

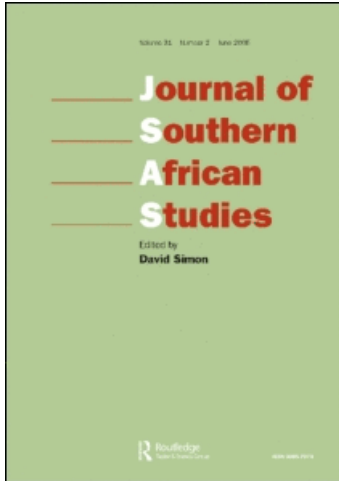
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*Naturing the Nation: Aliens, Apocalypse and the Postcolonial State**

JEAN COMAROFF AND JOHN L. COMAROFF

(University of Chicago/American Bar Foundation)

This paper examines the predicament of the postcolonial nation-state through the prism of environmental catastrophe. When are plant 'invaders' likely to become an urgent political issue? And, when they do, what might they reveal of the shifting relations among citizenship, community, and national sovereignty under neo-liberal conditions? Pursuing these questions in the 'new' South Africa, we posit three key features of postcolonial politics in the era of global capitalism: the reconfiguration of the subject-citizen, the crisis of sovereign borders, and the depoliticisation of politics. Under such conditions, we argue, aliens – both plants and people – come to embody core contradictions of boundedness and belonging. And alien-nature provides a language for voicing new forms of discrimination within a culture of 'post-racism' and civil rights.

Prolegomenon

*The White Heat of Apocalypse,
or 'The Week the Cape Burned'*

Helicopters scampering over the blazing vineyards of Constantia became the 'motif' of the Cape of Storms this week as the Peninsula burst into flames producing scenes that could have been staged for a mega disaster movie. From the beaches of Muizenberg columns of smoke rising above the mountains ... looked like Mount Vesuvius in full rage burying the fleeing victims of Pompeii ... Overhead the tiny helicopters buzz mosquito-like against the sky, heroic in purpose, but only adding to the sense of helplessness as they dash their toyish ... waterbombs against the ... advance of the lunatic flames.¹

What might 'natural' disasters tell us about the ecology of nationhood? Or about the contemporary predicament of the postcolonial nation-state? How might the flash of environmental catastrophe illuminate the meaning of borders and the tortured politics of belonging? How might nature remake the nation under neoliberal conditions? When and why, to be more specific, do plants, especially foreign plants, become urgent affairs of state? And what might they disclose of the shifting relations among citizenship, community, and national integrity in an era of global capitalism? Pursuing these questions in South

* We accumulated several debts in writing the present paper. The first is to our son, Joshua Comaroff, an architect whose specialist knowledge of landscape has drawn us into many discussions on the topic; he was with us in Cape Town during the events described here, and participated in the formulation of our analysis of them. Najwa Hendrickse, of the National Library of South Africa, helped us in our documentary work, going far beyond the call of duty in locating obscure texts. James Drummond, a geographer at University of the North West, alerted us to many relevant references and to crucial information, of which he is a generous, never-ending source. David Bunn and Steven Robins, as always, were critical interlocutors: our ongoing conversation with them informs most of what we do in South Africa. Finally, Maureen Anderson, our patient, creative Research Assistant at the University of Chicago, put up with our usual stream of difficult questions and unusual requests. To all of them, our warm thanks. An earlier, longer, and somewhat amended version of this essay has been published in Israel in *Hagar: International Social Sciences Review*, 1,1 (2000), pp. 7–40.

1 M. Merten, 'The Week the Cape Burned', *Mail & Guardian*, 21–27 January 2000.

Africa, we run up against two faces of 'naturalisation' in the politics of the postcolony: one refers to the assimilation of alien persons, signs, and practices into the received order of things; the other, to the deployment of nature as alibi, as a fertile allegory for making people and objects strange, thus to forge critical new social and political distinctions.

We shall make our way back to such matters of theory – about naturalisation, about the postcolonial state, about the ecology of nationhood – in due course. First, though, a dedication. This essay is written for Shula Marks, long-time friend and colleague, who has herself reflected astutely on the manner in which botanical knowledge, conservationism, and the aesthetics of nature – not least, in respect of the mountains of the Cape – have been mobilised 'in the service of nationhood'.² Possessed of a sharp appreciation of natural beauty and its social uses, she shares with us a deep emotional attachment to the human and horticultural landscape discussed here.

We begin our narrative with the fire.

Apocalypse, African Style

The turn of the millennium came and went in South Africa without incident; this despite public fears of violence and mass destruction. Then, two weeks later, Cape Town caught fire. On an unusually hot, dry Saturday afternoon the veld flared up suddenly in a number of places across the greater metropolitan area. Gale-force south-east winds carried walls of flame up the stately mountain spine of the Cape Peninsula, threatening historic homes and squatter settlements alike. As those in the path of the inferno were evacuated, SATV showed disjunctive images of civic collaboration: of the poor helping each other carry paltry possessions from doomed shacks; of the wealthy, having dropped their valuables in their swimming pools, lining up to pass buckets of water.³

On Monday, as the bush continued to burn, airforce helicopters dumped thousands of tons of water on the flames. Volunteers aided emergency firefighters brought from as far afield as Pretoria, more than 1500 km to the north. Round-the-clock reports told a distressing tale of cheetahs and ostriches grilled alive in local game parks, of landmark churches facing incineration, of world renowned vineyards razed to cinders. The Mother City sweltered under a blanket of smoke as ash rained down on her boulevards and beaches, causing the closure of many major roads. Air pollution increased by 20 per cent. At the national naval headquarters, shore leave for sailors was cancelled as flames devoured key administrative buildings.

In total, some 9,000 hectares burned. The mountains smouldered on sullenly for weeks. So, too, did the temper of the population. One man was charged with viciously assaulting a youth whom he suspected of starting a blaze along a rural road⁴ and attributions of blame flew in many directions, none of them politically random. Fire is endemic to the region and to the regeneration of its vegetation; those who profit from its fertility have no option but to live with the risk. But this, a conflagration of unprecedented scale, raised fears about the very sustainability of the natural kingdom in the 'fairest Cape'. For weeks, the blaze – some termed it 'the holocaust' – dominated public discourse. Its livid scars and apocalyptic proportions evoked elemental anxieties, calling forth an almost obsessive desire to construe it as an omen, an indictment, a call to arms. This public divination – the debate in the streets, the media, the halls of government – laid bear the complex social ecology whence the fire

2 S. Dubow and S. Marks, 'Patriotism of Place and Race: Keith Hancock on South Africa', in D. A. Low (ed) *Keith Hancock. The Legacies of an Historian* (forthcoming, 2001).

3 M. Merten, 'A Chronology of Destruction', *Mail & Guardian*, 21–27 January 2000; V. Foxcroft, 'Flames Past, Present – and Future?', *Cape Times*, 3 February 2000; 'KaaP Lek Sy Wonde; Weskus Veg Met Hulp Uit Noorde', *Die Burger*, 21 January 2000; 'Bokkie se Trane', *Die Burger*, 22 January 2000.

4 N. Joseph, 'Man Arrested For Beating Up Young Fire Bug', *Cape Argus*, 2 February 2000.

itself had sprung, enabling it to cast penetrating light on conditions-of-being in the postcolony.

Apocalypse, of course, soon becomes history, a process Davis aptly terms the ‘dialectic of ordinary disaster’.⁵ Thus, while early discussion of the fire was wild and contested, refracted along the diverse facets of communal interest, it would reduce, over time, to a dominant interpretation. That interpretation was never shared by all. As we shall see, some people, barely audible in the media debate, had a different reading of the issues at stake. But the dominant view *did* draw a wide consensus; wide enough to authorise strong government action and broad civic collaboration. This, clearly, was an instance of ‘ideology-in-the-making’. As such, its efficacy rested, first, on producing a plausible, parsimonious explanation for the extent of the blaze. But it also succeeded in making the flames illuminate an implicit landscape of affect and anxiety, inclusion and intrusion, prosperity and loss. Through a clutch of charged references, it linked the conflagration to other domains of public experience, domains in which natural images frame urgent issues of being-and-identity; in particular, being-and-identity in the body of the ‘new’ nation-state.

In the initial heat of the event, stray cigarette ends and abandoned cooking fires were blamed. But this was rapidly overtaken, in ‘official opinion’, by talk of arson, a theory supported by circumstantial evidence; some even detected a new front in the campaign of urban terror, widely attributed to Islamic fundamentalism, that had gripped the Cape Peninsula for several years.⁶ Then the discourse abruptly changed direction, alighting on an etiology that took hold with extraordinary force: whatever had sparked it, the calamitous scale of the blaze was a result of invasive alien plants that burn more readily and fiercely than native flora. Fire might be a ‘natural part’ of the Cape ecosystem, government advisors attested, but the presence of invasive aliens had changed that system significantly.⁷ Outrage against these intruders grew steadily, particularly in the English-speaking press (the Afrikaans media had a somewhat different agenda). Landowners who had allegedly allowed these interlopers to spread unchecked were denounced for putting life and limb, even ‘our natural heritage’, at risk.⁸

Heritage has become a construct to conjure with as global markets erode the distinctive wealth of nations, forcing them to redefine their sense of patrimony – and its material worth: the mayor of Cape Town, for example, is wont to describe Table Mountain as ‘a national inspiration’, whose asset value is ‘measured by every visitor it attracts’.⁹ Not coincidentally, South Africa is currently engaged in a bid to have the Cape Peninsula declared a ‘World Heritage Site’ in recognition of its unparalleled biodiversity. This heritage is embodied, above all, in *fynbos* (Afrikaans, ‘fine bush’; from the Dutch *fijn bosch*),¹⁰ the sclerophyllous or small-leaved, evergreen shrubs and heath that dominate the vegetation of the mountains and coastal forelands of the Cape.¹¹ In recent decades, *fynbos* has become the prime incarnation of the fragile, wealth-producing beauties of the region;

5 M. Davis, ‘Los Angeles after the Storm: The Dialectic of Ordinary Disaster’, *Antipode*, 27 (1995), 221–41.

6 B.. Jordan, ‘Ash City: Why the Fires Were So Bad’, *Sunday Times*, 23 January 2000.

7 Guy Preston, special advisor to Ronnie Kasrils, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry; quoted in J. Yeld, ‘Force Landowners to Clear Invading Alien Plants’, *Sunday Argus*, 22–23 January 2000.

8 Yeld, ‘Force Landowners’; L. de Villiers, Chair of Peninsula Mountain Forum, ‘Take Decisive Steps to Avoid Future Fire Disaster’, letter to the *Cape Times*, 28 January 2000.

9 ‘*Ukuvuka* the Biggest Ever’, editorial, *Cape Times*, 7 February 2000.

10 R. Cowling and D. Richardson, *Fynbos: South Africa’s Unique Floral Kingdom* (Cape Town, 1995), p. 21, suggest that the name might reflect the fact that early Dutch settlers found this species of Cape vegetation too slender to harvest as timber.

