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Occult Economies, Revisited

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I

In an essay written 20 years ago—of which this version is an update[1]—we sought to explain an unforeseen effect of the rise of neoliberalism and, with it, the spread of democracy to places it had not been before. These two processes, then widely thought to infuse each other, were attributed an almost magical potential to transform the human condition for the general good; magical in that the means-ends relations involved, and the causal circuits that linked them, were taken on faith rather than subjected to critical scrutiny. This millennial mood of expectation, of an eternal path to prosperity primed by the end of the Cold War, was driven by radical realignments in the received order of things—things at once political, economic, social, techno-scientific, ethical, even ontological—that shook existing inter/national institutions and eroded long-standing visions of society and world-making. New levels of global integration were experienced almost

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everywhere: an increasingly planetary division of labor notable for its mobility and flexibility, for instance, and an electronic commons that circulated capital, knowledge, images, consumer goods, and cultural practices with unprecedented speed, thus to compress space-and-time and to promote "free" trade. This was felt especially in places like South Africa, Latin America, and Central Europe, so-called transitional societies, where the collapse of authoritarian regimes had been accompanied by an uneven infusion of liberal freedoms, freedoms long deferred.

The sense of possibility that characterized that moment also brought with it new forms of uncertainty and precarity. In a world that saw the rapid ascendance of finance capital, a world in which unfettered market forces and entrepreneurialism were held to be the alchemic key to abundance, liberty, and opportunity for all, huge amounts of wealth accrued in some quarters, leaving an ever larger sediment of poverty in its wake; this as "jobless growth" became a measure of national well-being, as manufacture moved to ever cheaper, less regulated elsewheres, as the unbottled genie of "new" capitalism fed rising Gini-coefficients, separating affluent from disposable populations, the insured from uninsured, the propertied from propertyless. And leaving many caught more or less in/securely between. It was in this context, itself heavily inflected by race, gender, and generation, we argued, that there had been a turn, in many places, toward "occult economies": to what appear to have been arcane modes of attempting to generate value, often by experimental means, thus to access the hidden mechanisms held to operate behind conventional forms of accumulation. Hence the upsurge, we suggested, of "fee-for-service" theologies and prosperity gospels, "get-rich-quick" scams, and pyramid schemes of various sorts that eroded the clear line between the mundane and the miraculous (West and Sanders 2003; Wojcik 1997; Stoll 2013). Hence, too, the rise of locally inflected satanic scares and witch hunts. And a palpable preoccupation with magical practices: with mimetic performance of all kinds, from conjuring with body parts to the practices of voodoo economics—among them the turn to derivative financial instruments to charm assets from abstractions. All of which spoke, at once, to efforts to make sense of the mysterious possibilities of the "new way of the world" (Dardot and Laval 2014) and, to one degree or another, to act upon them.

Our conceptualization of occult economies, elaborated below, has received its fair share of critical attention, although it has also been productively deployed across several disciplines. Leaving aside disagreements over details, a few serious objections have been raised. One is that the concept "indiscriminately aggregate[s] … disparate phenomena" (Murray and Sanders 2005: 295). As Ranger (2007: 279) notes, this critique arises from the view that the various practices that we take to be interrelated—witch killings, medicine murders, ponzi schemes, whatever—ought each to be analyzed in its own ("local") right; this because they have different motivations and determinations. The argument here, he adds (p. 276), is a foundational one between "splitters," who insist on treating those practices as if each were discrete unto itself, and "lumpers," who prefer to look for, and find explanations in, the connections among them, hypothesizing that they are cognate elements in an embracing economy—itself conditioned by larger historical forces. In point of fact, in our original essay, *pace* those who accuse us of not taking indigenous beliefs seriously in and of themselves, we stressed that occult economies are *always* mediated by the substance of local signifying practices. However, our intention was not to write yet another micro-anthropology of witchcraft. It was to seek out higher order articulations, pragmatic and expressive, between patently different, but interrelated efforts to engage with changing material and social conditions: conditions that, to many, either appeared unpropitious or seemed to hold the key to great wealth—if only one could unlock the secret of their workings. The object of interrogating an occult *economy* is precisely not to look at its component elements in isolation. It is to account for the way they are subsumed in a *logic* of concrete practices and rationales. Whatever the specific ends those practices seek to accomplish, whatever the specific means they use to do so.

This is also why another critique—that our approach to the occult is functionalist, that it revives old anthropological arguments about social breakdown (Kapferer 2001, 2002; Rutherford 1999: 102)—is frankly spurious. We should, says Kapferer (2002: 18), have "rather" seen contemporary sorcery and witchcraft as "being generated in specific kinds of structural dynamics which … generate forces that are embodied in the forms that magical beliefs and practices take." This is exactly what we *did*

do in showing how occult practices concretized the structural contradictions of everyday life in *fin de siécle* South Africa. Far from treating "sorcery and witchcraft as pathological indicators of social breakdown," this being the original sin of British functionalism, we showed these practices to be directed toward explaining and acting on an historically labile world, thus to produce new forms of knowledge and creative action—and pointed out the parallels to, among other things, casino capitalism in New York City. Unless *all* historical change is taken to be "social breakdown" and hence "pathological"—which may be Kapferer's view, but is certainly not ours—our account of occult economies has nothing to do with functionalism. Unless, of course, any explanation, any analysis of cause or determination, is dubbed "functionalist," a common, if often meaningless, term of abuse in anthropological discourse these days. As we put it in another essay (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 169), "witches and zombies are to be read as aetiological principles that translate structural contradictions, experiential anomalies, and aporias … into the argot of human agency, of kinship, of morality and passion." Their "symbolic excess and expressive exuberance … gesture towards an imaginative play infinitely more elaborate than is allowed by purely pragmatic, functionalist explication." It is a play, we took care to show, that involves subtle dis/continuities between past and present (see Moore and Sanders 2001: 14).

