

Mediation, the Political Task

Between Language and Violence in Contemporary South Africa

by Rosalind C. Morris

Two paradigms of communication confront each other in South Africa today. One posits an ideal public sphere that recognizes the task of mediation but also requires its effacement. The other, frustrated by deferral, seeks to bypass mediation through apparently immediate forms of speech that range from visual slogans to messianic utterances that can be heard even by the dead. When viewed ethnographically, these competing conceptions and aspirations cannot be linked to particular technologies. On the contrary, the social scene is technologically heterogeneous. Epochal and ontological schemata of mediatic displacement must thus be rethought. In this paper I pursue such a rethinking on the basis of long-term ethnography in the gold-mining region of South Africa following the infamously violent assault on striking miners at Marikana.

Two women, both native isiXhosa speakers, sit in the office of an HIV/AIDS NGO in a gold-mining town near Johannesburg. One is a nurse and director of the NGO and a pioneer of peer-based preventive education in this epidemic-ravaged community. The other is a onetime graduate student of literature in the United States, a translator and education professional. They are speaking with each other but also for me. The topic is the sitting president, Jacob Zuma, who is, at the time, the subject of official corruption inquiries for his use of government funds to upgrade his private, multihome compound called Nkandla. Both of the women previously voted for the African National Congress (ANC). Both have since become disaffected with the party and its privileging of uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) veterans in government employment, tendering, and black capital formation schemes.¹ On this brisk winter's day, they are not talking about corruption or unfair employment practices or the self-aggrandizement and enrichment of former militants. They are talking about Jacob Zuma's English. Or rather, this speech about a speech that is both foreign to itself and national is enabling their condemning discourse about corruption and unfair employment practices and the self-aggrandizement or enrichment of former militants.

Public Speaking, Speaking in Public

There is something exemplary in this gesture, this discoursing about a kind of speech that fails to communicate precisely by becoming visible as speech. We may recognize the structure

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as an eruption of the mediaticity of the medium onto the horizon of reflexive consciousness (Kittler 1990) and thus as a communicational failure. Such failures are remarkably common in South Africa at present, and they have incited fantasies of an immediacy that would transcend the pitfalls and the limits of all forms of mediation, whether political or technological. But these same fantasies have elicited their counterdiscourses. And so, the fragmented and internally heterogeneous public spheres of the still decolonizing nation have become the sites at which the function of mediation has implicitly emerged as an object—not of deliberation but of an agonistic exchange about the very possibility of exchange. By extension, these disputes address the very possibility of political representationalism. In this paper I attempt to understand why this is the case. To do so, it is necessary to set the scene a little and place it in some relation to other scenes where other aspects of this phenomenon can be observed.

Lace curtains cover the windows, providing genteel camouflage against the intrusive gazes of outsiders. A second door made of latticed ironwork provides additional security. However, the fence that circumscribes the neatly clipped lawn is low and neither covered by barbed wire nor adorned with electrified spikes, as would be the case in much of Johannesburg. This is a small town, riven by crime, but stranded in its imaginary between the twin phantasms of the mining town in postapartheid South Africa: one the idyll of the modernist company town and the other a paranoid dream image of a nation in thrall to its own possible failures.

An AIDS education office is, of course, a public space promising relative anonymity. Visitors may receive information, obtain prophylactics or antiretroviral drugs, and be tested for seropositivity in private. Aspiring to a radical openness and threat-

1. uMkhonto weSizwe was the armed faction of the ANC.

ened by it at the same time, the office security expresses the limits and the contradictions of democratic consciousness in this moment of South Africa's history. However, it is neither ideological conflict nor legislated racial difference that structures the exclusionary impulse in this context so much as fear and the incapacity to locate it. Criminality names this fear only inadequately. It provides a vague designator for what suffuses the environment as a monstrous hybrid of statistical hysteria and narrative compulsion as well as real violence that takes its shape under conditions of largely racialized economic inequality (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Morris 2006). Criminality authorizes the anticipatory exclusion while enabling the appearance of an unlimited openness. (Only those who are supposedly criminal are to be kept out.)

Nonetheless, and despite the plethora of defensive strategies, people do enter the offices without notice, unbidden, and sometimes unwanted. They repeatedly rupture our conversation, distract us, and call our attention to other spaces, identities, and structures of obligation. They summon us with demands and solicitations, questions and instructions, promises and threats.

And yet, for the most part, no bodies intrude. The women's cell phones are the technological mediums of these absent voices.² They sit on the table awaiting the spirit of the times, namely, the demand to be on call (albeit with the option of screening by number; Ronell 1991). Alternately lighting up, buzzing, or ringing, these objects are the ciphers of a profane immanence. They are also fetishes in which are concealed the histories of mining and labor elsewhere.

The women interrupt our conversation for each call that comes, and as one or the other withdraws from our triadic discourse, the other two continue. The miniature public of the AIDS office fissures here: each of us is speaking, each of us is hearing the other speaking, but none of us is necessarily or constantly speaking or listening to the others present. As our discourse splits and responds to absent beings, the impossibility of the presence of the public discloses itself. A certain spectrality descends on the room. Historically, public spheres have been defined by an anonymity of address, by the fact of a speaking that opens itself to anyone who might hear but to no one in particular. It enables a public whose membership cannot be known in advance—even when exclusionary limits are constitutive of its domain. (Because some people are denied access on grounds of identity does not mean that those with recognized title will necessarily be present.) Public spheres understood in this way, as social formations enabled by technomedia phenomena such as newspapers and broadcast media rather than spaces of rational deliberation and consensus making (as in liberal political theory), are fundamentally scenes

of overhearing. Speech in public is by definition vulnerable to such overhearing.³ Public speaking makes that overhearing its goal.

In the little space of the HIV/AIDS NGO, however, something else can be discerned. It is the division and the opening of public space to a tense and temporarily converging multiplicity of private addresses that refuse generalization. These addresses are not opposed to public speech. Rather, they traverse its domain. Of course, private conversations occur in public all the time. But cell phone conversations spectralize the dyadic relation that provides the (fallacious) model for communication in so much media theory. Ironically, the very absence of the speaker, who nonetheless commands the listener, intensifies the voice as the locus of power and authority. It should not surprise us, then, that cell phones, however much they promise contact with elsewhere, will also, and by virtue of their capacity to transmit absent voices, sometimes appear as obstacles to the desire for full presence and the performative power of words. We shall encounter that frustrated desire below. Before doing so, let me to return to the scene at hand.