11 F. Kruger (compiler), *A Description of the Fynbos Biome Project*. A Report of the Committee for Terrestrial Ecosystems, National Programme for Environmental Sciences. (Pretoria, Cooperative Scientific Programmes, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, 1978); J. Day, W. Siegfried, G. Louw and M. Jarman, (eds), *Fynbos Ecology: A Preliminary Synthesis*. South African National Scientific Programmes, Report No.40. (Pretoria, Foundation for Research Development, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, 1979).

and, as it has, local environmentalists have become ever more convinced that it is caught up in a mortal struggle with alien interlopers that threaten to reduce its riches to 'impenetrable monotony'.¹²

The blaze brought all this to a head. 'Wake Up Cape Town',¹³ screamed front page headlines set against the image of a red fire lily poking, phoenix-like, from a deep bed of ashes. Efforts by botanists to cool the hysteria – to insist that 'fire in fynbos [is] normal', not a 'train smash in terms of biodiversity'¹⁴ – had little effect on the public mood. A cartoonist, allowing a rare moment of irony to flicker amid millennial anxiety, drew a UFO hovering over Cape Town as the city sank into the globally-warmed sea, its mountain tops covered by foreign flora. Peering down, the occupants of the space ship declare: 'They seem to have a problem with aliens' (see Figure 1).¹⁵

A problem with aliens indeed! Whether or not he knew it, the satirist had touched a deep nerve: the anxiety over foreign flora gestured toward a submerged landscape of civic terror and moral alarm. Significantly, when the fire was followed some two weeks later by ruinous floods to the north, another headline quipped: 'First fires, now floods – next frogs?'¹⁶ By then, it was not altogether surprising to read that 'huge forests of alien trees' were being held by experts to have 'caused all the trouble' in the water-logged Mpumalanga Province.¹⁷ In this, one of the poorest regions in the land, 'large stands of invading aliens',

Chip **SNADDON**

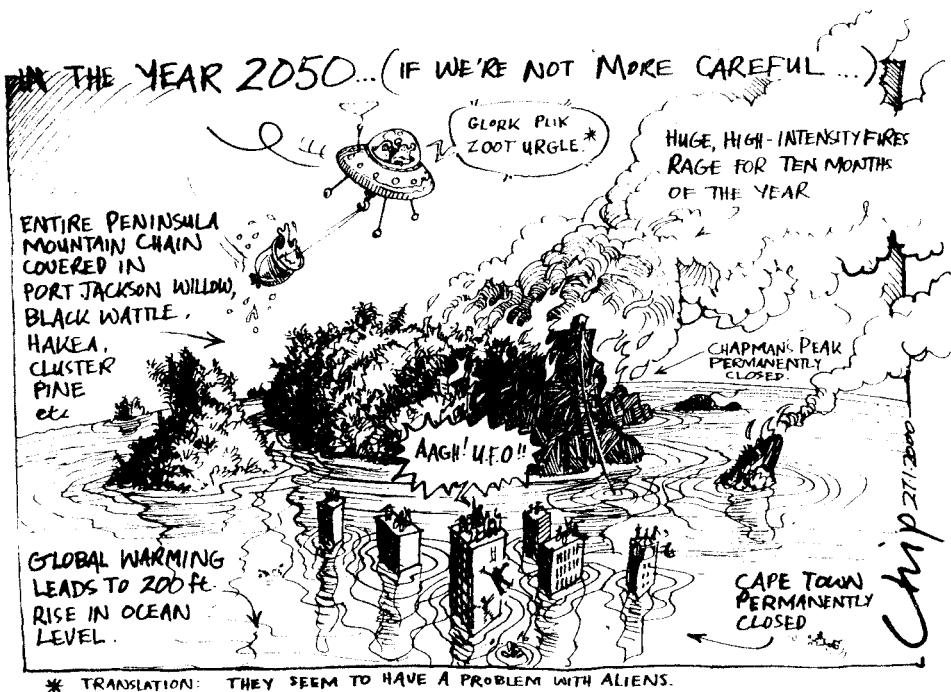


Figure 1.

12 A. Hall, 'Invasive Weeds', in J. Day *et al.* (eds.), *Fynbos Ecology*, p. 134.

13 J. Yeld, 'Wake Up Cape Town', *Cape Argus*, 7 February 2000.

14 Richard Cowling, distinguished scholar of the Cape fynbos biome, cited in 'The Peninsula's Fynbos Will Flourish Again', *Sunday Argus*, 29 January 2000.

15 Chip, 'They Seem to have a Problem with Aliens', *Cape Argus*, January 27 2000.

16 I. Powell and H. Hogan, 'First Fires, Now Floods – Next Frogs?', *Mail & Guardian*, 11–17 February 2000.

17 F. Macleod, 'The Trees That Caused All the Trouble', *Mail & Guardian*, 11–17 February 2000.

the vast plantations of powerful logging corporations, were blamed for thwarting the capacity of indigenous plants to act as ‘natural sponges’.¹⁸ At much the same time, a lead story in the national press, apparently unrelated, told how the Aliens Investigation Unit of the South African Police Services had swooped down on a luxurious club in Johannesburg, ostensibly because it employed a growing army of undocumented, unhealthy sex workers from abroad.¹⁹ Within days, the South Africa public was promised, again in banner newsprint, a ‘US-style bid to rid SA of illegal aliens’.²⁰

What exactly was at stake in this mass-mediated chain of consciousness, this litany of alien-nature? Why the propensity to ‘blame it on the weeds’, as one journalist put it?²¹ How much does it all tell us about the meaning of moral panics inside South Africa, or about perceived threats to the nation and its patrimony? Observers elsewhere have noted that an impassioned rhetoric of autochthony, to which alienness is the negative counterpoint, has edged aside other images of belonging at the end of the twentieth century; also that a fetishising of origins seems to be growing up the world over in opposition to the liberal credo of *laissez-faire*.²² But why? Why, at this point in the history of postcolonial nation-states, and of South Africa in particular, has the question of boundaries and their transgression, of membership and citizenship, become such an incendiary issue? Why, in the face of the burning bush, has nature presented itself as a persuasive alibi for the conception of nationhood and its frontiers? And how, in turn, does the naturalisation of nationality relate to the construction of older identities framed in terms of history, culture, race, ethnicity? Could it be that the anxious public discourse over invasive plant species speaks to an existential problem presently making itself felt at the very heart of nation-states everywhere: in what does national integrity consist, what might nationhood and belonging *mean*, what moral and material entitlements might it entail, at a time when global capitalism seems everywhere to be threatening sovereign borders, everywhere to be displacing politics-as-usual?

These questions are not meant to cast doubt on the danger actually posed by fire or flood; nor on the effort to explain and manage them with reference to the effects of foreign flora. It is precisely *because* these matters are so real and urgent that they carry the charge that they do. But the extent to which aliens of all kinds became a public preoccupation in South Africa just after the millennium went far beyond the usual bounds of botany, far beyond the concerns of the environmental sciences, beyond even the imperatives of disaster control. It is with this excess that we are concerned here. For, as we have already hinted, the explosion of events, emotions and arguments ‘after the fire’ has a compelling story to tell about citizenship, identity and nation-building in this and other postcolonies.

The Postcolonial Nation-State in Perspective, Retrospectively

First things first, however. *The* postcolonial nation-state – and here we write specifically from an Africanist perspective – is not, for all the tendency to speak of it in the singular, a definite article. It refers to a labile historical *formation*, a polythetic class of polities-in-motion. South Africa, famously, is the latest country to join the class. As such, it reveals,

18 Most notably, Guy Preston, the expert said to have linked alien vegetation to the Cape fires; F. Macleod, ‘The Trees That Caused All the Trouble’, p. 8 (see also below).

19 M. Burbidge, ‘The Best Little Whorehouse in the Civil Service’, *Saturday Star*, 12 February 2000.

20 R. Brand, ‘US-Style Bid to Rid SA of Illegal Aliens’, *The Star*, 14 February 2000.

21 M. Merten, ‘Blame it on the Weeds’, *Mail & Guardian*, 21–27 January 2000.

22 P. Geschiere and F. Nyamnjoh, ‘Capitalism and Autochthony: The Seesaw of Mobility and Belonging’, in J. Comaroff and J. L. Comaroff (eds), *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, Special Edition of *Public Culture*, 12, 2, (Spring 2000), 423–452.

with harsh clarity, many of the contemporary obsessions of postcoloniality, many of the contradictions that confront the effort to make modernist polities in post-modern, neoliberal times. That effort, those obsessions, reach into diverse realms of collective being-in-the-world: into the struggle to arrive at meaningful terms with which to construct a sense of belonging – and, hence, of moral and material community – in circumstances that privilege difference; into the endeavour to regulate sovereign borders under global conditions that not only encourage the transnational movement of labour and capital, money and goods, but make them a necessary condition of the wealth of nations; into the often bitter controversies that rage as people assert various kinds of identity to make claims of entitlement and interest; into troubled public discourses on the proper reach of twenty-first century constitutions and, especially, their protection of individual rights; into the complicated processes by which government, non-governmental organisations, citizens acting in the name of civil society, and other social fractions, seek to carve out a division of political and social labour; into the implications of *angst* about the decay of public order, about crime both organised and random, about corruption and its policing.

Such issues have not always dominated the discourses of postcolonial nation-states – in the plural, note – or saturated their public spheres. These polities have long entertained mass flows of human, animal, and vegetable migrants across sovereign borders;²³ but never before has the presence of aliens occasioned the same sort of alarm as it seems to nowadays.²⁴ As this suggests, many things have changed since the dawn of the postcolonial age, an age still uneasily defined by a prefixation upon what it is not. Even at the most gross of levels, postcolonies have moved through two epochal phases, a passage from the past that casts into relief much about the present.

Epochal Shifts: From the Past to the Postcolony

The first epoch was born, historically and figuratively, in India at midnight on 14 August 1947. It lasted 40 years or so. This period is conventionally associated, in master narratives of Empire, with the *decolonisation* of the Third World. It is also a period in which the new states of Africa found the promise of autonomy and growth sundered by the realities of *neocolonialism*, which freighted them with an impossible toll of debt and dependency. Under these conditions, the master narrative goes on, the idyll of European-styled democracy, the ‘black man’s burden’ according to Basil Davidson,²⁵ gave way to ever more authoritarian rule, itself buttressed by the cold war imperatives of the First and Second Worlds. The details need not detain us. What is most important for now is that, in its formative years, postcoloniality was a product of the ‘old’ international political order, of its organisation of sovereign nations within the industrial capitalist world system. In that order, people, plants, commodities, and currencies moved across frontiers under more-or-less tightly enforced, normatively-recognised state regulation. Every so often, alarmists in Europe called for the repatriation of immigrants or for rigorous control over foreign flora and fauna. But cross-border movement, mainly along the coordinates of former colonial maps – the British commonwealth, Greater France, the Black Atlantic – was regarded as a routine part of the bureaucratic work of governments everywhere.

The second epoch in the genealogy of postcolonial states, the epoch with which we are more immediately concerned, is very different. Its point of origin, says Bayart,²⁶ may be

23 J. Crush, A. Jeeves, and D. Yudelman, *South Africa’s Labour Empire: A History of Migrancy to the Gold Mines* (Cape Town, 1991).

24 M. Reitzes, ‘Alien Issues’, *Indicator*, 12,1 (1994), 7.

25 B. Davidson, *The Black Man’s Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State*. (New York, 1992).

26 J. Bayart, *The State in Africa: Politics of the Belly* (New York, 1993), p. x.

dated to 1989, when ‘most sub-Saharan African countries’ began to experience ‘an unprecedented wave of demands for democracy’. These events were a product of the same world-historical movement that transformed Central Europe and reverberated across the planet at the time: the *political* coming of age – its economic roots and its ethos, patently, long predate the 1980s – of neoliberal global capitalism. This world-historical movement, the recitative now goes, metamorphosed the old international order into a more fluid, market-driven, electronically articulated universe: a universe in which supranational institutions burgeon; in which space and time are radically recalibrated; in which geography is perforce being rewritten; in which transnational identities, diasporic connections, ecological disasters, and the mobility of human populations challenge both the nature of sovereignty and the sovereignty of nature; in which ‘the network’ returns as the dominant metaphor of social connectedness; in which liberty is distilled to its postmodern essence, the right to choose subjectivities, commodities, sexualities, localities, identities, and other forms of collective representation.

