Coolabah, Nr 36, 2024, ISSN 1988-5946. Online Journal of the Observatory: Australian and Transnational Studies Centre (OCEAT), University of Barcelona

Interviews with Zackie Achmat and Shaun de Waal: 30 years of democracy, accountability and violence in post-Apartheid South Africa

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Abstract. The following is an edited version of two interviews with the South African human rights activist and presidential candidate for the 2024 South African elections, Zackie Achmat, and the writer-scholar Shaun de Waal, respectively. The conversations took place in Cape Town and Johannesburg in 2023, when I traveled to South Africa to conduct research on medical humanities at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WiSER) of the Witwatersrand University in Johannesburg. The interviews explore the links between political accountability, good governance, health, culture and socio-economic development in the context of post-COVID19 South Africa.

Keywords: Medical humanities, memoirs, politics, South Africa.

Introduction

On May 29th South Africans will cast their votes to determine the nation's political trajectory amidst heightened polarization. The current political landscape in South Africa is marked by growing discontent due to the absence of clear governmental strategies regarding health, energy, employment, education, and social security. Following the end of Apartheid in 1994, the nation embarked on a hopeful journey, garnering international praise for its transition to democracy under Nelson Mandela's leadership (1994-1999), which was notably less violent than anticipated. During Thabo Mbeki's tenure (1999-2009), South Africa experienced rapid expansion, marked by robust economic growth, low unemployment, and a flourishing entrepreneurial activity. Initially perceived as a serious and reliable political party, the African National Congress (ANC), which has governed since 1994, has faced increasing criticism over the past decade. Jacob Zuma's rise to power was met with controversy, and his tenure (2009-2018) saw economic stagnation, rising unemployment, and corruption scandals involving high-ranking officials and Jacob Zuma himself, thus tarnishing the ANC's image. Cyril Ramaphosa, who came to power after a motion of confidence in 2018, has endeavored to restore the ANC's integrity and stimulated economic revitalization, albeit with limited success thus far. Still, challenges persist, particularly concerning frequent power cuts, indicative of Eskom and the ANC's shortcomings in energy provision, hindering investment and economic activity. This pervasive sense of crisis threatens to plunge South Africa into social, political, and economic turmoil, instilling widespread unease among South Africans.

Against a background of popular unrest, social tensions in South Africa are reaching a critical juncture, evidenced by mobs attacking shopping malls across the country and road closures protesting against the ruling ANC government. This unrest marks South Africa's most significant upheaval since the advent of democracy. Disruptions to public services have exacerbated issues, leading to backlogs in waste collection, occasional school closures due to demands for higher salaries, and instances of road blockades to garner international attention. Clashes between protesters and state security forces signify escalating violence nationwide, with demonstrators engaging in violent acts to express their discontent and to hold the government accountable for failing to guarantee Constitutional principles and fundamental rights. Adding to existing conflicts, Johannesburg, the country's largest city, is facing a new crisis as taps run dry, highlighting the breakdown of essential infrastructure due to decades of neglect amid a steadily growing population. The future trajectory of South Africa hangs in the balance, with citizens grappling with internal strife, political turmoil, and economic uncertainty, which have dampened hopes for a brighter tomorrow. As of May 29th, the political landscape remains highly contested, with the ANC and opposition parties competing to see who keeps the flag of change.[1]

[1] The two interviews were taken before the May elections, and they confirm the voting tendencies addressed here. The African National Congress (ANC), though remaining the largest party, lost considerable support and so its parliamentary majority held as of the start of Post-Apartheid in 1994. The centrist Democratic Alliance (DA) slightly grew and kept their second position, while uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK), a new leftist populist party led by former president Jacob Zuma, came in third. One month after these elections, a coalition government was formed by the ANC, the DA, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the Patriotic Alliance (PA), with Cyril Ramaphosa being re-elected President of South Africa.

The Democratic Alliance (DA) has come to a pre-coalition agreement with some of the political parties to join forces in their bid to unseat the ANC and keep the EFF (Economic Freedom Fighters, a communist pan-Africanist party) out of institutions. For the very first time in the democratic history of the nation, the ANC is below the critical line of 50% of the vote. South Africa is likely to face a historical turning point if the ANC eventually loses the majority in parliament. The ANC has been experiencing a gradual decline in support, and this loosely translates into a watershed moment in the political history of the nation. Although there is a small chance that the ANC will be out of government completely, the electoral results will probably force the ANC into a coalition. The overriding sentiment among South Africans, particularly Black South Africans that live below the poverty lines, is that after three decades in power ANC ruling has failed to improve their lives, as attested in the interviews. Envisioning South Africa in 2024 renders a view that the fabric of the country is falling apart. In the last legislature, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the entire nation, particularly people in need, and the government imposed a national lockdown, placing restrictions on the movement of citizens and confining them to their places of residence. The threat of the past HIV/AIDS epidemic re-entered South Africans' every-day lives, fearing that the COVID-19 pandemic would impact care facilities, [further compounded by] the memory of the government's late response to curb the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The first interview is a conversation with Zackie Achmat, South Africa's most well-known HIV/AIDS activist, co-founder of the *Treatment Action Campaign* (TAC), a grassroot social initiative to force political authorities to implement the public roll-out of anti-retrovirals, and a former anti-Apartheid activist. Currently, he is an independent candidate for the Western Cape's constituency in the 2024 elections. His mission is to hold the government accountable to its commitments and put the focus on ANC-aligned corruption and state captures. The second is an interview with writer-scholar Shaun de Waal, in which emphasis is placed on the current state of politics and culture in South Africa.

Interview with Zackie Achmat

Óscar Ortega (OO): Mr. Zackie Achmat is a well-known South African anti-Apartheid and LGBTI activist. He is a staunch advocate for the oppressed, and co-founder of the *Treatment Action Campaign*, the strongest post-Apartheid social movement. In 2002, Mr. Zackie Achmat was nominated for the prestigious *Nobel Peace Prize*, and the award eventually went to the Kenyan female activist Mrs. Wangari Muta Maathai. Nonetheless, Mr. Zackie Achmat's unrelenting work is acknowledged worldwide. He has been the recipient of a number of awards for his strong commitment to social causes at a very critical moment in the history of South Africa such as, for example, the Desmond Tutu Leadership Award, the Nelson Mandela Award for Health and Human Rights, as well as the Jonathan Mann Global Health Award, countless amongst many others.

Needless to say it is an absolute pleasure to be in your company today, and thank you very much for granting this interview, which is going to be published in *Coolabah*, a scientific journal published by the UB-based Centre for Australian and Transnational Studies (CEAT) in the field of Arts and Humanities. We actually feel showered with your hospitality. Before I go on and ask you some questions, I would like to let you know how I got [to target] you. As you may know

from our past chats back in 2020, when we scheduled to meet for an interview that was cancelled due to COVID-19, my PhD dissertation is an examination of HIV/AIDS sufferers' critique of the redemptive discourse of nation-building policies in post-Apartheid South Africa through the study of life narratives. The very first time I heard about your activism was actually through Stephanie Nolen's collection of short life narratives, *28: Stories of AIDS of Africa.* At first, I found this collection of testimonies both eye-catching and appealing for the purpose of my research. However, on second thoughts, a number of issues requiring further consideration came to mind, especially concerning Nolen's role so as to determine whether or not her mediation was effective.

Do you find Nolen's short biography on your life lacking in any way? Do you consider it to be biased somehow? Do you think that book is framed in such a way that it does not do you full justice? What were the connections between your narrative and the mediator?

Zackie Achmat (ZA): Well, let me say…I never read it!

OO: You've never read it? In that case, what can you tell us about your training as an activist?

ZA: No. Okay. I never read it. I generally don't read things about myself. What I did read was Samantha Power's *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*. I don't know if you've come across that book. She wrote a book on the Rwandan genocide, and then, she also wrote another book. She did the HIV work, and a lot of other articles, and she also became one of Obama's advisors, and then she became the UN representative for the U.S. – needless to say we don't speak anymore. In her piece, the headline was a former prostitute, and something on Mandela and Gandhi. Her article was a good one on what was happening at the time. And it also had a huge impact particularly in the U.S. because it was for *The New Yorker*. And one of the consequences of that article is obviously that a lot of US students then came out to South Africa, as volunteers and so on.

Well, I can't hold them responsible for the headline, that's *The New Yorker*. And her work was good. What always bothers me about these pieces… and it bothers me deeply, but on the other hand, I understand what these things cause, and it's problematic in politics and in history and so on, is the focus on the individual, and as you would have noticed, I work with a lot of people and they play a critical role in my own education and me transferring knowledge that I'd gained over years. So I would use the word perambulation…that is, walking and going all over peregrination. And perambulation is a slow walk. I'll tease people and say, I'll tease people insane. I'm going on my perambulation—and maybe a peregrination with my dog. So that's just a joke, and people say…what? And then I say, you can only get there if you are 60 years old, and you've lived through education where people who loved words taught English. And some were just people who loved old-fashioned words, not used much now. So, you know, it's, it's education that I received from other people. I've had a brilliant education. My grandfather, and my aunt, who encouraged me incredibly to educate myself, my dad, who was not really educated, both my aunt and my grandfather went properly educated. And then, you know, the education I had as a kid of the rightwing Islamist, a Pakistani-Indian based movement. My one uncle belonged to it. And what you would go do is go door to door to give people a message: God's message. And I used to be sent in, in case a woman opened the door because I wasn't of age yet. And I could greet the woman

and ask where's the man also. So, learning how to go door-to-door and try and convince people of a political project. It was really critical to my thinking. And then, of course, throughout the years, my first boy, my first political mentor was a woman called Jean.

The second one was Theresa Solomon, and then my lifelong, my first boyfriend, who is now my mother, Jack Lewis, who was doing a PhD in economic history and a Marxist himself. And then of course, people I met in prison, the smartest, most intelligent, serious intellectual that I've ever known is a chap called Rob Peterson who headed the Marxist workers, tendency of the ANC, which I belonged to, we're still very good close friends. He was a trained lawyer and very interestingly, he helped bring the prices of drugs down in a case before the competition commission, and the history sort of continues right to this day. And to this day, the most recent thing I learned from him is we had the equivalent of an informal seminar on Ukraine. He'd gone back to reading, learning on great Russian nationalism and the evil tradition of oppressing minorities in Russia. And he'd read the conservatives on Ukraine widely, you know, stuff like that. And we had a phenomenal discussion, so literally a trajectory that's lasted since 1985; and before, when I came across his writing from about 1977. I've had the most brilliant legal education, even though I never went to law school, from my first lawyer who became our minister of justice. He was my attorney when I went to prison. So literally you, if you look at my education, I've learned so much from other people. I'm just using these names to give you an idea that no kid who's been to Oxford has had this range of education. The arch of my own education is something that I believe contributed to the work I did and needs to be passed onto other people. And so it's not an individual effort. It is the accumulation of the knowledge of other people who, again, relied on previous generations before them. Oh, Paula Ensor (School of Education, Cape Town University) is the other person I've learned an incredible amount from. So you'd see, there's a combination of women and men, um, the old political people. They were phenomenal in my political education about organizing. Is this useful for you?

