

# COMMODIFICATION AND COMMENSALITY IN POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA AND NORTHERN IRELAND <sup>1</sup>

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This essay proposes that political violence can be informed by the symbolic logic of commodity fetishism. The political commodification/fetishization of emblematic bodies through violence enables harmed, ill-treated, and tortured bodies and corpses to circulate as ideological signifiers in situations of social conflict. This process involves rituals of depersonalization, the fabrication of racial and ethnic specimens or somatypes through attacks on bodily integrity, and aesthetics of consumption and commensality.

On a winter night in 1979 two Irish National Liberation Army men lay wrapped in blankets and conversing in their adjacent cells as a cold Northeaster blew snow through the broken perspex of the windows of the Maze prison in Northern Ireland. The cells were covered with the prisoner's feces they had plastered on the walls as a protest against being beaten by the guards when the latter infrequently allowed the inmates to go the bathrooms; the cells' windows had been smashed by the prisoners to alleviate the odor. The cell lights were periodically turned off and on by the warders in an effort to interrupt the inmate's sleep, and a white noise machine could be heard in the background in an attempt to promote further sleep deprivation. The conversation that took place that night was relayed to me three years later by one of the participants now released from the H Blocks jail.

I remember one night in the cell I was saying, "there was a policeman murdered today". The guy in the next cell says: "I'm surprised with you coming off with that old crack". I said, "what's that?" He says, "saying that

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there was a policeman *murdered* today". I said, "but so he was. He was banged<sup>2</sup> down the country somewhere. Fucking filled in right to." And your man says, "he was *assassinated* or *executed* not *murdered*."

At the time I thought about what he said. If anybody else had said that to me I'd have hammered him. I remember saying "but sure Tom wait'll I'll tell ye. You have fucking cars, you have Ford Escorts, you have Jaguars, you have Rovers, you have everything, but they're all cars. You have fucking murder, you have assassination, execution, termination. Call it what you want but there's always a stiff at the end of the day. It makes no difference to the individual banged."

It was then that I realized there was something changing here. You see, for a Republican what I said was some fucking insult. Like any soldier they find it easier to live with killing when they see it as politics and not as murder.

This was a conversation about brand names, about well-known consumer commodities, about political corpses and about what makes or does not make "a difference" in death. It was a conversation about how cars are named and commodified and how political corpses are named and, I would suggest, also commodified as bearers of political value. But why do victims of political violence need to be commodified? Why is it important that there be Jaguars and Ford Escorts and not simply generic cars? Why is it crucial that recipients of violence be "executed" or "assassinated"? And why do political victims like commodities require brand-names?

Here it would be useful to recall that commodities are exchangeable and therefore function as substitutes for one another, that this exchange and substitution is regulated by systems of equivalence or commensuration, and that commodities are material bearers of immaterial value: essences that underwrite objects and which migrate from one article to the next in a fulcrum of exchange and substitution. The exchangeability of commodities is frequently governed by vehicles of general equivalence like currency that functions as a conventionalized surrogate for a diversity of commodity artifacts. The historical insertion of the human body into these circuits of exchange and substitution, encompasses a wide range of socio-economic phenomena including the objectification dynamics of early capitalist labor markets, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the homogenized and partible body of the Fordist mass production line and the current transfer of body parts from one body to another in medical organ harvesting, to mention a few.

The allegory of the cars compels us to consider the extent to which ethnic and political violence is propelled by the culture and logic of

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<sup>2</sup> "Banged," "whacked" are slang for being shot.

commodification. Which is not to say that political practice and political violence is necessarily reducible to economic exchange. Rather I am concerned with the reproduction, the simulation, of commodity logics on different planes of social practice that can not be strictly defined as or even traced back to economic practice – I am speaking here to the cultural and symbolic efficacy of commodification and to associated practices of production and consumption in non-economic spheres.

### **Political commodification: theoretical frameworks**

In the *Dialectics of Seeing* (1989) Susan Buck-Morss uses two photographs, one of a 1930's homeless Parisian sandwich board man advertising goods for sale, and the other of a nearly naked middle-aged man, wearing a political placard bearing the following advertising endorsement: "I am a Jew and I have no complaints about the Nazi's," while being marched down a Parisian boulevard flanked by German soldiers. The photos link economic commodification to political commodification through the display of a branded body. For Buck-Morss, following Walter Benjamin, the culture of commodification imparts its after-image and its symbolic efficacy to modern political representation and practice. The sandwich-board man and the placard wearing Jew touted brand names, the first to circulate economic signs, the second to circulate political/racial signage impressed upon the body of the bearer: victims of political violence in Northern Ireland and elsewhere are similarly branded by violence and by naming ideologies which enable their circulation as political signs.