A further objection to the concept of occult economy is tied to the question of rationality: Bastin (2002: 169), for example, has it that we "cast sorcery and witchcraft as … an irrational response to the world by the impotent." Really? Even when we relate them to the workings of finance and venture capital? To be sure, we take care to extend the concept of occult economy to those among the wealthy and powerful everywhere who seek new, unconventional ways to become yet wealthier and more powerful. Mark also our stress on the fact that, at core, occult practices seek to produce knowledge by experimentation with means and ends. This is true of, and no more ir/rational than, most other techniques of knowledge production, which have their own enchantments—as do such "hard" scholarly disciplines as economics, itself sometimes viewed "as a religion" (Rapley 2017). This line of critique appears also to project onto our account other preoccupations. One, addressed elsewhere (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003), is that we have imposed a Eurocentric master-narrative of modernity on African

beliefs and practices (Englund and Leach 2000)—as if Africans are not actively concerned to construct their own cutting-edge modernities, are unconscious of the colonizing effects of Euro-modernity on their life-worlds, and do not engage in critical debate about the relationship between the two.

Which, in turn, responds to one last critical point: Ruth Marshall (2009: 25, 28) asks "[w]hat allows [us] to assume that these [occult] practices are principally modes of interpretation and understanding? Why might they not be, rather, principally forms of political practice, modes of *action* on the world?" Again, it is hard to take this seriously. As will be plainly evident below, we emphasize how occult practices *are* precisely that: modes of action on the world whose culturally grounded means and material ends have both political intention and consequences—unless one intends "political" in the most narrow, formalist, and literal of senses of the term. But why, *ab initio*, do we say that occult practices "are … modes of interpretation and understanding"? Because, unless one refuses interpretation entirely—which Marshall (p. 29) appears to do on *a priori* grounds—actions on the world, not least political ones, usually have some foundation in cognition; unless, that is, one treats those engaged in them as unthinking automatons, as zombies. Which *we* refuse to do. Our preference, by contrast, is to listen "principally" to indigenous voices. Says one South African scholar, Sibusiso Masondo (2011: 37), who has heard the same voices, those practices *are* just this: "a mode of producing new forms of consciousness, of expressing discontent with modernity and dealing with its [structural] deformities."

But a number of more pressing matters here: Was the turn to occult economies in the late twentieth century merely a passing, ephemeral phenomenon? Or did it bespeak something more enduring sewn into the fabric of polity, economy, society, and personhood with the triumphal rise of neoliberalism? How transitional *was* the moment at which we first wrote this chapter? What has happened as the millennial mood has given way to a new normal, a time of "entrepreneurial governance" (Dardot and Laval 2014)? As global integration and deregulation have yielded yet greater accumulations of wealth in certain quarters, deepening inequality and some of the dystopic effects of contemporary capitalism in others? As nation-states, often unable or unwilling to ensure the viability of many of

their subjects, condemn them either to a life of immobile disposability or to a desperate, migratory search for more secure footholds elsewhere? As means of communication, knowledge production, and conflict extend in both range and accessibility, linking local intimacies to political and economic processes of ever larger scale? As "truth" itself becomes harder and harder to plumb? How, in sum, does our argument about enchantment and the violence of abstraction hold up two decades on? With these questions in mind, let us return to our reflections on millennial capitalism and occult economies in the late 1990s. We begin, as we did our earlier version, with a clutch of ethnographic fragments; different from our three original ones, they are drawn from a more recent South African archive.

II

The First: from a report in *Times Live*, South Africa, 26 February 2014 (Sapa 2014a):

> There has been an increase in occult-related crimes reported in Gauteng [South Africa], police said on Wednesday. In the last three months, 78 … were reported, Lt-Col Hendriek de Jager, head detective of harmful and religious practices in Gauteng, said in Johannesburg ….Occult-related crimes "are on the increase, especially in the black areas where young boys and girls are promised fame and riches"…
>
> "It's all over Gauteng. It pops up, goes down and then appears again," he said.
>
> Occult-related killings were not limited to Gauteng, but were reported across the country.

The second: from *The Daily Maverick,* 13 October 2013 (Munusamy 2013):

> In the Gospel according to Jacob (Zuma, that is, not the son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham in the Old Testament) a whole lot of us are going to Hell for sins against the government … "When you are carrying an ANC membership card, you are blessed. When you get up there, there are different cards used but when you have an ANC card, you will be let through to go to Heaven …"

In the build up to the 2014 elections, there will be lots more sermons and laying of hands, not only with Zuma as the anointed one but many other political leaders desperate for spiritual guidance, endorsement and support from the faithful. [Julius] Malema[2] has already ventured beyond the borders for his spiritual enrichment when he led the EFF's "central command team" on a visit to the Synagogue SCOAN Church of All Nation International of the great Prophet of God T B Joshua in Nigeria.

It might be indulging in the "opiate of the masses" or "drinking from the well of living water", but making election promises is so much easier if it comes sanctioned by God.

Like the Lord, politicians work in mysterious ways.

The third: from *IOL News*, 24 January 2009 (Kgosana 2009):

[In January 2009, a doyen of the ruling African National Congress, industrial tycoon Tokyo Sexwale, accused the founders of a breakaway political party, the Congress of the People (COPE), of using witchcraft to attract support, JC/JLC]

Businessman and ANC leader Tokyo Sexwale fiercely attacked Congress of the People for parading 'old women' on TV, using them as witchcraft to attract support. Sexwale was speaking at an ANC rally in Zwide township, outside Port Elizabeth, hardly 10km away from a COPE rally in the same city.

Speaking mainly in isiXhosa, Sexwale said: "Our mothers are taken, house to house, they are also paraded on TV, these people are performing witchcraft with our mothers ….They are liars. You can't have respect for people who use older people in that fashion," said Sexwale … The defectors include the 92-year old mother of President Thabo Mbeki, Epainette and a veteran ANC MP Lillian Ma-Njobe.

The fourth: from *Inquisitr*, 1 February 2016 (Sewell 2016):[3]

Customers of a sangoma (or traditional healer) in South Africa are angry after the woman has failed to raise their loved ones from the dead as she promised. She reportedly claimed to be able to put the life back into "zombies" and return them to the heart of their families.

Nolonwabo Mangele, 50, appeared in the Stellenbosch Magistrate's Court after being arrested in the Eastern Cape of South Africa on January 18. She is now facing fraud charges for conning victims into believing she could raise the dead and bring back their loved ones.