As this suggests, the second postcolonial epoch has been marked by a great deal more than just a move ‘back’ to democracy. Indeed, while the renaissance of participatory politics *has* reanimated some of the institutions of governance eclipsed in Africa during the years after ‘independence’,²⁷ its promise to empower ‘the public’ in affairs of state came at a juncture when institutional power departed most states as never before, dispersing itself everywhere and anywhere and nowhere tangible at all: into transnational corporations and associations, into non-governmental organisations, into syndicated crime, into shadowy, privatised parastatal cabals.²⁸ Which may, in part, explain why there has been a strong countervailing stress on the reconstruction of civil society since 1989. We have argued in another context²⁹ that, as a call to action, the force of the latter – of ‘civil society’, that is – exists in inverse proportion to its density and content as a concept; that its appeal is largely underwritten by its inchoateness, its vacuity. We have also argued that its return as a dusted-off fetish in the late-twentieth century bears a strong parallel with its first rise in the late-eighteenth century. In each case, it has come to the fore under conditions of rapid transformation: conditions in which the present and future of economy and society, of community and family, of selfhood and the social division of labour, have been called into question.

To be sure, the very existence of ‘society’ *is* under scrutiny the world over at present; community and family *are* said to be widely at risk; the nature of labour *is* seen to be changing uncontrollably; masculinity *is* felt to be compromised with the reconstruction of gender roles and relations. What is more, the politics of ideological struggle melt away into the politics of interest as the ‘me-generation’ folds into the ‘we-generation’. And generation itself, in the guise of *youth*, becomes a major vector of political action, a problem, an increasingly salient principle of social distinction.

For its part, ‘the’ state, an ever more polymorphous entity, is held, increasingly, to be in perpetual crisis,³⁰ its power dispersed, its legitimacy tested by debt, disease, and poverty, its executive control repeatedly pushed to the limit and, most of all, its hyphen-nation – the articulation, that is, of the state to the nation, of *the* nation-state – everywhere under

27 See for example J. Harbeson, D. Rothchild, and N. Chazan (eds), *Civil Society and the State in Africa*. (Boulder, 1994).

28 See for example J. Roitman, ‘The Garison-Entrepôt’, *Cahiers d’Etudes africaines*, 150–152, XXXVIII, 2–4 (1998), pp. 297–329; D. Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World* (East Hartford CT, 1996).

29 J. L. Comaroff and J. Comaroff (eds), *Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa: Critical Perspectives* (Chicago, 1999); J. Comaroff and J. L. Comaroff, ‘Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming’, in J. Comaroff and J. L. Comaroff (eds), *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, Special Edition of *Public Culture*, 12, 2 (Spring 2000), 291–343.

30 See for example E. Worby, ‘Tyranny, Parody, and Ethnic Polarity: Ritual Engagements with the State in Northwestern Zambia’, *JSAS* 24, 3, (1998), 560–578.

challenge.³¹ In these circumstances, offers Mbembe,³² ‘the postcolony’ tends to be ‘chaotically pluralistic’, even when it evinces a semblance of ‘internal coherence’. Which is why, it is often said, postcolonial regimes evince a strong predilection to appeal to magicalities, especially, to anticipate what is to come, under the sign of autochthony. That ruling cadres rely on magical means to do the work of hyphen-nation is not new of course. But resort to mass-mediated ritual excess – to produce state power, to conjure up national unity, and to persuade citizens of the reality of both – *does* feature prominently in the second postcolonial age; in rough proportion, perhaps, to populist perceptions of crisis. Thus, notes Worby, in those parts of Africa where the hold of government is stretched, its authority has become dependent on the performance of the quotidian ceremonial, extravagant in its theatricality; citizen-subjects, he goes on, live with the state in a promiscuous hybrid of accommodation and refusal, power and parody, embodiment and alienation.³³

Belonging, Borders, Autochthony, Antipolitics

While these symptoms of the second age of postcoloniality are the stuff of anxious public discourse across Africa, the stereotypically bleak portrait of states falling apart, of nations drifting into an unhyphenated, Hobbesian state of nature, of nature itself out of control, is overdrawn; the political sociology of postcoloniality is much more complex, more diverse, than it allows. At the same time, both the contradictions and the perceptions of crisis experienced by many postcolonies are part of a broader condition. We refer, of course, to the much debated issue of the present and future of the nation-state under the impact of globalisation. Elsewhere³⁴ we have offered an extended commentary on this question, seeking to chart the transformation of the modernist polity in the Age of Neoliberal Capitalism. Here, however, it is enough to note just three things about that transformation.

The *first* arises out of the refiguration of the modernist subject-citizen. One corollary of the changing face of nationhood in the neoliberal age, especially after 1989, has been an explosion of identity politics. Not just of ethnic politics, but also of the politics of gender, sexuality, age, race, religiosity, life-style, and, yes, social class. As a result, imagining the nation rarely presumes a deep horizontal fraternity any more.³⁵ While most human beings still live as citizens *in* nation-states, they tend only to be conditionally, partially, and situationally citizens *of* nation-states. Identity struggles, ranging from altercations over resources to genocidal combat, seem immanent almost everywhere as selfhood is immersed – existentially, metonymically – into claims of collective essence, of innate substance and primordial sentiment, that nestle within or transect the polity.

In short, homogeneity as a ‘national fantasy’³⁶ is giving way to a recognition of the irreducibility of difference; so much so that even countries long known for their lack of diversity – Botswana, for example – are now sites of identity struggles. And culture, at once essentialised and open to constant reinvention, becomes yet another possession, a good to be patented, made into intellectual property, merchandised, consumed.³⁷ All of this puts

31 Note, in this respect, Appadurai’s observation, now a decade old, that the hyphen linking the nation-state is less an icon of conjunction than an index of disjunction; A. Appadurai, ‘Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy’, *Public Culture*, 2 (1990), p. 14.

32 A. Mbembe, ‘Provisional Notes on the Postcolony’, *Africa*, 62, 1 (1992), p. 3.

33 Worby, ‘Tyranny, Parody, and Ethnic Polarity’, pp. 560, 562; after Mbembe, ‘Provisional Notes on the Postcolony’, p. 3 and ff.

34 Comaroff and Comaroff, ‘Millennial Capitalism’.

35 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983).

36 L. Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia and Everyday Life* (Chicago, 1991).

37 See for example, S. Hegeman, ‘Shopping for Identities: A Nation of Nations and the Weak Ethnicity of Objects’, *Public Culture*, 3, 2 (1991), 71– 92; R. Coombe, *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties: Authorship, Appropriation and the Law* (Durham, 1998).

even greater stress – in both senses of the term – on hyphen-nation. The more diverse nation-states become in their political sociology, the higher the level of abstraction at which ‘the nation-state’ exists, the more compelling appears the threat of its rupture. And the more imperative it becomes to divine and to negate whatever is perceived to endanger it. States, notes Harvey, have always had to conjure up ‘a definition of public interests over and above ... class and sectarian’ concerns.³⁸ One solution that has presented itself in the face of ever more assertive claims on society and the state, of claims made in the name of different sorts of identity, has come to lie in autochthony: in elevating to a first-principle the ineffable interests and connections, at once material and moral, that flow from ‘native’ rootedness, and special rights, in a *place of birth*. Nor is this merely a strategic solution that appeals to those caught up in the business of government; it resonates with deeply felt populist fears – and with the proclivity of citizens of all stripes to deflect shared anxieties onto outsiders.

Autochthony is implicit in many forms of identity, of course; it also attaches to places within places, parts within wholes. However, as a claim against aliens, its mobilisation appears to be growing in direct proportion to the Sundered hyphenation of the sovereign polity, to its popularly perceived porousness and impotence in the face of exogenous forces. Citizens in contemporary nation-states, whether or not they are primarily citizens of nation-states, seem widely able to re-imagine nationhood in such a way as to embrace the ineluctability of internal difference: ‘multiculturalism’, the ‘rainbow nation’, and terms of similar resonance provide a ready argot of accommodation, even amidst bitter contestation. However, when it comes to the limits of that difference, autochthony constitutes an ultimate line. Whatever other identities the citizen-subject of the twenty-first century polity may bear, s/he is unavoidably either an autochthon or an alien. Nor only s/he. It too. As we have seen, and will see further, nonhumans may also be ascribed the status of indigene or other.

The *second* follows closely: it concerns the obsession of contemporary polities with the policing of borders – and, hence, with the limits of sovereignty. Much of the debate over the ‘crisis’ of the nation-state hinges upon the contention that governments can no longer control the flow of currencies and commercial instruments, of labour and commodities, of flora and fauna, of information, illegal substances, and unwanted aliens. It is true, of course, that international frontiers have always been more-or-less porous. But technologies of space-time compression *do* appear to have effected a sea-change in patterns and rates of global flow, human and virtual. Which is why so many states, most maybe, act as if they were constantly subject both to invasion from the outside and to the seeping away of what should properly remain within. South Africa, for instance, laments its brain drain and the pull of the market on its sports stars³⁹ – while anguishing, xenophobically, over the inflow of millions of immigrants, *makwerekwere*, who, as we shall see, frequently suffer gross violations of their human rights.⁴⁰

Similar xenophobia is on the increase in Western Europe. Much of it focuses on ‘unassimilable’ migrant workers. But not always. Recall the British fear that the Channel Tunnel would open England up to rabies, that the coming of the Euro would herald the end of sterling as its sovereign currency, that the authority of the European courts would destroy its legal dominion;⁴¹ or the phobic French reaction against the infiltration of US cultural products; or the Italian effort to protect *grappa*, a beverage become copyrighted national

38 D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, 1990), p. 108.

39 See for example, ‘Official Figures for Brain Drain Released’, *The Star*, 14 March 2000.

40 R. Kadalié, ‘Defy Barney’s Thought Police’, *Mail & Guardian*, 18–24 February 2000.

41 E. Darian-Smith, *Bridging Divides: The Channel Tunnel and English Legal Identity in the New Europe* (Berkeley, 1999).

property, from foreign makers. All alike express anxiety, in the face of global flow, about boundaries and their breach. Globalisation, after all, has provoked antagonistic responses not only among peoples of smaller and/or less powerful nation-states, for whom it represents itself as colonialism in new, largely North American guise; nor only among the marginalized of the world. Jeremy Seabrook recently observed that the 'European left scarcely distinguishes itself from a right whose faith in global laissez-faire is matched only by a hysterical defense of evaporated sovereignties and atrophied national powers'.⁴²

Our object, though, is not just to remark the heightened concern with borders and their transgression. It is also to observe that this concern is itself the product of a paradox. Under contemporary global conditions, given the logic of the neoliberal capitalist economy, nation-states find themselves in a double bind. In order to partake of that economy, to garner the value that it spins off, governments require at once to open up their frontiers *and* to secure them: on one hand, to deregulate as far as possible the movement of currencies, goods, people and services, thus to facilitate the inflow of wealth; on the other, to regulate them by establishing enclaved zones of competitive advantage so as to attract transnational manufacture and media, investment, information technology, and the 'right' kind of migrants – among them, tourists, highly skilled personnel, NGOs, development consultants, even labourers who will work more cheaply and tractably than locals without claim to the entitlements of belonging. In this way, the nation-state is transformed, in aspiration if not always in reality, into a mega-management enterprise, a business in the business of attracting business; this for the benefit of 'stakeholders' who desire simultaneously to be global citizens and yet corporate subjects with shares in the commonweal of a sovereign polity. The corollary is plain. The border is a double bind because national prosperity appears to demand, but is simultaneously threatened by, *both* openness and closure. No wonder the *angst*, the constant public debate in so many places, about what ought, or ought not, to be allowed in, what is, or is not, in the collective interest. And for whom.