In modernity the political form and the commodity form come together as state and other agents of power increasingly become invested in the production of bodies, and in regulating the circulation of these bodies in time and space in a manner analogous to the economic circulation of things. The homogenization of bodies generates somatic interchange where one body is made to substitute for another (a process that installs their uniformity) and where bodies are made to stand for institutional, political, and economic effectivity and achievement. This dynamic occurred through Fordist mass production technologies (Lukacs 1971), mass training and rehabilitative programs of behavioral normalization (Foucault 1979), the serialization or interchange of subjects in everyday life structures (Sartre 1976) and the leveling-off mass destruction techniques (Adorno 1973).

The rationalities and disciplinary regimes of the Fordist assembly line, the prison, clinic, asylum, bureaucratized life-worlds and campaigns of mass death all rendered chosen bodies alternates for one another; these regimes also distilled from these interchangeable bodies performative kinesthetics

and routines that advanced depersonalization as they built and regulated economic, political, rehabilitative and even sexual agency Adorno analytically pushed this process to its nightmarish extreme in his essay "After Auschwitz" (1973) when he spoke of the assembly-line production/destruction methodology of the concentration camp.

In the concentration camps it was no longer the individual who died but a specimen... Genocide is the absolute integration. It is on its way wherever men are leveled off... until one exterminates them as deviations from the concept of their total nullity (Adorno 1973: 362).

Despite the language of finality and termination this negativity had its dialectical character that closely replicated commodification effects. Here Adorno applies an eminently Marxian formula: he stages outside of market contexts, the separation of value from the thing in itself. Commodified value is a connective tissue invariably passed from one article to another through cycles of commensuration, substitution and exchange; the thing in itself is the heterogeneity of particular articles, bodies and persons subsumed and introjected by commodity regimes<sup>3</sup>. Value here is racial or ethnic essentialism.

For Adorno the concentration camp ontology of the Jew is a fetish value or essence that is performatively branded upon a heterogeneity of bodies through the assembly line process of selection, extermination and cremation. Adorno concludes, in a sociology of horror, that at Auschwitz racial/ethnic destruction was, in effect, political production. From out of the multiplicity of particular bodies a commensuration between diverse embodied persons is coercively forged, a "nullity" to which all bodies are reduced and distilled. Thus Adorno's "absolute integration" is the political commodification of the body. The camps used Fordism, violence and terror to make generic racialized/ethnicized bodies: entities serialized by linear production techniques and unified by imposed racial-genetic essences. In the metaphysics of the camps, where death was the ultimate conferral of identity, that is the ultimate naming and branding event, personhood is an aberration *vis a vis* nullification: that is personhood is a "deviation" from reduction to one of the extermination-selection categories of the camp – Jew, gypsy, communist, homosexual, and the mentally handicapped. Nullification of the particular person creates the prototypical or generic Jew or Gypsy – it creates pure identity as political value and allows such racial and ethnic constructs to function as systems of general value equivalence against which a multiplicity of bodies are fatally measured. I am speaking here of a concerted and bureaucratic fabrication of race and ethnicity which is profoundly

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<sup>3</sup> Appadurai (1996) would probably add here: prior to their commodification and after their decommmodification.

discontinuous with the ethnicity and other cultural identities both inherited and creatively appropriated by the inmates of the camps prior to their internment. Minoritization was a conferral inseparable from the production dynamics of the camps and was performatively achieved through a Sartrean serialization of bodies as inmates progressed through the various assembly-line regimens of the camps.

The camps not only concentrated bodies into an extermination space, the camps produced concentrated bodies, distilled into racial/ethnic essences by processes of desiccation. Ethnicization and minoritization were the branding and brand-naming of the body-particular. The monumental warehouses filled with the horrific legacy of discarded commodities – clothing, false teeth, eyeglasses and shoes – bear artifactual witness to the final stages of commodity concentration. Here the substitution logic of commodification and the nullification logic of genocide were fused, insofar as the part now stands in for the missing whole – the absent mass of the exterminated.