> Victims reportedly had paid R2800 ($231) plus a consultation fee of R60 ($4.95) to Mangele after she claimed she could "heal" dead people, or "zombies" as she called them, and bring them back to life within a year …
>
> According to Mangele's alleged fraud victims, she told them to buy clothing, blankets, toiletries and even airtime for cell phones and to deposit money into their dead relatives' bank accounts. [H]er clients didn't question why the clothing sizes kept changing as Mangele requested more to keep the "zombies" warm …
>
> According to a story on *Eye Witness News*, sangomas in South Africa … now advertise their services on Facebook.

As these snippets suggest, forces at once spirited and ostensibly arcane remain vibrant actants in South Africa. While they may seem lurid exotica from the cool distance of *Academia Americana*,[4] in their own context they seldom appear so, capturing a near-ubiquitous preoccupation—at times curious, at times playful, at times desperate, defensive, therapeutic—with those forces. And with the ways in which they may be wielded to gain advantage, private or collective, licit or illicit. This, moreover, has plenty of parallels elsewhere; although, to be sure, what counts as magic, and equally as rationality, varies across time, place, and cultures of knowledge production. Euro-America produces its own share of the late modern fantastic, the occult, and magical thinking (Kerr and Crow 1983; de Blécourt and Davies 2004; J. Comaroff 1994; Schwartz 1976). Commentaries on the turn to faith as "mysterious opiate" abound: *vide*, for instance, Jeff Sharlett's (2016) account of Donald Trump as "American Preacher, [b]uilding a congregation for his prosperity gospel" that offers "belief in return for relief." So does a vibrant discourse, especially in the conservative Christian press, about resurgent Satanism in a USA "'Submerged' in the Occult"; also about witchcraft that, some claim, "is on the uprise" and has gone "mainstream" (Gryboski 2013).[5] But not only in religious contexts. The turn to the paranormal, spirits, and magic, notes Annette Hill (2010: 1f.), is on the "uprise" across all contemporary Western societies. Even more, adds Eric Kurlander (2017: 299), the "renaissance in supernatural reasoning, shadowy conspiracy theories and extraterrestrial powers" has gone global in this age of uncertainty; significantly, Kurlander documents the centrality of the occult in

other structurally similar times and places, among them Nazi Germany, where, among other things, the Schutzstaffel (SS) actually set up a "witch division." In sum, occult economies are not new. Those of the present day have any number of precedents, each one taking on the form and substance of the social, cultural, political, and economic context in which it emerged.

The recent explosion of electronic communications has greatly accelerated the dissemination of narratives of the supernatural, digging deep into the archive of gothic, transcultural, and futuristic exotica: of zombies, vampires, revenants, wiccans, genies, jinns, and tokoloshes, all of them pulsing with the realistic half-life of digital animation. In tune with this, the boundaries of the post-enlightenment human are increasingly being called into question. Hence the fascination with *trans*humanism of one or another kind: with werewolves, changelings, or invading aliens clothed in ordinary physical form. And with paranormal processes like mind-uploading and digital immortality.[6] Africa has long been replete with accounts of the ways in which powerful people deploy devilish pacts and freakish familiars, the better to attract capricious wealth, political power, personal invincibility, ever more so in libertarian times (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993). Where postcolonial, post-totalitarian societies have been baptized anew in the gospels of democracy and *laissez faire,* a yawning gap has opened up between promise and possibility, means and ends. It is a gap that has been widened by the dizzying, apparently uncharted flow of goods, money, and influence across local horizons.

These "new situations," to evoke the ghost of Evans-Pritchard (1937: 513), have called forth "new magic." And new organic theories to account for the hidden forces driving the moral and material economy of wealth creation, many of them decidedly unorthodox in repurposing old knowledge to fresh ends, thereby to divine the mysteries of the moment. In Africa, amidst the extremes of affluence and destitution that followed the impact of structural adjustment, stories abounded about visceral forms of extraction and exchange, about the sacrificial logic—the violence, fast and slow—said to underwrite unnatural accumulation: stories of traffic in organs (Scheper-Hughes 1996; White 1997; Durham 2004); of blood drawn by "electric vampires" for illicit medical ends (Weiss 1996: 203; Bastian 1993); of trade in AIDS-impregnated clothes (Vision Reporter

2015); of commerce in indentured workers, sex slaves, brides, and the bodies of albinos, thought to hold the secret of power, prosperity, and health (Masanja 2015; Schühle 2013).

Often referred to as rumors or panics, terms that speak to their unauthorized, provisional, even perverse quality, these persistent suspicions tend to resonate at the interface of the corporeal and the commodity, captured by images at once apocalyptic and banal. Hence headlines like "Child Abductions at Spur Restaurants" (Sapa 2014b),[7] a South African restaurant chain, which tell of new frontiers of consumerism both eminently benign—blacks frequenting establishments once the sole preserve of whites—and deadly. Similarly, the spreading rumors, around 2001, of organ trafficking in Chechnya: Russian forces, it was said, were murdering Chechen youths in order to sell their body parts, marking out new horrors of war-as-commerce (Regamey 2012). As elsewhere in the world, this traffic is suspected of charting new forms of imperialism, in which the vitality and procreative capacity of impoverished "others" is siphoned off in an increasingly corporate, transnational system of extraction for the benefit of those at the centers of power and affluence. The point is brilliantly captured in Stephen Frears' film, *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), about a London hotel staffed by over-worked immigrants, alike licit and not, that hosts a clandestine operation in which desperate illegals swop kidneys for forged passports.

Given that many of these panics, especially nightmares of organ stealing, have deep histories, having long marked out the fault lines of colonial extraction, is there anything distinctive about the arcane, enchanted visions of economy and society characteristic of the present? Or about the occulting of the relations of means to ends that they invoke? Or about the preoccupation with the literal use of the bodies of some for the empowerment of others (cf. Meyer and Geschiere 1999)? Why *now* the acute anxieties about reproduction, physical, and social? What, if anything, has any of this to do with processes of globalization and the particular forms of capitalism associated with it? With postcoloniality? Or with the sociology of post-revolutionary polities?