The *third* salient feature of the predicament of the nation-state is, baldly stated, the depoliticisation of politics. The argument goes like this: neoliberal capitalism, in its triumphal, all encompassing global phase, offers no alternatives to *laissez-faire*; nothing else – no other ideology, no other political economic system – seems even plausible. The primary question left to public policy is how to succeed in the 'new' world order. Why? Because this new order hides its ideological scaffolding in the dictates of economic efficiency and capital growth, in the fetishism of the free market, in the exigencies of science and technology. Under its hegemony, the social is dissolved into the natural, the biological, the organic.⁴³ 'Political choices', as Xolela Mangcu puts it for South Africa:

are depoliticized and given the aura of technical truth. Public policies that get implemented are those backed by 'growth coalitions' which span government, business, the media and other interest groups ... [These] shape national consensus on priorities.⁴⁴

Politics, then, are reduced either to the pursuit of pure advantage or to struggles over 'special' interests and issues: the environment, abortion, health care, child welfare, rape and domestic abuse, human rights, capital punishment, and the like. In the circumstances, there is a strong tendency for urgent questions of the moment, often sparked by ecological catastrophe and justified with reference to the technical imperatives of nature, to become the stuff of collective action, cutting across older, ever more anachronistic lines of ideological

42 J. Seabrook, 'Racists and Hypocrites', *Mail & Guardian*, 18–24 February 2000.

43 See for example N. Abu El-Haj, 'Genetic Research and the Politics of Identity at the Turn of the Millennium' (unpublished research proposal, Chicago, 2000).

44 X. Mangcu, 'The Score So Far: Poverty Alleviation 0, Soccer World Cup 10', *The Sunday Independent*, 12 March 2000.

and social commitment. Each takes the limelight as it flares into public awareness, becomes a 'hot' issue, and then burns down, its embers consigned to the recesses of collective consciousness – only to flame up again if kindled by contingent conditions or vocal coalitions. Or both.

Our evocation here of the imagery of fire – now situated within the imperatives of the postcolonial nation-state, its location in the global world of neoliberal capitalism, its contemporary political sociology, its altered forms of citizenship, its obsessions with boundaries, aliens and autochthony, its displacements of the political – return us to the apocalyptic events in Cape Town at the turn of the millennium.

Naturing the Nation

... Ralph Waldo Emerson once commented on the impact of immigration: 'A nation, like a tree, does not thrive well till it is engrafted (sic) with a foreign stock'.⁴⁵

A Lesson from Fynbos

It is possible to read the burning bush as an epic instance of nature's deadly caprice. Such, to be sure, is a construction to which 'white Africans', who are disproportionately represented in current conservationist circles, are especially prone. But the full impact of the blaze arose, we would argue, from the capacity of those flowers and flames to signify charged political anxieties, many of them unnameable in everyday discourse. Also from the promise that there might arise, out of the ashes, a greater good: a distinctly local, 'new' South African, sense of community, nation, civil society. But we are running ahead of ourselves. How exactly did those flowers and flames come to mean so much to so many?

First, the flora. Flowers have long served as signifiers of modern states, of course. *Protea cynaroides* (Giant/King protea) – the bloom that most typifies fynbos – has been South Africa's emblem for many years. *Sui generis*, as an inclusive category, however, fynbos is associated primarily with the autochthonous identity and patrimony of the Western Cape; it is the distinctive mark, the 'rich cloak', of the region.⁴⁶ And of with Cape Town, whose emergence as a global city it has come to symbolise. To both, it stands a relationship resembling that of classic African totemism: a relationship of humans to nature, place to species, in which each enriches the other so long as the former respects, and does not wantonly consume, the latter. Thus, while the export of fynbos plants has developed into a huge industry since the 1960s – market demand has actually stimulated the development of many new 'wild' cultivars⁴⁷ – Cape Flora have simultaneously become the focus of ever greater conservationist concern, even 'passion'.⁴⁸ The object of ever widening state protection, this vegetation is commonly described by researchers as being under serious threat, a threat born, increasingly, by invasive aliens,⁴⁹ whose significance in

45 H. Radebe, 'Time We Became a Bit More Neighbourly', *The Star*, 16 March 2000.

46 J. Yeld, 'The Peninsula's Fynbos Will Flourish Again', *Saturday Argus*, 29–30 January 2000.

47 M. Fraser and L. McMahon, *A Fynbos Year* (Cape Town, 1988), p. 155

48 W. Bond, 'What Important Questions Remain Unanswered in the Fynbos Biome', in C. Marais and D. Richardson (eds.), *Monitoring Requirements for Fynbos Management*, A Collaborative Report of the Fynbos Forum Group, Foundation for Research Development Programme Report Series, 11 (December 1993), pp. 13–17.

49 D. Richardson and R. Cowling, 'Why is Mountain Fynbos Invasive and Which Species Invade?', in B. Van Wilgen, D. Richardson, F. Kruger and H. van Hensbergen (eds), *Fire in South African Mountain Fynbos*, Ecological Studies, Vol. 93 (Berlin, 1992), pp. 161–181; P. Manders, and D. Richardson, 'Colonization of Cape Fynbos Communities by Forest Species', *Forest Ecology and Management*, 48 (1992), pp. 277– 293.

environmentalist discourse has overtaken that of human beings.⁵⁰ It was not always so. None of it.

For a start, the use of *fynbos* to refer to the indigenous plants of the south-western Cape – the so-called ‘Fynbos Biome’ – is quite recent. Described by early naturalists as ‘Flora Capensis’⁵¹ or ‘Cape Flora’,⁵² this vegetation was ‘officially christened’ the ‘Cape Floral Kingdom’ in the early twentieth century,⁵³ and was known as such for decades.⁵⁴ Fynbos does appear in Acocks’ *Veld Types of South Africa* in 1953, but only as the Afrikaans translation for ‘Coastal Macchia’.⁵⁵ Sometimes colloquially used to refer to the narrow-leaved, evergreen plants of the region, the term did not become established, either in popular or botanical parlance until the late-1960s and early-1970s.⁵⁶ Note that this was precisely the time when international demand for Cape Flora began to take off, and a national association was formed to market them. It was also the point at which politicians began to dub fynbos a ‘natural asset’ and a ‘treasure-chest’⁵⁷ – and at which botanists began to argue that it merited conservation as a ‘unique biome type’.⁵⁸

In sum, for all the fact that fynbos has come to stand for a ‘traditional’ heritage of national, natural rootedness, it emerged as unique, and uniquely threatened, at a particular moment in the history of South Africa; at a moment, too, in the historical development of global capitalism when new relations were being forged between transnational markets and the fashioning of subnational identities, cultures, and ecologies that appear endangered by the very forces that produce them.⁵⁹ Before then, Cape Flora seem to have been resilient.⁶⁰ As recently as 1953, an authority on the subject actually described fynbos as an *invader* whose expansion threatened the mixed grassveld of the southwestern Cape.⁶¹ What is now said of aliens was being said, not long ago, of this ‘national treasure’.

Admittedly, the vegetation of this ecological niche *has* altered much since then. But so have the values that inform our perceptions of it. Where, once upon a time, farmers saw Cape Flora as useless, as poor grazing material on barren soil,⁶² a ‘fynbos landscape’ – rather than a landscape of grassveld or of trees that bind soil and provide fuel – is now widely taken for granted as the ‘climax community’,⁶³ i.e. an evolutionary end-point to be

50 See for example C. Stirton (ed.), *Plant Invaders: Beautiful but Dangerous* (Cape Town, Department of Nature and Environmental Conservation, 1978), p. 8.

51 W. Harvey, *Flora Capensis: Being a Systematic Description of the Plants of the Cape Colony, Caffraria and Port Natal* (Dublin, 1859–65).

52 H. Bolus, ‘Sketch of the Flora of South Africa’, in J. Noble (ed.), *The Official Handbook of the Cape of Good Hope* (Cape Town, 1886), pp. 286–317.

53 Fraser and McMahon, *A Fynbos Year*, p. 119.

54 M. Levyns, ‘The Flora of the Cape Mountains’, *Journal of the Mountain Club of South Africa*, 39 (1936), pp. 16–20; R. Adamson, ‘The Cape as an Ancient African Flora’, *The Advancement of Science*, XV, 58 (1958), pp. 118–127.

55 J. Acocks, *Veld Types of South Africa* (Botanical Survey of South Africa, Memoir 28, 1953), p. 13.

56 This was confirmed by botanists working on the Fynbos Biome, although ‘fynbos’ seems first to have appeared in a publication in 1916 (Dave Richardson, personal communication). Regular academic usage begins in the early 1970s. The term appears on a list of Summer School lectures at the University of Cape Town in 1972, for example, and in F. Kruger, ‘Ecology and Management of Cape Fynbos: Towards Conservation of a Unique Biome Type’, paper read at the South African Wild Life Management Association’s Second International Symposium (Pretoria, 1977). We certainly do not recall it being in circulation while we were growing up in the Cape.

57 L. Munnik, ‘Foreword’, in C. Stirton (ed.), *Plant Invaders: Beautiful But Dangerous* (Cape Town, Department of Nature and Environmental Conservation, 1978), p. 7.

58 Kruger, ‘Ecology and Management of Cape Fynbos’.

59 Cultures and ecologies are often explicitly linked in this process. Some conservationists, like Fakir, in fact, argue that ‘conservation of biodiversity must also concern itself with the preservation of indigenous cultures ...’; M. Fakir, ‘Biodiversity and Biotechnology in South Africa: Some Issues for the Development of Future Policy’, (Land and Agriculture Policy Centre, Working Paper 3, University of the Witwatersrand, 1994), p. 4.

60 R. Adamson, ‘Vegetation of the South-West Region’, in *The Botanical Features of the South-Western Cape Province* (Cape Town, 1929), pp. 15–39.

61 Acocks, *Veld Types of South Africa*, pp. 14, 17.

62 Cowling and Richardson, *Fynbos*, p. 21.

63 W. Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York, 1983), p. 10.

achieved and conserved. This despite the fact that other views are possible. One has it that a 'fynbos landscape' might be less an end-point than 'a stage in succession to forest'.⁶⁴ In this light, the ideal of sustaining such a landscape in perpetual equilibrium might be seen as an instance of the kind of functionalism that, Cronon argues, 'remove[s] ecological communities from history'.⁶⁵

Encounter with Aliens

However, it is not just as fragile heritage that fynbos has captured the imagination of the public in the postcolony. It is also as a protagonist locked in mortal struggle with alien invaders that threaten to colonise its habitat and choke off its means of survival. Foreign 'plants currently use ... 3300m cubic meters of water each year, ... 7% of South Africa's mean annual runoff', declared the Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry at a high level symposium on invasive species, held in Cape Town after the blaze.⁶⁶ Anxiety about these invaders is not limited to South Africa. The issue has become urgent in other Western nations as well; among them, the USA, Australia, Britain and Germany. Ironically, in Australia, it is South African flora (like yellow soursobs and Capeweed) that are demonised;⁶⁷ ironic because it was Australian species, vegetation that 'grows taller and burns easier than fynbos', that bore the brunt of blame for the Cape fires of January 2000,⁶⁸ the 'chief nasties' being wattles (including the infamous rooikrans), pines, bluegum, and hakea – this last, to close the ironic circle, a 'Protea-type shrub'.⁶⁹ There are, it is true, some telling contrasts between the other Western cases and the South African preoccupation with alien-nature.⁷⁰ Still, alien plants *do* seem to have become the stuff of melodrama, of resonant allegory, on a worldwide scale. This, we shall argue, is because they transform and represent diffuse political terrors as natural facts.