### **Violence and transparency: South African scenarios**

In July of 1996, in Pretoria at their amnesty hearing in front of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, investigators of the Fidelity Guards security firm and former policemen Hennie Gerber and Johan Van Eyk claimed they (along with co-investigator Frans Oosthuizen, who was not an applicant) had been in part acting on behalf of the National Party when they murdered suspected Pan Africanist Congress member Samuel Kganakga on May, 21, 1991 when investigating the robbery of R 60,000,000 supposedly committed on behalf of the Azanian People's Liberation Army<sup>4</sup>. Advocates, acting for the amnesty applicants, told the Truth Commission that Gerber's and Van Eyk's actions were politically motivated and met the Commission's requirements for amnesty. The amnesty applicants regarded themselves as agents of the police against what was at the time seen as a communist inspired onslaught against the state. Gerber is serving a 20-year sentence for the murder of Kganakga and Van Eyk a 15 year sentence. In earlier evidence before the committee, Gerber admitted murdering Kganakga after Kganakga was tortured at a remote spot – a mine-dump – on the East Rand. Kganakga he claimed was shot dead while trying to escape after he was wounded. Van Eyk testified he had disposed of the body by burning it.

The Amnesty committee's legal representative, Advocate Mpshe, disputed the applicants' assertion that the murder had a political objective.

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<sup>4</sup> All statements taken from Truth Commission transcripts of amnesty hearings held in Pretoria in July, 1996.

He said there was no evidence that the two men had a mandate from the National Party for their actions. There was also no evidence that Kganakga had been a PAC or APLA member<sup>5</sup>. The motive for the killing was to cover up torture and extreme assault, Mpshe countered.

The Pretoria hearing of Gerber and Van Eyck was an amnesty hearing, the applicants were attempting to show that the murder of Kganakga fulfilled the requirements of amnesty insofar they were making full disclosure, that the homicide was politically motivated and that the acts they committed were proportional to the political goals they were attempting to realize in committing the murder.

Jack Mkoama, a black employee of the Fidelity Guards Firm and accomplice to the torture testified that as Kganakga was abducted by the amnesty applicants at gun point.

The deceased was told... to put that bag over his head and then he must lie flat at the back seat (of the vehicle in which he was being transported) so that he cannot see where we are going. And then I kept on following Johan Van Eyck until we... went into the open veld, an unused mine dump like...

Gerber, one of the amnesty applicants, described the locale of the murder:

He was taken out of the premises by a side exit and taken by vehicle to this open field... Upon arrival there I noticed... workers from the electricity department were busy working on the robots (traffic lights) and that they would be able to observe us. I noticed and realised that this was not an appropriate place for an interrogation so I decided to go to Cleveland forest area where we usually had *braais*.

Mkoama continues:

Mr. Gerber and Johan Van Eyck, it seems they knew the spot, because we get out of our vehicle and they start walking straight into the direction to the bush, into that direction where that tree was... it is a tall blue gum tree.

Their captive was tied up and hoisted up by his legs so that he was hanging upside down. This was at about 9am. Mkoama continues:

Mr. Gerber... came with a bag with some extra ropes in [it] also, it seemed like old telephone [wire]. And then he instructed the deceased to sit down, tied his legs with a rope and used a piece of stone as the tree was very high, you know, to tie that stone to the rope and then throw it over the blue gum tree. They did that. They started hoisting the deceased upside down on that tree, and then after that they tied the rope on the tree. And they further

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<sup>5</sup> PAC stands for the Pan-African Congress and APLA is the military wing of the PAC.

untied his belt and... they pulled his trousers up and took out this torturing machine [electric shock apparatus]... and started [connected] one wire on his finger and then the other piece of wire on his private parts.

Kganakga was questioned while the electricity was applied to his genitals. Kganakga continued to deny all knowledge of the robbery which he was suspected to have played a part in. Mkoama continues:

I could see that the deceased was crying and starting jerking while hanging upside down and he was crying very badly. And while he was doing that, it seems they were enjoying the thing because they were laughing.

After the application of the shocks, which lasted for about an hour, Kganakga was left hanging upside down on the tree for most of the day until about 5pm. He was lowered from time to time but then hoisted back onto the tree.

