



THE UNBREAKABLE THREAD

THE UNBREAKABLE THREAD



NON-RACIALISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

Julie Frederikse

*"It is you, the reader of the page, that catches the cannon breath
and the drum beat off the written page. I am no more, no less,
than your clerk that writes it down, like a debt always owed
and partly paid. This book is a book of debt and part payment."*

Woody Guthrie, 'People I Owe', Coney Island, USA, 1946
In *Born to win*, Macmillan, 1965

SAHA commemorative edition - September 2015

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- Extending the boundaries of freedom of information in South Africa;
- Raising awareness, both nationally and internationally, of the role of archives and documentation in promoting and defending human rights.

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"I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities."

–Nelson Mandela

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There is a reason to emphasise that fundamentally non-racialism has to be learned and taught. The alternative is to assume that it is something innate, instinctive, a thread that has always been there — and is unbreakable. But non-racialism is not an intrinsic part of political consciousness. That became bitterly clear throughout the

ent road from almost all others. By bringing its international consciousness into South African race relations, a movement based on national pride and national identity has not degenerated into chauvinism. In recent times there are two striking cases that emphasise how important this has been: in Eastern Europe, where reliance on state procla-

FOREWORD

21 years after the end of apartheid and the first democratic elections in 1994, South Africa remains a country defined by race. Despite the strong ideological tradition of non-racialism in the liberation struggle in South Africa and the centrality of the founding principle of non-racialism to the much lauded South African Constitution, the legacy of the apartheid policy of race classification and the economic, social and political stratification this system both entrenched and enforced remain all too evident today.

A recent Nelson Mandela Foundation position paper argued that public discourses on race today “are dominated by expressions of denial, alienation, obfuscation and even self-hatred” and laments the apparent disappearance of those “robust narratives of non-racism and of Black Consciousness... that defined identity in terms of a political vision and a concomitant way of life, or praxis... that shaped our struggles for liberation and our negotiating of a post-apartheid polity.”ⁱ But, as Aubrey Matshiqi pointed out in 2011, “(a)ny attempt at building a non-racial society in SA will fail if it proceeds on the basis of avoiding difficult conversations about race. Also, such a nation will never come into being if we continue to posit a post-racial vision that seeks to deny the ravages of apartheid in present-day SA.”ⁱⁱ

In an attempt to ignite reconsideration of these “robust narratives” and foster these “difficult conversations”, the South African History Archive is conducting a two-year project in 2015 - 2016, drawing on archival materials to prompt inter-generational dialogues about, and educational engagements with, the history of non-racialism in South Africa. This project takes as its starting point Julie Frederikse’s 1990 book, *The Unbreakable Thread: Non-racialism in South Africa*, and its associated archive lodged at SAHA, including recordings and transcripts of those interviews conducted in the late 1980s on which this book draws.

At the time, the author likened the advocacy of non-racialism to an unbreakable thread which, although wearing thin at times, runs through the history of the struggle for democracy in South Africa. Since the original publication of this book in 1990, this thread appears, on the surface of it, to have been woven into the country’s democracy, with non-racialism being a key feature in the African National Congress (ANC) government’s post-1994 policy framework. Yet, despite the persistence with which non-racialism is referenced within both the laws on the ‘new’ land and the vocabulary of public rhetoric, there seems to be little understanding of what the term ‘non-racialism’ is actually intended to mean: David Everatt observed in 2010 that “it has almost as many meanings as there are speakers... Non-racialism is a slogan, but it lacks content or more accurately lacks consensual content, other than being an ideal most agree on.”ⁱⁱⁱ However, the status of non-racialism even as an “ideal” is being contested today - there is increasingly vocal scepticism of non-racialism simply being synonymous with colour blindness^{iv}, with pointed questioning of exactly who this “blind” non-racialism might be serving in contemporary South Africa.^v Recent activism on South African university campuses highlights dissatisfaction with the shallow contemporary rhetoric surrounding non-racialism as one commentator on the #IAmStellenbosch campaign commented: “Non-racialism is the new magic cloak whiteness wears to disguise itself.”^{vi}

