occupiers and those deemed ‘illegitimate’. In camps from Zucotti to Los Angeles, middle class suburban families and college students carved out a space for legitimate concerns to be expressed, while confining the homeless, drug addicts, and other urban vagabonds attracted to occupy for a variety of reasons to a supposedly illegitimate encampment, spatially siphoned off from the ‘real occupiers’. Zucotti occupier Craig Hughes brought together his concerns about this division within occupy in a pamphlet entitled “Occupy Zucotti: Social Struggle and Planned Shrinkage.” In November 2011 he expressed his disgruntlement about a growing trend.

Stories abound from and about homeless youth at the park about being policed and marginalized by some working group participants and protest gatekeepers who presume the intentions of others present. Some vocal activists have argued that dealing with issues of poverty in the park have sidetracked all other work. Some have made unfortunate comments about poor and homeless people—arguments conflating homelessness with ‘substance abuse,’ and ‘substance abuse’ and homelessness with morally reprehensible behaviors; arguments conflating ‘mental health issues’ with disruption and violence’; arguments implying that formerly incarcerated people and the homeless are problems to be dealt with instead of comrades and allies, or potential comrades and allies. Some organizers have strategized ways to cut service provision in the park in order to disperse poor people (2012: 4-5).

While class was clearly a dividing line along which this fracture within the Occupy 99% began to grow, race was an equally obvious framing for distinguishing the legitimate
activists from those who were deemed to be the source of additional problems. “That most of those being blamed are people of color and many of those doing the blaming are white is an obvious fact that points to just a couple of the numerous ways that racism and white privilege are evincing themselves” (7). Even more striking than this division within Occupy itself is Hughes’ conclusion based on participant observation that this dynamic revealed an underlying and defining similarity between Occupy and the right-wing Tea Party movement. Both were largely middle class white movements, disenchanted with the fact that neoliberalism, an ideology of self-help that neither group initially disagreed with, had failed to deliver the goods despite their hard work. “Much of the struggle at Zucotti Park and similar protests elsewhere is about not becoming ‘the poor’ and decisively not about ending poverty. Like the Tea Party, much of this movement is about not loosing the relative privilege that some have and not about ending that privilege all together” (21).

Occupiers were soon met with force by local police departments, carrying out a coordinated intimidation campaign to reclaim occupied space from the public. Horror stories flashed across every major cable channel of police pepper spraying innocent occupiers in Zucotti and student occupiers in Los Angeles. The image of a SWAT team sent to evict occupy activists in Chapel Hill, North Carolina quickly went viral, as citizens were shocked to see innocent looking white youth forced to the ground with military grade weapons pointed at their skulls. And yet, the justified outrage expressed in the face of such police repression also revealed a relative silence in the face of ongoing, mundane violence the police commit on a more regular basis against poor communities of color throughout the country. In a rare moment of truth telling on cable news,
MSNBC host Lawrence O’Donnell captured the systemic nature of such police violence in a commentary responding to an early incident of unjustified police repression of Occupy Zucotti protesters.

This weekend, a few troublemakers turned a peaceful protest against wall street greed into a violent burst of chaos. The trouble-makers carried pepper spray and guns and were wearing badges... Every day in America police are too tough, every day in America police cross the line and abuse citizens...Every day in America police get away with that. White America was shocked at what they saw police doing to Rodney King. Black America would have loved to have been shocked by what they saw police do to Rodney King but black America only could have been shocked if what the police did to Rodney King was something completely alien to their experience, was something they couldn’t imagine doing to their community. There’s a Rodney King every day in this country, and black America has always known that (2011).

Sure enough, one week before the incident of police brutality that triggered O’Donnell’s tirade, the state of Georgia had executed Trayvon Davis. Davis was an African American man convicted of a crime that he arguably did not commit. His defense argued that seven of the original nine witnesses who testified against him in 1989 had since altered or recanted their testimony. Despite this, Davis was put to death. Five months later in a suburb of Sanford, Florida, African American teenager Trayvon Martin was shot dead at the hands of a local self-appointed neighborhood watch vigilante, George Zimmerman. Martin was not in the process of occupying Wall Street or protesting the government. Martin was not even engaged in a defiant act of any kind. Arguably, Trayvon Martin was shot simply for being a black male in the wrong place at the wrong time. One year later in mid-2013, his killer was acquitted of any wrongdoing and allowed to go free.

As a preliminary response to the patently divergent experiences of violence and death-dealing between predominantly white college students in Occupy and black and brown youth within and outside the movement, some occupiers of color attempted to
generate a critical conversation. In a piece titled “A Critique of the Occupy Movement from a Black Occupier,” Emmahunn Rahim Ali Campbell argued that Occupy had inspired a generation of activists to social change, and that such an achievement could not be dismissed so easily. However, Campbell continued,

It is also the case that people of color do not have a space in this movement as it is currently oriented. Despite its horizontal structure and consensus-based actions, it is still led by white middle-class youth. These individuals, whose very social reality as white people, allows them close access to institutions of capital and the power that is closely associated with these institutions, cannot afford and will be unable to continue this movement without a full acknowledgement, critique, and dismantlement of white privilege within its ranks. As it currently exists, the Occupy movement is hypocritical in its anti-racist stance (2011: 50).

