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Editorial: Humour in South African Literatures and Cultures From Apartheid to the Present

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Editorial note

Humour is a phenomenon that is simultaneously unifying and divisive, embedded as it is in social context, history, and situational circumstances. As such, humour is a versatile medium that transforms with those who use and perceive it. It is a universal occurrence, yet what is considered funny changes depending on the cultural environment, historical moment, and how much time has passed since a certain incident would have occurred, as the well-known saying goes, “tragedy plus time equals comedy”. Attempts to make sense of this multifaceted phenomenon date back to antiquity, with humour’s “bad reputation” (Morreall, 2024) persisting long before our contemporary positively inflected understanding of humour. In addition, the long history of research and philosophy on the topic has not resulted in a single theory or consensus on the intricacies of humour. The more scholars attempt to delineate its boundaries, the more humour resists definition and demonstrates its elusive character. A joke that is well-received by one community may be perceived as offensive or confusing by another, a fact that underscores humour’s context-dependency. This resistance to definition is reflected in Bergson’s (1900, p. 4b) assertion that “we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition” because it is “a living thing.” In Bergson’s (1900) view, humour is intrinsically linked to human existence, and it is a living thing because it finds expression in real-life conversations and cultural contexts. Bakhtin (1984, p. 66) later expanded on this perspective, arguing that “certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter.” He positioned laughter as a vehicle for reason and intellectual inquiry rather than mere entertainment. Bakhtin (1984) also postulated various concepts, including the carnivalesque, which demonstrates the capacity of cultural performances and texts to subvert, challenge, and disrupt authority, while mediating the complex relationship between official and popular discourses.

Within the maze of competing theories, three major theoretical strands have crystallised over time. Most philosophers of humour, from Aristotle to Thomas Hobbes, have theorised humour as a mode

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of power and aggression. This formulation assumes that humour is used by those with power against the less powerful, a negative understanding that is now termed superiority theory, according to which amusement derives from the hierarchical subjugation of others or ourselves ((*i.e.*) self-deprecatory humour). More recent theoretical approaches are typically subsumed under the relief theory, pioneered by Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud, which focuses on the release of psychological pressure, and the incongruity theory, which posits that the collision of incommensurable elements creates comic pleasure (Morreall, 2024).

Today, humour is commonly associated with pleasure and entertainment, an assumption that maintains that pain and suffering are antithetical to it. This binary, however, obscures a more complex reality: humour can coexist with suffering without necessarily challenging it. In his work *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe (2001) complicates this binary and suggests that the laughter of the oppressed is not necessarily a form of resistance, since it takes place within the confines of a world created and sanctioned by the oppressor. These theoretical provocations raise questions about humour in general and about the geographical focus of this special issue, namely South Africa: How has humour functioned and what purpose has it served across different periods of South African history? Does humour follow a subversive or collusive aesthetic? How have South African literatures and cultures used humour as an aesthetic and narrative framework over the years, from apartheid to contemporary times? Do specific forms of laughter in South African texts point to distinctive concepts of South African humour? Where does the humour in these works originate, and what are its implications for how South Africans imagine their collective cultural identity and national narrative?

South Africa offers a particularly interesting context for investigating these issues. The nation's history of violent colonial dispossession beginning in the seventeenth century, the institutionalised racial segregation of apartheid (1948–1994), and the ongoing challenges of post-apartheid democracy have given rise to cultural and literary traditions in which humour assumes complex and often subversive functions. Whereas satirical humour has undermined apartheid's claims to legitimacy, for instance, comedic responses to the period and beyond have also functioned as critique and coping strategies alike, as suggested by South African comedian Trevor Noah: "Comedy plays an important role in us weathering the scars of apartheid" (Onishi & Itzkoff, 2015). Determining what is considered humorous in South Africa, and by whom, is inextricably linked to questions of power, identity, memory, and belonging. The contributions to this special issue are located within this multilayered and dynamic terrain.