OO: Absolutely. Some questions will push in that direction but you can go ahead, no problem.

ZA: So if you take, um, take, for instance, Lindy and, her teaching me about the union movement, teaching me about the ANC. She was the first secretary of the ANC, or one of the secretaries of the ANC youth league, let Lindy, she was already elderly. So one day I came from Hanover Park, where I was helping to organize the 1980 school. I was a boy. And I was on the same bus as her. And I came in and she was sitting there and my hair was like an Afro. And I had a black coat on, you know, the traditional black coat that revolutionaries had to wear.

OO: And what about Lucille Meyer? She is running the Chrysalis Academy in Cape Town.

ZA: Just before that. So I sit down in the bus next to her and she grabs my ear and turns it and says, if you want to be serious in politics, you have to dress respectably, which is also what my aunt told me. You have to look the standard. You have to…so you were asking?

OO: I was asking about Lucille Meyer because she is part of all these people you mentioned earlier and that had a say in your education. I was wondering if Lucille Meyer also played a leading role in your education.

ZA: I'm surprised that she's still in the ANC because she has a brain. I think anyone who remains in the ANC must have turned off a part of their brain and that's a moral and conscious part of their brain.

OO: In what sense?

ZA: In the sense that the focus on individuals in history and in politics never sat well with me, because movements are built by many people, the sacrifices of many people. There's a movie on my life done by someone who used to be a close friend of mine, Brian Tilley. I hate the movie. I really hate the movie. First, it cuts out the most important part of my life, which is the fact that I'm a socialist. And he was a socialist with me. Sure. So, that's the first thing. He had access to every meeting that I attended and heard so many people speak, and engage and interact. He didn't use one of those meetings, no, except the personal one where I was discussing where I should go on onto medication because I had refused to take out medication. So, in a sense that is the political role that I played. And the one I continue to play is one that tries to build movements but in broader society. And I understand, if I go to a meeting it's very easy for me to connect to any audience. It's very easy for me…cross class, cross race, cross nationality…

OO: Okay. The next question is on that, because under Apartheid you were classified as 'colored'. Thus highlighting your in-betweenness, do you think your position as a middleman helped build bridges between ethnic groups in South Africa? I'm saying so because, by default, Apartheid authorities and white supremacists elsewhere considered HIV and AIDS a 'black issue/thing'.

ZA: Yeah. Let me say that there are a whole lot of reasons. First, I come from a working class and made it into the middle class. And as you can see from my apartment…I stick to my words. I guess in a sense, I stick to the knowledge of my roots, but I also know that I can never go back there. Sure, and so the appeal for a lot of people is that here's someone who can speak English properly and for a certain class of people, right. And he doesn't speak English with a colored accent. For instance, I went to do work with the British miners at the end of the mine workers strike. I said the word okay. And the mineworkers looked at me and said: You've been to Oxford?

Of course, I said no. "You can't be from Africa!" Really? Yeah, I said, why? Because of your English, right? Did you cultivate this accent? No, no, no, no. My parents came from Johannesburg, and there was no accent among colored people. At least, of the nature of Cape colored accent. Okay. And when I came to Cape town, my aunt used to smack me if I spoke in the accent that we had in school, which was of course the local dialect and local language. I was good at language. Okay. And so that's how the accent developed. So it wasn't cultivation. It was an education in sense. And this accent goes across…

OO: You actually mentioned that in your story "My Childhood as an Adult Molester: A Salt River Moffie."

ZA: Yeah. Yes, exactly. Many people can understand me, because if I'm in a meeting with colored people, I would say I'm black.

OO: Okay. Which is…a political style?

ZA: It is a political identification… it is broad by. When I'm with black African people, I would say I'm colored, in order to create the connection of African colored unity, black African and colored unity, because there's a huge gulf divide: there's a huge divide and a deeply racist divide, particularly for colored people.

OO: Fermented by the old apartheid regime…

ZA: Yes and no. Okay. It's also like the white working class in the United States compared to black shareholders. Yes. We're slightly better off.

OO: I see.

ZA: Even though it may be worse off in certain circumstances.

OO: Yeah. But it's that kind of…

ZA: It's that kind of ideology which comes from white supremacy. It may not be officially encouraged, but it is as it was subliminally, it definitely comes from a place of inequality.

OO: For sure.

ZA: And so that possibility also [exists] with white people. I'll say I'm black because for whites blackness…and here I'm talking about white people who have not reflected on racial privilege and supremacy. It's critical to bring that up. It allows the crossing. And because I have a plain accent that everyone can understand internationally, it's also easy. It's easier.

OO: Easier to project yourself outside of the country, right?

ZA: It's language, it's class, and it's across class. The fact that I've had upward mobility, not necessarily property, but certain knowledge and…

OO: And sorry to interrupt, but just very briefly and in relation to your Asian heritage, because your family comes from the Indian subcontinent, how do the Asian population fit into this? It's kind of interesting that you were pegged as colored because Asians are always this buffer zone, closer to the blacks, but at the same time, even perhaps more hated.

ZA: Exactly. The first thing, my Asian heritage is also mixed, Okay. So it's both Malaysian and Indian. It's that combination. And then in this country my great grandmother was from the East African coast. Black East African. There's a German white man, who was her husband. It's that sort of mixture. My Indian grandmother on my paternal side was deeply racist…

OO: So that's a caste-based family, even though it's Muslim, it's still because caste still seeps into the…

ZA: It's deeply racial. Sure. It's deeply racial. Sure, it's caste and in a sense, if you look at my sisters and brothers, particularly one brother who is darker than me, [they] would get less food, would get colder, would not get birthday presents and would be told you'll never get a husband or wife.

OO: It's of worth.

ZA: Sure. And those of us who were lighter-skinned had had more than her. And my one sister today is institutionalized for mental health because she always felt that from the family. I remember once I took a picture during a wedding or something, and she was out and cooking and someone took the picture. And she assumed it to be natural. It was because she was dark that she was left out.

OO: And she internalized that, right?

ZA: She internalized that so deeply to the extent that she adopted a Somali kid that was very dark.

OO: As if to say…

ZA: As if to say I'm going to be kind to someone who's darker than me. So you know that to answer that question about building coalition, it is what helped and the fact that I'm clear it is what helped this in.

OO: It's about bringing together.

ZA: Certainly if you take TAC at its height, the Treatment Action Campaign, it added 15,000 members. But its circle of supporting society was so broad. Yeah. That it had impacted everywhere at every dinner table, and it moved HIV from a curse, a stigma, and an irresponsible, moral disease to something that was an illness.

OO: Actually, this is going with the next question, because South Africa's Constitution is very forward-looking. Shortly after its approval in 1996, the HIV/AIDS epidemic began to hit the country the hardest to the point of becoming the global capital of HIV/AIDS. The latter was a great opportunity for the authorities to showcase its effective implementation, and you, as a co-founder of the TAC, flagged up the spirit of the 'new' South Africa in terms of commitment to others. Why do you think Mr. Thabo Mbeki's administration turned a blind eye to the plight of the nation? Do you think the question of privilege was at the core of it? Did the HIV/AIDS epidemic widen class divides, creating first, second and third-class South Africans? What is your current relationship, if any, with the political authorities of the country? Have things changed a great deal and for better?

ZA: First, a conceptual point on nation. I think nation is shit.

OO: In what sense?

ZA: Nation. Nationality. Nation is like race construct, and it's deeply material. It means an incredible amount to people; its linguistic basis is phenomenal. I'm just reflecting on the harm that it's done, the incredible harm. So if you look at the question of Rosa Luxembourg, for instance, she had a great analysis of why we shouldn't support nationalism. She had a great understanding of what you had to do to bring people together across nationalities. So her thinking was both conceptual, but very abstract and not so much related to the reality. Russia was very different to Germany in terms of the composition. It was very much what you call a homogenous society. So to go back to your question, I got active in HIV in the 80's because people I had sex with were dying, and HIV became a disease of queer and black people. And the reason that it predominantly became heterosexual black is because of the migrants' labor route, the mines in particular. And so the transmission went both from our mines into rural Southern Africa, and it went into the local rural communities.

So some of the early HIV work I posted in 1994 was on the national union of mine workers. We did the AIDS law project to ensure that the mine workers' death benefit was not cut for people living with HIV because the mines were saying that the increase expenditure in that area came out of too many claims for HIV. Okay. And what we showed is that it came out of other illnesses, long part of the mining industry and that the AIDS epidemic itself had not yet grown. HIV had not yet moved into a fully-blown AIDS epidemic. And what we found is that it was the management of the benefits fund: the management of the management of the benefits fund caused chaos and led to these increases.

OO: I was to touch on that later as well, because health is a big issue in this country.

ZA: Yes, indeed. We established a primary healthcare clinic, which had a doctor come once a week, but a nurse during the week, okay. When we started a lot of our work was on TB (tuberculosis) and we helped, so there was still quite a huge TB epidemic. TB epidemic has been especially in the colored community. And on [*sic*] the mines, it's a mine-related disease, it was a mining-related illness. Yeah. That's how it came to South Africa from Europe. Sure. And it's, it is a colored and working-class thing.

OO: It is absolutely mine-related, indeed. My grandfather died of that when working in a mine in rural Spain.

ZA: Yes, it's a deeply mine-related thing. In the Belville Community Health Project, we not only organize people around healthcare but also around housing. And the workers in the area that we organized were municipal workers, street cleaners outside of the city because the municipalities were broken up and they weren't allowed to join a union, but we unionized them. Through that health project, we became part of the primary healthcare network, and obviously the doctors working on the mines were part of that. Yeah. And when HIV took off in the country around 1990, maybe a little bit before, I'm not sure, Edwin Cameron became active and he started two projects, the AIDS consortium at the Center for Applied Legal Studies and the AIDS law project, which is where I went to work as a paralegal.

OO: That is the next reference to your work in your autobiography.

ZA: The ANC formed the National AIDS Convention of South Africa, the NACOSA. And it drafted the first HIV plan.

OO: It gave rise to that later because between 1994 and 1999 was when TAC was founded.