Despite Occupy’s ability to highlight some of the most glaring detrimental effects of the concentrated financial power of the 1%, its inability to link struggles across class and race lines proved to be a major weak point. In this failure, it revealed perhaps the major underbelly of radical attempts at social change in the United States over the past century since the breaking up of the multi-racial populist movement. The current age of neoliberalism has proven to be no exception to the refusal of movements to grapple seriously with the processes of racialization that are constitutive of the very couplings of difference and power that Gilmore identifies. In his own attempt to highlight such issues, geographer Clyde Woods was appreciative of much of the mainstream critique of neoliberalism that was in part represented by the Occupy Movement. “Yet,” he argued, “the scholarship on neoliberalism is peculiarly silent on the global significance of the forms of hegemony that have been worked out in the United States. Internal racial regimes can no longer be treated as incidental to global processes” (2007: 48). A side-stepping of the centrality of “the threat of race” in the contemporary neoliberal moment has arguably weakened the attempt to create a new society and foreclosed the
opportunities for encounter between otherwise segregated communities that the
ocket of public space by Occupy activists presented. “Ignoring the transformation of
regional and racial regimes allows proponents and critics of neo-liberalism to also freely
ignore their own complicity in a wide variety of domestic racial projects that undermine
democratic institutions and constituencies: massive social spending cuts, segregated
education, welfare reform, gentrification, the prison-industrial complex, employment
discrimination, and electoral disenfranchisement, among others” (ibid).

**Europe: From Anti-Austerity to Migrant Menace**

The state is an extraordinary machine for manufacturing the inexistent—through
death (the history of states is essentially a history of massacres), but not
exclusively so. The state is capable of manufacturing the inexistent by imposing a
figure of identitarian normality, ‘national’ or otherwise. Now, especially in
Europe, this issue of identity has become an obsession. A sort of cultural racism,
which in fact conveys the fear of the ‘middle classes’—querulous profiteers from
the imperial dynamic—of being reduced to the inferior status of ‘people from the
*banlieues*’, poisons the situation and even ends up clouding the minds of once
admirable and courageous intellectuals (Badiou 2012: 71).

The global ramifications of a necessarily racialized neoliberalism were similarly
highlighted in the wake of European anti-austerity struggles that evolved coeval with the
Occupy movement and were equally inspired by the precedent of the Arab uprisings. An
initial round of impressive square occupations—most prominent in Spain and Greece—
articulated with a denunciation of the entirety of the political class. Many of the
‘indignados’ in Spain decided to boycott elections as an unviable solution to the
profundity of the economic and political crisis they faced. In Hardt and Negri’s analysis,
this represented a deep desire for greater democracy, something the established political
institutions could no longer offer. “So many of the movements of 2011 direct their
critiques against political structures and forms of representation, then, because they
recognize clearly that representation, even when it is effective, blocks democracy rather than fosters it.” (2012: 29). And yet the ability of the movements themselves to accurately ‘represent’ or even incorporate their respective country’s most marginalized members also proved quite weak.

In the wake of electoral defeats in Greece, Italy and Spain, as either right-wing or technocratic and supposedly ‘neutral’ governments came to power, the movements faced a crisis of faith and began to dwindle in numbers. Following a decline in numbers, a similar discourse emerged demarcating legitimate from illegitimate protestors. On June 30, 2011 public sector workers across Britain spearheaded a one-day general strike. Hundreds of thousands of protestors took to the streets in downtown London to voice their concerns about the increased austerity measures of the British state. While the one-day strike was initially seen as a sign of strength of the movements even in Britain, the government went on to pass austerity measures regardless. Soon thereafter, from August 6 to 11, riots broke out across the country. The immediate impetus for the rioting was the police murder on August 4 of Mark Duggan in Tottenham. Duggan, like Trayvon Martin, was a young black male, targeted by police for being armed and dangerous. Despite conflicting accounts of this narrative, and the state changing its story multiple times, an inquest into his killing found no wrong doing at the hands of the police.

Regardless of the findings, the community response to Duggan’s killing clearly revealed an underlying rage among communities of color, youth, the unemployed, and those with a criminal background—the groups most prominent in the riots—in British cities (Trott 2013b: 543). While rioters attacked indiscriminately, looting stores and burning buildings and cars in their own neighborhoods, a few commentators tried to give
voice to the expressions of rage. But British civil society proved largely deaf in the face of calls for understanding the experiences of rioters as part of a broader search for justice.

There were at least three possible politicized understandings of the riots. They could have been read as political if viewed as a response to a specific political context of neoliberalism, a declining welfare state and a corresponding rise in racialized containment; they could have been understood as political in the sense that rioters became objects of a range of political strategies of policing that deployed the full repressive apparatus of the state together with a media discourse of supposedly rampant criminalization; or they could have been politicized by understanding the protagonists as expressing an underlying political subjectivity, attempting to tackle the state head-on while revealing the underlying ethics of a commodified society—loot or be looted (Trott 2013, Gilroy 2013). None of these interpretations could gain much traction in Britain however. The violence and looting in the riots combined to discredit the events and paint them as horrific examples of licentious consumerist desires and anarchistic destructive impulses. This inability to connect the political context of the June 30, 2011 general strike with the rioting of youth one month later would prove emblematic of the division that emerged in continental movements over the next few years.