We pose this problem as both a general matter of anthropological interest and, more specifically, one of concern in contemporary South Africa. Is it not surprising, for example, that the thoroughly modernist

African National Congress saw it necessary, among its earliest gestures in government, to appoint a commission of enquiry into witchcraft and ritual murder in one of the new provinces (Ralushai et al. 1996)? That it found itself presiding over a so-called epidemic of mystical evil? That this "epidemic," far from abating with the end of apartheid, *increased* with the democratic dispensation, despite the rationalist predictions of theorists of modernization? That, according to a former head of the Occult-Related Crimes Unit of the South African Police Services—itself a curious, oddly enchanted creature—the devil had been "[making] a revolutionary re-appearance" here (Gevisser 1995)?[8] What are we to make of the strange longevity of this Unit, which survived legal challenge on the ground that its treatment of witchcraft and Satanism violated the constitutional recognition of all religions and cultures? Officially disbanded in 2006, it was soon revived again, according to an internal police memo leaked in 2012. Now called the SAPS Harmful Religious Practices Unit, it strives, like its predecessor, to combat crimes driven by "belief in the supernatural, ritual, and spiritual coercion"—all held to be on the rise, as our opening fragment makes plain. Its 40 officers remain active across the nation (Kemp 2015).

In short, the story we told continues to unfold. If anything, even more palpably, more urgently.

III

The popular preoccupations that, in late 1990s, sedimented in the spread of an occult economy—with the pursuit of prosperity by all possible means; with the rising incidence of witchcraft, real, or imagined (Ashforth 1998: 505); with killing those suspected of magical evil; with zombies, Satanism, the piracy of body parts, Faustian bargains, and much besides—waxed behind the more mundane surfaces of the "new" South Africa. This, to paraphrase Julian Barnes (2016: 125, 91), was the "whisper of history" beneath the more audible, more strident "noise of time." Primed by the expanding horizons of the post-Cold War world (cf. Piot 2010), with a sudden awareness of new geographies, new media, new means of mobility and accumulation, these preoccupations, as we have repeatedly

said, drew on cultural elements with deep local pasts. But, in probing circumstances at once familiar and uncanny, they also invoked the narrative of liberal transition that beckoned them into the "brave neo world": the narrative of democratization and development, of rights, resources, redress. And, above all, of the free market, the salvific spirit of millennial capitalism—which, in the global south, was experienced, ambiguously and ambivalently, as an uneasy fusion of the modern and the postmodern, utility and futility, promise and its perversion (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001).

As this suggests, the roots of the rising occult economy are not to be found simply in poverty or deprivation; local populations had suffered these things, and worse, for a very long time. They were grounded, rather, in a doubling. On one hand was the perception that, behind the ordinary, visible workings of the market lie mysterious mechanisms that hold the real key to its bounty: to the rapid, often immaterial, invisible flow of value across time and space, converging in the gray spaces where the local meets the transnational. This perception was authenticated by glimpses of vast wealth passing through many postcolonies into the hands of a few of their citizens. On the other hand was a dawning sense—not only among the poor, also among those caught in the middle—of having been left out of the full promise of prosperity. In South Africa, after all, the end of apartheid held out the prospect that *everyone* would be free to speculate, accumulate, and indulge repressed desires. But, for many, the millennial moment went by without payback, either economic or political. While those who enriched themselves *openly*—political "big men," cultural producers, property tycoons, prosperity preachers, sports stars, even "great" criminals—became objects of fame and admiration, others whose sudden affluence had no discernible source were subject to suspicion and scandal. And were thought, by virtue of their presumed control of the dark arts, to be potentially dangerous to those around them. This, in turn, underlies an essential tension at the core of many occult economies; or, more precisely, the fact that they tend to manifest themselves on two inimical fronts at once. The first is the search for the key, the hidden means—often taken to lie in the power of profanation and the flouting of moral conventions—to tap into the arcane knowledge that yields this new kind of wealth-without-work. The

second is the effort to identify and eradicate those held to have enriched themselves by those very means.

Partly because of the nature of the struggle to end apartheid, partly because of the legacy of racial capitalism here, partly because of the economic and political history of South Africa since 1994, most of those who experience the present as privation and thwarted aspiration, and who engage most visibly in enchanted commerce, are young. It is they, progeny of the digital age, who held out the greatest expectations for "the revolution." They see themselves, with good reason, as the repressed for whom the promise of postcolonial return has been most obviously blocked by the hardening materialities of life. As a result, the dominant line of cleavage across the land has become generation. Post-1994 South Africa, to put it bluntly, has been attempting to construct a modernist nation-state under postmodern conditions, a historical endeavor fraught with contradictions and impossibilities. Black underclass youths embody those contradictions and impossibilities most tangibly. And volubly. It is the males among them, more than anyone else, who have to face up to the contemporary situation: to the difficulties of social reproduction in an age that once held out fervent hopes of rebirth. But, as we have already intimated, it is not only them. Entry into the occult economy transects color, culture, age, and sex.

In order to illuminate this, and to explore how locally grounded occult practices retool culturally familiar technologies for new ends, how they give voice to discontent with prevailing the social, economic, and political order, how they produce new forms of consciousness, and how they express themselves as one variant of a global phenomenon rising in response to similar structural conditions, we focus on a particular ethnographic setting: the northerly provinces of South Africa, just before the end of apartheid. And after, into the continuing present.

IV

In March 1995, in response to a mounting sense of emergency in the countryside (above, p. 00), a *Commission of Inquiry into Witchcraft Violence and Ritual Murders in the Northern Province*[9] was established by

the new provincial administration. Not unlike official commissions in colonial times (Ashforth 1990), this one was an uneasy hybrid of governance and ethnography: an effort at once to regain control over a runaway world and to grasp persistent lived realities, its terms of reference drew both from the tropes of scientific universalism and from the language of cultural difference. Chaired by Professor N.V. Ralushai, it comprised nine members, eight of them Africans. Their report is a rich, barely analyzed, amalgam of informant accounts, case records, first-hand observation, and recommendations. These recommendations voice two impulses: (1) civic rationalism, expressed in a call for liberation through education and for a rigorous response to witch-related violence, including possible reinstatement of the death penalty and (2) frank, even assertive cultural relativism. Consistent with the latter, the report declares that most Africans regard magical attacks as "normal events of everyday life," a reality incompatible with the legacy of European law, which criminalizes witch-finding (p. 61). The report also notes (p. 63) that most black police believe in witchcraft, making them reluctant to intervene when suspects are attacked. The conclusion? That there is "no clear-cut" solution to the legal problem—other than to advocate various strategies to stem the brutality with which accused witches are hunted down. The actuality of witchcraft itself, however, was never called into doubt.