Mkoama was never told to ask Kganakga about his political affiliations. What he was told to ask him about was the R60, 000,000 which disappeared the night before. Later, Mkoama and another black employee were sent by Gerber to buy “cool drinks”:

[Mkoama:] “They said to me I must go to the shop to buy some cool drinks, because it seems maybe they have had enough [of torturing]. They have been trying to get the information from Samuel, but all the time he was denying. So they said to me I must go to the shop to buy some cool drinks... And I went to the shop and I came back with the cool drinks. Only to find out there is sort of a fire which was busy dying off. By that time they were now standing by the cars having some drink... They were having some like brandy and whisky, mixing it with the cool drinks. So in other words, the other cool drinks which I went to the shop to buy, it was just to make it extra...”

[Amnesty Judge Wilson:] “And is it correct that you [Mkoama] bought a bottle of brandy, a litre bottle of vodka and some more Coke and Sparkling Lemon?”

[Mkoama:] “That’s correct, your Honour.”

When they returned, Gerber and Van Eyk had retired to their vehicles about 200 meters from the tree. They were drinking whisky and vodka. Gerber explained the drinking of alcohol as follows: “During these type of investigations and interrogations alcohol is always used. No right-thinking person can act in this way without your conscience plaguing you”. However Gerber never made any reference to the laughing, the joking and the interrogator’s connoisseur-like perusal of their handiwork that accompanied the torture and the alcohol consumption and which imbued the occasion with a recreational atmosphere.

Every now and then they returned to where Kganakga was hanging to continue the torture and questioning. At some point, Oosthuizen fired a shot but the victim was not hit. During the course of the day, while Kganakga was hanging suspended from a tree, Van Eyck collected leaves that were lying in the vicinity and set a fire under the head of the deceased. It was his evidence that the intention was not to cause any injury to Kganakga but to discomfort him further by causing him to breathe in the smoke. Mkoama continues his account:

And then we went to Samuel Kganakga to speak to him, because we could see that he was... in bad pain. So we tried to speak to him. You know, maybe to gather information. He had something to say, he must tell us, since we are maybe Black like him, but he said to us no, he knows nothing... Then later as the day goes, maybe by 12 o'clock, it seems that they were now maybe tired. They said that we must keep on asking Samuel Kganakga, and I could see that his face has started swelling and his legs were now, because of the rope... the skin was coming off... Then later Frans Oosthuizen then pulls out the firearm and fired one shot, only one shot, in the direction of the deceased, where the deceased was hanging. Then I screamed. I then screamed saying "why is he shooting?" because I was worried now, maybe he killed him. Then I ran in the direction of the deceased where the deceased was hanging. I went to find out he was not hit. Then they came back, they were standing there by the cars. They were just drinking".

At 5pm Mkoama and another black employee of the security firm were told they could go, which they did. Kganakga was lowered and brought back to where the vehicles were. His face was swollen, his eyes were bloody and red, he could hardly walk and he had marks and abrasions on his legs. Gerber related:

In the next moment Oosthuizen took out his firearm and shot Samuel through the shoulder without any reason, without saying anything. Samuel immediately jumped up and charged Johan Van Eyck and grabbed him as if he sought protection from him. My colleague pushed him away. At this stage there was a lot of blood, he was also covered in blood and he ran in the direction of the bakkie which was parked not very far away. He tried to jump into the bakkie. He was presumably trying to protect himself, but they pulled him away before he could jump into the bakkie and then Samuel started running in the direction of the mine dumps, not very far away. That was when I realised that we had big problems. I took my firearm and I shot Samuel. He fell down into a ditch and – because it was nearly dark at that stage – I went to my car to fetch my torch and started moving in the direction where Samuel had run. I found him, he was lying on the ground and when I shone the torch on him he jumped up again, grabbed the torch and started running again. He ran further along the ditch. I still had my firearm in my hand and shot two shots. I heard him falling again and I moved in that

direction. I shone the torch again and I noticed that he had been fatally wounded. I felt his pulse, I felt his throat. There was no pulse any more, he was dead.

It was decided to get rid of the body and Gerber took the body to a deserted spot where he poured the petrol over the corpse and burnt it. Later Gerber took the body and chopped off one arm, which had not been burnt, to prevent identification of the body.