A common experience of immigrants in Europe following the initial euphoria of the 2011 anti-austerity protests became one of walking the streets in fear of being identified. Like the post-9/11 slogan deployed in the New York City Subway and

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2 As Paul Gilroy (2013) argues, “In a post-secular celebrity-obsessed culture that conceives of selfishness as an innate virtue, the rioters’ greed and gratification, though undesirable, misplaced, and criminal, were also morally insufficient to make them truly deviant. We can see that their pursuit of gratification is in fact a mainstream attitude common to corrupt bankers, expenses-fiddling politicians, and others seeking the addictive thrill of acquiring something for nothing” (556). “1981 & 2011: From Social Democratic to Neoliberal Rioting,” South Atlantic Quarterly. Vol. 112, No. 3: 550-558.

throughout the airports of the United States, Europeans were encouraged to be vigilant: “if you see something, say something.” Zizek recounts this experience vividly:

Imagine a scene from a dystopian movie depicting our society in the near future: ordinary people walking the streets carry a special whistle; when they see something suspicious—an immigrant, say, or a homeless person—they blow the whistle, and a special guard comes running to brutalize the intruders…What seems like a cheap Hollywood fiction is a reality in today’s Greece. Members of the Fascist Golden Dawn movement are distributing whistles on the streets of Athens—when someone sees a suspicious foreigner, he is invited to blow the whistle, and the Golden Dawn special guards patrolling the streets will arrive to check out the suspect. This is how one defends Europe in Spring of 2012 (14).

But how could such a radical shift in the emancipatory agenda of the anti-austerity movements take place? For Zizek this was possible because so many of the movements that were born in 2011 were principally responding to a decline in relative benefits accrued to capitalism’s middle class. Part of what characterizes contemporary capitalism is a demotion in status of many workers, what Zizek refers to as the “proletarianization of the lower salaried bourgeoisie”. This strata of workers are still remunerated at higher rates than the working class proper, and therefore are accustomed to accruing a ‘surplus-wage’.

But if Zizek is critical of the European movements for remaining confined to the middle class sectors in danger of losing access to a surplus wage, he has even less enthusiasm for the popular sectors of British society involved in the riots. There is nothing positive or even political to be found in the riots of August 2011 for him. “The student protests against university reforms in the UK, for example, were clearly different from the UK riots of August 2011—that consumerist carnival of destruction, a genuine outburst from those excluded from the system” (12). In characterizing the riots in Britain as exemplary of capitalist consumption, Zizek undermines any possibility of recovering a
political project from such events. In so doing, he becomes complicit in the very anti-immigrant hysteria he is at pains to unpack through a theory of a declining middle class.

Although the UK riots of August 2011 were triggered by the suspicious death of Mark Duggan, it is generally accepted that they expressed a deeper unease—but of what kind? Similar to the riots in the Paris suburbs in 2005, the UK protesters had no message to deliver. The contrast with the massive student demonstrations of November 2010, which also turned violent, is clear. The students had a message—the rejection of the government’s higher education reforms. This is why it is difficult to conceive of the 2011 riots in Marxist terms, as indicative of an emerging revolutionary subject; much more appropriate here is the Hegelian notion of the ‘rabble’—referring to those outside the organized social sphere, prevented from participating in social production, who are able to express their discontent only in the form of ‘irrational’ outbursts of destructive violence (53).

For Zizek there is a surprisingly direct parallel to be drawn between the lumpen proletariat and peasantry classes in Marx’s account of 1848, who are unable to represent themselves and must be represented, and the rioters of 2011. By confining them to the terrain of ‘non-society’, Zizek condemns the rioters’ acts to an illegible, meaningless space of (self)destruction. His initial lamenting of the fact that the anti-austerity protests remained confined to the middle classes ultimately proves paradoxical because he reserves his harshest critiques for those members of the working class who act out in a fashion he cannot comprehend. While concerned by the rise of right-wing anti-immigrant hysteria throughout the continent, Zizek is unable to point to the inability of formally ‘organized’ groups to link up with the communities that rioted as a principle cause of the loss in momentum for the anti-austerity struggles. The fact that the riots in Britain were instigated by yet another incident of police brutality directed against racialized youth seems to be meaningless for Zizek. Instead, he openly mocks those social commentators who sought to provide any such contextualization for the rioters’ actions. But, as Paul Gilroy has demonstrated, “the official statistics on unemployment,
street stops and searches, and school exclusions told a different story about the institutionalization of racialized inequality, prejudice, and discrimination” (2013: 555).