Time was when there was great enthusiasm at the Cape for plant imports. Already by the opening decades of the eighteenth century, species such as Mediterranean cluster pine had to be introduced to the mountain slopes in large numbers to cater for the timber demands of the settlers.⁷¹ By the middle of the nineteenth century, interest in horticultural borrowing had turned to Australia – the other antipodean British colony and South Africa's enduring rival – whose heathlands constitute a Mediterranean biome so similar to the south-western Cape that some posit an evolutionary convergence between them.⁷² In the effort to bind soils on the windswept Cape Flats, the most sizeable agricultural plain in the

64 P. Manders, D. Richardson, and P. Masson, 'Is Fynbos a Stage in Succession to Forest? Analysis of the Perceived Ecological Distinction Between Two Communities', in B. Van Wilgen, D. Richardson, F. Kruger and H. van Hensbergen (eds), *Fire in South African Mountain Fynbos*, Ecological Studies, Vol. 93 (Berlin, 1992), pp. 81–107; see also M. Gandar and S. Forster, 'Impact of Commercial Afforestation on Rural Areas of South Africa' (Land and Agriculture Policy Centre, Policy Paper 14, University of the Witwatersrand, 1994), p. 19.

65 Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, p. 10.

66 Ronnie Kasrils as quoted in J. Yeld, 'Invasive Plants are Costing SA Dearly', *The Star*, 24 February 2000.

67 N. Wace, 'Naturalized Plants in the Australian Landscape', in R. Heathcote (ed.) for the International Geographical Congress 1988, *The Australian Experience* (Melbourne, 1988), pp. 139–150; G. Carr, J. Robin, and R. Robinson, 'Environmental Weed Invasion of Natural Ecosystems: Australia's Greatest Conservation Problem', abstract in R. Groves and J. Burden (eds), *Ecology of Biological Invasions: an Australian Perspective* (Canberra, 1986), p. 150.

68 B. Jordan, 'Ash City'.

69 M. Merten, 'Blame it on the Weeds'.

70 In recent Australian writing on the topic, for example, processes of naturalisation are given greater prominence, thus acknowledging that (a) yesterday's exotics can become today's natives; that, therefore, (b) separating naturalized species from autochthons is at best an imprecise process. See for example, Wace, 'Naturalized Plants in the Australian Landscape', p. 139 (see also below).

71 Fraser and McMahon, *A Fynbos Year*, p. 147.

72 M. Cody, M. and H. Mooney, 'Convergence Versus Non Convergence in Mediterranean-Climate Ecosystems', *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics*, 9 (1978), pp. 265–321.

region, the then Colonial Secretary began bringing in Australian wattles and myrtle to provide screens and enable dune formation. By 1875, the government was encouraging large plantations of cluster pine and other imports, including hakea and Port Jackson, to shelter them. So eager were the authorities to see these exotics take root that they distributed millions of seeds and awarded prizes for the greatest acreages planted.⁷³ This is in stark contrast to the present day: now there are moves to tax foreign seed and force landowners to clear their properties of these very same imports.⁷⁴

What happened in the intervening 100 years? How did desirable imports become invasive aliens, 'pests', 'colonizers', even 'green cancers'?⁷⁵ For one thing, exotic species spread beyond the confines of plantations and gardens – both spontaneously and through human effort – establishing themselves with great success among Cape Flora. Experts see this process as having gained ground through the twentieth century but, until quite recently, it evoked little interest among botanists, government, or the population at large; this despite the fact that disquiet had already been voiced in the late nineteenth century. (Legislation to curb some 'noxious weeds' was passed in 1937.⁷⁶ But it was ineffectual.) Only in the late-1950s and 1960s did the Botanical Society of South Africa established a committee to promote awareness of the problem; only then did voluntary 'hack groups' first take to the veld to cut out the malignant growth.

During the 1970s and 1980s, plant invasion at the Cape came under increasing scrutiny. Botanists, noting that foreign 'infestations' were visible even on satellite pictures,⁷⁷ concluded that invasive weeds had 'outgrown any merits they might have had in the fynbos region'. In 1978, the Department of Nature and Environment Conservation published a popular source-book, *Plant Invaders: Beautiful but Dangerous*, and additional hack groups were founded in upper-middle class rural white areas; although the effect of their efforts remained uncertain, as the aliens – like those in Hollywood B-movies – seem to thrive on chopping and burning.⁷⁸ At the same time, local expert opinion continues to have it that exotics, in controlled populations, *did* have some utility; that, in any case, it was impossible to eliminate them altogether; and that, even if it were possible, 'other species might appear as weeds in the future'.⁷⁹ All of which implied a sense that botanical categories shift over time, a view reflected in debates on the topic elsewhere – such as Australia, where the line between the 'naturalised' and the 'native' is still taken to be much more fluid (see footnote 70). At this point, too, threats to the Cape Flora were described in multidimensional causal terms, terms that embraced fire, climatic change, and human intervention.⁸⁰ It was not always to remain so.

The 1990s witnessed a marked tendency to reduce multidimensional causes to monolithic agents – above all, to alien plants – in accounting for the fragility of Cape Flora. This becomes abundantly clear from the way in which attitudes to fire in the fynbos shifted over the decade, culminating in the 'holocaust' of January 2000.

73 Hall, 'Invasive Weeds', in *Fynbos Ecology*, p. 134.

74 Yeld, 'Force Landowners'.

75 See Anonymous, *The Green Cancers in South Africa* (no publisher given, 1959).

76 Hall, 'Invasive Weeds', in *Fynbos Ecology*, p. 135; I. Macdonald, M. Jarman, and P. Beeston (eds), *Management of Invasive Alien Plants in the Fynbos Biome*. South African National Scientific Programmes, Report No. 111 (Pretoria, Foundation for Research Development, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, 1985).

77 Hall, 'Invasive Weeds', in *Fynbos Ecology*, pp. 135, 139.

78 Hall, 'Invasive Weeds', in *Fynbos Ecology*, pp. 1, 151; see also Macdonald *et al.* (eds), *Management of Invasive Alien Plants*.

79 Hall, 'Invasive Weeds', in *Fynbos Ecology*, p. 140.

80 Day *et al.* (eds), *Fynbos Ecology*; Fraser and McMahon, *A Fynbos Year*; R. Cowling, D. Le Maitre, B. McKenzie, R. Prys-Jones and B. van Wilgen (eds), *Disturbance and the Dynamics of Fynbos Biome Communities*, A Report of the Committee for Terrestrial Ecosystems. South African National Scientific Programmes, Report No. 135 (Pretoria, Foundation for Research Development, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, 1987).

Playing with Fire

As we have said, fire has long been recognised as endemic to the Cape floral ecology;⁸¹ as even the earliest colonial observers noted, ‘natural’ blazes consume large expanses every year, their rate and intensity varying with the age and state of the vegetation, with topography, and with prevailing weather conditions. Much burning is also intentional: African views of regeneration have long set great store on it – despite the fact that colonial authorities, unnerved by the prospect of natives playing with fire, applied stringent discouragements.⁸² Official disapproval continued until quite recently, when systematic research began to paint a more complicated picture of the forms and functions of fynbos combustion.⁸³ Thus, while the media almost invariably labels these fires ‘devastating’,⁸⁴ expert opinion acknowledges that the conservation of species diversity is ‘at least partly dependent’ on burning.⁸⁵ But these caveats were muted by the popular debate that raged after the millennial conflagration in Cape Town.

Most salient to our concerns here is the changing place accorded to aliens in arguments about the connection of fire to fynbos – not to mention in the politics and the perceptions that inform them. True, it has long been said that certain imports burn more intensely than Cape Flora, which *is* itself quite flammable. But foreign vegetation was, in the past, only one of several factors held to produce fires of distinct kinds, scale, and effects. One authoritative report,⁸⁶ for example, does not even discuss invasive plants; van Rensburg’s more recent popular guide to fynbos lists exotics only at the very end of a diverse list of possible combustible agents.⁸⁷ As we have seen, not even the public discourse after the fires of 2000 alighted immediately on aliens. When it did, however, they became a burning preoccupation.

Not everybody blamed them. But dissenting voices were drowned out as the dialectic of disaster gained momentum. One view attributed the conflagration to global climatic change. It was given remarkably short shrift;⁸⁸ this, tellingly, was a calamity that seemed to demand an explanation grounded in *local* contingencies. Another line of argument was to be read in the Afrikaans press which, while it reported the same events, dealt with them rather differently. Indicative, here, was the stance of *Die Burger*, the major organ of the New National Party, which held a majority in the Cape provincial parliament. While the paper did say that experts blamed aliens for the blaze, it glossed the whole event as an indictment of the ANC government, of its inefficiency, its inability to deliver emergency services, its wanton neglect of the Cape, and so on.⁸⁹

Such, of course, were divisions among more or less enfranchised fractions of the population; aside from echoing party political oppositions, they gave voice to the kinds of tension that often arise in postcolonies between regionalism and national governance. However, many others were altogether excluded from the public debate. For some of them, alien plants had another significance altogether. We refer to the large numbers of poor and unemployed of the Peninsula – in particular, those living in informal settlements.

81 R. Marloth, ‘Notes on the Question of Veld-Burning’, *South African Journal of Science*, 21 (1924), pp. 342–345; Adamson, ‘The Cape as an Ancient African Flora’.

82 A law passed at the Cape in 1687 imposed a ‘severe scourging’ for unauthorised veld burning. Second offenders merited the death penalty; F. Kruger, ‘Fire’, in Day *et al.* (eds), *Fynbos Ecology*, p. 43.

83 Van Wilgen *et al.* (eds), *Fire in South African Mountain Fynbos*; Kruger, ‘Fire’.

84 Fraser and McMahon, *A Fynbos Year*, p. 140.

85 Kruger, ‘Fire’, p. 44; T. van Rensburg, *An Introduction to Fynbos* (Pretoria: Department of Environment Affairs, Bulletin 61, 1987), p. 41.

86 Kruger, ‘Fire’.

87 van Rensburg, *An Introduction to Fynbos*, p. 41.

88 See M. Feris, ‘Scientists Pour Cold Water on Global-Warming Claim’, *The Star*, 17 February 2000.

89 ‘Totaalplan Teen Brande’, *Die Burger*, 21 January 2000; ‘Regering en Dienste Moet Beter Koördineer – Minister’, *Die Burger*, 22 January 2000; ‘Bokkie se Trane’, *Die Burger*, 22 January 2000.

Squatter ‘camps’ have loomed ever larger in the Cape metropolitan area since the late-apartheid years. During those years, migrants to the city resisted forced removal to impoverished ‘homelands’ and, in so doing, brought the savagery of the ruling regime to the attention of the world. Africans have long felt unwelcome in the Western Cape, which has “traditionally” been the preserve of whites and coloureds. However, since the transition, black in-migration has become a veritable flood. Informal communities have burgeoned along national roads and on mountain sides, many in close proximity to healthy populations of combustible alien trees – like the Australian rooikrans (*acacia cyclops*), fuel of choice for the *braaivleis* (‘barbecue’), a key rite of white South African commensality.

What is extraordinary about many recent migrants to the Cape is the degree to which their lives are provisioned by alien timber.⁹⁰ Unelectrified settlements in the hollowed-out-bush comprise row upon row of square houses, most of them built of slim, laterally-laid logs of rooikrans and other Australian wattles. Threading between these abodes walk women and children, heads piled high with kindling of ‘imported’ provenance; the search for fuel is a permanent feature of the lives of squatters, wherever they reside. Along the roadsides men sell small bundles of *braai* wood to commuters, the vast majority of them white and middle class, as they travel to leafy suburbs or the fynbos coast. Used in domestic food fests, these aliens, condemned in public, are, in private, the stuff of a hallowed cultural practice.⁹¹

Not surprising, then, that the first reaction to the blaze of wood vendor Thami Mandlana – perhaps the only squatter camp resident interviewed by the press at the time – was to exclaim that ‘the price of logs will soar this month!’⁹² He was right. The cost of a bundle of rooikrans went up 50 per cent after the fire. But its longer-term implications for these woodcutters was more alarming. Mandlana again:

[L]ots of people ... cut wood around here and now there won’t be enough to go around. Our hearts are sore because of this fire ... This is our only livelihood and now we hardly have any left.