On the contrary. The urgent tone of the commission, the sense of crisis to which it spoke, was underscored by a rising demography of violence: between 1985 and 1995 there occurred over 300 cases of witch-related killings in the Northern Province (p. 31); in the first half of 1996 there were 676, a 45-fold increase. Similarly in the Northwest Province where, although the overall incidence was lower, it also increased over the decade. Two decades later, in 2014, as we saw in our first fragment above, it was also said to be rising in Gauteng Province. Little wonder that many people, here as elsewhere in Africa, feared that witchcraft was "running wild." Many still do. The mood of alarm was well captured in the opening remarks of the report (p. i): "[A]s the Province continued to burn," as "witchcraft violence and ritual murder" were becoming endemic, "something had to be done, and very fast."

The countryside was burning alright. But there were lots of ironies in the fire. For one thing, this was a much heralded moment of exodus from

colonial bondage. And yet rural populations were convinced that their communities harbored trenchant human evil; that familiar landscapes were alive with phantasmic forces of unprecedented power and peril; that the state, past and present, had failed to shield them from malignity, leaving them to protect themselves. For another thing, it was youths, not persons in authority, who felt most moved to cleanse their towns and villages by executing "instant justice." They had greeted Nelson Mandela's release from prison, viewed by the world as a sign that reason had prevailed at last, with a furious spate of witch burnings—often to the august chanting of freedom songs (pp. 62, 244). All this was accompanied by a growing fear, in the northerly provinces, that some people, mainly old people, were turning others into zombies: into an army of ghost workers whose lifeblood fueled a vibrant, immoral economy pulsing beneath the sluggish rhythms of rural life. The margin between the human and the inhuman had become permeable, ruptured by the living dead and their depraved owners. Along with a grisly national market in human body parts, these zombies bore testimony to a mounting confusion of people with things.

None of this, we repeat, is entirely new. In much of Africa, the colonial encounter gave rise to the sorts of frictions that ignite witch hunts (e.g. Richards 1935; Auslander 1993). To be sure, witchcraft has proven to be every bit as protean as modernity itself, thriving on its contradictions and its silences, usurping its media, puncturing its pretensions. Yet longevity does not imply continuity. Whatever their putative powers, witches cannot escape history. Neither is their flexibility infinite or random. Shifts in their cultural conception often speak, if often indirectly, to the impact of large-scale structural transformations on local worlds. Indeed, their very durability stems from a genius for making the parochial language of intimate, interpersonal affect register the impress of abstract social forces. It is this articulation, in both senses of the term, that has underlain the intensification of witch-finding in South Africa, and throughout the continent, since the late twentieth century (Geschiere 1997; Meyer and Geschiere 1999). The parochialism of witches, it seems, is an increasingly global phenomenon.

Because witches distill complex, diffuse material and social processes into comprehensible human intentions and actions, they tend to figure in

narratives that tie translocal forces to local events, map them onto proximate landscapes, and translate them into vernacular vocabularies of cause-and-effect. In rural South Africa, the 1990s rise in witch-finding coincided with an efflorescence of other occult technologies that linked the arcane and the ordinary by thoroughly modern, even postmodern, means; means that evoked, parodied, and contorted the mechanisms of the market. Thus ritual murder was widely reported in the media to have become "big business" in northerly South Africa. In 1995, for example, stories spread about dismembered corpses found in the freezer of a casino in Mmabatho, capital of the Northwest Province, formerly the "independent" Tswana "homeland" of Bophuthatswana. The casino had been built for tourists during the apartheid years, when betting and interracial sex were illegal in South Africa—but not in the ethnic "homelands." There, over the border, in the gray interstices of the transnational, white South Africans came to gamble and purchase sexual services. After 1994, as we have noted, black bodies were still for sale, but in different form; the gruesome trade now nested within the orbit of everyday commerce, circulating human organs to whomever could invest in them, thus to abet their undertakings by occult means.

Much the same thing was apparent, too, in all the talk about the "fact" that some local entrepreneurs were turning their fellows into working zombies, a practice that conjures with a foundational law of the market, namely, that rates of profit are inversely related to labor costs; as our fourth fragment makes plain, zombie-conjuring remains part of the social and media landscape in South Africa. But the most fabulous narratives, especially in the Northwest Province, concerned Satanism, held to be the most robust, most global of all occult enterprises. Less a matter of awesome ritual than mundane human greed, dabbling in the diabolical was said to be particularly captivating to the young. In 1996, when the Setswana TV network broadcast two programs on the subject, the "reformed" ex-Satanists featured were juveniles. Taking calls from the public they told, in prosaic terms, of the translocal power of the black arts, among them an ability to travel great distances at miraculous speed to garner fabulous riches at will.

We shall return to ritual murder, zombies, and Satanism in due course. Here we note merely what our local interlocutors insisted on telling us:

that the available array of enchanted, often visceral, modes of producing value was expanding rapidly. Visceral, yet also oddly banal. In the past, divination and resort to occult means involved a clandestine encounter with a human expert. Now anxieties about witchcraft, money magic, ritual murder, and unnatural death are ventilated in a public sphere comprising "electronic" churches, radio, TV, and social media; newspapers, magazines, and online websites regularly advertise "dial-in-diviners" and "short time call" consultations with traditional healers on WhatsApp (see e.g. Gumtree n.d.). The multimediated quality of this communication is neatly captured in innovative ritual technologies. One is divining by "mirror" or "television" (Ralushai et al. 1996: 6, 148, 177): it requires clients to visit a "screen-room," where they imbibe a fermented drink and watch a white, wall-mounted cloth, on which appear figures of miscreants, both human and animal. Their transmission mimics the way in which satellite dishes, broadcast networks, and long-distance magic condense images, objects, and sounds from afar. Such technologies, moreover, keep evolving, like those facilitated by texting, whose enchanted potential has not been limited to Africa, as the haunting movie, *Personal Shopper* (2016, dir. Olivier Assayas), makes plain.