Threading itself around innumerable interruptions, much of our shared conversation on this bright winter day revolves around a violent assault experienced by one of the women who runs this program. As she recounts her harrowing tale, a young man is sitting at the table with us, typing on a laptop. I had interviewed him years earlier in an informal settlement near the mines where he both lived and worked as a peer educator among sex workers. At the time, he had told me of three elderly women who had been killed after he accused them of witchcraft. He had claimed that the accusation had not demanded the women's execution by a mob and that he was innocent of their deaths if guilty of inciting suspicion. He did not claim any authority nor grant his own words the force to make something happen. Instead, he had narrated his flight from the police prosecuting this crime and described how, while hiding in the informal settlement near the mine that would become his temporary home, he had himself been attacked by his neighbors who suspected him of sexual impropriety. A deep scar across his face testifies to the injury.

Even so, he has now left the settlement out of fear of violence spilling beyond the conflict between competing groups of pirate miners, the *zamazama*, who have recently staked their claim on his shack community. Like many people, the young man describes them as illiterate "criminals" who "cannot even sign their own name." As such, they are not eligible for a public sphere that depends on literacy. For without literacy, they cannot submit to the law.

Zamazama are, in effect, described as men for whom language provides no alternative to violence. Almost uniformly

2. The word "mediums" designates the plural of medium in order to imply a relationship between these technologies and the spirit mediums of relatively nontechnologized traditions (Morris 2000).

3. My understanding of the role of "overhearing," as a constitutive practice of the public sphere under conditions of mass mediatization, comes from James Siegel (1999).

(and contrary to actuality in most instances) they are imagined to speak seSotho.⁴ Nor is this fact incidental in this community, whose very name comes from seSotho. The dominant language in the area is now isiXhosa (Mandela's language), which signals ascension to full status as citizen-subject; even non-isiXhosa speakers use it as a first language of address in formal conversation that is not conducted in English. Beyond the question of ethnolinguistic identity, however, the young man with the scarred face says that these migrant pirates of deindustrialization speak only to threaten. They thus abuse language by treating it as a weapon.

The two women mainly disregard this protégé of the program. They nonetheless pause when he describes the *zamazamas*' illiteracy, nodding in agreement with his condemnation of the men who cannot sign their own names. A signature, after all, would be a form of writing recognizable across all of South Africa's (mainly romanized) languages and is the ideal condition of possibility of recognition from within its constitutional order.⁵

Returning to our conversation, the women veer from the narrative of a hijacking to their admiration of Barack Obama—as though there is a link between a style of leadership and the nature of the violence that afflicts the social field. A leader whose speech demonstrates the value of speaking rather than violence, that secures the liberal opposition between language and violence, appears, in this scene, to represent the possibility of violence's overcoming. Obama exemplifies the rhetorical grace appropriate to leadership. The women recall his inauguration speech in order to stage for me a norm against which Zuma's failures are to be remembered. Not Mandela, but Obama. Mandela's authority exceeded his famed rhetorical prowess. His charisma emanated from his identification with a righteous struggle, with his being more than himself. His authority was not therefore reducible to his oratorical skills. To the extent that he spoke for South Africans, he did so in their voice, lending his tongue. But it was his life more than his speech that grounded his authority. For this reason, the contrast with Obama allows the women to both include me in the conversation and emphasize that it is Zuma's oddly accented English that irks them and that symptomatizes his political failure. In unison, they mimic his most recent address to the nation, landing on the word "development" and breaking into derisive laughter. This is not because development is being realized in its breach in a country with the highest Gini

4. In my interviews with *zamazama*, I have found that they hail from all of the regions that have typically sent workers to the mines. Often, they have previously had formal employment in them. The work teams that they form tend to be organized on the basis of a shared place of origin (including Mozambique and Zimbabwe), and thus language.

5. With the exception of Arabic, Gujarati, and Urdu, widely spoken by South Asian and Muslim citizens in South Africa but not among the official languages, all South African languages are written in the roman alphabet.

coefficient in the world or because the idea of the developmental state has been evacuated or, worse, become an alibi for neoliberal economic policy. Their criticism is directed not at the signification of his discourse but at the signifier. It is the wrong distribution of emphasis, the heavy first syllable, rather than the appropriately accented second syllable that elicits their contempt. "Dev-el-op-ment": they bring themselves to tears of intimate hilarity in a mime of Zuma's improper trochee, treating the missing iamb as though it contained the secret of Zuma's intellectual and political incapacity.

Language As and Beyond Mediation

It is a truism of materialist analyses of language that dialect bears within itself the evidence of social history: of class position, regional origin, gendered identification, ethnic or national affiliation, education, professional training, and so forth (Bakhtin 1981). The ridicule heaped on Zuma by these two educated women is partly a derogation of those who lack education, partly a Xhosa bias against Zulu ethnicity, partly a repudiation of the patriarchal traditionalism that Zuma incarnates, and partly a resentment that they have not been the recipients of opportunities they feel they deserve. But, for the moment, I would like to linger on the argument with which I commenced, that there is something exemplary in this scene wherein the mediaticity of speech itself and not merely of media technologies (telephony, telegraphy, and broadcast media) demands to be thought.

Let me thematize what the foregoing narrative has put into question. To begin, the HIV/AIDS NGO office is a metonym and a metaphor for a kind of South African public sphere that aspires to inclusiveness but is terrorized by its incapacity to know what that opens it up to. It therefore arms itself against potentially aggressive others. Narratives of violence work to reinforce the sense of necessity for a general securitization, but they must work in the mode of a negative meritocracy. Those who would violate the rights of others are to be excluded, but no others. The problem is how to know in advance who has perpetrated or intends to perpetrate such a violation.