ZA: TAC was indispensable to our work over the years. People did a fantastic job leading it, together with a bunch of other people, such as Jonathan Berger or Tim Hasan. We drafted the National AIDS plan and I was on the Law and Human Rights Committee with Edwin Cameron, and the entire thing was extremely progressive, the law and human rights section, for instance, called for the lowering of the prices of AZT (Azidothymidine) because AZT was the only medicine then; the lowering of the prices for opportunistic infections, the costs and for legislation to ensure that that happens; for the decriminalization of drug users and the decriminalization of sex work, decriminalization of sodomy, and then all their rights of access to employment and schooling and so on for people living with HIV. All that was in the first AIDS plan. I don't have a copy here. It might be in my archive …

OO: And how much of it came into effect?

ZA: An incredible amount of it. I'll tell you from what I know, there are only two things that didn't come into operation: sex work and drugs. Those are the only two that have not been enacted. Employment, rights, medicine, housing, and privacy informed consent…all that stuff came into operation. And it's only two parts of the National AIDS plan, the law and human protection that didn't come into operation.

OO: What about sex workers? I think this continues to be some sort of blind spot. I mean in terms of research here in South Africa.

ZA: There're serious services, there's access to services. Generally and legally, it is not discriminatory. And there are places which provide special services to sex workers. But in terms of criminality, they're still in evil. It's evil. It's what still happens. Absolutely. There were a whole range of other things like access to medicines and so on. The ANC government adopted the plan. At that time I was at the AIDS law project. I'd already become director of the project. And the first director called me in. And she said, I want to give you 10 million rand to implement a law and human rights program. I said to her, no, no, no, no. I can only spend a million really. I can only spend a million; don't give me more money than we need. And we did a lot of work with that. We informed an AIDS legal network. We started helping. And we helped them; particularly the first ANC parliament was just brilliant. Really, it was phenomenal. If you went for a meeting with someone else, another MP would call you into the office and say, listen, what, what can you do about this? Can you help with that? We need you to mobilize a little bit. So everything from the Medical Schemes Act to the Employment Equity Act, all those things, we were able to make representations, particularly against the mining industry, which is fundamental, which was fundamental. And of course, we made pressure on the drug companies, too.

OO: History is the past and historiography the interpretation of past events. In the course of a conversation with Prof. Mokoena, from Wits/WiSER, she made me realize that South African

historians failed to document past epidemics in South Africa. After reading the work of Howard Philips, on recommendation of Prof. Mokoena, this idea became deeply entrenched in my mind. Do you think your life (narrative) has been instrumental in both building the historiography of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa and filling up the vacuum left by historians in that respect? If so, in what way(s)?

ZA: Yes and no.

OO: Do you think your experience with HIV/AIDS has been instrumental in building the historiography of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in this country and in addressing the vacuum left by historians in that respect?

ZA: It's instrumental. So back to historiography, the archive on epidemics is phenomenal. If you wish to search for it, the issue is not the documentation. The issue is the story; that is, interpretation. Phillips did that work, did a lot of that work. You know, if you look at that, for instance, very little has been written about it as far as I can remember. But when we were in school, a nurse would come…

OO: Is it because of religion? The interference of…

ZA: Religion? No, no, no. Um, the nurse would come around; they check your teeth, your eyes, your chest for TB. At factories people would go and be screened for TB. Yeah. And if they had TB, they would get treatment and get time off. Right. Right. That sort of stopped, the National Party stopped it and the ANC didn't bring it back. They stopped it, because they said it was not cost-effective. So there must be some documentation of that. The mining industry has phenomenal documentation on illness. Yeah. When I did a paper on TB, in the mines, I collected a huge amount of medical articles, so the place to actually look for is within the medical archive. That's where a lot of it would exist, as opposed to the historic archives. There was no record of black African people in the land registry and so on, but there were TB records of where people lived. So there was an archive and Mark Martin, who was one of my historians and also one of my educators in the marketers' worker tendency, he found it there. He found it. He knew how to research, right. History today is taught by people who wish to be postmodern and a whole set of things which comes out of cultural studies. It's a good thing, but it is such influenced history that it's all about subjectivity, the individual and subjectivity, as opposed to the history, and as opposed to the movements and individuals, and so on. Sure. So the historiography that you speak of—for instance, in the UCT (University of Cape Town) library, you would find it— if it were damaged, we don't know [due] to that big fire that was there. And AIDS….

OO: Yes, please, focus on the HIV epidemic.

ZA: Right. We made actually a great job, you know, and it's like a repository of knowledge. Have you looked at my AIDS archive at the South African historical archive?

OO: I have had access to some archive. That's one. But the thing is that I found problems in having access to the CSR (Council for Scientific Research). And apparently, you know, then is when they did this data back to the Apartheid days, right? It was very difficult to have access to the records.

ZA: Yeah. But that's just because the ANC is doing a bad job of archival management and stuff like that. Terrible. And that's why I came up with this idea of my own records. The problem is that the historians haven't brought it together. They haven't done the battle that they need to do, for sure, with the authorities to get the archive, to get it digitalized, to get it, to write about it. And because we've moved off history into a subjective thing. I'm very much of the old school history, the history workshop, okay. I don't know if you know the South-African old-history workshop. You must look it up. The primary historian of South Africa for me is a woman called Shula.

OO: Okay. Maybe you can write it down for me.

ZA: Shula was in South Africa and then she moved to London and she became the Head of the Institute for Commonwealth Studies, and there's a school of Oriental and African studies, a very…

OO: A very colonial institution.

ZA: Right. And she decolonized it way before people understood what decolonization meant and focused on it. So you'll find mining history, you'll find even a great deal of health stuff, trade union history, land stuff. They used to run a seminar that brought historians from South Africa and African history, but particularly South African history. That person ran a fantastic workshop, their books, and Charles Island, Phil Bonner and all those historians…Helen Bradford…those people created what was known as the history workshop. Its major drawback is that it was so white.

OO: Okay, was it alienating perhaps?

ZA: Alienating, of course. The liberal universities were predominantly white. And there were very few African graduates in history.

OO: So in a way they were decolonizing but colonizing at the same time.

ZA: Yeah. And I, but I wouldn't, I know it, it's easy now to say that they were colonizing, sure. One has to look at the conditions at the time.

OO: One has to consider the context, no doubt.

ZA: The context and many things that aren't better histories today. And contemporary histories so much would rely on what they wrote without acknowledgement because it's white history—I don't know if you ever read a thing I wrote called "Apostles of Civilized Vice."[2] And honestly, so I didn't finish high school. I started university because of age exemption, and then because of state

[2] Zackie Achmat's historical exploration of homosexuality in South Africa from colonial times to the present, which deals with the AIDS epidemic.

of emergencies, I left the politics and state of emergencies so I didn't finish university. I was admitted to an Honors Degree at the University of Western Cape in English literature on recognition of prior learning, so you write an entrance exam and they see whether…

OO: Whether you're fit for the degree or not.

ZA: Yeah. Okay. And I passed it and then I went to university right in it. I wrote a thesis on the discourse of male homosexuality in South Africa.

OO: Interesting. I mean, how about the politics of homosexual themes and South Africa, I think that makes for another interview.

ZA: The irony is we are not going to go there. The irony is that the opening up of the field of South African queer historiography was my work really. That was what opened the gay debate: when the AIDS epidemic came in, I published the article called "Apostles of Civilized Vice."

OO: That actually links somehow into the next question.

ZA: If you just go back to the history quickly. There was the Carnegie inquiry into the poor, the poor white problem in South Africa, which was a fantastic set of histories on poverty, ill and health among white working-class people. And then there was a second follow up in the eighties, the Carnegie inquiry into poverty in South Africa, which was led by Francis Wilson, who just died. He didn't have a good theoretical framework, but he opened up a feeling for lots of people to do such a thing in sociology. And the Carnegie inquiry into poverty in South Africa had a great deal of health work in it. So it would look at malnutrition, which was epidemic. It was a biological bacterial or fungal epidemic. It was an epidemic created by poverty. It affected working class children, particularly black African working-class children. It affected their physical development. They also did TB on the mines and community illnesses and stuff like that. So you'd find that really well documented. I want to write about all of these things and you can, too. What I really would like to do is supervise a thousand PhDs, that's what I really would like! The archive is there. It is the historians' fault. If you look at past epidemics, it is the epidemics of tuberculosis, malnutrition, and always the unspoken epidemic, which is mental health.

OO: It's to do everywhere. I mean that's on a global scale.

ZA: Absolutely. And, and here it goes, masculinities are so layered. Being a man means no depression and being a woman, you can't be heartsore. If you look at my life, I've had depression since I was 10.

OO: Really? How come?

ZA: Yeah, as we are sitting here, I've got three drugs in my body. So you have that set of epidemics that were never documented, which is mental health. Those are the past epidemics before HIV.

OO: HIV, as you say, is very well documented, right?

ZA: It is superbly documented and many different people have written about it. Many different people.

OO: Is that for any particular reason?

ZA: Well, considering it was so taboo.

OO: That's it.

ZA: It is in the post-Apartheid age that it became a well-documented epidemic. And I would say so primarily because of Thabo Mbeki.

OO: Certainly.

ZA: Primarily because of Mbeki, right.

OO: Very often life-writing revolves exclusively around personal testimonies. However, in my opinion, South African HIV/AIDS life writing drifts away from that premise, focusing instead on the virtues of community life-writing to create a repository of public knowledge.

ZA: Indeed. It is important to create this repository of public knowledge. I'm sure you have come across it, but the photography of Gideon Mendel is very helpful. He's got these little biographies, very potted biographies of people. You would find people speaking about what HIV meant to them, but not in a detailed story. It's not a detailed history of the person.

OO: He's based in England now.

ZA: That's it.

OO: When it comes to the AIDS epidemic in South Africa, I feel there is a very strong emphasis on community life writing, and on building a national testimony. People, especially outsiders, seem to be more willing to learn about their neighbors and so on. Do you think that the booming of illness memoirs in the 2000's has contributed to healing the wounds of the past somehow? And do you think that community life writing is the way forward?

ZA: That's interesting. I would say no, mostly because of the low levels of literacy, the incredibly low levels of literacy; here's a constitutional court case about Patricia DeLille. Do you know who she's? She's a member of parliament. She was a great member of parliament, not rigorous but great.

OO: Was she ANC?