When Mkoama reported for the work the next day: "On arrival at the office, the first person I met, it was Frans Oosthuizen. He then said in Afrikaans "*moenie worry nie, ons het hom gebraai*", "Don't worry, we have *braai*ed him."

A *braai*, of course, is Afrikaans and South African English for an outdoor barbecue, and *braaiing* is an ubiquitous weekend recreational practice throughout South Africa, with associations with sports competitions, the bush, relaxation, alcohol consumption, and the political culture of white dominance. The security guards had actually *braai*ed and/or interrogated and tortured other prisoners at that locale and similar bush locations in the past. At this *braaiing* site consumption, commensality and violence were integrated and this synthesis had become convention – to the extent that one cannot immediately discern if Gerber's references to past *braais* at this spot refer to actual barbecues, to torture, or to both. In this instance *braaiing* connotes more than the botched attempt to burn the deceased's body. In another case of political "elimination" the Pebco Three where three Black Civic Association activists were kidnapped, beaten and executed on May 5, 1985, near Cradock, one of the implicated policemen, Colonel Roelf Venter, described the scene of interrogation

Both normalization of gross violence against civilians and distanciation from the consequences of these acts are facilitated by the commensality of *braaiing* – the modalities and methods of state violence contain built-in alienation-effects that inure perpetrators from the consequences of their acts (this is also evident in the language used in amnesty-testimony by the police which bears further examination). For example, the association of the Kganakga murder location with past and present commensality serves to both culturally integrate the violence and to create moral distance between the perpetrators and their action. Distancing and depersonalization began with the victim's hooding, the erasure of a face, of individual identity, and is intensified by successive acts of disfiguring violence. The victim is tortured in a manner that can only be considered as racially motivated in part, given the absence of any corroborating evidence of Kganakga's imputed political associations, the torture methods used, the commensal culture that prevailed, the specific body-parts subjected to ill treatment and the precise symbolism

of the torture-site selected – the state’s coercive situating of Africans in bush locales, usually through wholesale residential removals, is considered by many victims of racial relocation policies as sealing their dehumanization and animalization: that one belongs to and in the bush. To be brought to the bush to participate in a violent ceremony of domination and to eventually die in that locale carries all the dehumanizing associations of South African racial relocation ideologies to their nullifying finality.

Torture has been perennially described by its practitioners as softening the interrogated so that they will want to relinquish their information. Kganakga’s body is subjected to an elaborate and baroque series of culinary type procedures that have little to do with the extraction of information: he is hung upside down like a piece of meat; he is softened or marinated by electric shock attacks (and I use the latter culinary term in this context to counter the normalization and neutering effects of the euphemism of *braaiing*); he is smoked and cooked by fire; he is dismembered and butchered – his body transformed into left-over refuse. The ordeal is accompanied by “cool drinks” and alcohol consumption (the brand-names of which seemed crucial to one of the presiding amnesty judges) in the late afternoon winter twilight. These atrocities transform Samuel Kganakga into an object of food consumption and recreation. Mkoama is obviously not part of this culinary culture, he misinterprets the call for cool drinks as the termination of torture and as the ex-policemen’s frustration with their captive’s denials, however drinking was necessary to intensifying the commensality of the violence.

The racial compulsion of the violence is confirmed by the stages of consumption deployed at the torture scene. After close range electric shock treatment to the sexual organs the ex-policemen retreat to a distance from the *braaiing* carcass they have prepared, in order to drink “cool drinks” and to digest their *braai* as a visual spectacle – to consume and cannibalize a black body changed into a generic political object. Afterwards, as in any barbecue, the waste, the unconsumed remnants and debris must be disposed of in more ways than one. After Kganakga’s corpse is burnt, dismembered and buried, Kganakga becomes an anonymous cipher upon which can be projected, ex-post-facto, a number of racial and political imaginaries. Thus after this disposal and further injury to the already mutilated corpse, the former policemen put it about that a PAC or APLA member was actually killed in the course of the robbery and Kganakga’s disappearance and hidden corpse is inserted as the stand-in for this mythical “terrorist.” Of such reality are too many “terrorists” fabricated and fictionalized.