However, the office scene is not merely a metonym or a metaphor. It is a scene of quotidian exchanges in which face-to-face conversation models itself on a vision of a judiciously deliberative process. Focus group discussions and educational training are a central part of its activities. They aim to generate a commonsense about both the etiology of disease and the best ways to avoid HIV transmission. Nor is it incidental that the office makes this communicative and educative function a source of income, thereby economizing on both democracy and public health. Nonetheless, this scene of face-to-face communication is also one in which myriad technologies of mass mediatization are present: as objects, as solicitous signifiers, as media of connection with absent presences, and as symbolically invested instruments. Cell phones and land-based phones, wired computers, video screens and digital re-

ording equipment lie casually about the space, bringing into the material sphere the traces and forces of those who are absent and promising connection across vast distances (calls arrive from across the city but also from across the world). There are also family photographs on desks, key chains, and mass produced posters featuring the images of now-deceased individuals. Photocopied forms with handwritten notes are stacked in piles and filed in cabinets.

In the shadow of communicational technology's fashion industry, this scene has uncountable analogues around the world. But in the bountiful banality of the technologies and artifacts of mass reproducibility that are strewn on desks and tables and concealed in purses or pockets, this scene ridicules the teleological fantasies of every theorist who would speak of the displacement of one kind of technology by another. It is often useful to speak of mediatic technologies in ways that privilege new media as the signifiers of social and historical change that they are said to instigate. In such narratives, one often finds sequences, such as lithography is superseded by photography, which gives way to cinema, which is transformed by sound technology, which is displaced by integrated and multiplatform digital media, and so forth. Ontologized in epochal schema, these sequences become something more and different: analog media are said to be displaced by digital media, and the logic of representation gives way to that of information, as the symbol relinquishes its sovereignty to the binary logic of the code. If the office of the HIV/AIDS NGO can be read as indicative, there is no evidentiary ground for such totalizations or for the belief that new media completely displace already existent forms of mediation. Certainly, new technologies can replace old ones (e.g., there are few public telephones in South Africa today, and legislation has secured the digitization of television). But the conflation of media with mediation, which is itself symptomatic of both a technological determinism and an effort to ontologize technology, demands questioning. I am interested here in certain crises of mediation (not media) at the point where the communicative aspiration and the presumptive unity of medium and message in language are brought to their limit. Media technologies play a role in this drama, but they do not explain it.

The scene above lets us grasp two coexistent and apparently contradictory understandings of the crisis, which nonetheless share a certain logic. For the women, Zuma's speech represents a political failure precisely because it has become so audibly marked. This communicational fail is associated, from their perspective, with illegality, corruption, and violence. If the political sphere were functioning as it should, he would be a great communicator; mediation would occur by virtue of its self-effacement.

Now, this ideal of political speech is different from "immediacy," which term would describe the aspiration of properly performative or magical speech and which would be associated with the politics of the commandment rather than representationalism. Such speech, in the form of witchcraft and prophecy, is known to these devout Christian religious

women and to the young man. If we were to embrace the kind of logocentric historiography that imagines literacy to constitute a secondary mediation of a primal and autoaffective orality, then the young man's derision of *zamazama* illiteracy would seem to run counter to the women's valorization of a speech that effaces its own mediatic dimension (Derrida 1976). But the opposition does not hold. On the one hand, we must bear in mind his hostility to witches, for they are technicians of a speech in which the identity between word and world reaches its maximal extent, when the mere utterance of a spell (even when that utterance is nonverbal) is thought to cause things to happen. At the same time, his discourse is not a straightforward valorization of literacy in opposition to orality. In his discourse, the foreignness of seSotho is analogous to Zuma's improper English. It inserts a division between the saying and the said, the medium and the message of communication. In his account, the literacy that testifies to *zamazama* exteriority to the legitimate public sphere is extremely minimal: the sort that lets a man write his name. But precisely to the extent that such men could write, their speech would function as it should: not as threat, or instrument of violence, but as the means for communication across difference. Literacy here does not signify the secondary mediation of a primary orality; it is that which permits the mastery of mediation and thus its effacement.

I emphasize that the operative opposition in this context is not simply between immediacy and mediation and certainly not between signal and noise. The opposition is between self-effacing and apparent mediation. There is no risk here of the scene devolving into one of absolute unintelligibility, even when the specter of violence is present. There is, rather, the experience of a doubleness that is felt as a disturbance and a distraction, one that somehow mitigates the capacity to sustain a desired opposition between language and violence and to thus underwrite a public sphere defined in its essence by legality.

A few anecdotes scraped together from across the years do not yet legitimate generalization. Nonetheless, in my experience, these fragments of discourse are representative of a widespread phenomenon and of a general unease at the heart of a society that is being reconstituted around a commitment to constitutional multilingualism and democratic proceduralism but that is nonetheless felt by many of its citizens to be threatened by foreignness and suffused by violence, criminality, and corruption. Neither has the state secured a monopoly on violence nor has the constitutional valorization of multilingualism been matched by educational reforms capable of generating multilingual literacy. Bureaucratic proceduralism has been read as a tactic of both corrupt governments and labor aristocracies within the unions. Those who were promised a voice at the end of apartheid find themselves frustrated; their expressions of will do not command transformation. To the contrary, everywhere there is delay and deferral, and the rituals of governmentality increasingly appear as evasions of transformational labor and cloaks for the intensification of inequality. In this context, and in contrast to

what can be observed in the HIV/AIDS NGO, direct-action campaigns, strikes, incendiary protests, and messianic movements abound. Political parties are being fractured as youth withdraw from and disavow the structures within which they had previously been expected to enter the hierarchies of power. Elder statesmen of the unions and the established political parties condemn the impatience of youth. But there is also increasing violence carried out by the agents of the law, the most dramatic example being the massacre of strikers at the platinum mines of Marikana in August 2012.

Across a vast and heterogeneous field, one sees tactics that aim to bypass former structures for the representation of interests and to access or deploy power immediately—without delay, without the risk of dissemination or dispersion. On the one hand, the fantasy of immediacy manifests itself in messianic movements and direct-action politics and in various kinds of violence. On the other, as though to short circuit its essential characteristics, there is language hollowed out of ambiguity, pried away from subjectivity, and instrumentalized in slogans and catchphrases from obsolescent ideological programs.