So why this obvious lacuna in Zizek’s analysis, precisely at the moment when the groups ignored by the anti-austerity protestors and made victim of the right-wing backlash that followed in their wake, decided to take action in the streets of Britain? Zizek’s own important attentiveness to the anti-capitalist, class struggle basis of the 2011 movements also unfortunately clouds his interpretation of struggles that mobilize racialized populations. Despite emerging from an important critique of multiculturalism, his attack on what he perceives to be identity politics elides the concrete forms of organization and political expression that are arguably present in the 2011 British and 2005 French riots. The Invisible Committee offers one model for thinking this through: “Not making ourselves visible, but instead turning the anonymity to which we’ve been relegated to our advantage, and through conspiracy, nocturnal or faceless actions, creating an invulnerable position of attack. The fires of November 2005 offer a model for this. No leader, no demands, no organization, but words, gestures, complicities” (2009: 113). Unfortunately, very few of the protagonists behind the global spring movements were able to capture this sense of dynamism amongst racialized communities in rebellion, and too often ignored their contribution to struggle, at the expense of the liberatory vision of the new round of struggles. The Arab Spring proved no exception.

Libya: Anti-Blackness and “African Mercenaries”

Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation on December 17, 2010 in the provincial town of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia led to a national protest that culminated with President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali resigning from office on January 14, 2011. Inspired by the Tunisian
precedent, protests quickly spread to Yemen and Egypt in late January. The protests grew in Cairo’s Tahrir square until Hosni Mubarak was overthrown on February 11. Valentine’s day was named a national day of protest in Bahrain, and on February 15, 2011, the Arab Spring arrived in Libya. Three days later, the anti-Qaddafi forces already controlled most of Benghazi, the country’s second-largest city after the capital Tripoli. Because the events were transpiring so rapidly, it was difficult for the media to cover the daily developments while also providing an adequate geo-political history that contextualized each conflict within its own specific national dynamics. Progressive American news outlets therefore simply went along with the general idea that each struggle represented a popular demand for more democracy in countries where a single leader had held power for far too long. The movements were characterized as anti-authoritarian in nature, rejecting the silencing of dissent in each context. And yet Libya represented a special geopolitical case: while Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain and Yemen were all ruled by pro-Western regimes, Libya’s Colonel Muamar Qaddafi had for most of his four decades in power taken a strong anti-imperialist stance. It wasn’t until 1999 that Qaddafi began to make overtures towards the West, in part as an effort to lessen the harsh sanctions imposed on his country for its supposed role in the Pan Am Lockerbie bombing.

Regardless of the fact that Qaddafi was no longer a stalwart anti-imperialist, the political positions his government took continued to emphasize Pan-Arabism and Pan-Africanism as part of a broader project to unite developing countries economically and politically in order to improve their bargaining power in the face of persistent Western hegemony. In this regard Qaddafi followed in the footsteps of leaders such as Frantz
Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere, all of whom were early advocates of a United States of Africa, modeled in part on the European Union. Qaddafi had drawn up a formal proposal for greater African unity in 1999, and this document became the basis for the transition from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to the African Union (AU), formally launched in 2002 at a continental summit hosted in Durban. Part of the new framework of the AU announced in Durban included a Peace and Security Council designed to manage Africa’s conflicts internally, and a Pan African Parliament intended to signal a shift towards explicit political sovereignty on a continental scale (Horace Campbell: 133). It was certainly a surprise, then, when South Africa, then a temporary member of the United Nations Security Council, voted in favor of UN resolution 1973 calling for the establishment of a No-Fly Zone over Libya in order to assist the forces attempting to overthrow Qaddafi’s government. The resolution was notably silent about the violent crackdown on protestors in Yemen and Bahrain, an inconsistency in UN policy that led Germany along with South Africa’s BRICS partners—Brazil, Russia, India and China—to abstain from the vote. The government of Jacob Zuma later became extremely critical of the way in which the NATO-led operation quickly exceeded the bounds of the UN No-Fly Zone resolution. This led certain leaders within the ANC to admit error in having supported the initiative from the beginning.4

Without question, then, South Africa’s vote represented a low-point in Pan-Africanist politics and the dream of a united Africa. As Horace Campbell argues, critiquing the NATO intervention did not necessitate a whole-hearted endorsement of

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Qaddafi’s own repression of the protests or of his policies in general, which are extremely mixed and at times contradictory. “The response of Gaddafi to these demonstrations was of great concern, but soon it became obvious that the forces of counterrevolution were busy seeking to exploit the political development of the social forces in Libya. When Nicolas Sarkozy emerged as the champion of the ‘uprisings,’ it was instantly clear that the British and the French were up to mischief” (9-10).

Unfortunately, the worst of what was transpiring in Libya still lay buried beneath the celebratory news stories of a supposedly dignified people’s revolt transpiring in Libya.

Very soon after the initial uprising against Qaddafi, rumor began to spread that his government was deploying “African” militias to defend the government. This quickly devolved into a racialized discourse deployed against all dark-skinned individuals residing in the country. While a few reports highlighted the fact that more than a million African migrants made their living in Libya, almost none pointed to the fact that the Libyan citizens included recognizably black communities. Glen Ford of The Black Agenda Report was one of the few journalists who remained consistently attentive to the hyper-racialized dimensions of the anti-Qaddafi movement.

Numerous reports from migrant workers who escaped from rebel-held areas indicate hundreds of black Africans have been lynched, including black Libyan citizens. A Turkish oil worker related an especially horrific account to NPR: ‘We left behind our friends from Chad. We left behind their bodies,’ he said. ‘We had 70 or 80 people from Chad working for our company. They cut them dead with pruning shears and axes, attacking them, saying you’re providing troops for Gadhafi. The Sudanese, the Chadians were massacred. We saw it ourselves (2011).