Once these theaters of mundane magicality render their verdicts, who are revealed as the witches? And who take responsibility for acting against them? According to Ralushai et al. (1996), the purported malevolents were, as they continue to be, the usual suspects of African witchcraft—men and women of unshared, conspicuous wealth (pp. 219, 253)—although those physically attacked were typically old, often socially isolated, and defenseless. As to taking action against them, "[i]n general the community is responsible … but the youth who are called '*comrades*' are in the forefront" (p. 15). Not only were these young men the primary perpetrators of witch-related violence but they seem often to have forced neighbors and ritual experts to do their bidding.

Let us take a closer look at the most extended case recorded by the Witchcraft Commission, the Ha-Madura witch hunt (pp. 193f).[10] The defendants, who ranged from 14 to 35, were charged with having murdered an elderly woman by "necklacing" and attacking two other elderly persons. Witnesses recounted that, on the afternoon of 21 March 1990,

"the majority of the youths" of Madura, most of them male and unemployed, gathered under a tree near the primary school. Speakers urged them to exterminate the witches in their midst (p. 202), and they set off in search of suspects. The vacant homes of a couple of suspected miscreants were torched before the youths moved on to the yard of the deceased. When they found her, they doused her with petrol and set her alight. She tried to flee across a nearby field but the crowd caught up with her. "Why are you killing me, my grandchildren?" she wailed. Her assailants responded: "Die, die you witch. We can't get work because of you!" (pp. 206, 212).

There could scarcely be a more bald statement of deadly antagonism between generations. Or the reasons for it. Or its political consequences. For these youth, mass action might have vanquished the *ancien regime*. But it did not bring them the wealth or empowerment that was supposed to follow. South Africa threw off the shackles of apartheid just as global processes were compromising the sovereignty of liberal nation-states and their control over economic growth, as the manufacturing sector was shrinking, as multinational capital found more exploitable sites of production, as the service sector and the immaterial economy grew, and as other features of the neoliberal turn took root—all of which made un- and under-employment increasingly chronic, disproportionately so in the countryside. The fact that the living standards of a growing urban African middle class were rising at the same time (Mabandla 2013) only underscored the predicament of those rendered disposable in the post-apartheid moment. Complex historical forces, these: forces that brought deep structural change in their wake—but, to underscore our point, distilled into the vernacular idiom of occult evil. And into a proximate, human cause, one that was actionable. Thus the cry from the youths as they killed the alleged witch: "We can't get work because of you!"

It is no wonder, then, that the most spirited witch-finding tends to occur where conditions are especially straitened, where raw inequality is especially blatant, and where contradictions inherent in the new order of things are most acutely felt.[11] Limpopo, the former Northern Province (see note 9), is the second poorest in the country;[12] the remote reaches of the Northwest come close behind. The failure of plans for reconstruction,

development, redistribution, and accelerated growth has been most evident in these regions. Agriculture is still practiced, largely by women, but much of it is pitiably limited. Along with social grants, petty business—beer-brewing, food vending, construction, service- and piece-work—supplements household budgets. At the same time, the migrant wages that had long subsidized faltering agrarian endeavors, and had granted young men a modicum of autonomy, have diminished markedly. Concomitantly, cash assets vested in the elderly, like pensions and grants, have risen in relative value; as disposable income, they are the object of fierce jealousy and mystical activity (e.g. Ritchken 1994: 361, 357). Also, conditions in the countryside have facilitated the emergence of modest new elites there too, if on nothing like the scale of the rising urban middle class. And so, in places like Madura, material distinctions, albeit of widely variable magnitude, have become apparent among neighbors. Such differences are embodied in the kinds of commodities that index prosperity: houses, cars, televisions, even cell phones. The alleged witch of Madura owned some of these luxuries. She was, in fact, the occasional employer of several of her attackers and sometimes let them watch her TV (p. 212). The petrol that consumed her was seized from local men who now could afford cars by young men who saw little chance that they would ever do so.

Witch-hunting youth in the Northern Province acted as a cohort, much like an age-regiment (*mophato*) in Sotho-Tswana society of old. Ridding the countryside of *baloi*, witches, was all of a piece with the other forms of mass action that had fought a repressive social order; during the struggle, it should be noted, urban "comrades" denounced their parental generation as passive sellouts to colonial oppression. Indeed, the war against mystical evil fused political and ritual means of both recent and older vintage. In addition to singing songs of freedom as they carried out their exorcisms, "comrades" in Venda and Giyani also intoned a well-known circumcision chant (pp. 50, 179, 244).

Age, of course, is a relational principle. The young comrades forged their assertive identity against the foil of a gendered gerontocracy; significantly, those attacked were referred to as "old ladies," even when they were men (p. 211). The antisocial greed of these predators was epitomized in the idea of unnatural production and reproduction, in images

of toxic, ungenerative sexuality, of adultery, rape, and abortion (Ritchken 1994: 325, 363). The Commission, for example, made repeated reference to the inability of witches to bear children, to their "red" vaginas, and to their lethal, "rotten" sperm (pp. 141, 150, 158, 168). Killing these "perverts" by fire, a vehicle of simultaneous destruction and rebirth, bespoke an effort to engender, literally, a more propitious, socially constructive mode of reproduction.

Threats to local viability, as we have noted, were also ascribed to the creation of a zombie work force. Thus, the following fragment from a case record (pp. 50, 158):

> On a certain day … [when] the accused arrived … [people] shouted from the street that she is a witch with a shrinked [*sic*] vagina. They further said that she had killed people by means of lightning and that she has a drum full of zombies. They also said that her son "Zero" has no male seed and that he could not impregnate a woman.

It is hard to imagine a more pointed portrait of perversion: of witchcraft as a negation of life-giving, social exchange. In place of fertile procreation, and the forms of wealth that nurture community and enrich others, the witch makes ghost workers out of the able-bodied. She thrives by cannibalizing people, especially robbing the rising generation of a legitimate income and the wherewithal to marry and establish their own families, indeed, of becoming fully adult.