In order to demonstrate the relationship between direct-action politics and a violent drive to immediacy on one hand and what Roland Barthes would describe as relatively unary ideological discourse on the other,⁶ I want to turn to the recent and widely publicized debacle in the South African National Assembly as a point of entry before moving to a discussion of the forms of discourse that arose at Marikana and elsewhere in its aftermath.

An Other Scene: The Theater of Noncommunication

On February 12, 2015, President Jacob Zuma delivered his annual state of the nation address, remarking on the sixtieth anniversary of the Freedom Charter, signed at Kliptown, and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the release of Nelson Mandela. It was the Freedom Charter that enshrined the principle of one person, one vote, while promising rights of representation to all residents and not merely citizens of South Africa. And it is to appropriate the force of that still resonant declaration that the ANC declared 2015 to be the “Year of the Freedom Charter and Unity of Action to Advance Economic Freedom.” This nomination also sought to appropriate the authority of the emergent and self-consciously militant political party started by the ANC’s former (deposed and disciplined) Youth League president, Julius Malema: the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). The EFF rose to power in the

6. Barthes’s analysis, traceable to his early writings on myth, remains helpful for thinking ideological discourse not because it is possible to escape such discourse via the “neuter” that he ultimately embraced but because he identifies a violence against language that is foundational for a politics organized by the concept of truth rather than, say, equality (Barthes 2005, 2012). Foucault’s analysis of veridiction makes a similar point.

aftermath of the massacre at Marikana, vowing to reconstitute the revolutionary content of the anti-apartheid movement through the expropriation and nationalization of lands and mineral resources, the establishment of higher minimum wages, and free universal education.⁷

Before the commencement of Zuma’s address, EFF members stood and demanded that he answer questions about his Nkandla estate. Many shouted “pay back the money” or “we want our money.”⁸ The phrase had become ubiquitous during the 2012 strikes at Marikana, when it expressed a demand for increased wages. Resigned in the aftermath of Malema’s own split from Zuma and the ANC, it expressed the demand that Zuma repay some or all of the 246 million rand of public funds used to pay for infrastructural upgrades near or on his estate.⁹

The EFF’s interruption of the ritual event was anticipated in advance, but this did not mitigate its capacity to delay the evening’s agenda. Although they participated in elections and received more than 6% of the popular vote in 2014, which made them the third largest party in the sitting government, members regularly disavowed parliamentary protocol. Indeed, seven EFF members were charged and found guilty of “contempt” and “creating a disturbance in parliament” when they shouted similar slogans in 2014. In 2015, they accused the Speaker of using bureaucratic regulations to exclude necessary political discussion—as did others. Even former president Thabo Mbeki had opined, “you don’t use administrative instruments to resolve a political problem” (South African Press Association 2014). During the confrontations in both 2014 and 2015, the Speaker of the House summoned security personnel to forcibly remove EFF members, and public disgust at the disrespect shown to government was twinned with that regarding the use of violence against the people’s representatives.

These events were all televised, photographed, circulated via social media in the form of cell phone videography, and tweeted. But in February 2015, as security forces undertook their eviction, transmitters in the Assembly were intentionally jammed so that cell phone communications from within

7. <http://efffighters.org.za/documents/declaration/>.

8. This expression was central to the Marikana strikers’ protest. It was initially made the refrain of a hit house-music song, using the O’Jay’s “For the Love of Money” as background track. It was later remixed and then given an update following the melee of February 2015. For the first remix, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01uZQ7LBdTE&feature=youtu.be>. The latest version can be found on *Soundcloud* via the EFF’s official website: <https://soundcloud.com/economic-freedom-fighters/point-of-order>. Another version lays the recording of the parliamentary outbreak over the Pink Floyd hit “Money.”

9. The misappropriation of funds was first claimed by *Mail and Guardian* reporters Mandy Rossouw and Chris Roper in December 2009. An investigation by the public protector, Thuli Madonsela, concluded in March 2014 that Zuma was personally responsible for repaying funds from which he benefitted disproportionately. See Rossouw and Roper (2009) and Madonsela (2014).

the parliamentary buildings were prevented. The press considered this a violation of their freedoms, as did many of the MPs. But the delay in dissemination of messages did little to inhibit the rapid relay of images of a House in chaos. Nor did it reinforce ANC authority. Following the eviction of EFF members, a considerable percentage of television viewers ceased watching the broadcast of their president's anniversary speech. In reader-response sections of social media, not a few remarked on the clumsiness of Zuma's discourse, repeating the contempt that had bound the women in the HIV/AIDS NGO office in mocking solidarity.

It is my contention that the physical confrontations in the South African parliament are more than the eruption of frustration or the leakage of affect into a ritually rationalist space. More than this, the EFF's strategy entails the provocation of a mimetic transformation by which the state's representatives are incited into deploying force as a means to defend the regulatory order within which political discourse is contained and made to appear as the disinterested representation of interests (Taussig 1987, 1993). Usually, the concealment of such force provides the ruse by which constitutional orders secure their appearance as the spaces of peaceful deliberation among equals. Thus, its overt display constitutes more than a revelation or a failure to maintain appearances. In the moment that "law-preserving violence," as Walter Benjamin termed it, moves from the realm of immanence to that of overt coercion, the barbarism of civilization is exposed (Benjamin 2004). But the capacity to counterpose violence with something else is also strained. This is why Benjamin had to adduce the concept of "divine violence" to escape from the apparent inextricability of foundational and preservative violence.

EFF members not only repudiate barbarous civilization by speaking "out of turn." The disavowal of their fellow parliamentarians also solicits others elsewhere, namely the television-viewing and social-media-consuming public. To secure this indirect transmission as well as the identification that it enables, they must also and simultaneously secure the appearance of their exteriority to the institution whose corruption they assail—despite having sought electoral office. So, they speak in a manner that will not be admitted in parliament and, at the same time, in a manner that travels uninhibited beyond its confines. This is why they draw attention to the impropriety of their discourse. They theatricalize their own *ob-scenity* so as to inhibit any communication with other government officials and the corollary implication of seeking recognition from them while nonetheless making themselves overhearable.¹⁰ If they invoke *Robert's Rules of Order*, shouting "point of order!" (as they have in the past), their bright red T-shirts and berets are already an ironic repudiation of parliamentary discourse and the deliberative processes behind which capital and the state hide their interests.