The anti-Qaddafi movement thus clashed with the Libyan government’s long-standing Pan-Africanist positions and its willingness to provide refuge to a variety of guerrilla
movements from sub-Saharan Africa. This dynamic was rarely grasped in reports by the Western press.

The town of Tawergha, disproportionately comprised of many dark-skinned Libyans, represented one important example of the extent to which the anti-Qaddafi forces conflated their own struggle with a corresponding purging of the country of a “black African menace.” Tawergha was occupied by Qaddafi’s forces as they moved closer to rebel-occupied Misrata in their battle to re-gain sovereignty over the country. The rebels announced that the town was captured by “African mercenaries” fighting in support of Qaddafi’s government. By September 2011, the town had been cleansed of its original inhabitants, transformed into a ghost town. In December a journalist from the BBC visited Tawergha and issued the following report: “The possessions of the people who lived here are scattered about, suggesting desperate flight...Buildings show the scars of heavy bombardment, some are burnt-out shells, some are just abandoned. The town is empty of humans, apart from a small number of Misratan militiamen preventing the return of the town’s residents.” (quoted in Campbell: 168). The chair of the Commission of the African Union, Jean Ping, expressed outrage on behalf of African countries at the alarming extent to which anti-blackness seemed to represent a core component of the rebel movement. “Blacks are having their throats slit. Blacks are accused of being mercenaries. Do you think it’s normal in a country that’s a third black that blacks are confused with mercenaries? There are mercenaries in Libya, many of them are black, but there are not only blacks and not all blacks there are mercenaries. Sometimes, when they are white, they call them ‘technical advisers’” (quoted in Campbell: 166-167).
“Xenophobia” in South Africa’s Shack Settlements: ‘The Anger of the Poor Can Go in Many Directions’

It is perhaps fitting that South Africa’s ANC cast its vote in favor of the NATO presence in Libya that would facilitate the rise to power of a rebel movement plagued by anti-blackness and a xenophobic attitude to migrants. After all, South Africa had recently experienced its own racialized hysteria in the face of a growing population of migrants from across Southern Africa. In May 2008 a series of pogroms across the country targeting Mozambicans, Somalis, Zimbabweans, and other African migrants left 62 people dead, and forced anywhere from 80,000 to 200,000 others to flee their homes (Neocosmos 2010: 117). In an image that harkened back to the violent period of transition from apartheid to democracy in the early 1990s, some immigrants were even ‘necklaced,’ a process that involves dousing a tire with gasoline before wrapping it around a victim and setting it alight. While shocking, these attacks on migrants were in fact representative of a consistent and growing trend throughout the country that precedes 2008 and recurs periodically, persisting to the present day. Most distressing for the Southern African region was the fact that many of the migrants hailed from countries that historically had risked so much in their decision to provide the armed wing of the African National Congress, Umkhonto we Sizwe, with shelter and training grounds in the fight against apartheid. The attacks seemed to shatter the myth of a post-apartheid ‘rainbow nation’ governed by the idea of ‘Ubuntu.’

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5 This is a slogan popularized by Abahlali. It represents their own intervention into comprehending the xenophobic attacks that periodically occur in South African shack communities against migrant populations from neighboring Africa. It should also be read as their insistence upon adequate forms of autonomous organization in poor communities. Without such political structures, independent of moneyed interests and established political apparatuses, the anger of the poor can veer down a variety of inadequate and politically regressive paths.
In Durban, these attacks were largely limited to a few core areas, including the downtown flatlands and the informal settlements of Bottlebrush in Chatsworth and Cato Manor. Part of the discourse that drove the paranoia around a migrant menace had its roots in a fear over migrants ‘stealing’ not only jobs, but also women, from South African citizens. Within the context of social movement struggles around housing rights, the accusation also commonly arose that ‘foreigners’ obtained public housing through corrupt means. An activist from a Johannesburg-based organization voiced this concern explicitly, claiming that Zimbabweans and Mozambicans had “become rich” by corrupting ANC officials, “stealing houses,” and even “marrying our women.” (Field notes, July 27, 2012). Abahlali baseMjondolo consistently spoke out against such xenophobic attacks on migrant communities, and were therefore successful in preventing violent attacks in their own communities in Durban. But the salience of xenophobia in shack communities was undeniable and persists into the present day.

The fear over job loss makes sense from a strictly economistic reading of xenophobia, but the articulation of this concern with the patriarchal drive to “protect our women” requires a bit more analysis. The trends of unemployment and shack formation in South Africa were in large part driven by a gendered pattern in the changing nature of social reproduction throughout the country. Because the city was largely restricted to African males under apartheid, the reproductive work of homemaking and childrearing was outsourced to the rural Bantustans. As the benefits of urban citizenship declined along with a stagnating apartheid economy by the late 1970s, women were also forced to enter the workforce by migrating into the city and establishing a home in peri-urban shack communities. This pattern boomed in the late 1980s and has continued up until the
present. As unemployment rose, men were often emasculated as they were decreasingly able to raise the funds sufficient to pay for *ilobolo*, or bridewealth. Marriage rates have therefore plummeted over the past decades, “down to less than half of the 1960 levels, so that today only 3 of 10 South African adults are married” (Hickel 2014: 107). As Mark Hunter has argued, these corresponding changes in the broader political economy of South Africa and the intimate spaces of social reproduction combined to exacerbate the HIV/AIDS crisis throughout the country. The shack settlement has since become a central site of both poverty and HIV/AIDS.