This is the other face of the story of alien vegetation in the Western Cape. That vegetation has long been an integral part of the local economy – the underclass part, which is all but invisible to the more fortunate who passby roadside edges. But in the postcolony, where wealth is ever more polarised and state provision is largely absent, it is a vital part; a recent survey of ‘people’s plants’ estimates the value of rooikrans as fuel wood in the Cape at R30m p.a.⁹³ This touches hardly at all on the interests of those for whom aliens have become anathema, for whom they are seen to jeopardise the future of a lucrative natural, national heritage. Where, in fact, imported flora *does* feed mainstream commerce, those who publicise its dangers have run into difficulty: Guy Preston, quoted as having blamed huge forests of non-indigenous trees for exacerbating floods in poverty-stricken Mpumalanga – where giant logging corporations are major employers – was later prompted to ‘clarify’ his remarks. He went to some lengths to acknowledge that the planting of these forests was ‘usually acceptable’, that it provided much needed jobs and yielded foreign currency.⁹⁴ The discourse of invasive aliens clearly has its limits. Still, as we shall see further, its ideological scope has become strikingly broad, encompassing the integrity and regeneration of the nation-state itself.

90 No wonder, then, that they were quick to ask early hack groups what uses were envisaged for the felled trees. Efforts have since been made under the *Working for Water* program (see below) to develop secondary industries using alien wood (<http://www.waf.pwv.gov.za/idwaf/Projects/WFW/Secondary%20Industries.htm>).

91 In the national campaign to extirpate invasive plants, burning alien wood for domestic fuel has been suggested as a patriotic duty; see ‘Hack Day 2000’, special supplement to mark Water Week, *The Star*, 20 March 2000.

92 B. Jordan, ‘Ash City’.

93 B. van Wyk and N. Gericke, *People’s Plants: A Guide to Useful Plants of South Africa*. (Pretoria, 2000), p. 284.

94 G. Preston, ‘Loving the Alien’, letter to the *Mail & Guardian*, 18–24 February 2000.

As Preston's 'clarification' makes plain, scholarly experts find themselves playing a delicate role as the drama of alien-nature has caught fire, fanned by an avid press. With the conservation of 'natural heritage' being sucked deeper and deeper into a space of intense public passion, botanists are invoked as never before, their work taken to be a matter of urgent national import. However, as their findings become the stuff of political mobilisation, nuances – like the fact that not *all* imported plants are aggressive invaders – are lost. To wit, polite protest to the media has added little subtlety to the escalating excitement.⁹⁵

How has this ideological inflation occurred? To what anxieties, interests, emotions does it respond?

Aliens and the African Renaissance

Until a few years back, the term 'alien' had rather archaic connotations in South Africa, enshrined in laws – like the Aliens Act (1937) and Aliens Registration Act (1939) – which aimed to prevent an influx of European refugees prior to World War II. This legislation remained largely intact until the 1990s,⁹⁶ when 'aliens' once again became a charged political issue, now in the 'new' South Africa. It was at about the same time that foreign plants took on fresh salience; that they became both the subject of ecological emergency and an object of national renewal.⁹⁷ Perhaps the most telling evidence of this was the *Working for Water Programme* (WFW), launched in 1995 by then Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, Kader Asmal. Part of the post-apartheid government's Reconstruction and Development initiative, the scheme centred squarely on the eradication of alien vegetation. Billed as a flagship public works project to create jobs and combat poverty, the Programme envisaged twenty years of bush clearing, at a cost of R600m p.a. Its tone was urgent: '[Alien plants] are similar to a health epidemic, spreading widely out of control', declared the WFW home page;⁹⁸ laws would be promulgated to prosecute landowners who failed to curb non-indigenous flora. Concerted intervention would not merely restore the productive potential of the land. It would also invest in 'the most marginalised' sectors of South African society, thus to promote social equity. Unemployed women and youth, ex-offenders, even the homeless, would be rehabilitated by joining alien eradication teams and by working in industries that made invaders into marketable products. Meanwhile, the general public was exhorted not to buy or sell foreign plants – and to inform the authorities of anyone who encouraged their spread.

Alien-nature, in other words, was to become the raw material of communal rebirth. At first, the scheme met with mixed success. Financing eradication units in any sustained fashion proved difficult, although stirring pictures of the formerly unemployed hacking away at unwanted foreign growth duly appeared in the media. In July 1997, the *Cape Argus* reported that Minister Asmal had been 'given the brush-off' by the Cape Metropolitan Council, which refused to fund the clearing of invasive plants on Table Mountain.⁹⁹ Efforts to pass legislation were equally controversial: proposals to introduce levies on 'water interception' and 'alien seed pollution' drew strong protest from the forestry industry.¹⁰⁰ But, while the eradication plan was made to 'tread water' for a year or two, public anxiety about invasive species became ever more audible.

95 See for example the efforts of Richard Cowling to insist that 'fire in fynbos is normal'; Yeld, 'The Peninsula's Fynbos will Flourish Again'.

96 It was replaced by the Aliens Control Act 96 of 1991 and subsequent amendments.

97 See Hall, 'Invasive Weeds', p. 138. Government support at this point came mainly from the Department of Agriculture Technical Services via its Plant Protection Research Institute.

98 <http://www.dwaf.pwv.gov.za/idwaf/projects/WFW/Default.htm>.

99 A. Weiss, 'Alien Plants Plea by Asmal Rejected: Dispute Over Water Supply', *Cape Argus*, 3 July 1997.

100 'Asmal Defends Pay for Rain Plan', *Cape Argus*, 5 May 1997.

Thus, by the time the apocalyptic fires broke out in January 2000, there was no half-heartedness about attacking the alien. *Ukuvuka*, Operation Firestop, was launched within days of the blaze, and media and corporate sponsors stepped in to bolster the Working for Water Programme.¹⁰¹ Even the powerful Forestry Owners Association, formerly on ‘collision course’ with the Programme, came to an uneasy compromise about clearing foreign flora from river banks.¹⁰² With popular feeling ever more sharply focused on attacking the ‘scourge’, public commentators seemed intent on coaxing ‘a spirit of community’¹⁰³ from the ashes. A newly elected Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry put it succinctly:¹⁰⁴

The fire has united us all. All key stakeholders – the authorities, the commercial interests, the landowners and the general public – now can come together to ensure that we are never again placed at such risk. And the key to it all is the clearing of these alien plants ...

There now appeared to be widespread faith in the fact that a purge of foreign flora had ‘huge potential for job creation’, itself a nation-making priority. The Director of the Botanical Society of South Africa took the occasion to suggest that the ‘environmental sector’ deserved 15 per cent of the proceeds of that neoliberal substitute for the commonweal, the National Lottery.¹⁰⁵ A national Water Week and Hack Day would soon follow, with special newspaper supplements illustrating the most offensive aliens, calling on the public at large to report those who harboured them, and appealing, in the name of patriotism, for recruits to voluntary hack groups.¹⁰⁶

As time went by, politicians made ever more overt connections between the war against aliens and the collective prosperity of the nation. A symposium to discuss international cooperation in the control of invasive species, held in Cape Town a month after the blaze (see above), drew no less than four government ministers, one bearing a message from the state president. ‘We are all in this together’, pleaded the Minister for Water Affairs, ‘for alien species do not respect lines drawn on maps’.¹⁰⁷ Global trade and tourism, it was noted, had created a class of ‘unwanted international travelers’ such as foreign flora and disease-bearing insects.¹⁰⁸ But the most portentous words of all were those of President Mbeki himself: Alien plants, he avowed, ‘stand in the way of the African renaissance’.¹⁰⁹

Foreign Objects: the Politics of Estrangement in the Postcolony

And so, in rhetoric that both mirrored and magnified the public mood, invading plants become embroiled in the state of the nation. But this does not yet answer the questions posed earlier: to what anxieties, interests, historical conditions does the allegory of alien-nature, the allegory fed by fire and flood, finally speak? What underlies the ideological inflation that began with the burning bush, went on to inflame patriotic passions, and has

101 *Ukuvuka*, Xhosa, ‘to wake up’; as we have seen, the image of the alarm call was ubiquitous in this discourse. See B. West, ‘“Firestop” Launched to Save Mountains’, *Cape Times*, 7 February 2000; J. Yeld, ‘Four Fire-Hit Hotspots Get Top Priority in R3,6m Rescue Effort’, *Cape Argus*, 21 February 2000.

102 J. Soal, ‘Working for Water has Deal with Forestry on Alien Plants’, *Cape Times*, 22 February 2000.

103 de Villiers, ‘Take Decisive Steps’.

104 Yeld, ‘Wake Up Cape Town’.

105 Dr B. McKenzie quoted in ‘Many Lessons to be Learnt from Fires, Floods’, *The Star*, 15 February 2000.

106 See ‘Hack Day 2000’, special supplement for Water Week, *The Star*, 20 March 2000.

107 Address to International Symposium on Best Management Practices for Preventing and Controlling Invasive Alien Species, Kirstenbosch (Cape Town), 22–24 February 2000 (proceedings forthcoming); see also Yeld, ‘Invasive Plants are Costing SA Dearly’.

108 M. Merten, ‘Eradicating Invasive Aliens’, *Mail & Guardian*, 3–9 March 2000.

109 Message from President Mbeki, read by Valli Moosa, Minister for Environmental Affairs and Tourism, at the International Symposium on Best Management Practices for Preventing and Controlling Invasive Alien Species, Kirstenbosch, 22–24 February 2000; see also K. Bliksem, ‘Only the Truly Patriotic can be Trusted to Smell the Roses, and Weed Them Out’, *Sunday Independent*, 22 February 2000.

flared so fiercely as to endanger the African renaissance? An answer is to be found in a cluster of implicit associations and organic intuitions that, as they surfaced into the public sphere, gave insight into the infrastructure of popular consciousness-under-construction: in particular, into the way in which processes of naturalisation made it possible (i) to speak the unspeakable, to assail the unassailable, thus to address with the contradictions inherent in the making of postcolonial nationhood under post-1989 conditions; and (ii) to deal with the sense of apprehension that seems accompany this age of globalization, of borders at once open and closed, of people unavoidably on the move, of irreducible social and cultural difference, of compromised politics, of a shrinking commonweal.

Take this comment by a well-known newspaper columnist, satirist and self-confessed cynic:

Doubtless there are gardening writers who would not think twice about sounding off in blissful praise of something as innocent ... as the jacaranda tree ... But ... you may be nothing more than ... a racist. Subliminally that is ... Behind its blossoms and its splendid boughs, the jacaranda is nothing but a water-hogging ... weed-spreading alien.¹¹⁰

As *naturalised* immigrants, plant imports used, in the past, to grace the nation. The jacaranda (*Jacaranda mimosifolia*) was 'almost ... South Africa's national tree'.¹¹¹ Now, in a bizarre drama in which flora signify what politics struggles to name, they are becoming objects of estrangement, even racination; this in a land obsessed with who is or is not a citizen, with constitutional rights and wrongs, with routing out all vestiges of racism from within the body politic, not least the liberal press.¹¹² A second columnist made this yet more explicit in speaking of the 'ethnic cleansing' of the South African countryside. For centuries, she wrote, people enjoyed the shade of oaks, the smell of roses – aliens all. Now, 'floundering in the complacency of democracy', they blame all evil on those very aliens.¹¹³ But it was a wry letter to the *Mail & Guardian*, perhaps South Africa's most distinguished newspaper, that made the political subtext most brutally plain.