10. As I understand it, to be ob-scene, off scene, is to be outside of the norms of discourse such that an affective force threatens to overwhelm the semantic content of the utterance.

There is an enormous risk in this strategy, which is apparent to everyone. The EFF wants not only to oppose the government and parliamentarianism but to partake of the power that emanates from the people in an electoral democracy. It is significant that they claim to be acting directly and on the basis of an identity with the people. The EFF is thereby confronted not only, as its website says, by the Leninist problem of "what is to be done" but also of how to make people think of the EFF's speech as their own. How indeed can they generate that kind of identity, which would spare them the burden and the contamination of representation, of speaking for others? The postulation of this kind of collective identity enables and even summons a kind of speech in which what is said is already read or known in advance and without subjective inflection. This is why the EFF members can and indeed must generate a sense that there is both absolute continuity between their words and deeds and that what they say might just as easily have been spoken by others.

The need to traverse the gap between word and deed is fulfilled in this context by slogans, which convert the difficult tasks of education and redistribution into the clarion call, "We want the money." Like the lyrics to a song, anyone can utter these words and in so doing find themselves enthralled by the strange sensation of speaking someone else's words and simultaneously experiencing them as one's own. Song often has this power. No wonder, then, that the EFF's slogans and recorded parliamentary interventions have been mixed with lines from familiar pop songs (e.g., by the O'Jays and Pink Floyd) and then remixed to become kwaito-inflected dance house music. They now circulate on social media and can be accessed through the EFF's official website or on its Soundcloud account.

With or without music, the slogan is speech at the point where the boundary between language and thing threatens to dissolve. It is a deeply reified speech, at once vacuous and overfull. Its communicative function is mainly limited to the solicitation of identity among speakers. For it does not open itself to dialogism. Its primary signification is the fact of collective utterance. We can see these qualities by considering the migration of the slogan "We want the money" from the strikes at Marikana to the critique of Zuma's corruption, and I will therefore now turn briefly to that history.

An Unoriginal Slogan

Marikana is the name of a place and also of an event. Following on a week of intensifying interunion conflict, it occurred on August 16, 2012, when police and armed security forces of the Lonmin Platinum Mine opened fire on striking mine workers, killing 34 of them. The killings were followed by mass protests, further strikes, and additional violence leading to numerous deaths among the mine workforce, the management's security personnel, the ANC, and the two unions representing miners: the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), formed in 1982, and the Association of Mineworkers and Con-

struction Union (AMCU), formed in 2001. The EFF emerged against the backdrop of Marikana and quickly joined those proffering a public critique of corruption in the previously dominant unions and the governing political party. There have now been at least three major documentary films and several extended television reports, numerous books, scholarly and journalistic articles, and even a musical (*Marikana, the Musical*) produced with Marikana as its subject matter. A commission of inquiry, established on August 23, 2012, deliberated for nearly 3 years before issuing its report on March 31, 2015, having amassed thousands of pages of testimony and documentation. Its conclusions exempted top political officials from culpability but found fault with Lonmin's management as well as with the police at all levels. It also impugned the leadership of both the NUM and the AMCU and called for an investigation into the actions of individuals in each of these organizations (Farlam, Hemraj, and Tokota 2015).

I have written elsewhere about these events, the conditions in the mines that led to the strikes, the calendrical logic by which they were deemed illegal, and the citational histories within which the miners gave themselves to be seen by others, knowing as they did that their struggle and their deaths would be televised. As indeed they were. Here, I want to focus

on only two elements of the events, namely, the rapid concentration of the miners' many and sometimes conflicting demands into a single slogan that then functioned as the sign of their unity, and the corollary transformation of individual lamentation on the part of the widows and their supporters into a single, urgent chant.

Two images can assist us in grasping the issue. The first (fig. 1), reproduced and widely circulated across numerous platforms both within South Africa and internationally, was taken in November of 2012, and it depicts women protestors outside of the hearings of the national commission of inquiry. All bear the same placard, mechanically reproduced with letters of sufficient size to be read from afar.

The second, but earlier, image (fig. 2), depicts men, also bearing a placard, but this one is fabricated from found materials—a torn piece of cardboard, with barely visible ink, and nearly illegible script. The script is in Fanagalo, the pidgin lingua franca of the mines. It reads “Tina funa lo mali R12,500” (We want the money 12,500 rand).

It is not surprising that the clumsiness and illegibility of the script on the latter placard drew attention beyond the miners' ostensibly intended signification, namely, a wage increase in the monthly recompense for Rock Drill Operators



Figure 1. “Don’t let the police get away with murder.” Photo, Mick Hutchings, Reuters Pictures. A color version of this figure is available online.



Figure 2. “Tina Funa Lo Mali.” Striking workers at Marikana, August 2012. Photo, Greg Marinovich. A color version of this figure is available online.

(RDOs). If our discussion of Zuma’s ridiculed speech prepared us to recognize how the awkward trace of dubious literacy shows itself and thereby introduces resistance into the communicative process, the reflection on EFF strategies demands another, deceptively simple question: who speaks? Or, even, what speaks? In both cases, there is a message inscribed on the placards, addressed to anyone who might be able to read them. This open-ended address, sent into public spheres where it will be read, reread, interpreted, and misunderstood in turn, is nonetheless differently circumscribed in either case. The language on the men’s placard is narrowly addressed to those within the mining sphere—no one else speaks this pidgin.¹¹ Its minimal and unambiguous message borders on telegraphic code. If it seeks out management, it expresses an aspiration to unanimity among the miners. And

11. Indeed, the translation of Fanagalo into English was a contested issue in the Commission of Inquiry. The police commissioner Lieutenant Colonial McIntosh had required a translator to speak with the strike leaders, and the commission’s report notes Lonmin’s withholding of the name of the translator as an index of the fear that suffused the environment in August before the violence (Farlam, Hemraj, and Tokota 2015:560).

yet the code dissipates at the perimeter of the language’s functionality, beyond the world of the mines.