The 1980s reconfigured expectations, emotions, dreams, and intimate relations that for generations had been profoundly shaped by the joint but contested project of *ukwakha umuzi* (to build a home). Living in an umjondolo [shack] came to symbolize precarious economic circumstances and life without marriage—and this was true in townships where backyard shacks mushroomed as much as in informal settlements themselves. These shifts are what I refer to as the changing political economy and geography of intimacy. And they coincided with the introduction of the deadly HIV virus in the 1980s, which would come to be disproportionately found in informal settlements (Hunter: 86).

Poor South Africans thus lashed out at foreigners not only for stealing their jobs but also for supposedly being able to access “their” women, whom regular citizens could no longer afford to marry.

In identifying the existential precarity that seems to define so much of shack life, we must be careful not to fall into a common trap of demonizing the poor and painting them as incapable of positive political action. Nothing could be further from the truth. When those who dwell in shack communities collectively become insurgent, deciding that their condition should be challenged, tremendously courageous political acts ensue such as land occupations that often improve the lives of their immediate community members and serve as a model of resistance for the country as a whole. Thus, focusing
on the decline of oppositional social movements, while identifying the wretched conditions of shack life, should in no way occlude the very real and ongoing forms of insurgency present in these same spaces⁶ (Pithouse 2006).

In response to a question I posed to him about the relative decline in organized social movements in South Africa since 2004, life-long activist and scholar Martin Legassick nonetheless had the following to say about the idea that rebellion in the shack settlement can go in many different directions:

For a start, there are still social protests going on. For example in Wallacedeen… a shack settlement set in the northern suburbs… They have been up in arms, you know, the usual sort of Toyi Toyiing, burning tires, fires etc. etc… That was partially a protest against the government, but it was partially against Somalis. And there’s been reports that there were 200 Somali shops demolished. I mean, that’s a very interesting statistic because it shows that… if there are 200 Somali shops in Wallersteen, I mean that must be the majority of the shops there. I’m surprised there are as many as 200 and it shows how foreigners are taking over the township shops and that’s inevitably going to produce antagonisms. You know like in the old days when the Jews were the sort of money grubbers and traders and all that. So that’s the problem with these social protests, they can go either way. (Interview: June 25, 2013)

Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the murder of Abahlali activist Nkululeko Gwala in Cato Crest, Durban in June 2013, an Ethiopian shopkeeper was also murdered. While the two incidents appear to be disconnected in this latter case, it demonstrates the dual paths that the rage of the poor can travel down: either address government and the multinational and subnational representatives of neoliberalism, or target those amongst you who are even more precarious, dark-skinned, and visibly or linguistically ‘Other’ in the context of your everyday environment. And as Legassick implies with his paralleling of xenophobia in South Africa to the European attacks on Jewish communities, the ruling

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⁶ This is a point often made by Richard Pithouse is his writings, including the article cited above. I am therefore most indebted to him for this formulation, and for recommending that I read Mbembe’s work in this regard.
classes have the most to gain from finding a convenient scapegoat in subaltern communities for the poor to unleash their anger upon.

In the South African context, this misdirected rage operates along both racial and ethnic lines. Despite our initial attempts to de-center the scale of the nation-state, it is clear that race couples with nationalism in a xenophobic drive to eliminate supposed outsiders. The ANC-led state has been a principle instigator of anti-foreigner sentiment, and has consistently been involved in round-ups of dark-skinned migrants. “Indeed, every year, the South African Human Rights commission reports on state agencies harassing and detaining so-called ‘illegal aliens’: people being apprehended by the police for being ‘took dark’ or ‘walking like a black foreigner’” (Gibson 2011: 191). And yet a good argument can be made that xenophobia is somewhat of a misnomer when applied to the pogroms in South Africa. In the case of the May 2008 attacks, a third of the victims turned out to be locals, full South African citizens. Importantly, many of these victims were from minority ethnicities commonly associated with surrounding Southern African countries. However, the only people capable of being deemed a foreigner in South Africa appear to be black people. No white person, immigrant or citizen, has been attacked for lacking the qualities of a proper South African. So xenophobia in this context can also be read as a replacement term for rampant anti-blackness, internalized amongst the black poor and deployed as an outlet for the expression of rage in the confined spaces of urban shack communities where battles over territory and limited employment opportunities are fought out with the highest stakes. Reformulated, then, the periodic expressions of xenophobia by the poor and government alike reflect a broader problem about the persistence of apartheid-era racism into the present. “The question is to what degree
post-apartheid South Africa remains a victim of ‘White South Africa’s’ Afrophobia, and to what degree is that Afrophobia expressed in the violence against African ‘foreigners’?” (Gibson 2011: 192).