It is not just young South Africans who have lost faith in, or grown impatient with the term “non-racialism” – we have seen previous advocates of non-racialism distancing themselves from the term in recent years. As far back as 1998, John Sharp named the growing discontentment with non-racialism “a post-apartheid paradox.”^{vii} In a June 2015 paper laying out why he considers himself to no longer be a non-racialist, Suren Pillay argues that the “political present” demands of us an engagement with a “politics without guarantees” in which we “give up on both the spirited defence and the tragic lament about the fate and future of non-racialism as the sacred destination of our political horizon.”^{viii} In contrast, other scholars have argued that instead of dismissing the concept entirely, the historically deliberate, and richly debated, use of the term over time deserves consideration. Deborah Posel recently observed in an editorial entitled “Whither non-racialism?”, while the country’s “foundational commitment to non-racialism is looking a lot thinner than in the democracy’s infancy”, the call for a “fuller and more concerted engagement with its meaning and promise... should include, and proceed from, a reappraisal of what the term originally stood for – a meaning that ... can and should be extracted from how the term was used.”^{ix}

Hilda Bernstein, in her positive, yet critical 1991 review of *The Unbreakable Thread*, made the cautionary, prescient observation that what is revealed through the interviews was that non-racialism had, and has, to be fought for. Unlike nationalism, non-racialism emerged, often slowly and with difficulty, for a variety of reasons, not the least being the practical experience of struggle:

“Fundamentally non-racialism has to be learned and taught. The alternative is to assume that it is something innate, instinctive, a thread that has always been there – and is unbreakable. But non-racialism is not an intrinsic part of political consciousness... each new generation must study it and learn it for themselves. It is a breakable thread. It does not arise naturally out of South African life, as does African nationalism. It has to be learned by teaching, by experience, by example.”^x

At the inaugural Ahmed Kathrada Foundation annual lecture in 2010 Kgalema Mohlanthe spoke of the “dimming of this non-racial aspiration.”^{xi} And arguably it is this notion of aspiration that is at the heart of rethinking non-racialism. What the voices in this book reveal, in their attempts to reflect on non-racialism, is a long and rich practice of meaning-making and re-making through rigorous debate, and those strategic decisions taken by selecting and aspiring to the term “non-racialism”, in different ways, in response to different pressures, over time.

By bringing these voices out of the archive and into the “political present”, it is hoped that this 25th anniversary commemorative edition may prompt a return to the frank talk and dedicated work South Africa is in desperate need of, if the country is to consolidate in any meaningful way a non-racial democracy that is always coming.

GLOSSARY

ABRECSA	Alliance of Black Reformed Churches in South Africa	DEW	Detainees Education and Welfare
ANC	African National Congress	DPSC	Detainees' Parents Support Committee
ANC (WP)	African National Congress (Western Cape)	EATWOT	Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians
Anti-CAD	Anti-Coloured Affairs Department	ECC	End Conscriptioin Campaign
Anti-PC	Anti-President's Council	FAWU	Food and Allied Workers Union
Anti-SAIC	Anti-South African Indian Council (Campaign)	FBWU	Food and Beverage Workers Union
ARM	African Resistance Movement	FedSAW	Federation of South African Women
APDUSA	African People's Democratic Union of South Africa	FedTraw	Federation of Transvaal Women
AZACTU	Azanian Council of Trade Unions	FOSATU	Federation of South African Trade Unions
AZAPO	Azanian People's Organization	FSU	Friends of the Soviet Union
AZASM	Azanian Students Movement	GAWU	General and Allied Workers Union
AZASO	Azanian Students Organization	GCD	Grahamstown Committee of Democrats
AZAYO	Azanian Youth Organization	Gradac	Grahamstown Democratic Action Committee
BAMCWU	Black Allied Miners and Construction Workers Union	GWU	General Workers Union
BC	Black Consciousness	IANC	Independent African National Congress
BCM	Black Consciousness Movement	ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
BCP	Black Community Programmes	ICT	Institute for Contextual Theology
BOSS	Bureau of State Security	ICU	Industrial and Commercial Workers Union
BPC	Black People's Convention	IDAF	International Defence and Aid Fund
BSS	Black Students Society	IDASA	Institute for Democratic Alternatives in South Africa
CAD	Coloured Affairs Department	IUEF	International University Exchange Fund
CAHAC	Cape Areas Housing Action Committee	IIE	Institute of Industrial Education
CAL	Cape Action League	ISL	International Socialist League
Cathsoc	Catholic Students Society	IWA	Industrial Workers of Africa
CAYCO	Cape Youth Congress	IYY	International Youth Year
CCB	Civil Cooperation Bureau	JORAC	Joint Rent Action Committee
CI	Christian Institute of Southern Africa	MAWU	Metal and Allied Workers Union
COD	Congress of Democrats	MDM	Mass Democratic Movement
Comintern	Communist International	Milcom	Military Committee
Contralesa	Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa	MK	Umkhonto we Sizwe
COSAS	Congress of South African Students	MWASA	Media Workers Association of SA
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions	NAC	National Action Council
COSG	Conscientious Objectors Support Group	NACTU	National Council of Trade Unions
CP	Communist Party	NADEL	National Association of Democratic Lawyers
CPC	Coloured People's Congress	NAFCOC	National African Chamber of Commerce
CPSA	Communist Party of South Africa	NAMDA	National Medical and Dental Association
CUSA	Council of Unions of South Africa	NCFS	National Catholic Federation of Students
CWIU	Chemical Workers Industrial Union	NEC	National Executive Committee
DEFA	Defence and Aid Fund	NECC	National Education Crisis Committee
Descom	Detainees Support Committee	NFC	National Forum Committee