By contrast, the women’s message is single but multiplied. A serial incarnation of the message suggests the possibility of an infinitely repeating demand: “Don’t let the police get away with murder.” The English is as close to a global address as it is possible to achieve in South Africa at present. But the organizational title of the “Marikana Support Campaign” that appears below the message summons and evacuates the concept of signature. We are therefore left to ask, is the campaign the author of these words? If so, in whose names does it speak? In whose voice?

What happens when a mass of people enter a public sphere, to actualize their right to “have a voice,” only to speak in a manner that lacks the particularity that we associate with the very concept of voice? The words spoken—worn, one should say—could be spoken by any of the women in the image, but in this typographically standardized form, the statements are shown to be no one’s in particular. They are the graphical form of a chant, itself the vocalization of a slogan. As we have seen, the fact that anyone can speak such phrases enables their re-signification and redeployment. And this remains the case in the EFF’s new appropriations of the miners’ translated slogan.

A slogan in a political rally is a literalist response to the mundane crises of mediation that the HIV/AIDS NGO office staged. As we have seen, the public sphere avowed at the HIV/AIDS NGO is based on a belief in the necessity of mediation but also of its effacement. This is quite different from that short circuiting to which the slogan aspires with language that is stripped of ambiguity, pried away from subjectivity, and reduced to the most instrumental dimension. I want to now consider the messianism that expresses, in an even purer form, the drive to transcend mediation altogether.

From Slogan to Sublimity

Shortly after my encounter at the HIV/AIDS office, I met with the leadership of the AMCU in their new offices on Palladium Street. The regional secretary was a young man who spoke slowly and precisely in an elegant, educated English, though it is not his native language. He was accompanied by the union's regional chairperson. In this gold-mining town, which was the seat of NUM's founding in 1982 and which has been central to the narrative of both gold mining and labor activism in national historiography, the AMCU's rise to power came quickly and without much forewarning. Barely 6 weeks after the massacre at Markiana, workers on AngloGold Ashanti's mines staged a monthlong strike, organized against the advice of their NUM representatives, and shortly thereafter, the miners migrated en masse to the upstart union. Within 6 months, the AMCU was granted official bargaining status by the Chamber of Mines.

A few doors from Wimpy's, a franchise diner where the local politicians and businessmen meet to make deals over greasy eggs and bacon, the new office was still without much furniture. There, the secretary explained what had happened with all the art of a storyteller and truly Spartan authority: "For a long time workers have been feeling that they have no power . . . not only in terms of wages or money or salary but in terms of their dignity." There is no way I could understand this, he said, if I had not been underground. After ascertaining that I had been underground, he continued.

Yeah, it's another world. It's a kind of system in which people are being seen as slaves. Their dignity is reduced drastically. Ah, their safety . . . in terms of money . . . it led to desperation. . . . A human being will work close to 12 hours a day underground without seeing the sun, . . . so that he can meet his monthly needs. . . . The current union at that time, which was the NUM, was becoming distant from the mandate of the workers in terms of daily issues. Workers did not see—I personally did not see NUM, even though I was a member—I personally did not see NUM as a party that can represent me. Ah, in my daily disputes made with management, I wouldn't go to NUM because I knew very well that I'm not going to get assistance. The mass meetings' mandates were not implemented, leaders started to see workers as stepping stones to getting to higher po-

sitions in [the] municipality, in [the] parliament. . . . When you do not listen to your constituency, the very same people that put you there . . . you're looking [at an] erupting volcano if I can put it in that manner. After, after . . . in 2012, as you know, after 34 of the workers were killed, I think that was the last straw . . . where workers decided that we are not going to sit back and watch while our brothers are being murdered like it is still apartheid.¹²

The secretary's passionate narrative moves from working conditions to state and corporate violence against workers while enumerating NUM's failures. But the massacre is not the origin of the radicalization; it is only that which brings to fruition what was already in process, namely, a failure of representation.

We elected a government democratically and they slaughter the very same people who put them in the parliament. They slaughter the very same people who put them in power. Most of the people in government come from the NUM, they were elected by the very same workers, so it was quite a shock, that they could be slain, the very same workers could be slain like that. Before the uprising in 2012, the workers started joining AMCU, even before the Marikana Massacre, they were joining AMCU drastically, in many numbers.

Later, the secretary would speak of the ways in which labor disputes were recoded as disciplinary hearings. In these proceedings, he argued, a combination of racism's history and the drive for power (and the salaries associated with it) on the part of NUM representatives materialized itself in the demand that workers confess to supervisors' accusations in order to receive lenience. The mitigation of penalties constituted a victory from NUM's perspective even if it meant workers' false confessions. In this narrative, a failure of representation at the level of the elected officials leads to an overt enactment of violence in the place of representation by those officials and against those who are the origin of their power. In other words, the representative function has been confused with a governing function, speaking with the exercise of power. This is precisely what the EFF is trying to expose. However, in the union that claims better representational capacities (there is a sign in the office that reads "AMCU will make the difference"), there is also an attraction to and an aspiration for something beyond this representation, a power that would, in fact, exceed all representationalism.

In our first conversation, the AMCU secretary surprised me with a fabular gesture that paired song and slogan. He said, "there's a song, professor, which basically states that—it's a Xhosa song, a slogan—it states that AMCU found us in the bushes while we were lost, you see, and it took us to the

12. Technically, NUM is not a party, and yet its role in the Congress of South African Trade Unions, which is part of the Tripartite Alliance governing South Africa, blurs this distinction. As can be seen throughout the interview, NUM's failures are construed in terms of a governmental logic as much as a syndicalist function.

promised land.” Despite my obvious expression of surprise he commenced his history, which I have already quoted: “for a long time workers have been feeling that they have no power.”