In an effort to provide greater insight into the dynamics driving the attacks, Michael Neocosmos (2010) argues that the role played by community level leadership structures was key. Linking the resentment against migrants at the level of the shack settlement to structural shortcomings of post-apartheid freedom, Neocosmos emphasizes that shack dwellers linked housing shortages with migrant complicity in corruption. “RDP houses” which were built to house the poor and distributed to South Africans are then sometimes sold to foreign nationals, giving the impression that South Africans are still waiting for housing while ‘foreigners’ live in government provided housing” (128). This often plays out through the following resentful comments by everyday shack dwellers: “Even I don’t have a RDP house, but go to Madalakufa you’ll find foreigners owning houses which they have bought from South Africans…Government is fighting against us, employers are fighting against us and foreigners are fighting against us, that is why we fight against them because they are nearer; they don’t support us in our struggle” (HSRC 2008, 29, 30, 38, 45)” (ibid).

Neocosmos claims that people resort to xenophobia, then, in the absence of access to the powerful structures that they may also blame, and in the absence of an adequate leadership structure that could channel community anger towards a productive outlet of political organization. Unfortunately, in such a context, “leadership is allowed to wander

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7 “RDP houses” is the common term for the public housing the ANC government has built since 1994. RDP refers to the broadly Keynesian, redistributive economic plan called “Reconstruction and Development Programme” released in 1994, quickly eclipsed by the more neoliberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) unveiled in 1996 after much World Bank consultation (Bond 2000).
into the hands of unscrupulous leaders” (129). Existing structures of community leadership, characterized by patrimonialism, informal gangsterism, and political party lackeys, were forced to lead the battle against migrants in order to maintain credibility in their communities in the face of a rising tide of xenophobic sentiment. A report commissioned by the United Nations International Organization for Migration and carried out by researchers at the Forced Migration Studies Programme at the University of Witwatersrand, therefore argued: “The xenophobic violence in most affected areas was organized by the…parallel structures or by some self-serving members of formal institutions who capitalized on residents’ feelings, fears and negative attitudes towards non-nationals…the study found that in most affected areas, the attacks on foreigners were organized and led by different local community leadership structures and/or known influential groups” (132). The principal instigators of the violence were therefore often the same figures struggling to maintain the status quo that benefitted them. Xenophobia proved a productive outlet to let off steam in this context for people receiving meager trickle-down benefits as a result of their leadership position.

Our overview of the different case studies of global struggles indicates that a critique of neoliberalism does not necessarily imply an understanding of racialized inequalities. Race, migration and neoliberal imperatives all combine to produce cheap labor, a lifeline for surplus populations, and convenient scapegoats that divert attention away from elite constituencies that benefit from the persistence of the status quo. The spatial concentration of inequality and xenophobia in the particular site of the shack settlement in South Africa highlights the manner in which the city and its surrounding urban peripheries have become a central flashpoint for antagonism and struggle in the
twenty-first century (Zibechi 2012: 189-266). In Durban, Abahlali baseMjondolo was among the first organizations to identify the importance of the shack settlement as the paradigmatic site of social conflict in post-apartheid South Africa. The group linked the xenophobic attacks to the broader issues they were struggling against by contrasting the shack communities of Alexandria (Alex) where many xenophobic attacks occurred, with one of the richest communities in South Africa, Sandton, where Ferraris, Porsches and Lamborghiniis are common modes of transport. “Let us be clear. Neither poverty nor oppression justify one poor person turning on another. A poor man who turns on his wife or a poor family that turn on their neighbors must be opposed, stopped and brought to justice. But the reason why this happens in Alex and not Sandton is because people in Alex are suffering and scared for the future of their lives. They are living under the kind of stress that can damage a person” (Abahlali 2008). After providing a context for the attacks by elaborating on the precarious conditions facing inhabitants of shacks, Abahlali is careful to identify the real beneficiaries of xenophobia in South Africa. “The perpetrators of these attacks must be held responsible but the people who have crowded the poor onto tiny bits of land, threatened their hold on that land with evictions and forced removals, treated them all like criminals, exploited them, repressed their struggles, pushed up the price of food and built too few houses, that are too small and too far away and then corruptly sold them must also be held responsible” (Abahlali 2008).

Unfortunately it was relatively common among other social movements in the country to identify ‘foreigners’ as contributing to poor South Africans’ impoverishment. This occurred even in the most discursively radical groups where neoliberalism was attacked daily, and class exploitation was highlighted as the central axis around which
struggle had to develop. As the history of the labor movement has already demonstrated, too often class struggles can mutate to become nationalistic and xenophobic in orientation, re-directing the anger of the poor against other exploited and marginalized communities rather than at economic bosses and political rulers.

Abahlali baseMjondolo therefore contributed an important intervention in a largely xenophobic society where government, elites, and even some social movement participants were actively feeding the generalized hysteria about the threat of racialized “outsiders”. Because of the prior work Abahlali was able to do in incorporating migrants into their local chapters, and in emphasizing that there is no such thing as an illegal human being—“An action can be illegal. A person cannot be illegal. A person is a person where ever they may find themselves” (Abahlali 2008)—none of the communities in Durban with an Abahlali presence experienced xenophobic attacks.