ZA: No, she wasn't. She was in the PAC (Pan Africanist Congress) and then she moved to the Independent Democrats and then she moved to the DA (Democratic Alliance) and now she's in her own party called GOOD PARTY. She went on marches and all that manner of things, but she intervened foolishly and in a bad way, not understanding in a clinical trial and saying black women

were being exploited at the University of Victoria. Yeah. And then when she got a woman called Charlene Smith to write her biography. She gave those women's names and broke their privacy agreement and got it written in the book and one of her defenses was poor people don't read books, so it doesn't matter what you write, so it doesn't matter. The constitutional court gave her a decent clap.

OO: Books are very expensive in this country…but it was a wrong move on her part, no doubt.

ZA: Yes, it was. Books are very expensive in South Africa. So it's a combination of cost and literacy. And then of course the other thing is the language in which stories are mostly written is Afrikaans ironically, and then follows English. If you take it proportionately… who speaks what?

OO: That's right. Because if you browse around the NB publishers' catalog, most of the publications are in Afrikaans.

ZA: That was a National Party press. There you'd find incredible, incredible stories in literature. Now, the first gay poem was written in Afrikaans and the first gay short story was written in Afrikaans, too. So if you look at narrative stories, whether it's black or Edwin Cameron, or those sorts of, um, now there's a woman called Barbara Kingsley, who wrote about HIV, but not from a personal perspective.

OO: It's a story on her daughter.

ZA: People have rest in different things. I would say that one of the things that influenced me enormously was I went to do a course in 1993 at the University of Milwaukee called Cultural Perspectives on AIDS.

OO: Okay, tell me about it, please.

ZA: Cultural perspectives on AIDS. And I must have read 50 or more novels and not novels but memoirs: Davidovich, Paul Monk, Sarah Schulmann's stuff.

OO: The HIV/AIDS historian in the United States or, at least, one of them.

ZA: True. And so you find an incredible amount of stories written by gay men. And that had an influence in the broader queer community because of literacy and the affordability, the fact that people could afford to buy books and the levels of education of the people who wrote. Right. Um, so it was people with PhDs or people who'd been to university or people who are filmmakers.

OO: Sure. Jonny Steinberg, who wrote *Three Letter Plague* (2008), pushed in the same direction.

ZA: I think there's a serious place for this kind of literature. People would consume it. Sure. People would consume it, but in South Africa the place where people got narrative is television. I know you've probably come across it. When I went to the US I studied the films on HIV and then their cultural perspectives on age, boyfriends, sex… so sex had a very important role in my education.

Probably the most important role in my education, and I say that very seriously because it is something that people very often deliberately overlook. But the reason I went to do the course in Milwaukee is I fell in love with a chap called Christopher, who was a Freudian, Lacanian, English literature professor at the University of Milwaukee. I would've married him and I was foolish…that took me there. I learned an incredible amount there. And when I came back and we started TAC, the first thing, even before we started, I said, Jack, who was my boyfriend and my mother, if we are going to do this properly, we have to make short movies because he was making short movies.

Jack was making movies, and we'd already done two or three documentaries together. And he and I said, we can show them on the streets. We can show them in different locations. He looked at me and he said we'd get them onto television. And the name BEAT comes out of an Act Up poster, which had a big penis. And it said, men wear condoms or beat it beat. It means two things beat. It means go away or it means whack. And Jack started this thing, which was on television once a week. For many years. So literally we had a TV show once a week with people wearing HIV positive t-shirts interviewing doctors, interviewing drug companies... We had our own propaganda on national television, and the important thing of that was the fact that people living with HIV told stories.

OO: Probably that explains TAC's breath of appeal.

ZA: Exactly. And only one person has really written about it. A woman called Rebecca Hodes but she doesn't really get it. No, she doesn't really get it.

OO: Now that you focus on people, their testimonies and accountability… Do you think some ghosts from the past turned up during the COVID-19 emergency? What lessons, if any, have the South African authorities learned from the past?

ZA: The first thing is to see Ramaphosa posted on television as a president talking to people and saying, we're going to close down, we're going to lock down. We are going to… this is what you have to do with social distancing… it was a phenomenal contrast to Mbeki, who was the chair of the South African national AIDS plan until he became a denialist. When he became a denialist, that arises out of two or three factors. The first is, I would say, drug company costs and the battle with the South African government and the fact that Clinton put us on a sanction watch list. It took the US government 40 years to put the South African National Party on a sanction list. And certainly it took Clinton less than three years of democratic government to put us on a watch list at the behest of the US drug companies. That influences thinking about the colonization of [*sic*] pharmaceutical companies of markets.

The second thing is Mbeki doesn't like sex. He's a kind of puritanical self. He's a puritanical Victorian gentleman from his education. He would have his sexual pleasure whatever way, but it's like Victorian. It is behind closed doors. It's behind closed doors. And he was Victorian because his history is a Victorian one and that dreadful Mark's.[3]

[3] Mark Gevisser is a South African author and journalist, as well as the organizer of one of the first Gay Prides in South Africa in the 1990s.

OO: Well, his schooling days took place in the UK so one may figure it out.

ZA: Well. Yeah. I mean the dreadful Mark, and you may say I say he is dreadful because I'll never forgive him for the Mbeki biography. He spent a whole chapter about looking for a table at the beginning, on Mbeki's childhood table or something…and 10 pages on HIV! 10 pages on Mbeki and the HIV epidemic in South Africa!

OO: The biography could have been crucial to understanding his political leanings…

ZA: The whole of it! I would've written probably a quarter of the book on the whole on that, because that said put up so many things. So the Victorian…drug companies… the Victorian position, and then the sexualized nature of the epidemic…so he's Victorian. Okay. Yeah. But the racialized in his mind…and yes, in some white supremacist minds, black Africans have too much sex.

OO: That's the "official" narrative; that is, the hyper-sexualization of blackness.

ZA: Absolutely, but how come? This is a deliberate thing to racialize and to oppress racially. It's a new assertion of white supremacy. And then I think the last one is Mbeki really wants to be an intellectual. He has a good mind, but he is like the clever child in the class who always wants to be recognized. Okay. As the clever like me.

OO: Okay. So you identify with him?

ZA: Don't get me wrong. I'm not sermonizing or whatever. I'm not. I do sympathize with him, but not on some things. You know, in politics, if you don't have a sense of humor, you're dead…and in life, for sure.

OO: Well, in many ways, according to some voices, he ran the country very effectively except for the HIV/AIDS crisis.

ZA: No, no, no, no, no, no.

OO: That's my impression, too, as an outsider. He did a good job and on average people agree on that.

ZA: He just did it perhaps better than others, but no.

OO: Correct every scenario, if possible, please.

ZA: Let's start with the Arms Deal. He was instrumental in covering up the Arms Deal. He attacked the Scorpions[4] and the judge as white people who think black people must be corrupt and the black government was corrupt so the racialization of our politics started with him. And that was the last

[4] The Directorate of Special Operations (DSO) was also known as the Scorpios. It was a specialized unit of South Africa's National Prosecuting Authority to investigate organized crime and corruption.

point I was going to make: that he racialized everything. And then there was a different type of racialization: white doctors. They were telling black patients all that sort of stuff. So the denialism that the white gay men run TAC. There was one white gay man named Nathan Geffen. He's a brilliant chap. Brilliant, brilliant, brilliant, a scientist. That's someone you should meet.

OO: Absolutely. He wrote a fantastic book called *Debunking Delusions: The Inside Story of the Treatment Action Campaign* (2010), which I read.

ZA: That's a great narrative. He did great work, but I don't speak to him and I probably never ever speak to him again.

OO: For personal reasons?

ZA: For personal and political reasons. He did great work anyway. So Mbeki's denialism led to, I would say, deaths and it all started with him. The Arms Deal shutting down, the public protectors investigations. In parliament, when Barbara Hogan pointed out that TAC had done a study that shows it's cost-effective to provide treatment at a finance committee, Mbeki called her in and said: you'll never do that again. So in a sense, that was the political climate of shutting down: no debate. He then also was central to corruption. I don't think he's personally corrupt…but he knew all the corrupt, all the corruption because it went into ANC coffers.

OO: Everyone was taking a bit off and then actually the comrades took more than they gave to the ANC.

ZA: Right. And then his insistence on Black Economic Empowerment and affirmative action.

OO: To the detriment of?

ZA: To the detriment of everything. It so racialized the country's discourse. So that's me and this economic policy, for sure. Could have been better. Okay. But that's a separate discussion to come to COVID.

OO: I agree.

ZA: In the C epidemic, as I said, the first thing that was critical is Ramaphosa and the government's intervention.

OO: Please, elaborate on that a little more.

ZA: It was phenomenal, even though we all know now the lockdown was problematic, but it was necessary because the health systems weren't really—and that was globally—all ready, I know for sure, to take an influx of large numbers of people.

OO: Of course. And especially with a weak public health system, as is the South-African, at present.

ZA: The health system collapsed, yes. And if we didn't have lockdown, then the death rate would've gone much bigger. It was necessary. Sure. At least in the first wave of course. HIV globally, but particularly in South Africa, created the infrastructure, the medical infrastructure and the scientific infrastructure to deal with the epidemic, with us.

OO: That's a lesser-known fact, isn't it?

ZA: Yes, and ideologically the two epidemics aren't connected. I mean both are very different epidemics. One is, uh, only transmissible through bodily frozen sex and takes a long time for incubation. So it doesn't lead to immediate death, and all that stuff. And now there's treatment for it, etcetera. The other one is contagious. It's in the air. You're going to get it, anyone can have it, and you have to have had sex to get the other one, this, the whole bloody population. It doesn't matter where you are if you breathe it in, it's done.

OO: But also the sharing of bottle fluids help spread the disease. So in a way, can we also understand COVID-19 as some sort of STD (Sexually Transmitted Disease)?

ZA: No, I wouldn't say that. It can be transmitted, but the predominant transmission is airborne. You know, if you look at households, the data on households, that's where the pandemic is in every country; particularly there was a phenomenal amount of beautiful articles, moving articles, in *The New York Times* about houses with a father getting sick mother getting sick, sister getting sick, brother getting sick… two of them dying, two of them living, one has long COVID and one doesn't get sick. There's a probability that if you have sex with someone who's sick, you're going to get it. Sure. Because you're breathing air, but if you're sitting around a table having dinner, it's likely that a significant number of people are going to get it. The public perception isn't one of sex. No.

OO: Another difference with HIV is that there was initially no real testing, no real test available. It became available very quickly. With HIV, initially there was no test. Testing became available in 1987, I think.

ZA: Right. Right. Prior to that, nothing prior to that, nothing. Right. It was just symptomatically clinically diagnosed. The first few weeks of COVID were also clinical diagnosis. And then you had the understanding of how to treat it. But the vaccine and more effective treatment come along much quicker. And the global transmission was like that. The global transmission of HIV took many years. I mean, it did, but in gay communities, but beyond gay communities, in minority communities in the US it took a little bit more time.