This sense of illegitimate production and reproduction pervades youthful discourses of witchcraft in much of South Africa. Many young black men, their adult masculinity ever more at risk, blame their incapacity to ensure a future for themselves on an all-consuming, aged elite. Their concern is underscored by the preoccupation with zombies (sing., *setlotlwane*, Northern Sotho; *sethotsela*, Tswana). Long a feature of Caribbean vodoun, their appearance here owes much to a diasporic flow of occult images (Appadurai 1990), although they resonate with an indigenous affliction known as *sefifi*, a state of "living death" first described by nineteenth-century missionaries (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 143). Spliced into local mystical economies, these shadowy figures take on the color of their surroundings. As one of our opening fragments suggests,

they are persons who are thought to have been killed and revived by witchcraft. The living dead exist only to serve their creators—generally, in the South African context, unrelated neighbors. Bereft of tongues to give voice to their alienation, they are believed to work after dark, mainly in agriculture (Ralushai et al. 1996: 5; Ritchken 1994: 329). Ghost workers can also be magically transported to urban centers, in fact, to any place where they might toil for their owners. In this era of casualization, there are even "part-time zombies" (pp. 224–225): people who awake exhausted in the morning, having toiled unwittingly at night to feed the greed of their masters

Reduced from humanity to raw labor power, the zombie, like the murderous criminal, is a nightmare citizen of contemporary South Africa. His absent presence makes tangible the sort of violent abstraction that fuels otherwise inexplicable accumulation; to be sure, he dis/embodies that mode of abstraction. Existing solely for the benefit of its owner, the toil of the living dead is pure surplus value (Marx 1976: 325): it has "all the charms of something created out of nothing." Zombie production is thus an apt image of the inflating occult economies of postcolonial Africa, of their ever more brutal forms of extraction. As spectral capital, it will be evident why these forms of extraction are typically associated, as is witchcraft in general, with older people of apparent affluence: why they are thought to have multiplied as wage work has become scarce among the young and unskilled. Not only does the rise of a phantom proletariat consume the life force of others. By yielding profit without cost, it destroys the labor market, conventional patterns of social reproduction, and the legitimate prospects of "the community" at large. This, in essence, was the point made by striking workers on an Eastern Transvaal coffee plantation in 1995: they demanded the dismissal of three supervisors accused of killing employees to gain control of their jobs and keeping zombies for their own enrichment (*Weekly Mail & Guardian* 1995: 8). Spectral times also yield spectral crimes: the power of zombies to materialize wealth in the guise of ordinary things that mark the good life—clothes, toiletries, cell phone airtime—also shapes the fraudulent imagination; *vide* the case of the fake *sangoma* we encountered above in our final fragment.

But zombie production is merely one means among several. Recall that there has also been an increase in recent years of the incidence of ritual murder, of killing for the purpose of harvesting body parts. As Ralushai et al. (1996: 255) explained:

> [B]ody parts are used … to secure certain advantages from the ancestors. A skull may … be built into the foundation of a new building to ensure a good business, or a brew containing human parts … buried where it will ensure a good harvest.

While they have long been part of the ritual repertoire of southern African societies, these practices appear to have been rare in the past. But a great deal of evidence confirms that, in this domain too, market forces have spurred production. In addition to stories of mutilated remains, the press purveys matter-of-fact details of such things as going rates for various body parts (Khoza and Mapoma 1994). Evidence from court cases in different regions of the country confirms that would-be entrepreneurs, most of them young, engage in the sale of organs.[13] These youths appear to act on the assumption that the occult economy feeds the malevolent ambitions of their elders, said to be the most ready consumers of the purloined parts. Already in 1988 it was noted that, in the (future) Northern Province, any disappearance of persons, especially children, was "immediately linked to businessmen and politicians" by young activists (p. 271). Across the border at Mochudi, Botswana, public discontent over the handling of a girl's ritual murder in 1994—allegedly by local entrepreneurs, abetted by her father—brought youth onto the streets of the capital, prompting the Office of the President to call in Scotland Yard to help solve the crime (Durham 2004).

We reiterate that, just as the traffic in human organs is not new, neither is it restricted to South Africa: that there is a well-established, global economy in body parts (e.g. Frow 1997; White 1997: 334; Scheper-Hughes 1996), which flow from poor to rich countries, south to north, east to west, young to old; that some governments are said to raise revenue by farming corneas and kidneys for export; that, from the Andes through Africa to East Asia, mysterious malevolents are believed to extract blood, fat, members, and living offspring from the unsuspecting (Scutti 2014). At issue in these panics about corporeal free enterprise is a fear of

the creeping commodification of life itself. Among Sotho and Tswana, people speak apprehensively of a relentless process that erodes the humanity (*botho*) of persons and renders them susceptible as never before to the long reach of the market.

Notice the emphasis on distance. The translocal dimension of the occult economy is crucial to the way in which its workings are understood in rural South Africa. Throughout the northerly provinces, people ponder the role of mobility and the means of abstraction—specifically, the capacity to siphon goods and people across space in no time at all—in producing new forms of wealth. Preternatual movement adds value. But how? How are its mechanics to be mastered? As South Africa has cast off its pariah status and has sought ever greater integration with transnational markets, the growing velocity of long-range transaction, of the almost instantaneous flow of signs and styles and commodities across the earth, is discernible all around. This, to wit, underlay the fascination in the Northwest with Satanism (see above), itself a feature of the millennial moment in many parts of the world (e.g. Wright 1995; La Fontaine 1998; Meyer 1999).

Remember, in this respect, the television programs mentioned earlier, the ones in which "reformed" devil worshippers spoke to callers. When asked to explain the relationship of the diabolical to *boloi* (witchcraft), one laconic youth said, in a fluent mix of Setswana and English: "Satanism is high-octane witchcraft. It is more international."[14] So it is that old ideas are extended and new tropes domesticated to meet altered conditions. The devil's disciples were rumored to travel far and wide, fuelling their accumulation of riches with human blood. As the petrochemical image suggests, the basis of their potency was, again, the capacity to "ride the tiger of time-space compression" (Harvey 1990: 351): to move seamlessly between the parochial and the translocal—here and there, then and now—thus to weave the connections of cause-and-effect that hold the key to the mysteries of the history of the present.