No one asked Kganakga if he was a member of the PAC or APLA because he is confirmed as PAC by the violence applied to his body and by techniques of progressive disfigurement which transform his identity in expunging his person. Further, I would suggest that the use of food consumption

metaphors here communicates with long-standing racist traditions of the bestialization of black bodies by whites – these traditions are embedded in both histories of economic exploitation and racial stereotyping that pre-justify physical atrocity. Gerber and Van Eyck were denied amnesty on the legal criteria that their actions lacked political motive, but no mention was made of the complex and culturally mediated racial dynamics invested in their brutality.

### The symbolic economy of labor and violence

The economic instrumentation of racial subordinates in colonial and post-colonial South Africa, by slave-holding, agri-business and industrial production, and the physical repression materially applied to black bodies in both the economic and political spheres, are historical/cultural legacies that intertwined in contemporary South African state violence. I would suggest that metaphors and rites of bestialization/dehumanization such as the fusing of police torture with *braaiing* and other euphemisms of racial solidarity and coercion express an historically defined symbiosis between economy and terror. This is a neo-colonial political economy where the symbolic consumption and labor commodification of bodies of color are two sides of a contiguous process. This symbiosis between labor commodification and violence was institutionalized with slavery in the Cape Colony in the 17th and 18th century, was greatly expanded in terms of population and geographical scope following the military annexation of trans-Ciscean territories in the 1840s and 50s, and legislatively finalized with the 1913 Land Act – that rapid and violent mass production of a rural proletariat from African tenant farmers who had staged an economic recovery in the latter half of the 19th century<sup>6</sup>. Informal “cajoling” and violent coercion of African labor resources under independent chiefly control from the 18th to mid 19th century, was transformed, into a coercive policing grid consisting of the Land Act, coupled with pass laws regulating labor migrancy and the creation of labor compounds – an well known story that does not need rehearsal here. It is sufficient to point out that the historical encounter of black South Africans with capital, labor discipline and a state apparatus devoted to the policing of labor was consistently informed by potential and actual corporeal and symbolic violence throughout this imposed social transformation.

The right to corporeally discipline the underclass of color had been vigorously defended by slave holders in the Western Cape since the 18th century when colonial governments had attempted to place halfhearted

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<sup>6</sup> See Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Keegan 1996; Plaatje 1916; Van Onselen 1982.

limits on these practices, and was reasserted as part of the coercion of labor in the supposedly post-emancipation free labor market. In the second third of the 19th century white land owners, as represented by such organizations as the Zuid-Afrikaansche Boeren Beschermings Vereeniging (BBV), promoted an ethic of farm-labor discipline based on patriarchal familial metaphors – rural labor paternalism was the repressive apparatus enforcing class and racial distinction. By the late 19th century the white homestead, with its underclass of tenant and seasonal laborers, was seen as the ideological well spring for the ethics of “working, obeying and submitting” which organized racial interaction, and class relatedness within disciplinary frameworks. This rural paternalism and its command of violence were advanced as the model, in miniature, for the South African state as a whole by the BBV (see Giliomee 1989). As the Comaroffs have extensively discussed these views were part of a wider ensemble or “moralized discourses” that respectively posited African labor discipline in policing, geographic, theological and medical frameworks. Of salience here is the Comaroffs’ discussion of late 19th century ideologies and practices of what can only be termed spatial violence, which they call a politics of “the margins”, the imposition of a policed “topography of capitalist production” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 203-204). In other words, the inscription of topography with signs and structures of economic subjugation can historically be correlated with the coercive inscription of the African body with disciplinary signs and postures – a dynamic that can also be discerned in the location and methods of recent *braai* tortures and murders where the moral geography of “the bush,” economic allegories and the subjugated black body came together in violence and pain<sup>7</sup>.

In South African labor history the Comaroffs have identified a historical iconography that rationalized economic exploitation of Black populations with animalistic imagery – the trope of “beasts of burden” – particularly associated by recently proletarianized Black workers with degrading and dangerous labor in the mines (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 206, 225-226). I have extensively discussed elsewhere the racist dynamic of animalization/depersonalization in the Rodney King episode (Feldman 1994). Animalization of the racial Other transforms the latter into prey and communicates with economic and food consumption metaphors that further deface, and by inference, commodify, the victim’s body. The electric shock treatment, the bullet wounds and the attempt to burn the victims head are all techniques of racist cuisine, of changing the raw into the cooked, the individual into a nullified specimen, Kganagka the security guard into a classificatory terrorist.