And the thing that I was most angry about was that our activist history wasn't used, no, they didn't draw from that resource base. Here's the thing. One would assume that things like Treatment Action Campaign would have been at the forefront. Why? Because it was as difficult for someone living with HIV to get COVID as anyone else wasn't different. But once you had it, it was much more serious. And in addition to that, another set of epidemics, the comorbidities, diabetes, hypertension, all those things in people on ARV (Antiretroviral treatment). So the people who are most likely to get it and die were people who are untreated.

I think the legal strategy is misplaced. In what sense? Two court cases are about access to the contracts that multinationals had with the government. Of course we need to see that. It should be open, but all you do is go to an opposition party and tell them task for it. To go to court for it is like you taking total, total detour, and it's not going to be effective. And believing that we have to go to the World Trade Organization to get a waiver is foolish because in public health emergencies there's absolutely no reason that you have to do all this. We need to go and spend on flights to the US. Brazil did it under the rightwing government with Bolsonaro and passed legislation that says we are going to manufacture. And then there was only a focus on the vaccine earlier. Now they've sorted added treatments, but there was no focus on the cost of treatment or on the cost of testing. The cost of testing here is 10 times the cost of testing in Europe, 10 times, 10 times the cost of testing in Europe.

OO: It's R500. It's very expensive.[5]

ZA: Testing has come down, but it used to be R800.

OO: That's pretty much the monthly allowance for impoverished individuals in South Africa.

ZA: And here the activists just went to have tea with international bureaucrats and made press conferences…

OO: So there's this price gouging and all this is sort of…

ZA: So you can imagine my anger.

OO: Absolutely. And also for someone like you, coming from the early AIDS activism…it must be something difficult to cope with, no doubt. My next question is: Was the Ramaphosa administration more willing to incorporate TAC knowledge into SA's national strategy to face COVID-19?

ZA: He said, we're going to use legislation to, but he can't do it because the EU and the Americans are pressurizing him and the companies. I'm going to do it and I want to do it. That's public. And he raised it strongly at the WHO (World Health Organization) and elsewhere. Okay. But behind him, they needed to be a movement. There was nothing; there were a few voices in America, quite hysterical, about what the WHO and WTO do, but they lost the plot. The real activism that happened with COVID-19 was the Cape Town Together and the Community Action Networks, which was about food and helping people get food and anything else that people needed.

OO: Good. So there was a cross-class and cross-race movement to face COVID-19.

[5] R stands for Rand, SA's currency.

ZA: Of course. And that was so phenomenal. I just helped on farm because I would imagine with the informal economy here, if you have lockdown, all those people were certainly lost. They can't get out to make a crust.

OO: So either you die of COVID or you die of starvation.

ZA: Indeed, indeed. So all that community activism was phenomenal and the HIV activist didn't plug into that. Right. But also because that could've picked up very quickly, the medicines need to come so that we can lift the lockup, the vaccine needs to come so that we can lift the lockup. So there would've been a dramatic interaction between the two things.

OO: Sure.

ZA: And it's very different now to TAC's time because of evil social media.

OO: Why?

ZA: Because of the conspiracy theorists. It is both great for us and it is bad for us. TAC faced conspiracy theorists, but they didn't have Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter. They didn't have that, and they didn't have Fox News either.

OO: Absolutely, I do see your point.

ZA: Now we have that. The clash of things, you really need a movement in order to counter that. There's no way that you can counter that by simply countering on social media. No way. So those are the lessons that we still have to learn, learn. And maybe you can write about it, a short article, if you don't mind.

OO: Why?

ZA: Why? Because I'm a perfectionist. So I want to read everything on a topic.

OO: Okay, good. Let's linger now on the future. Actually, I was going to ask you about the future challenges of the national health system.

ZA: Let me just step back in time very quickly. Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma was the best healthcare minister we've had. She brought in legislation on termination of pregnancy. Even though she was Catholic, she brought in the legislation on medical schemes, on drugs. The most important achievement is she said that no one should be further away than five kilometers from a clinic. That was revolutionary and literally brought in all the primary healthcare centers. Several mistakes that were made is in how these institutions were managed. So she closed down nurse training colleges and said that nurses must go train at the universities. Nursing training colleges were much bigger, much more effective, had better links with communities and had a culture of nurses. Now you had to get professors to go and teach people nursing so that was a mistake. And then also the demonizing of tertiary medicine…hospitals, professors, academic professors, and so

on, she also did. She created an essential drug list. So before, as you would know, doctors would prescribe the latest medicine from the hospital, from the public budget. And she expanded the budget to the whole country to incorporate black people.

OO: You couldn't go at the prices that the drug companies were demanding.

ZA: Yes, so she created the essential drug list, and she created it through law: generic substitution. So, if you are a private patient and you go to a pharmacy yeah, they have to offer you the generic, generic, not the brand, you have to request it if you want. So she did all those things, which created access very broadly. And in the medical schemes act, she said, you're going to do this, you're going to cover pregnancy. You're going to cover HIV. You're going to cover any disease and you're not going to charge more solidarities. So that is revolutionary in our healthcare system.

Mbeki's economic policy said no new jobs in the public healthcare sector or in the public sector, so no new nurses, no new cleaners. We had outsourced cleaning, instead, and all that sort of stuff. Yeah. That was at the time where you actually had to increase healthcare professionals. Because the future was the AIDS epidemic, and that's a lesson we have to learn. The cutting of the health budget now would be a huge mistake. It needs to be expanded. It was only until the antiretroviral program rolled out that state spending increased.

OO: In connection with this, I was going to ask you what in your view the most pressing needs for stability, sustainable development and economic progress in South Africa are. With the advent of democracy South Africa joined the ranks of globalization, entering the corporate world with force. Yet the economy doesn't seem to take off.

ZA: Our tax revenue increased. We are collecting taxes now, and then during state capture, and now it's being reversed again with people being audited. Some people are dodging taxes. The new government put in Pravin Gordon, who tried to get me expelled from the ANC in the old days. He ran the South African Revenue Service (SARS) and professionalized it so much and targeted who to go after which businesses and criminals, all that sort of stuff. He did a fantastic job. And then we had Zuma cause SARS. He took oversights and kicked out all the good people. Now they've had to rebuild it. Wow. And it's still struggling. It's still starting. So we've had cycles of good and bad tax collection.

OO: I'm glad to hear that tax revenue has increased in order to sustain public services in the context of load-shedding and mass unemployment. Two more questions to conclude, okay? The first is: what are the future challenges of the health system in terms of epidemics?

ZA: The epidemics we have to prepare are biological; that is to say, viruses, fungus, bacteria…so those are one set of them. The second set are those that will be created by displacement. Well, actually there's a third set. Those that will be created by climate emergency displacement. TB will rise again; all those things will come back in full force. Things that we supposedly eradicated.

The biggest thing that worried me is ARV disruption during COVID, of course, because literally in six months you start getting ill in the year. You're dead. And the whole thing is, yeah, it's been

that you reverse. All the progress is gone. So the loss of supply lines would be major in bringing back epidemics as well under control, such as hypertension, heart disease, all those things if you have a disruption of the supply line. Our system collapses and, most importantly, health collapses. And you will have exactly what we have in HIV: deterioration of life expectancy. So the preparation of that is understanding supply lines and preparing nurses, doctors, paramedics, community, healthcare workers to understand and change the university curricula of doctors and nurses to focus on emergency medicine and to refocus people coming through management studies and business studies-on towards what's going to happen to supply lines. So someone who goes into procurement in the health department needs to know this can happen. So have stocks…

OO: Actually, that's a historical claim in Spain. Nurses and doctors very often ask the Spanish authorities to train medical personnel in emergency. It's not a specialty yet.

ZA: That's reasonable, so that needs very serious interventions out. When I think of WHO, they have an understanding of it, but it's not sufficient. I'll go back to the essential drug list to make a point. The essential drug list in the past used to exclude drugs that were essential because poor countries can't afford them. The essential didn't mean essential but what people could afford. And we said their job is not to say what can be afforded and that they needed to say what a life- saving essential is. The pricing is a separate issue, for sure. We can do with that. That changed. That's true.

So ARVs came onto the essential drug list for the first time as an expensive medicine. That was essential so that changed. The other thing that changed is they had to set up citizens committees with people who were directly affected. I was on a strategic technical advisory committee of WHO when there was a radical transformation around HIV, which previously WHO treated separately from TB. They said both can't be treated together. It was MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières) here in KwaZulu-Natal that came in and said they couldn't do that to the health department. They told them to treat them together because most people with HIV will get TB. And most people with TB will get HIV.

OO: Now they do.

ZA: Now they do. The thing is: why have a separate clinic? So, anyway, WHO can change if there's pressure, otherwise it's a useless organization, particularly the African region of WHO is corrupt. It loves flying around. It has no infrastructure to deal with pandemics. It's Save the Children. It's MSF, it's the Red Cross. They all come in to lead and do the groundwork and they'll issue press statements. That's it. WHO has tea with the government to say something, and then they go back to their fancy houses. And the same with UNAIDS (United Nations AIDS programme), it was transformed into a totally different instrument than what it was before. So we need climate activists and the health activists to come together.

OO: Will you write your own memoir some day? If you could step back in time, what would you change in your life? What role does HIV on the whole play in your life? In my view, you are a national icon and a living legend of South African activism, thus highlighting a long-established tradition of South Africans' commitment to social demands. What do you want your legacy to be?

How would you like to be remembered? Of what importance is national memory to you? What role are you willing to play in this sense in the years to come?

ZA: First, let me start with memory; history and memory is important for everyone. The most important lessons that I learned was not from national history or memory, but international. It was about the workers' movement, the women's movement or queer movements in other countries. It was about the revolutions in other countries. And that influenced people's thinking. So memory does it generally, but history makes a difference because memory is faulty, very faulty.

What would I say to myself if I look back? It's lovely to be angry, but be patient and be nice and be a nice, horrible patient. You need to know that the results aren't going to come quickly. The first political lesson I learned is burning my school down. I became an anarchist and decided to burn my school down, hoping that the revolution would ignite the revolution. Yes that's [it]. And when I went back to school the next day, every kid was happy. It was a holiday. Then I thought nobody's got this. And within a couple of years, my thinking changed completely to patient and organizing. It's a long place. So there has to be urgency and patience to do things, both combined because there's certain things that require urgent attention. But only if you do it in a way that draws people in rather than alienate and polarize. I'm a great believer in creating moral consensus. I've exercised my patience for a long time, but there're flares of madness.