It is alien-bashing time again. As an alien ... I am particularly prickly about criticisms of aliens even if they are plants ... Alien plants cannot of course respond to these accusations. But before the Department of Home Affairs is dragooned into investigating the residence permits of these plants I, as a concerned fellow alien, wish to remind one and all that plants such as maize ... soybean, sunflower ... originated outside of the continent of Africa. In any case, did the fire-and-flood-causing alien plants cross the borders and establish plantations ... by themselves?¹¹⁴

For this interpolated alien, himself under no illusions, the allusions are obvious. They flow from the naturalisation of xenophobia. Barely displaced in the kingdom of plants is a distressingly familiar crusade: the demonisation of migrants and refugees by the state and its citizenry alike.

It has been noted that the migrant, and more recently the asylum seeker, is the 'spectre' on whose wretched fate the triumphal neoliberal politics of the 'new' Europe has been founded. In South Africa too, a phobia about foreigners, above all from elsewhere in Africa, has been the illicit offspring of the fledgling democracy – waxing, paradoxically perhaps, alongside appeals to the African Renaissance and to *ubuntu*, a common African humanity.

110 Bliksem, 'Only the Truly Patriotic Can be Trusted to Smell the Roses'.

111 E. Moll and G. Moll, *Common Trees of South Africa* (Cape Town, 1994), p. 49.

112 A controversial investigation of racism in the mainstream press, both overt and 'subliminal', was being conducted by the Human Rights Commission at the time; see for example E. Rapiti, 'Journalists Must Do Their Jobs Without Interference', letter to the *Mail & Guardian*, 10–16 March 2000.

113 C. Lazar, 'Forget Alien Plants, What About Guns?', *The Star*, 7 March 2000. For a reply on behalf of the Working for Water Program, see B. van Wilgen, letter to *The Star*, 14 March 2000.

114 M. Aken'Ova, 'Loving the Alien', *Mail & Guardian*, 18–24 February 2000.

That this is occurring among a people themselves familiar with exile, who in the past lived reasonably peaceably with in-migrating labour, seems all the more ironic – and all the more in need of explanation. Of late, the phobia, which started out as a diffuse sense of misgiving, has congealed into an active antipathy to what is perceived as a shadowy alien-nation of ‘illegal immigrants’; the qualifier has become all but inseparable from the sign, just as, in the plant world, *invasive* has become locked, adjectivally, to alien. Popularly held to be ‘economic vultures’¹¹⁵ who usurp jobs and resources, who foster crime, prostitution and disease, these doppelgänger anticitizens are accused – in uncanny analogy with non-indigenous flora – of spreading wildly out of control. And of siphoning off the rapidly diminishing wealth of the nation.¹¹⁶

Aliens are a distinctive species in the popular imagination. In a parodic perversion of the past, they are marked ineluctably by skin colour and ‘native’ culture. This is most dramatically revealed, as such things often are, at moments of mistaken identity – when South Africans are themselves thought to be outsiders and treated accordingly. Like the national volleyball star, apprehended by police because she looked too dark, or the son of a former exile, arrested eight times over the past few years because his ‘facial structure’ and accent marked him as foreign.¹¹⁷ Once singled out, ‘illegals’ are seldom differentiated from bona fide immigrants or refugees.¹¹⁸ All are referred to as *makwerkwere*, a disparaging Sotho term for incompetent speech – and, by implication, for exclusion from the moral community. Many live in fear of deportation. Or worse.

The fear is well founded. With the relaxation of controls over immigrant labour, previously secured by intergovernmental agreements and electrified borders,¹¹⁹ South Africa has become the destination of choice for unprecedented numbers of people from troubled countries to the north; estimates vary from two to eight million.¹²⁰ This influx has occurred amidst transformations in the domestic economy that have significantly altered relations of labour to capital.¹²¹ Not only has drastic downsizing, euphemised as ‘jobless growth’, cost some 500,000 jobs in the past five years, most of them held by blacks;¹²² even more noteworthy, over 80 per cent of employers now opt for flexible, ‘non-standard’ labour,¹²³ much of it done by lowly paid, non-unionised ‘illegals’, whom farmers and industrialists see as essential to their survival in competitive markets.¹²⁴ Small wonder, then, that unemployment is a ubiquitous anxiety; that it is seen as a major impediment to postcolonial prosperity; that routing *the alien*,¹²⁵ who has come to embody the threat

115 Radebe, ‘Time We Became a Bit More Neighbourly’.

116 M. Sinclair, ‘Unwilling Aliens: Forced Migrants in the New South Africa’, *Indicator*, 13, 3 (1996), 14–18; Reitzes, ‘Alien Issues’.

117 H. Radebe, ‘Persecuted for an Incorrect Facial Structure’, *The Star*, 16 March 2000; L. Madywabe, ‘My Four Hours as an Illegal Immigrant’, *Mail & Guardian*, 3–9 March 2000.

118 Madywabe, ‘My Four Hours as an Illegal Immigrant’.

119 These agreements laid down terms of contract and reimbursement, and decreed that foreign workers could not join unions; Reitzes, ‘Alien Issues’, p. 8.

120 See the findings of the South African Migration Project, summarised in C. Carter and F. Haffajee, ‘Immigrants are Creating Work – Not Taking Your Jobs’, *Mail & Guardian*, 11–17 September 1998, p. 3; also J. Matisonn, ‘Aliens Have Many Years’ Respite in SA’, *The Sunday Independent*, 19 March 2000.

121 See J. Comaroff and J. L. Comaroff, ‘Alien-nation: Zombies, Immigrants, and Millennial Capitalism’, *Codesria Bulletin*, 3/4 (1999), pp. 17–28.

122 See P. Salopek, ‘Mandela Stresses Success, Struggle’, *Chicago Tribune*, 6 February 1999.

123 H. Adam, F. van Zyl Slabbert and K. Moodley, *Comrades in Business: Post-Liberation Politics in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1998), p. 209.

124 Reitzes, ‘Alien Issues’, p. 8.

125 It is because most job losses have occurred at the lower-paid end of the labour market – where welfare services are also most stressed – that anti-alien sentiment is directed overwhelmingly toward Africans. Asian, European, and other Western immigrants, perceived to be richer and better educated, are more welcome and a policy encouraging skilled immigration has recently been announced. See Radebe, ‘Time We Became a Bit More Neighbourly’; K. Magardie, ‘Skilled Immigration to be Encouraged’, *Mail & Guardian*, 11–16 March 2000.

to work and welfare, presents itself as a persuasive mode of confronting economic dispossession.

Thus it is that foreigners – in particular, black foreigners – are the object of consternation and contestation across the new nation, from politicians and their parties, through the media and trade-unions, to street hawkers and the unemployed.¹²⁶ In September 1998, a crowd returning by train from Pretoria, where they had been protesting the loss of work, threw three *makwerekwere* to their deaths for purportedly stealing jobs.¹²⁷ A few months later came reports of a gang of hoodlums in Johannesburg dedicated to the ‘systematic elimination’ of aliens.¹²⁸ Immigrants and their property have regularly been attacked by local communities, forced into ‘ghettos’, criminalised and scapegoated.¹²⁹ A survey conducted in 1997 by the South African Migration Project, under the aegis of the Institute for Democracy, ranked the hostility of South Africans toward newcomers as one of the highest in the world. So acute is it that the Human Rights Commission has launched a ‘Roll-back Xenophobia Campaign’ and various agencies of government are actively promoting cultural projects aimed at combating discrimination against outsiders.¹³⁰

Yet the state is itself an ambiguous actor in this drama. On one hand, it strives volubly to uphold the standards of liberal universalism, insisting on the uncompromising protection of human rights; on the other, it sometimes contributes, wittingly or not, to the mood of xenophobia. Thus, for example, its law enforcement agencies have been unable to resist the temptation of attacking the foreign spectre. As its ability to maintain public order has increasingly been questioned, the Ministry of Safety and Security has grown proportionately more active in its war on non-citizens: while anxiety about invasive plants was escalating in the opening weeks of 2000, government announced its ‘US-style bid to rid SA of illegal aliens’ (see above) and to penalise those who knowingly employed them. The parallel could not have been clearer. Not long after, police around the country carried out high profile raids on ‘gentlemen’s clubs’ suspected of trafficking in undocumented sex workers.¹³¹ Onslaughts on ‘illegals’ in show business, the media, and the music industry followed.¹³² Then, within weeks, the Minister of Safety and Security personally initiated a ‘blitz’ in Johannesburg on strongholds of immigrant business, vowing to ‘thoroughly ventilate all criminal elements and illegal immigrants out’.¹³³ Senior police in Pretoria followed suit. Panic ensued as some 14,000 people were searched, over 1,000 arrested¹³⁴ and, despite their

126 For example, the African Chamber of Hawkers and Informal Business claims that illegal immigrants imperil the commerce of their members, the South African Congress of Trade Unions has threatened to strike over the hiring of non-unionised aliens, and the Inkatha Freedom Party has warned that it will take ‘physical action’ if the state fails to ‘take drastic steps’; see Reitzes, ‘Alien Issues’, p. 8. The press, moreover, has been repeatedly charged with encouraging xenophobia; see for example P. Dube, ‘Media Berated for Stoking Xenophobia’, *The Sunday Independent*, 27 February 2000.

127 ‘Jobless Mob Goes on Death Rampage’, *Cape Argus*, 4 September 1998.

128 T. Amupadhi, ‘African Foreigners Terrorized’, *Mail & Guardian*, 18–23 December 1998.

129 Sinclair, ‘Unwilling Aliens’, p. 16. Our observations in the North West Province confirm this. A letter to the *Mail* (Mafikeng) from a ‘concerned villager’, for instance, reported on two ‘illegal aliens’ running businesses on the outskirts of the town, and accused them of ‘robbing hard working South African citizens’; ‘Illegal Aliens – Where’s the Justice?’, *The Mail*, 23 July 1999.

130 This campaign is a joint initiative of the Human Rights Commission, the National Consortium on Refugee Affairs, and the United Nations High Commission on Refugees; M. Kebede, ‘Don’t Let this be a Curse’, *Cape Argus*, 12 January 2001. An exhibition entitled *Kwere Kwere: Journeys into Strangeness*, held at the Castle of Good Hope in Cape Town in March–April 2000, was supported by the Arts and Culture Trust of the President and the National Arts Council of South Africa.

131 ‘Brothel Raided’, *Pretoria News*, 3 March 2000; P. Molwedi, ‘Brothel Owner Granted Bail of R10 000’, *The Star*, 7 March 2000.

132 E. Maluleke, ‘Bitter Informants Flush Out Successful, but Alien Celebs’, *City Press*, 13 February 2000.

133 M. Tsedu, ‘Illegals Deserve Better Than This’, *The Star*, 20 March 2000; Radebe, ‘Time We Became a Bit More Neighbourly’.

134 ‘121 Illegal Immigrants Held in Swoop East of City’, *Pretoria News*, 3 March 2000; ‘Police Raid Sex Club’, *Sunday Times*, 19 March 2000.

protests, 'honest, taxpaying citizens' humiliated in the streets and in taxis.¹³⁵ Reports reminiscent of the apartheid era told of violence on the sidewalks where refugees, desperate for documentation, camped outside the Home Affairs Department. Foreign nationals, held at a privately owned deportation centre, were said to have been harshly beaten, their property looted.¹³⁶

Then began the reaction: amidst accusations of excess, respected commentators maintained that the clampdown had seriously backfired, putting human rights at risk. They and others voiced urgent calls for a more adequate, enforceable immigration policy.¹³⁷ Meanwhile, suspicion started to surface, just as it did in the case of invasive plants, that the zeal for weeding out aliens was misplaced. Why this harassment of strangers? asked one 'appalled citizen'. It was not as if *they* were guilty of the 'rape, murder, hijacking and bank robberies' that South Africans were perpetrating on each other.¹³⁸ The answer seemed plain, at least to Steven Friedman, Director of the Centre for Policy Studies in Johannesburg:¹³⁹ arresting 'illegal' immigrants may do 'nothing to reduce crime'. But it *does* create 'the impression of activity and effectiveness' on the part of government, an illusion 'often as important as reality'. Here, in short, is an instance of precisely the kind of symbolic activity of which we spoke earlier; of the mass-mediated ritual excess, directed to producing state power and national unity, that features so prominently in the second postcolonial age. It appears to work. According to a Human Sciences Research Council poll, notes Friedman, most citizens believed, in December 1998, that the regime had lost its capacity to contain crime and to assure public order. In March 2000, some 60 per cent thought that it actually *does* have some control – despite no change in the incidence of serious felonies.