Despite the secretary’s performance of moral righteousness, the Biblical metaphor remained enigmatic. Did it imply an identification on the part of the miners with the founding prince and the Mosaic legend? Did it imply that the surviving miners had been spared a massacre precisely in order to establish a moral order on an analogy with Moses, who, among all the infants of his generation, had been saved by being hidden in the reeds? Would it entail their own exclusion at the threshold of liberation? And who or what would be the AMCU’s Joshua? In this social space, where Biblical narrative circulates as common sense and where Zionism names the largest denomination of African Christianity, such readings are at once on the surface and compulsive, unconscious mythopoetic structures. Few miners profess overt religiosity, and yet the messianism of this fable suffuses the post-Marikana political sphere not only in the rhetoric of the mountain, which binds Marikana and other locations (the secretary says, without irony, “we have our own Marikana”), and with the prophetic traditions of Eastern Cape and Kwa-Zulu Natal but also in the understanding of the strike as an ecstatic experience of collectivity and self-presencing rather than self-representation and thus mediation.

Soon thereafter, I met with a shop steward in an empty parking lot of AngloGold Ashanti’s properties. We talked in the shadowed back seat of my car as the sun set on silver mountains of mine tailings. This was to avoid the “eyes,” which, my interlocutor told me, are always looking. Later, he would tell me to Google him, but this desire for celebrity disclosed itself only after several days of theatrical secrecy. Of course, his insistence on being clandestine was a claim of importance, but this does not mean, at the same time, that there was not surveillance. There was.

The steward had previously worked at a platinum mine in Rustenburg, in the vicinity of Marikana, having entered the mines on the advice of an uncle after his father’s death “in the mines.” But he had quit, horrified at the intensity of the labor underground, only to be forced back there when he could not obtain work from the municipality. When he moved from the platinum belt to the gold mines following dismissal during a strike, the steward was shocked by the complaisance of his new coworkers and took it upon himself to “inform” them: “I think there was a lack of information. People didn’t get a clear picture of what is happening within the mining industry. They were remote controlled.” The phrase stood out: a poetic registration of industrial capitalism’s compulsive force cast in the idiom of contemporary media. I asked the steward how things had changed after Marikana, recalling the AMCU secretary’s insistence that Marikana did not originate but had rather catalyzed an incipient disaffection in this area. “When I arrived here,” he answered, “I could see that there is a lot of things that’s not going well.” To remedy the situation, he

started “to engage people individually. . . . The gold sector as it was, the operation and the system that was used in the mine that I was employed at before, it was a different thing, and you can see that people don’t have information of actually what is happening.” As he described his efforts to explain to them “how things should be,” he meditated with obvious excitement on the “fortunate” events of “2012, when things happened in Marikana. The people started to realize that they got power in their hands. And that is when we decided to go at the hill, on the 25 of September.”

The strike at AngloGold Ashanti lasted a month and generated a mere 2% wage increase. But the paucity of economic gains was partly compensated for by the sense of empowerment that came with being on the mountain. I asked the steward what it was like, during those days of anxious anticipation, so soon after the massacre of workers in the neighboring town. He responded, “It was fun. . . . We took a month, on the strike. . . . It was fun, we took it like fun, but it was very difficult. . . . We were very much militant on the engagement with management. . . . We used our own intelligence so that people can’t lose their jobs.” When I questioned what made the experience fun, he paused and reflected before continuing, grandiosely, “I was a, I was the pillar of around 12,500 people, that were on strike. Not only this shaft. . . . There are three shafts at AngloGold Ashanti, so we gathered at the mountain, the three shafts. So, I could realize that I’ve got, I’ve got this, I’ve got this power mentality, and this power, ways that I can say to people, to convince people. . . . It’s not easy to convince people that this is what is happening and we are going to stand for what we are actually here for.”

At first sight, the steward appears as an ordinary labor organizer, a man who would exercise his rhetorical skills in suasion appropriate to a public sphere characterized by deliberative processes. His skills, he says, are necessary because something has blocked the other workers in what should have been a verily automatic recognition of their own interests. Precisely because they are blocked, however, he must speak to and for them in order that they discover their own voice.

What is at stake here in this eloquent appropriation of the workers’ possible but interrupted capacity for self-representation? We know from Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* that the identity of the workers’ interests does not automatically become the basis of a sense of community (Spivak 2010). This is why, he asserts, they must be represented. In Spivak’s reading, his account of the peasants’ superstitious adoration of Louis Napoleon, the figure of the emperor is shown to provide the poor peasants with an image and a trope (*Darstellung*) that absorbs into itself the act of representation as persuasion, a coming to consciousness of an identity of interests (*Vertretung*). The steward appears to recognize the difference between these two elements of representation (concealed in English as “representation”; Spivak 2010). However, this difference is a gap to be closed as much as it is to be mediated or maintained.

It is, indeed, to cover over this gap that he offers himself in the role of “leader” in the pursuit of immediacy. His claim to a metonymic status vis-à-vis the mine workers (a profession that he nonetheless feels himself above) moves his gesture from what might have been organic affiliation, à la Gramsci, to a presumption of the tropological function, which is to say a substitutional function grounded in the claim to full identity. In this respect, his function is extraordinary, and its origins are also extraordinary: “I believe that I was sent to, I was sent here to come and actually rescue the mine workers that are oppressed.”

Even before he arrived among these workers, blocked in their capacities for self-representation because they had not yet grasped their own lack, “there were signs” that came to the steward from beyond. To be sure, he says, he “was always in the lead” (at school, in relation to his age-mates), but he came to this community after receiving something like a commandment: “it was like an ancestor.” It is to assuage the unease of the ancestor, namely his father, that he says he now speaks, and it is because the ancestor hears him that it (and not the workers) is now “at ease.” Up until this point, the father/ancestral figure had been described by the steward only in terms of his failure to fulfill the paternal function (“he has done *nothing* for me”).

The steward’s speech restores to the father the ideal function of recognition. In this way, however, there is a kind of detour in the representational dramaturgy of the working-class accession to self-representation, a detour and a substitution. As the workers are replaced by the father as the origin of the steward’s communicative and thus social power, the labor of history is transferred to a narrative of origins. A patriarchal and phallogocentric sublimity overwhelms the steward, who, in the course of our conversation, abandons his earlier self-presentation as a skilled rhetorician and pedagogue and asserts, instead, that he is the recipient of a gift, a quality of leadership at once inborn and compulsive: “leadership . . . it’s not something I actually learned, it’s something that I was born with.”