And if you ask me what I would change, that could be one of the things, okay. To be a more decent person.

OO: A more decent person? Aren't you a decent person already after all of your struggles and battles with nonsense?

ZA: Yeah. I think especially as an atheist one struggles to be good every day. You're never a good person. You always struggle to be good.

OO: But that's a moral, that's almost like religious from what we talked about at the very beginning of this.

ZA: You reflect every day on what good you've done or what bad you've done and the same is for prayer. That's what you're meant to do. When you pray, whoever harmed, who have I been horrible to? What thing did I do that was bad? What good did I do? And what can I improve? And that is what prayer is meant to bring to you.

It's not a ritual. It's a critical ritual that makes us human. Yeah. Because it's what makes us human for me is what had our rent believes or her philosophy that what makes us human is thought and reflection, otherwise we are just machines.

Then, I mean, what was your legacy? You know, I think what I think 's good, pretty clear, but I don't think about it like that when I think about who will be left behind to do good work.

OO: Hence my question because the other day when you walked us around Bertha House[6] and introduced some of the people you work with to us. I soon realized that was one of your concerns. You're a mentor to all those young, positive, motivated, and intellectual activists. Of that, I have no doubt. Bertha House has very good vibes. It's an inspiring place to carry out community work.

ZA: I prefer to call it support work, mentoring. We do it, too, and so very often that it makes me feel like a boss.

OO: That's great. Thank you very much for this wonderful and very generous interview.

Interview with Shaun de Waal

Oscar Ortega (OO): Welcome, Shaun. Thank you for agreeing to do this interview.

Shaun de Waal (SW): Hello, thank you. It's my pleasure.

OO: Could you, please, tell me something you feel particularly proud of as a South African?

SW: It's a difficult question in a way because this relates to the national unity question, and it relates to the national identity question. So these are difficult things. I'm proud of South Africa that we made a political settlement at the time that we did as a country. I'm proud of our constitution as a South African. I'm proud of many of our writers and artists and singers and so forth. I wish I was more proud of where South Africa is today.

OO: Almost 30 years have gone by since the first Democratic election. In what sense do you take pride in your Constitution? I say so because it's a forward-looking Constitution. Then, is there any aspect of the South African constitution that you consider that deserves or that merits further praise?

SW: Look, I think for me, it's probably the obvious thing, which is that we have a bill of rights that protects people from discrimination on the basis of race, sex, gender, and etcetera. That's a fundamental right. In other words, people that in Apartheid South Africa were excluded are now included as full citizens. And I take it personally because, you know, as a gay man, you can grow up in South Africa as I did in the sixties and seventies, feeling quite oppressed, so I think that for me, it's important. That's the achievement of the Constitution, and from there, from that point the various elements of the Constitution can play out. You know, there's an argument about socioeconomic rights that people do have rights, too, not just protection of the state on the level of rights, but also physical amenities. The hope is that that's the template for a better society, whether it's working or not. We're still fighting.

[6] A foundation providing safe spaces for activists to connect, organize and co-create.

OO: Let's linger on the politics of the country now. The current politics in South Africa are conducive to creating a stifling atmosphere. For example, we may want to take in mind the never ending load-shedding, mass unemployment, not enough affordable housing, inflation rates, ANC and ANC-aligned people's corruption, political scandals that affected the current president Mr. Ramaphosa, such as the money in foreign currency that was stolen or apparently stolen at this house. So, I wonder how much of all these things South Africans can stand. I mean, isn't it time to vote the ANC out? Is a much-needed political regeneration possible in South Africa? Can you foresee any substantial shift in politics in the offing?

I'm asking so, because every time I Uber, I engage with Uber drivers in politics, right? And very often, even though they show discontent with the ANC, they think that if they vote them out Apartheid will be back, which is something senseless in our age. And very often they say that they would go for the EFF (Economic Freedom Fighters). They ask me sometimes do you think that's a good option for our country? And I often say it might not be the best available option because South Africa could become the next Zimbabwe in three years.

SW: I know what you mean. I worked for many years as the editor of the opinion section of *The Mail* & *Guardian*, and I edited a lot of copy about all these arguments about South Africa and the state. And I think it's hard to make predictions, but you can see what the historical tendencies are. The party of liberation comes into power. They've usually got about 20 to 30 years. Look at many other countries in Africa and South America. Liberation government comes into power and usually does some good things and some bad things. Usually over time, it runs out of energy, runs out of life, and becomes too corrupt. And, then, at that point, you've got the hope that the democratic process will take over and that the people will start voting the ANC power out.

I mean, what has happened is that we've seen ANC's share of power at voting level decreasing and decreasing and decreasing with every election since Thabo Mbeki's time. Ramaphosa helped a bit to bring it up a bit after the Zuma years. But, basically, it's getting to the point now where most of the nation is quite clear that the ruling party has fucked up, and that too much has been lost. And when you're experiencing load-shedding every day, or in my area water shortages, never mind what people who live in the townships go through every single day because they don't have proper plumbing or electricity, etcetera. That's people living at a very poor level of existence, and the state is not offering a solution to them. I mean, there's no reaction. Nothing.

OO: Exactly. What is happening in a country with so much potential, as is the case of South Africa, that is beyond non-accountability. How come?

SW: Whenever I see any of these ministers, like the outgoing premier…I just would wish I was there to like, stop and say, okay, so how many houses did you build? Just tell me how many houses did you build for the people who live in the streets and the people who are squashed, with all shacks and things… they are supposed to be building houses. But no, you know, the backlog was millions. And they're going to have a big party because they built 10,000, 20,000. I mean, it's pathetic. So, you know, you're seeing a certain level of state failure.

You've got to build the nation. And the first thing you do to build the nation is that you build the state because the state is going to drive the nation. This is the model of the nation, state of Europe,

etcetera. So you're going to follow that path, and you're going to get some of it. You get some of it wrong. But unless you build the state, unless you have, at least, a capable state, you will not drive development of that country. You will not drive social cohesion; you'll not drive any of these things that are supposed to be taking us towards a better future.

OO: When the country was handed over to Mandela, there was a surplus of electricity. South Africa could rely on its electricity for at least 14 or 15 years.

SW: Absolutely. That's true.

OO: Load-shedding started in 2008, right? And since then, it has never stopped. So the state was already constructed or under construction. There was an infrastructure that just needed proper maintenance.

SW: The state neglected its duties. And I mean, that does often happen in places where you've got an overdominant party because they can get away with it at elections and stuff. They get so involved; it becomes an internal power struggle to reap the benefits of being in government. And it's also happened all over Africa, South America.

What we're seeing now with load-shedding, and so forth, is in a way part of a cycle that is worrying, because it's basically de-industrialization. The model of a nation state is successful, multi-society if it's partly built on the idea that you have a functioning economy and that everybody can, at least, live and work. If you've got de-industrialization as we do in South Africa now, where factories are closing down, the country becomes poorer, and South Africans become less cultured. Half the population is out of work. They're not working. 17 million people live on state welfare.

OO: The country is pushing in the opposite direction because what we have now is a malfunctioning economy, as regards the many cases of state captures and scandals such as that which involved Jacob Zuma and the Guptas. So, this aspirational mood that post-Apartheid South Africa created is somehow…

SW: Well, that mood is gone! There was a brief Rama-euphoria moment when Ramaphosa came into power and got Zuma out. Zuma just destroyed the state. The Zuma government was so busy ripping off everybody, and looting. And the other public institutions, like the Chapter Nine institutions[7] that are supposed to protect the rights of citizens, are probably… they actually undermined those institutions so they could get away with their crimes, and the same with the tax service. If you don't have a functioning tax service, you do not function as a nation state. So they were actually endangering the nation state of South Africa, this new democratic state that was brought into being in 1994, why were they endangering it for personal gain? So basically, yes, the answer is going to have to be voted out, but unfortunately, it's going to take a long time and to be ugly.

[7] Such as the Public Protector and the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC). They are constitutionally independent and serve to uphold and defend the new Constitutional rights.

OO: It's going to be ugly. I agree with you. It can be felt in the air, no doubt.

SW: Because I realize, again, from having worked in this field and edited so much political material for so long, but probably one of the only hits at oppression is that the revenue increased in the country. That's very possibly the only positive thing, but if you want to talk about any political transitions and things like that, and the decline and decay of the majority party that thinks they have God-given right to rule, never mind, you know, large sways of people think just because they are Zulu they've got God-given right to rule the rest of South Africa. They feel we should all be part of the Zulu empire. You know, there are a lot of these tensions and, you know, unless it's well-managed…

OO: Yes, you're right. South Africa looks a pleasant place on the surface, but there are lot of tensions underneath. And taking up again on this aspirational mood that post-Apartheid South Africa created, there were aspirations, expectations, most of which were actually never fully or even partially met. My impression as an outsider is that somehow South Africans are so reluctant to change. Well, I'm saying so, because I've noticed that from time to time, especially ANC and EFF senior leaders sort of make the ghosts of the past re-emerge, and I find this quite dangerous, as in my view, this stirs up conflict where conflict already thrives. So why are the South Africans, black South Africans in particular, so reluctant to change?

SW: Do you mean to change, in general, or to change and to not vote for the ANC anymore?

OO: Yes, because it's very easy. When South Africans hold elections the ANC always reminds rural South Africans and black South Africans that the ANC brought democracy, and they were not the only people who fought for it. Obviously one must give credit to their unrelenting work and the liberation struggle, no doubt. But they were not the only people who fought for democracy in this country. And I think that the appropriation of democracy on their part is insane, especially when it comes to brainwashing when elections are in the offing.

SW: Well, that is why I find it insane. That is what the government of the liberation movement is going to do. That is going to always be the propaganda of the ruling party. Where they take power is that, you know, we liberated you, you owe us forever, you must believe in us. But obviously it's part of propaganda. So, and I think many, many South Africans see through that. Some people don't. I mean, some people just take it on a material basis that they've been told we're going to have a DA government, and they're going to withdraw social services. You're not going to get your pension. Whatever, you know, you don't know what the hell they tell people. And if you have an educated population who can make a reasonably informed decision, you are not going to get people making decisions when they vote on the basis of policy.

That one party offers social and the other one doesn't, that's what they say. Whatever, they're not making it on that basis. They make it on the basis of a set of intersecting loyalties that are partly tribal, that are partly of memory, of particular political struggle, etcetera. These overlapping and intersecting loyalties that for many, many people add up to the fact that, in a sense, the ANC is their family. They're part of the ANC family, the clan of the family. We all believe in the struggle,

liberation and stuff like that. And this movement demands our loyalty and we continue to give it our loyalty. Otherwise, we have nothing.