V

It will be clear now why, in post-1994 South Africa—and elsewhere in a world of whose epochal shifts South Africa is symptomatic—there has been a palpable intensification of appeals to enchantment. The rise of

occult economies has tended to occur, at the turn of the twenty-first century at least, in contexts in which an optimistic faith in the free market has encountered the realities, indeed the "crises," of neoliberal times: unpredictable shifts in sites of production and increasingly casualized, increasingly scarce, increasingly insecure labor, exacerbated, for many, by the contraction of real wages; the rising power of corporations and, with it, explosive levels of inequality; the dis/ordering of space, time, and the flow of value that has accompanied tightening global integration and the spread of a digital commons; the devolution of many of the functions of state to the private sector, rising authoritarian populism, dedemocratization, and the dissolution of received political alignments—without any obvious coordinates, beyond identity and interest, along which new ones are taking shape. In South Africa, still struggling to cast off the legacies of apartheid, these things have been felt especially acutely, along with the dawning realization that the dream of liberation, its promise of new freedom, prosperity, plenitude, has given way to a new normal. It is a "normal" characterized by state capture and epidemic corruption, by mass concern with violent crime against persons and property, and by the highest levels of debt in the world. Almost daily protests—for the delivery of basic services among the poor, for free and decolonized education among students, for safety, protection, and ethical government among the public at large—express spreading political disaffection. And urban environments continue to juxtapose the comfortable neighborhoods of the propertied against the violent, insecure streets of their less privileged, racially marked compatriots.

Such are some of the corollaries of the new age of capital. At the same time, of course, all sorts of legitimate ventures, some of them strikingly inventive, prosper and propagate themselves. From the quiet backyards of rural homesteads through the teeming taxi ranks of large townships to sedate urban corporate quarters, African entrepreneurs "do business," dissolving many, if not all, older cleavages of color. And a goodly number of whites continue to live in paradisiacal comfort. A politics of optimism is actively purveyed by the ANC, not altogether in vain; the broadcast media envisage an Afropolitan future in which black is not bleak. Cultural production, often exhilaratingly experimental, spirited, intense, thrives across the country. Still, the dystopic undersides of the

moment persist, although they evince ups and downs. At times they recede in the popular imagination, at other times—in the wake of the 2008 economic recession, for example, or with spikes in official crime rates and fresh revelations of corruption in the upper reaches of government—they grow increasingly baroque, medieval almost.

Perhaps all this will turn out to be transitory, a mere passing moment in the *longue dureé*. For now, however, enchantment in its diverse manifestations, far from slipping away with the resolute march of modernity, seems virtually everywhere on the ascent, from back country Limpopo to an American presidency deeply mired in millennial thinking. In South Africa, as we saw in our opening fragments, it is palpable in police reports of spiraling occult crimes, especially killings, across the country; in "the Gospel according to (ex-)President Jacob Zuma," according to which an ANC membership card is not merely a guarantee of direct access to heaven, but a ticket to electoral success and the privilege it conveys; in the claim by leading public figures that witchcraft has the magical capacity to attract electoral support; and in the fact that zombie conjurers advertise their services in the national media, even, allegedly, on Facebook. No wonder, then, that, in July 2017—amidst a rush of bewilderingly complex scandals surrounding state capture and political corruption—a public intellectual wrote, in the largest national newspaper, that, "against a backdrop of precipitous economic decline and a total collapse of governance," the country at large has become "[an environment] fertile for purveyors of miracles" (Zibi 2017). The conditions that gave rise to the occult economy with which we were concerned almost 20 years ago, it seems, have not disappeared. If anything, that economy has become endemic, constantly reinventing itself in step with the contingencies of the historical present.

Notes

1. The original essay (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) was first delivered as the Max Gluckman Memorial Lecture in Manchester, UK, in May 1998. We give the present, updated version—which also has new front and back ends—a different title to avoid bibliographic confusion.

2. Julius Sello Malema, charismatic leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters [EFF], a South African political party, which he co-founded in July 2013.
3. *Inquisitr* is an online website.
4. In the original version of this essay, we stressed that, while some non-African scholars are reluctant to speak of witchcraft and sorcery for fear of "exoticizing" Africa, the ontological reality of these phenomena are taken for granted and spoken about more or less openly across the continent (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1997; Meyer and Geschiere 1999). Further, we take care not to treat these things as part of an atavistic "tradition." They are elements in an historically labile repertoire of knowledge and practice. Since the point has been made repeatedly by many scholars over the past decades, there is no need to explicate it again here.
5. This article reviews *Dancing With the Devil* (Harshbarger 2012), said to be "in the top 100 Christian books in the UK and has been received in the US in a powerful way."
6. For an enlightening account of the current vibrancy of transhumanism—and the longer history of esoteric futurism—in Russia, see Bernstein (2015).
7. One report (Chawane 2015), which called this an "urban legend," went on to note that "[s]ome users of social media have … [suggested] that waiters are actually being paid to distract patrons while their children are being abducted."
8. The man in question, Colonel Kobus Jonker, head of the Unit, is known by the nickname "Donker," Afrikaans for "dark."
9. The Northern Province was renamed Limpopo in 2003. To avoid cumbersome citation, we refer to the report of the commission as Ralushai et al. (1996), and to content in it by page number alone.
10. See also State v Mutshutshu Samuel Magoro and Others, CC36/91, Supreme Court of Venda, heard 5–27 May 1992, delivered 3 June, 1992.
11. On the incidence of witch-related violence in the Northern Province, see *Weekly Mail & Guardian* (1996: 9).
12. Limpopo ranks just behind the Eastern Province in this regard; see (Vid 2016).
13. One such case was heard in the Bisho Supreme Court; see Wright (1996: 1). Another is State v Edward Nkhumeleni and Others, Venda Supreme Court, CC17/94, February 1995.

14. The series of programs was entitled Metsweditswedi ("Source of Sources"). This particular show was broadcast by Bophuthatswana TV on 31 July 1996.

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