During our second meeting, this one in the residential section of the compound, where minivans beeped and fruit vendors offered their produce to the men coming off shift, the steward’s speech grew more elaborate. He was radiant with this tale. His power assumed mythic proportions as he conjured the specter of a company conspiracy to torture him.

On the mountain, he says, he was chased by security forces in a helicopter but escaped repeatedly, each time returning to his fellow strikers on the mountain, where he “ma[de] that it was a joke.” When I asked, “wasn’t it frightening?” he responded with alacrity, “No, it wasn’t. It wasn’t. Because I believed that, eh . . . I am untouchable. I believed that I am untouchable. And I was preaching that.” What confers this sense of immunity to violence, deployed by the company in the interest of crowd management and the protection of private property, is, in the end, the paternal gaze: “I believe that wherever my father is, he’s watching over me. And I said that

to the employees, that ‘I know that my father is watching over me, wherever he is, because I am doing this for you, because he has done nothing.’” This is why, he said, his words became true. He no longer conceals the substitutional logic, the conflation of *Darstellung* with *Vertretung*, and in this very moment, he describes a potent, corporeal sensation of limitlessness, of being the locus of power and not merely its explanatory vehicle. His most thrilling recollection is the sensation of a pure power in speaking, a speaking so potent that it traverses the boundaries separating the living and the dead. It is in this sense that I speak of messianism, a messianism that partakes of both Christological myth and socialist metaphysics while casting them both in the idiomaticity of Xhosa genealogical convention.¹³

The Political Instance

The problem on the mines from the AMCU’s perspective is that the elders are uneducated and, despite this, presume authority. They presume authority but do not exercise it, especially with regard to the treatment that black workers have received at the hands of the white establishment. According to the young men, foreign elders, migrant laborers who entered the mines during apartheid, accustomed themselves to being boss boys and living in hostels. They allowed management to tell them when they could strike and what they could negotiate. They accepted the bureaucratic obstructions and institutional degradations that the old union elite now perform in their mimicry of the whites. By contrast, the young mine workers say they have the right to speak on their own behalf and to demand a hearing. Despite all of the critical literature that explains the poor remuneration of the mine workers at Marikana in terms of their poor access to education in rural areas, the mine workers’ claim that, today, mine workers are educated, at least relative to their forebears. They can, they say, read the legislation and critique the dissimulations that are encoded in the text of mining capital.

And yet despite their new knowledge, the mine workers cannot make their words the source of transformation in the world. At every turn, there is something obtruding between what should have been and what is. Where people ought to have found their voice they find themselves newly muted and excluded. The presumption, widely shared in this context, is that power consists in making oneself heard and heard in a manner to which others must respond. In liberal, electoral democratic orders, of course, having a voice is the mark of political subjectivity, but this is exercised mainly in the del-

13. A long tradition of messianism in this area makes the mountain the seat of transcendent powers. Largely associated today with the Nazrite church of Isaiah Shembe, this tradition has been broadly significant in the history of rebellions throughout the Eastern Cape and Kwa-Zulu Natal, especially among the Pondo. As many commentators have noted, the relatively impoverished Pondo ethnic group provides a high percentage of the RDOs, who were at the center of the Marikana strikes.

agation of that speaking function to a representative. Elected representatives should articulate the interests of those who have delegated their speaking function. The perceived failure of such a representative function by union officials was a crucial motivating factor in the disputes at Marikana. Dissatisfaction was also intensified by NUM's vectoral use of cell phone technology to transmit information in lieu of mass meetings. The AMCU had used text messaging to crowd-source such meetings, but it had quickly recognized that the absence of face-to-face engagement was a critical failure on NUM's part. The desire for that thrilling exchange between the one and the many would not be satisfied by a branched tree of text messages. The AMCU recognized and gathered to themselves the desire for a transcendent experience of communication in which the sensation of presence and immediacy is particularly heightened. The point of efficacious speech is, or course, that there be no loss or dissipation between speaking and being heard, whether by one's coworkers or by the spirits.

As we have seen, this desire for immediacy is satisfied differently by different practices—from the slogan that has banished ambiguity at the expense of signification to the messianic utterance that penetrates even into the realm of the ancestors. It is intensified by a contradiction: technologies promise immediacy and thus a corrective to conditions of miscommunication and deferred access to resources whose distribution should have been secured by political representatives. But technology will not suffice as an answer to political problems, which are experienced by those at the bottom of the social hierarchy as desire in excess, which is to say lack. There is not enough: not enough money, not enough services, not enough jobs, not enough educational opportunities, not enough material resources, and so forth. That there are resources to be had but that these have been removed from the field of circulation and distribution by private property in a system of racialized capital is widely recognized by all.

Insofar as lack is a function of blocked access to resources, the aspiration to immediacy and communicative fullness is a simple oppositional corrective. People desire to overcome what interrupts the path of their desire. The EFF and the shop steward both assert a metonymic relation with the class they would represent, and they do so in ways that, as Spivak describes, collapse the political labor of collective subject formation (whether under the name of class or something else) with a substantialized, corporealized figuration of power. And they make themselves into pure proxies.

The alternative, as we have seen, is provided by the satiric discourse of the HIV/AIDS office. No doubt, it expresses a liberal fantasy of an ideal public sphere in Habermas's sense, but it also reveals that ideal speech community as one predicated on the effacement of communication rather than the actually perfect transmission of intention or the production of consensus. In that scene of pedagogy, where the work of

persuasion (HIV/AIDS prevention) is itself the center of activity, there is suspicion of the one—both Zuma and the EFF's Malema—who would use the critique of bureaucratic proceduralism to underwrite a substitution of a representatum for the work of representing. Bureaucratic proceduralism remains a source of violence, of course, in the form of deafness. But the literalization of Benjamin's divine violence, which is perhaps one way to understand the messianic element in South African labor politics today, does not solve the problem. Rather, it exposes the necessity of critique: of the substitution of the medium (and media in general) for the thought of mediation. Media theorists who are themselves enthralled by the idea that technology can bridge or even suture the gap between these two dimensions might learn from this scenario.

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