GLOSSARY CONT.

NGK	Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church)	SARHWU	South African Railways and Harbour Workers Union
NIC	Natal Indian Congress	SASM	South African Students Movement
NIS	National Intelligence Services	SASO	South African Students Organization
NLL	National Liberation League	SASPU	South African Students Press Union
NOW	Natal Organization of Women	SAYCO	South African Youth Congress
NP	Nationalist Party	SAYRCO	South African Youth Revolutionary Council
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers	SOMAFCO	Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College
NUMSA	National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa	SOYCO	Soweto Youth Congress
NUSAS	National Union of South African Students	Spro-cas	Special Programme for Christian Action in Society, Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society
OAU	Organization for African Unity	SRC	Students Representative Council
OB	Ossewa Brandwag (Oxwagon Sentinel)	SSRC	Soweto Students Representative Council
PAC	Pan-Africanist Congress	TIC	Transvaal Indian Congress
PC	President's Council	TLSA	Teachers League of South Africa
PEYCO	Port Elizabeth Youth Congress Council	TUACC	Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Conference
PFP	Progressive Federal Party	TUCSA	Trade Union Council of South Africa
PMC	Political-Military Council (ANC)	UBJ	Union of Black Journalists
POPCRU	Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union	UCC	United Committee of Concern
RDM	Rand Daily Mail	UCT	University of Cape Town
SAAWU	South African Allied Workers Union	UDF	United Democratic Front
SACC	South African Council of Churches	UDW	University of Durban-Westville
Sached	South African Council on Higher Education	UN	United Nations
SACOS	South African Council on Sport	UNISA	University of South Africa
SACPO	South African Coloured People's	UWC	University of the Western Cape
SACP	South African Communist Party	UWCO	United Women's Congress
SACTU	South African Congress of Trade Unions	UWO	United Women's Organization
SACTWU	South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union	VAT	Victims Against Terrorism
SADF	South African Defence Force	Wits	University of the Witwatersrand
SADWU	South African Domestic Workers Union	YCS	Young Christian Students
SAIC	South African Indian Council	YCW	Young Christian Workers
SAIC	South African Indian Congress	ZANLA	Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army
SAIRR	South African Institute of Race Relations	ZANU	Zimbabwe African National Union
SANNC	South African National Natives Congress	ZAPU	Zimbabwe African People's Union
SANROC	South African Non-racial Olympic Committee	ZIPRA	Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army
SAP	South African Party		

NOTES ON THIS EDITION

The text from the original publication has, for the most part, been reproduced verbatim, except for a few expansions of names and information about primary sources cited that has become available since the book was first published.

SAHA has included additional archival visual and textual sources in the layout of this new edition and the digital repository. Original captions to images, and biographical descriptions of individuals interviewed have been retained from the original 1990 edition of the book - as such, they are reflective of the context of the time. Brief updated biographical profiles are available for each interviewee in the related digital repository.

All extracts from primary sources are displayed in block quotes throughout the text, with those extracts taken from interviews conducted by Julie Frederikse indicated by inverted commas. The full interview transcripts, along with selected extracts from some of the original audio recordings, and digitised copies of most of the primary sources cited in the book can be accessed in the virtual exhibition at www.saha.org.za/nonracialism.