This was possible in part due to the historicization of struggle and oppression that the movement places front and center in their collective analysis. “We all know that South Africans were welcomed in Zimbabwe and in Zambia, even as far away as England, when they were fleeing the oppression of apartheid. In our own movement we have people who were in exile. We must welcome those who are fleeing oppression now. This obligation is doubled by the fact that our government and big companies here are supporting oppression in other countries” (Abahlali 2008). And while the attacks are situated as in part a nationalistic response to people from other countries, Abahlali’s statement, released right in the heat of the spreading attacks in May 2008, was careful to capture the core of anti-blackness lying at the center of the hysteria. “Yesterday we heard that this thing started in Warwick and in the City centre. We heard that traders had their
goods stolen and that people were being checked for their complexion, a man from Ntuzuma was stopped and assaulted for being ‘too black’” (ibid).

The group’s intervention on the terrain of ideas took the form of a call to all South Africans to refrain from attacks, and to instead identify the true enemies of the poor. They were careful to highlight the ever-present danger of a potentially ambiguous expression of the rage boiling beneath the surface of impoverished communities. “We have been warning for years that the anger of the poor can go in many directions. That warning, like our warnings about the rats and the fires and the lack of toilets, the human dumping grounds called relocation sites, the new concentration camps called transit camps and corrupt, cruel, violent and racist police, has gone unheeded (ibid).” The group went further, and linked their critique of neoliberalism with a racialized restriction on the freedom of movement. “While goods and services are increasingly ‘freed’ to move across spatial borders, human beings, despite their conceptualization by economists as ‘human capital,’ still don’t enjoy such freedoms. It is time to ask serious questions about why it is that money and rich people can move freely around the world while everywhere the poor must confront razor wire, corrupt and violent police, queues and relocation or deportation” (ibid). In an effort to identify capital’s hypocritical spatial erasure of borders for goods with an increase in the policing of transnational flows of migrants, Abahlali argued for a similar link between global apartheid policies and the domestic spatial policies of confinement directed at urban shack dwellers, regardless of citizenship.

**The Global Threat of Race and the Decomposition of Struggle**

The fact that Abahlali highlights the spatial confinement of migrants as something that mirrors the persistence of urban apartheid targeting black populations in South Africa
is crucial to elaborating what appears to be a growing trend in racial neoliberalism. In a broader global environment dominated by color-blindness—the idea that anti-racism should consist in simply banishing race as a meaningful category of analysis in understanding the world (Bonilla-Silva 2006)—the proliferation of a variety of forms of racism continues to operate as a divisive tool fracturing struggles, allowing elite groups to side-step otherwise significant challenges to their hegemonic rule. Yet the dominant readings of global neoliberalism, certainly in South Africa, but also around the world, remain locked in a stultifying ‘class’ analysis.

If colorblindness remains dominant in South Africa, a society that lived through the horrors of apartheid, then it is unsurprising that at a more global level the intertwining of regimes of racialization and neoliberalism remains underexamined. While Zizek argues that the contemporary crisis that generated the 2011 uprisings dictated that the revolts would be comprised by a middle class now losing its hold on even the meager surplus wages of a post-Fordist economy, this analysis is still largely devoid of the centrality of race. As David Roediger argues, “To set race within social formations is absolutely necessary but to reduce race to class is damaging” (8). In many places, a battle to defend what Du Bois called “the wages of whiteness” might operate as a more appropriate lens through which we can grasp what Zizek’s “middle class” has been rebelling against. “The pleasures of whiteness could function as a ‘wage’ for white workers. That is, status and privilege conferred by race could be used to make up for alienating and exploitative class relationships, North and South. White workers could, and did, define and accept their class positions by fashioning identities as ‘not slaves’ and as ‘not Blacks’” (13).
In the absence of a more broad-based emphasis upon race in South Africa, the vacuum of analysis regarding the lived reality of racialized inequality and violence has been filled by populist groups. Gillian Hart’s emphasis upon the popular as a central terrain of contestation over political meaning has therefore only gained in relevance. The ANC largely refuses to address the persistence of racism in South Africa through more than piecemeal programs, directed more at developing a black bourgeoisie than alleviating the challenges facing the black poor.

It makes sense, then, that the debate on the relationship between precarious inclusion and surplus exclusion must take place on the specific terrain of shack communities in a South African context. Simultaneously spatially incorporated into the post-modern metropolis, but socially excluded from many of its potential benefits, shack dwellers are forced to walk the tightrope between the fruits of urbanity and the ever-present threat of premature death as a marker of the disastrous pairing of power and difference. Indeed, “by centering attention on those most vulnerable to the fatal couplings of power and difference signified by racism, we will develop richer analyses of how it is that radical activism might most productively exploit crisis for liberatory ends” (Gilmore: 22). It is not a surprise that in the course of eking out a living in such a context, the anger of the poor can indeed go in many different directions. And yet arguably, absent an interrogation of the persistence of the threat of race in the purportedly post-apartheid present, movements in South Africa and around the world will continue to be plagued by internal fissures, making themselves vulnerable to repression or co-optation at the hands of populist and conservative attempts to restore the status-quo.
References