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<sup>7</sup> Violent labor discipline in the agricultural economy persists today as a barely underground practice that continues to uphold farm paternalism against a rural proletariat of color in the Western and Eastern Cape.

In the aggression inflicted upon Samuel Kganakga and other victims of *braai* tortures, the symbolic economy of performative violence and the violence of historically inscribed economic domination can be seen as integral to each other's ideological replication in consciousness and performed act. The conjuncture of subjugated labor, the command of violence, racial bestialization and degradation and consumption practice is explicit in the following account from Jabu James Malinga speaking of his torture near Alexandra in 1978<sup>8</sup>. Here the use of the term kaffir, and the rehearsal of labor subservience serve to set the scene of intimidation and the racial-class relations between the police aggressors and their victim, all of which seem important to the policemen's interrogation protocol<sup>9</sup>. The fact that, as in the Kganakga torture, policemen of color either assist or watch these atrocities further accentuates the dramaturgy of domination – we have on the one hand, the bestialized black body fit for punishment, labor and burning and the quasi-humanized black body wearing the endowed uniform of its masters. However we must not forget that Kganakga was also security guard, the subordinate, if not exactly the colleague, of those who tortured him, thus the divide between bestiality and quasi-humanity is a labile one for persons of color in the *braai* theater.

And Mtibi and Skieter and... Van der Linde (policemen), they were in a green Chevrolet. They called me, they said I must get into the car. I wanted to know why. They said you kaffir you mustn't ask a lot. Get in. Then I went inside the car and left off with them. They took me into some bush in Alexandra where it is a highway at the moment. They took some meat from the car, they said I must just go and get some wood for them. I did as I was told. And then they said I must make fire for them. Thereafter they said I must *braai* the meat for them as well. And thereafter they were eating and drinking alcohol. They wanted to know why didn't I die on that day when I was shot. I said I don't know. They said you must tell us about your friends that you were with on that day and you must tell us about Tsetsi Mashini when you talked to him on that night at school, on the 15th June. I must tell them what we were talking about. I refused to tell them any details of our meeting. Then they started beating me. They said I knew too much, they will show me something that I don't know. They handcuffed me and the fire was still burning at that time. They took me towards the fire, they threatened to burn me should I not be prepared to talk the truth. I didn't think that they would burn me or not. Whilst they were assaulting me and the other one lifted my leg they dragged me towards this fire. They started burning me, they said I must talk the truth. I refused because I knew that should I tell the truth they

<sup>8</sup> Recorded at Truth Commission hearings in Gauteng in 1996.

<sup>9</sup> The presence of a black policeman as in the Kganakga incident, and the implications of this role of the black observer of violence by whites will be the subject of subsequent analysis.

will kill all my companions. Then they burnt me. I was dressed in an overall. When they realised that I was burning they took something to extinguish the fire. They extinguished the fire. They said they wanted to know what we were doing on the 17th June. They wanted the truth. I still refused to tell them. I was just being kicked, I was not aware of what was happening, I was unconscious at that moment. I found myself at the clinic. That is when I became conscious. I can't remember what happened.

The rhetorical search for the truth by the torturers indicates that another type of truth is being extracted from the pain of Malinga's body. It is a truth that is not so much encased in what is said or silenced in an interrogation but a truth and a discourse that is articulated in the methodologies and sequencing of acts of degradation and intimidation that move Malinga and his interrogators through a series of stylized role sets organized by labor, consumption and personal nullification.

## Conclusion

This paper has briefly examined three discursive and performative sites of political violence and political commodification: Northern Ireland in the 1980s, Nazi extermination camps, and the counterinsurgency culture of South Africa's securocrats during the 1980's and early 1990s. In each historical instance I have examined the surrogation of concrete bodies and persons by systems of conferral, commodification, substitution that all serve to depersonalize victims and to dematerialize violence, creating ideological insulations against the human consequences of wholesale political atrocity and murder. In turn, I would propose that serious analysis of racial/ethnic essentialization and/or minoritization must consider political commodification dynamics in the positioning of Othered identities by violence and terror. Further, I would suggest that exploration of political violence from the vantage point of commodification logics can serve to dismantle the invested symbolic systems that legitimize human rights violations through various strategies and technologies of victim neutralization, distantiation, reduction and mythification; procedures and mediations that enable the tortured and the murdered to circulate as political signifiers, and as consumer artifacts within diverse political cultures.