OO: You made an excellent point because loyalty to the ANC comes first and loyalty to South Africans comes second.

SW: Yes. Because that's the way that things have worked out in the political economy of South Africa; any old Marxist could have predicted that the ruling party has now become not only as access to power, but also become access to money for the growing bourgeoisie, so now we have a growing elite.

OO: Can we then equate the ANC with elites in this country?

SW: Yes, without a shadow of a doubt.

OO: Johannesburg is currently run by a DA major, a woman who seems to be doing a good job. I can find some resemblances between some of the Spanish and South African largest cities in terms of urban and spatial politics. For instance, something that calls my attention is the deterioration of the CBD, the old Central Business District. It's a place teeming with infinite possibilities, with beautiful—but crumbling—historic buildings. As far as I know, I'm surprised that there is no such thing as an ambitious initiative that seeks to restore that public, historic and symbolic space, with the goal of giving it back to Jo'burg's people. Whether you believe it or not, it's one of my favorite urban spaces in Jo'burg together with Melville, Linden or the former Indian area. The inner cities of Bilbao, Barcelona, Valencia or Madrid used to be sites for social and economic degradation, violence and conflict. They all underwent a deep process of transformation due to the so-called pink euro, right?[8]

And that's creating some sort of safe environments. Doing business became something friendly. The bad thing is that all of them gentrified to a greater or lesser extent, except for Bilbao, which is still affordable for local people. These projects revitalized the social, cultural, and economic fabric of those formerly depressed areas. I've noticed that there's no such thing as a queer district or queer neighborhood in Johannesburg, even though it might be risky because it means that you're singling out members of a specific community in a country where discrimination achieved the category of official policy for more than four decades. But bearing all this in mind, do you think that Johannesburg's inner city can become a site for queer people and queer related business? Can you envision a pink inner city or the booming of a solid economy that revolves around the pink rand?

SW: It could happen, but it won't happen anytime soon because what you're talking about, first of all, is the kind of situation where you've got a fair amount of money in the system to do things like regenerating inner city spaces or to do any of that kind of development.

[8] It is said that gay people, in general, earn more, and have more cash available to spend, than heterosexuals. In western countries businesses tap into this market because they often have a higher purchasing capacity.

OO: But you already have the infrastructure…you just need to take advantage of it and make it accessible to citizens.

SW: We already have the infrastructure, but we also have a construction industry that is struggling. And we also have a construction mafia that is undermining projects if they're not getting a cut on the side. And it's a very complicated situation because the general economy is down, so because there's all this political turmoil I think it becomes very hard to say that anybody's going to invest a great deal in that kind of project at this point. I mean, they did it before when Maboneng was developed. Various places have been developed. I mean when talking about development, in general, that goes hand-in-hand with the bourgeoisification of a sector of society. There's a greater proportion of people who are earning a decent salary, who can afford a house, who can afford a flat that's being done up, you know, with young professionals and these kinds of people.

So unless those numbers are growing, you've got to have that. And you've got to have such a growth of social consciousness that people say, oh, the queers can have a little village or whatever. I mean, in South Africa, there's an instinctive… What's the word? Resistance to segregation. You know what I mean? You can't say, we have a white area here, black area, you know, we are not allowed to segregate in that way. So in a way, people may say: "what do you want a queer village for?" People might say we can go anywhere we like, which is true.

OO: But a place like Johannesburg should have a queer district. Some people claim for that kind of urban areas where they can feel part of a specific community.

SW: Well, you know, average people want to be integrated, all together. They don't like the idea of a separately queer space. But certainly I find that there's something missing in the queer scene of Johannesburg. You've mentioned the Maboneng project, which in my view wasn't properly thought out, especially considering that it was in the old city, in the old CBD, and quite far away from town. And I think that the fact that it was out of town, outside of town, not accessible, not safe… plus the closing of the highway M2, as you may figure out, further complicated the possible success of that project. I think, in that regard, Newtown could have been the perfect place for a project like that of Maboneng, in my view, because it's next to Braamfontein, which is an area that is relatively safe and walkable even at night.

OO: They did develop a lot of public housing in Newtown in the past few years. It's certainly much nicer than when I first visited Johannesburg in 2018. I could even walk Mandela Bridge alone for the first time.

SW: Newtown is much better at present. Of that, I have no doubt.

OO: They did develop brand new houses, because I know someone who was involved in that, who worked for the city-owned housing development in the nineties, and they did some successful densifications, as they were called, and more residential space. You see that in Newtown, Fordsburg, and etcetera. That's all been commercial space for a long time. Fordsburg was purely commercial, that bottom end of Newtown was purely commercial because it was actually supposed to be the barrier between the white center of the city and the Indian part of town.

SW: Newtown was the Indian part, but the moment you go into Fordsburg, that is the industrial area, and on the other side of that is residential, mostly for Indians. I mean Mayfair, etcetera. That's the legacy of apartheid spatial planning.

OO: I see your point.

SW: Any of these things could change. They can be repurposed and so forth, but you need the political world. You need the economic resources to do it. And because South Africa's economy is in a bad way, and because we're suffering under the lash of all these various things, including de-industrialization, lack of electricity, etcetera, these kinds of projects are not going to take off easily.

OO: Well, personally, I think the country will revamp within a few years. Let's hope so. But that's my bet. You know I have a hope for the better of the country. I certainly hope so. Right. Because I feel the country has the potential and the infrastructure. It has an enormous potential. What might help to increase this feeling of safety in the city? The extension of the Rea Vaya bus lines actually brings security as well. It is a very modern bus system, well thought out, and the stations are safe and clean. And I've noticed that the density of the population has grown along the Rea Vaya lines. So I think, in that regard, there's some sort of collaboration between public institutions and private institutions, there is a possibility for improvement.

SW: There's scope for improvement, but unfortunately the private public partnerships as they were called, you know, between state money and private capital to develop these areas are exactly the site where state capture has taken place, and where money has been siphoned off, and those development projects have fallen apart.

OO: Do you think South Africa may need bureaucrats?

SW: We need better bureaucrats, better bureaucrats, because Lenin would've said fewer, but better.

OO: Fewer, but better, that's it. Let's linger now on the queer issues, okay? Well, in one of your publications *Pride: Protest and Celebration*, which saw light in 2006 you walk the readers through the history of the gay liberation struggle in South Africa, which also runs parallel to the anti-Apartheid struggle. And that's creating a repository of public knowledge that is accessible to everyone. On top of this, you were also a staunch advocate for same sex marriage in South Africa, as attested in the book, *To Have and To Hold: The Making of Same Sex Marriage in South Africa*, published in 2008. And considering your background in queer studies, do you consider queer people in South Africa today are making the most of past struggles? Or on the contrary, are they jettisoning the legacy and conquests of the past? What do you think is looming on the horizon in terms of queer struggles in South Africa?

SW: It's an interesting question, very interesting question. I don't know entirely how one can answer it.

OO: Can I tell you my impression?

SW: Sure! Go ahead!

OO: My impression is that, for some reason, and of course, in general, what happened in Apartheid is not present for the youth in South Africa. I've noticed that we are enabling some sort of inappropriate attitude on them in the sense that I don't see them prepared for life in contemporary South Africa. I often engage in lively discussions with youths. Very often, some point out that if things go wrong, they can survive on state welfare. Maybe this is a sweeping statement, but I think some need lots of supervision and lack curiosity, in my view. So I think that somehow this inspirational mood that post-Apartheid politicians created is not doing good, any good to the country as this is enabling a subsidized South Africa when this country, in the past, was very innovative and was at the forefront of many things. South Africa was once among the top ten economies in the world. Obviously, I'm not saying that Apartheid should be back, at all. Don't get me wrong. I'm just suggesting that perhaps some things of the past should be revised in the sense that the country largely benefited from industrial and scientific research, particularly in terms of revenue for the country. Many patents after 1994 were sold when the country could have made money on them to finance the public services, for example education. The educational system is going to the dogs. I find it shocking that people can get a pass with 30% in matriculation.

SW: Well, you see there, your question answers itself. Sorry, your question answers itself, because to my mind, I mean, you can accuse the ANC as the ruling party of liberated South Africa, of a lot of things. But I think one of the worst sins is mismanaging the education system, letting education decline to the degree in South Africa that it has because it's just fucking ridiculous. It really, really is. I mean the Greek, they're democratized, you know, spread schools. But, you know, if your state, you know, I mean, I come back to this thing of, of you know, post-liberation societies, you know, you've got to build the state. You know, look at Turkey in the early part of the 20th century, actually. You've gotta physically build a state, you know? They said, look, how do you get, how do we get a state, whatever, you know?

The state education system is a complete mess. The union is very undisciplined. It's very powerful, but it's very undisciplined. And you know, I don't know, they should have been shut down or professionalized. I really think it's a great crime against the people of South Africa. Our education system is falling apart because, you know, then you don't get people with the technical skills to run off the things that need to be run in the world. And you don't develop and help to change and push forward social attitudes to do with all sorts of things from gender-based violence and misogyny and masculinity, you know, all the way to queer stuff. And just how society operates because we want to get to a place where we're all free to walk the streets at night anywhere in this country.

OO: Exactly. That's a pending challenge. We need to take back the streets for law-abiding citizens and gather for all sorts of activities. We have to reclaim the streets from robbers and criminals.

SW: Exactly. You know, whether you are queer or whether you're a woman or whoever. You know, we want to be citizens and we want to enjoy our life and our freedom, and so forth. The fact that we can't do that is a social failure.

OO: I agree, that's a big issue in cities like Johannesburg. One of the books that I recently read is one called *Femicide in South Africa* (2020) by the journalist Nechama Brodie. There were some heart-wrenching moments because of the amount of crime, and most of it was directed to queer people, who are a minority group in South Africa, and lesbians, who are victims of corrective rape. I think that's the term, if I'm not mistaken.

SW: Corrective rape, yes.

OO: Thank you. So that's why I was wondering if queer people in South Africa are making the most of past struggles, in which you were very active, by the way. You know, the country was very active in the liberation of gay people in the eighties, early nineties. The first Pride took place in 1990 in South Africa. So there was like some sort of social fabric that endorsed this idea that was strongly supported to build a fairer society.

But my impression when I engage with the youth is that they don't give credit to that struggle, or that's my impression, at least, because they show no familiarity with that, which I find problematic, you know; because I think memory is important. And I don't see that they are connected with it. There's no such thing as intergenerational communion. I find that worrying. So that's why I am asking what is looming on the horizon in terms of queer struggles in South Africa because, in my view, lot of work needs to be done.