Ends and Meanings

Geschiere and Nyamnjoh¹⁴⁰ argue that the growing stress in Africa on autochthony – and, concomitantly, on the exclusion of the *allogène*, the stranger – departs in important respects from older ontologies of being, belonging, and difference; most notably from ethnicity, with which it shares many features, among them a capacity to arouse strong affect and to justify the construction of unambiguous social boundaries. Autochthony, they suggest, is less specific, more protean in its substance. Its supple discourses readily accommodate 'a switch from one Other to another.' They are thus more readily open to political manipulation on many levels at once; not least in reaction to the kinds of social and economic processes set in motion by 'seemingly open-ended global flows'.

Yet more may be said about the salience of autochthony as a naturalising allegory of collective being-in-the-world; also about its salience as a motor of collective action. However, it is undeniable that, in post-apartheid South Africa, outrage against aliens *has* provided a versatile call to arms, uniting people long divided by class, colour and culture: it *is* enthusiastically mobilised by those who seek to conjure a new nation not merely by

135 Madywabe, 'My Four Hours as an Illegal Immigrant'; L. Mitchelson, 'Anti-Crime Blitz Should be Extended to All Suburbs', letter to *The Star*, 17 March 2000.

136 Reports of violence at the centre, owned by a consortium that includes members of the 'struggle elite', are not new. In this case, the Cameroonian embassy lodged a formal protest to the South African government; C. Banda and G. Clifford, 'Cameroon to Lodge Protest Over Repatriation Center Beating', *The Star*, 17 March 2000. See also Tsedu, 'Illegals Deserve Better Than This'.

137 See 'We Should See Human Rights Body as Our Ally', special comment by the editor, *The Sunday Independent*, 19 March 2000. The Aliens Control Acts of 1991 has garnered its share of criticism, and government officials have acknowledged that its application is 'arbitrary and subjective'; see Sinclair 'Unwilling Aliens', p. 15, Matissonn, 'Aliens Have Many Years' Respite in SA'.

138 Mitchelson, 'Anti-Crime Blitz Should be Extended to All Suburbs'.

139 S. Friedman, 'Action with Too Little Discussion', *Mail & Guardian*, 24–30 March 2000.

140 Geschiere and Nyamnjoh, 'Capitalism and Autochthony', pp. 423–425, 448.

bridging familiar antinomies but by erecting finite frontiers under conditions that, by all appearances, threaten to dissolve them altogether. And, with them, the coordinates of material and moral community. We have spelled out those conditions. They lie in the particular historical circumstances of postcolonial nation-states at the close of the twentieth century, of their absorption into a global capitalist economy whose neoliberal ways and means have altered Fordist patterns of production and consumption, the articulation of labour to capital, the nature of sovereignty and civic identity, geographies of space and time, and much else besides. Hence, the insistence earlier on situating our understanding of those nation-states not in a comfortable sociology of ideal-types, but in the hard-edged specificities of their second, post-1989 coming.

Here, then, lies one theme in the theoretical counterpoint that animates this essay: the conceptualisation of postcolonial polities. It is beyond our present scope to ‘theorise’ those polities – whatever that might mean at this moment in the history of Western social thought. However, because of the manner of their insertion into world history, we have argued, they evince three notable features. Each is an intensification of the predicament of the contemporary nation-state *sui generis*, each a corollary of the changing face of capitalism, all of them interconnected. The first is the transfiguration of the modernist political subject: a move away *from* a sense of belonging in a homogeneously imagined community of right-bearing individuals *towards* one in which difference is endemic and irreducible, in which the polity subsumes persons with a range of diversely constituted identities and entitlements; *from* a stress on citizenship based on ‘deep horizontal fraternity’ to which all other connections are secondary *toward* one in which each national is a ‘stakeholder’ vertically rooted, like homegrown plants in soil, in a body corporate; *from* a notion that attachment may be acquired equally by ascription, residence, immigration, and naturalisation *toward* the primacy of autochthony, making it the most ‘authentic’, the most essential of all modes of connection. The second is the contradictory logic of sovereign borders: the simultaneous necessity that they be open to various forms of flow – of finance, workers, commodities, consumers, infrastructure – and yet enclaved enough both to offer competitive advantage for global enterprise and to serve the material interests of a national citizenry; in other words, to husband the kinds of difference, the kinds of distinction between the local and the non-local, from which transnational capital may profit and rich nations protect their spheres of influence. The third is the depoliticisation of politics, their displacement from the realm of the social and the cultural, the moral and ideological, into the technical, apparently value-free dictates of the market – and its attendant forms of economic and legal ‘rationality’. Also into the imperatives of nature, however those come to be constructed, disseminated, taken-for-granted.

Put these things together, and the moral panic about strangers becomes over-determined. Take human aliens. Their very existence embodies the contradiction of borders and boundaries in the age of global capital. On one hand, by crossing those borders they import value into the heart of the polity, be it as cheap, manageable labour for agribusiness or industry, as traders who undersell indigenous merchants to the advantage of local consumers, as people with skills in short supply, or whatever. On the other, they are held to take away jobs and benefits from nationals, to undercut the struggles of local workers, to bring contagion, and, by trafficking in drugs, bodies and contraband, to commit the kinds of crime that unravel the social fabric itself. Moreover, their presence raises difficult questions about the changing nature of political citizenship in the postcolony: given that South Africa, like other nation-states, fetishises human rights – rights, that is, which transcend parochial identities and borders of all kinds – should outsiders not enjoy them like any autochthon? What precisely ought to separate the entitlements of the citizen from those of any other human being? On what basis is discrimination against foreigners justified in

a society dedicated to 'non-racism', in a nascent national culture that speaks the language of *ubuntu*, a common Africanity? Taking into account the apotheosis of the free market, why should strangers be the target of local protectionism? This, in sum, is where the liberal ideology of universal inclusion runs up against a politics of exclusion, a politics whereby identity is mobilized to create 'closed' spheres of interest within 'open' neoliberal economies. Note here, too, the depoliticisation of politics in the treatment of the alien-aspectre, of their displacement into a technicist discourse about demography and economic sociology, about health and disease, about social pathology and criminality.

Much the same may be said of alien vegetation. We have seen how that vegetation may, simultaneously, be one person's livelihood and another's apocalypse. The passage across frontiers, among plants as among people, illuminates all the contradictions of openness and closure, of regulation and deregulation, of otherness and indigenisation: *is* the jacaranda, 'almost the national tree', a naturalized South African? Or a hateful interloper? The fact that it has become the subject of ironic comment about subliminal racism and ethnic cleansing – something almost unthinkable a short while ago – makes clear how much the concern with borders, belonging, autochthony, and alien-nation has imploded in very recent times. It is, of course, but a short step to posing the same questions about humans. Who, exactly, *is* a South African? As this suggests, the transference into the floral kingdom of profoundly political questions is a dramatic instance of the process of depoliticisation of which we have spoken. While there is no doubt that real issues of ecology *are* raised by the effect of imported vegetation on fire and flood – as we have said, their gravity is *not* to be underestimated – the effort to construct a nation with reference to a rhetoric of exclusion, a rhetoric validated by appeal to the apparent value-free exigencies of botany and the environmental sciences, is a cogent instance of naturalisation. To which, we still have to return.

Before that, however, a parenthetic remark. Self-evidently, South Africa is not alone in its obsession with aliens and alien-nature. Earlier we noted that many countries, some of them postcolonies some not, are caught up in similar moral panics. These nation-states share a common feature: all are former labour importers and centres of capital – and, as such, nexes of wealth within a vastly unequal world economy – into which job-seekers and fortune hunters are popularly imagined to be pouring, usually across ill-regulated borders, in order to take scarce work and resources away from locals. This standardised nightmare evokes exactly the same anxieties as those to which we have alluded in South Africa. It has historical precedents, as we all know. Similar panics about immigration and belonging, about inclusion and exclusion, have characteristically occurred at the close of imperial epochs, when people from former 'overseas possessions' have sought entry to the 'mother country' only to find themselves barred, as colonial subjects, from citizenship – and from the sovereign benefits that accrue to it.

But this leaves one remaining topic not yet resolved: why *nature*? Here lies the other strand of our theoretical argument. Central to our analysis are the claims (a) that the apocalyptic fire in Cape, under-determined by the proximate events themselves, became the lightning rod for a panic about non-indigenous vegetation, a panic (b) which crystallised inchoate fears about alien-nature, named them, and called them into the heart of public consciousness; (c) that this is owed, over-determinedly, to the fact that the anxiety concerning foreign flora, while real enough in and of itself, was, at the same time, also a metonymic projection of more deep-seated questions facing the postcolonial state about the nature of its sovereign borders, about the right to citizenship within it, about the meaning and the passion inherent in national belonging – and, in particular, about the tendency to invoke autochthony in answering those questions, both pragmatically and figuratively.

This is where naturalisation enters the picture. Recall that, classically, as we have noted,

the term has had two contrary connotations. One is the assimilation of alien persons, signs, and practices into a world-in-place; its prototype is the metamorphosis of outlanders into citizens of the liberal nation-state. The other, whose genealogy stretches from Marx through Gramsci to Foucault, is the deployment of nature as alibi, as a fertile allegory for rendering *some* people and objects strange, thereby to authenticate the limits of the ('natural') order of things; also to interpolate within it new social and political distinctions. It is tempting, in the South African case, to invoke yet another connotation – one owed to Durkheim – according to which processes in nature are taken to be a direct reflection of processes in society. Some local commentators did just this, as we have seen, finding in the panic about invasive plants a mirror for the angst about immigrants. But such a reading of the events in question is insufficient. Nature is everywhere more directly, more dynamically implicated in the social practices by which history and ideology make each other. The unfolding controversy about indigenous plants and alien-nature became the vehicle for a public debate, as yet unfinished, over the proper constitution of the polity, over the limits of belonging, over the terms in which the nation, the commonweal, and the stakeholding subject are to be constituted in the age of global capitalism and universal human rights. In so doing, it permitted a vocalisation of anxieties and conundrums not easily addressed by politics-as-usual. Even more, the displacement of the argument about outsiders into the floral kingdom made it possible, by analogy, to contemplate and legitimate discrimination against those humans not embraced in the body of the nation, those cast adrift on the currents of the new world order. In so doing, it sanctioned, albeit unwittingly, a new, post-racist form of racism; a form of racism that, by concealing itself in the language of autochthony and alien-nature, has come to coexist seamlessly with a transnational culture of universal rights.

As this implies, discourses of nature cast a sharp light on the everyday actions and events through which definitions of belonging and citizenship – and their dark underside, the politics of exclusion – are being reframed in the postcolony. In particular, they illuminate the question of why it is that autochthony – a form of attachment that ties people to place, that natures the nation, that authorises entitlement – has become so central in an epoch when nationhood seems at once critical and yet in crisis, when borders everywhere present themselves as paradoxes, when a beleaguered political imagination strives to make sense of social being in a world of *laissez faire*.

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