In the debates that have surrounded the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission there has been much comment about the Commission's focus on "exceptional" "extreme" and "gross" acts of human rights violation; that the inquiry risks normalizing and backgrounding the everyday structural violence of apartheid's socio-economic institutions in South Africa. The commission, indeed, seems to be more centered on the acts,

agents, ideologies and institutions that were mobilized and deployed to defend the apartheid regime from internal and external assault than with the actual system of racial separation and economic immiseration in itself. Though this stress has been somewhat balanced by the various hearings on legal, medical, psychiatric, business and media institutions and practices. From certain perspectives the emphasis on “gross human rights violations” is seen as an artificial separation of the political dimensions of the apartheid regime from its economic character and everyday structural underpinnings. However, once analyzed from the perspective of both the commodification of the body and critical race theory, such acts as Kganakga’s torture and murder come into focus as present-day expressions of a depth archeology.

Here we must reflect on the process by which the racial Other, initially and coercively deployed as an instrument of economic production is eventually transformed into a medium of pleasurable consumption – a process that links violence, the commodification of Black labor with consumption/commensal practices that elaborate white dominance. Consider the use in 19th and 20th century American mass advertising of pleasure seeking, euphoric African-American faces and bodies as vehicles for selling commodities to a predominantly white audience. We are dealing here with racial images which provoke commensal pleasures on the one hand, and acts of domination and violence that are encrypted by consumption symbols on the other, thereby indicating the presence of commodification logics at the core of both repressive and ideological apparatuses focused on race and class.

The association of *braaiing* locales and the act of *braaiing* with the torture, mutilation and the political murder of Black people by members of the security force is a pattern that runs throughout many of the testimonies submitted to the Truth Commission. This suggests that state counter-insurgency in the 1970s-1990s in South Africa frequently functioned as a theater of reenactment where these two economies, violent repression and neo-colonial economic subjugation were made to meet: an intersection where the former mode of oppression borrowed from the symbols, scenarios and emblems of the latter. To paraphrase Hegel, the owl of state violence only flies at night. In other words, many acts of state violence can be viewed as expressions of structural nostalgia, they are infused with retrospective mythographies of historical conditions that either no longer exist or are swiftly decaying. Elsewhere, in the context of Northern Ireland, I have shown that chronic and excessive political violence can also be invested in the momentary provision of prospective mythography. This framework allows us to see how violent states, para-state organizations, and mimetic counter-state organizations like insurgency forces may repeatedly using violence to materially contour and reshape the social and material world into momentary idealities – desired historiographic stages that can have no concrete

existence otherwise and which cannot be sustained without the use of further desiring violence. This framework can explain the persistent use and reuse of violence despite its inability to further the stated political agenda of the perpetrators in any real fashion.

In South Africa, *braai* tortures were a theater of economic replay and nostalgia for old hierarchies that could only be replicated in the present through the sensory associations of the barbecue. The *braai* torture was a pleasure inducing performance where the subordination of racial others was explicitly linked to heightened moments of commensality, object-choice and virtual cannibalism. It is precisely the capacity of *braai* tortures to evoke and replicate old hierarchies that enabled the perpetrators to extract power and identity from these atrocities, essences that had little to do with the gathering of political intelligence. These chronic episodes were sites and moments where white dominance and state authority was both celebrated and symbolically renewed over the odor and smoke of the sacrificial burning away of the humanity of both victims and aggressors.

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MERCANTILIZAÇÃO E COMENSALIDADE  
NA VIOLÊNCIA POLÍTICA NA ÁFRICA  
DO SUL E NA IRLANDA DO NORTE

*O artigo sugere que a violência política pode ser informada pela lógica simbólica do fetichismo da mercadoria. A mercantilização/fetichização de corpos emblemáticos através da violência permite que corpos e cadáveres feridos, maltratados ou torturados circulem como significantes ideológicos em situações de conflito social. Este processo envolve rituais de despersonalização, o forjar de modelos raciais ou étnicos por meio de ataques à integridade física, bem como estéticas de consumo e comensalidade.*

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