SW: I agree, a lot of work needs to be done, but I think we're kind of in a state of limbo. You know, I think we're in a way a bit stalled in terms of many things. I think the various legal challenges up to and including same sex marriage was a sort of trajectory that I think showed as a triumph of achieving these kinds of rights, of getting them into the law and so forth. And I think that there was a kind of attitude, I don't know if it was just people who had been involved in one form or another for a long time like me, but certainly there was a point at which I kind of thought it was fine. Okay, now can we just like, get on with something else now? I think there was a bit of defocusing on that aspect, in particular of, let's call it, the queer struggle.

OO: Is it because in this country, whenever a social group is singled out, that gives rise to or might be interpreted as a possible source of discrimination? Aren't we singled out somehow?

SW: You know, I don't know. I think you'd have to do a lot of sociological study to answer that question. I don't know. There's so much in terms of the history of queer people, but there's a dearth of research in that regard.

OO: People like you or Mark Gevisser did excellent work, and the visual artist, Zanele Muholi, amongst other people, too. However, more people may want to take the lead and engage with this question more openly, don't you think?

SW: Sure. No, I mean, you know, the struggle continues in some form or another. I think we've come to understand that in all these years in South Africa we've had a plague, we've had a pandemic, we've had all of this, we have a collapsing state around us… in the end, life must go on, and we have to keep fighting those battles. That's just how it is. And I think that, to a greater or lesser degree, that's the same for people all over the world. We're in a bad way. I mean, let's hope

that there are ways in which South Africans can address it on the level of citizenship. I think that queer citizenship is part of it. So I don't want to sort of exclude or erase that, or, you know, absorb it into everything. I think queer citizenship has got its own specificities. At the moment, I don't think that the queer is an active site of struggle.

OO: Survival comes first. I think it's obvious there is more pressing needs. Still, it is convenient to raise awareness on this type of issues in South Africa. We also need to consider very carefully what we bring to scholarship.

SW: Absolutely. I think that we have achieved a lot, an awful lot. And I think that's great. And I think that is to be celebrated, but at the same time, I think one can understand it. It's understandable that it's not an active site of struggle.

OO: Well, both of us are university lecturers. Plus you are a recognized writer. And myself, as someone who specialized in South African studies, I find that life writing in general, and memoirs in particular, provide a representative stance of modern South African societies, which are paradoxically deeply rooted in the country's past. Why do you think that life narratives such as, for example, that of Trevor Noah, *Born a Crime* (2016), sell very well? Students love it. Well, at least, that is my experience with Noah's memoir. Again, are South Africans really ready to truly move on and stop thinking of the past? I'm saying so because in a way, although national memory is of utmost importance, I feel that in the case of South Africa, bearing in mind how stuck the country is in its past, it might not do any good to the country. So, why this insistence on the past? The past doesn't allow people to envision neither a present nor a future. What are your insights into life narratives?

SW: I don't know. I think that in a lot of those life narratives what has to be grappled with, you know is a sort of a national trauma and a sort of national, like some kind of glimpse of a dream of healing. And very often in the kind of life writing that we see in South Africa, you know, since 94, its bullying is about, in a way, this question which says, the question would be, okay, here we are, the new South Africa, 1994 or from 1996, when the final Constitution was promulgated because The Constitution is a foundation of a new nation. There is now a new South Africa. Does that mean that there is such a thing as a new South African? No. Well, maybe not. What would such a person look like? What would they be? And I think it's very useful to look at the kind of life writing that people have done from the nineties till now, as they are really grappling with exactly that issue.

Because many of them are grappling with this issue of what it means to be a South African? How do we become a new person? Does this make us a new person? Does our citizenship confer a new kind of personship on us? I mean the Constitution's fundamental claim is to guarantee the dignity, the dignity of every person in South Africa. Well, but the dignity of every person in South Africa is at stake and at risk because of car hijacking, for example. Of course, you can have a big argument about what constitutes dignity and what the state has to maintain, the dignity and the ways in which it has failed. I think the bearing that this has on the kind of writing that you're talking about is that what the Constitution does when it protects people, even if it's in law only, and not in reality.

Here your life was determined by what color your skin was and what your racial and tribal history was. We've broken that citizen system, and we've said, to be a citizen means that we cannot be

discriminated against on these grants. How do we articulate that freedom or that understanding of maybe this thing we are claiming in our own lives? And it's very much the question that people who write life stories and investigate that are simultaneously investigating a kind of sense of self. Because when you ask, "who am I?" one of the first answers is going to be, well, I'm a South African.

We're still trying to put all the pieces together and say, this is what it might mean, or what it doesn't mean. However, it's interesting to me that it's often articulated on those axes of race, gender, sex, class, and sexuality, that those are issues that are at somehow at the core of South African's liberation narrative.

OO: The problem that I find is that you cannot paste all those features back randomly. So I think this process of the reconstruction of national identity cannot be built from a scratch. It's impossible, right. I find South Africa to be still nowadays a place of contested boundaries. I'm sharing my perspective with you because, in a way, even though some areas are supposed to be walkable, only supposed to be walkable, everyone may come, you know there's no restrictions on people's movements. But still, I find this place to be a place of contested boundaries. And historically, South Africa has always been a place of contested boundaries since it's early inception. So do you think that in our current day and age, South Africa is still a place of contested boundaries? If so, in what way(s)?

SW: I do! That's an interesting point. And that's what gives rise to the kind of boundaries that we're constantly trying to negotiate, and those are difficult ones because we haven't grown as a society sufficiently to work through a lot of that stuff. I mean, in the end, you know, in the longest possible historical cycle, it comes down to a fundamental boundary between the haves and the have nots. I mean, socially, the haves and the have-nots. It's about the people who do have access to resources in some form, and the people who do not have access to resources. The people who have so little access to resources are basically all at war with each other all the time for what little they can get.

OO: That's interesting. You've mentioned the haves and have-nots. What about the dos and don'ts?

SW: You know, I think that's an issue. You know, I read a lot of history. I see it in a historical perspective. I think you're part of building a society, as we know from things like the Constitution is about laws. And the sense that some things are acceptable. You know that you respect the dignity of your fellow citizens in certain ways, in the same way that they respect your dignity. So your bodily integrity is protected. You can't just attack somebody in the street for any reason. But that is part of something that's got to be built into a society as it develops. And we haven't done that work hard enough. It's a pending challenge. It's work that needs to happen.

OO: I think the new government or most likely the next government after the 2024 elections will have to give a boost to nation-building policies because this has absolutely been abandoned, especially when Zuma was in office. The social fabric of the country is sort of falling apart, and unity is much needed to face the challenges that lie ahead. It's an unfinished business in my view. What about you?

SW: I think that's exactly a very good point. That's exactly what came across my mind because I think that if a lot more attention had been paid to that kind of thing… You know, we come out of a long and tormented history; there are a lot of resentments. There are a lot of people who are still poor and suffering but are curious about getting to know the person next door. We're still building the nation. The fact that we feel like we've abandoned the nation building projects, you know, and all seems to be fine. And we've got a rich elite. Maybe poor people are suffering, but just let the government give them money. That is a ridiculous notion. Things like load-shedding and state failure and all of these things are, at least, bringing to our attention the fact that these problems have to be addressed.

OO: So, then…what? 30 years after liberation, I think people have legitimate questions to ask. Is South Africa in dire need of some sort of new TRC?

SW: The thing is the TRC was intended to solve a number of political problems, and at the same time, sort of takes South Africa to the next phase. It was part of the reconciliation project that people have to sell to the nation because the first thing that South Africa had to do, if it was going to get over this terrible problem of apartheid, was stop killing each other. That sounds very blunt, but I mean, politically that's exactly what it is.

OO: It's a way of telling people the police won't go into the township and kill people anymore. It's a way of telling people to stop killing each other. Let's talk and let us try and come to a political solution. That was the first thing that had to happen, actually, but what is happening is the opposite. That dialogue never came into effect, you know, because of rampant crime.

SW: Well, I think it went some of the way.

OO: Crime and violence grew exponentially, and violence is such a strong emotion. So in that regard, I was wondering, what writers do you think that best grasp the present or future of South Africa? Because I don't see many people focusing on the present and future of South Africa. The long shadow of Apartheid prevents the country from building that new South Africa.

SW: I wouldn't be able to say because I think that all of those bodies that are now state-funded are working on a number of premises about what the public wants to see or not see, what the public can afford to see or not see. They're working on such an outdated model of what culture does in society that they're just basically wasting their money. I mean, those places are kind of museums, isn't it? The form of old cult, old stuff. I don't see them as innovative, isn't it? The innovative stuff does not arise out of state institutions. I mean, they actually suffocate innovation. On the cultural level, it's going to take some time. There's going to be a new resistance. There's going to be a new sense of how society works or doesn't work, new voices are going to emerge slowly, and this always happens, slowly.

I think we're still processing a lot of the past. I think people are still processing in terms of literature that it's hard to answer that question, you know, because, I mean, this definitively is what I'm saying. Guess, I think it's very open at the moment. It's open; it's a very open field. People are putting out feelers. Some people say, ah, look, that starts to look interesting. I mean, there's a Cape Town writer, it's this fiction again, Cape Town writer Mia Arderne wrote a book called *Mermaid*

Fillet (2020), which is very, I've heard of it, surreal. Fantasy writing like that is starting to generate a kind of picture of the future. And it's looking very dystopian. Looks like we have a good future ahead.

OO: I've heard of this book, too. The book received good reviews in the professional literature. Cape Town is a fantastic setting for any story. Capetonian literature is a genre of its own. For some reason, it's a city shrouded in mystery that holds deep secrets and surprises.

Unfortunately, Shaun, we are running out of time. I wish we could keep talking a bit more. Thank you so much for accepting this interview and for sharing your insights into the current state of South Africa with me.

SW: It's been my pleasure. Thank you.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Maarten Renes for his insightful comments, suggestions and time dedicated to reviewing my work.

I am especially grateful to Dr. Maurice O'Connor, my former Ph.D. advisor, colleague and friend, and my dear friend May Wentworth for their guidance and encouragement throughout the preparation of Zackie Achmat's interview. Their feedback was invaluable in shaping this work.

My sincere thanks to Carl Geldenhuys for introducing me to Shaun de Waal.

A heartfelt thank you goes to my Capetonian host family, the Schwagers. Our discussions, both personal and academic, in their always-crowded dining-table enriched this experience, helping me persevere during challenging times.

Lastly, I would like to extend my appreciation to OCEAT-University of Barcelona for providing the funding necessary to carry out this research.

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