Humour has always been part of South African social life. In precolonial times, people used humour in everyday communication to convey difficult messages in a light-hearted manner. In the Zulu cultural tradition, for example, poets (known as imbongis) used humour to counsel kings and caution against abuses of power. The debate about whether humour works for or against power, which has characterised humour scholarship for many years, plays out starkly in the different periods of South African history. During apartheid, humour was deployed as "an integral medium for indoctrination and pacification" (Donian, 2021, p. 1). The apartheid system put in place restrictive laws that banned the publication of anything that contradicted its logic of racial segregation. To avoid the wrath of the law, writers and comedians had to play it safe either by avoiding political humour altogether or by adopting subtle and ambiguous forms of humour. Writing about black humour in South Africa in the 20th century, Crigler (2023, p. 49) identifies humour as a "useful lens for understanding changes in black South African culture in the mid-twentieth century". Understanding what jokes circulated in public discourse would shed light on the power dynamics of the time. This is because humour is not neutral. It often draws on popular stereotypes to communicate its message. The question of who has the power to laugh at whom explains why most of the humorous writings and performances by black writers revolved mainly around social issues. Stories which were published by black writers of the 1950 s and 1960 s, such as Can Temba and Lewis Nkosi, focused specifically on the social experiences of black people and showed how they were carving their own space in the apartheid city. *Drum*, a "popular consumer magazine launched in 1951 . . . became a key forum for a new generation of young black writers" which by the mid-1950s had "begun to articulate new ideas of a modern, urbanized African culture, explicitly rejecting the atavistic tribal fantasies of apartheid" (McDonald, 2009, p. 25). Early South African black writers, such as R.R.R Dhlomo and Casey Motsisi, deployed humour as a "medium through which to reflect on social realities in the grim atmosphere of repression and (self-)censorship which distinguished mid-twentieth-century South Africa" (Crigler, 2023, p. 49). Contrary to nationalist anti-apartheid narratives that emphasised the suffering of black people and the violence of the apartheid system, these writers "responded to the challenges of the apartheid era in creative and revealing ways" (Crigler, 2023, p. 49) by cracking jokes about the everyday lives of black people. Social ills in black townships, such as crime, violence and alcoholism, provided rich material for dark humour. Given the censorship laws of the apartheid era, these writers only referred to apartheid and its segregationist laws in passing, preferring to direct their humour at the horrors of black life. Dhlomo's writings, for example, which were published in the newspapers *The Bantu World* and *Ilanga lase Natal*, drew on the absurdities of black life under apartheid.

The development of comedic humour in South Africa "mirror[s] changes in the country's socio-political landscape" (Donian, 2021, p. 1). One can understand the history of South Africa, particularly its socio-economic landscape and the political ideologies and beliefs that underpinned its different historical junctures, by looking at what people laugh at in everyday conversation at different times. Donian's study of the historiography of humour in South Africa identifies three distinctive forms of humour that can be linked to different historical periods. The first category, humour as an instrument of social control, is associated with the height of apartheid, particularly the 1950 s and 60 s where the apartheid regime deployed humour to legitimise racial segregation. This category framed black people as deserving segregation because their cultures were incompatible with modernity. Given the strict censorship enforced through laws such as the Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963 and the Publications Act of 1974, humour was deployed primarily as "a propaganda machine – both for indoctrination and escapist pacification" (Donian, 2021, p. 2). Although the 1950s saw the emergence of a vibrant black intellectual culture in the cities, most of the humorous works produced by black writers such as Can Themba and Bloke Modisane addressed everyday issues such as infidelity as depicted in Can Themba's famous short story, "The Suit". Casey Motsisi, another famous writer of the Drum Decade, "revelled in the bustle and squalor of Johannesburg, ultimately honing a critique of the apartheid state that was novel in the sense that it was grounded neither in Marxism nor in respectability-focused petty-bourgeois values" (Crigler 2023). Motsisi's commitment to humour invoked criticism from some quarters on the grounds that he diverted people's attention from the suffering of black people and the urgent need for resistance and in that way playing into the hands of the apartheid state. The second category, humour as social protest, gained traction in the 1980 s, leading up to the end of apartheid in 1994, while the last category, humour as an instrument of social and political transformation, coincided with the democratic dispensation and its legislative provisions. Humour as social protest falls into the category that Ndebele (1994) described as "literature of spectacle" which concentrates on the spectacle of apartheid violence and the suffering of black people. The humour as an instrument of social and political transformation category is evident in the works of contemporary South African humourists such as Chester Missing, Loyiso Gola and Trevor Noah whose humour often targets the post-apartheid state and its failures. Trevor Noah's humour is preoccupied with, among other things, the questions of race and racism, crime and state corruption.

In apartheid South Africa, the media industry functioned as an arm of the state, responsible for disseminating state propaganda. It played "an explicitly ideological function" of propagating and legitimising "the values, mores and viewpoints of the apartheid regime" (Donian, 2021, p. 2). Most films and television productions of the period popularised a conservative Afrikaner worldview underpinned by Calvinist moral norms of the Dutch Reformed Church. Often, "blacks were negatively depicted as incompetent buffoons, uncivilised, inferior, evil or in servile positions" (Donian, 2021, p. 3) while their white counterparts were depicted as modern, civilised paragons of virtue. Comedy was thus used as the opium of the people, designed to lull them to sleep and divert attention from the gross injustices of the apartheid state. The entertainment function of comedy was twisted so as "to distract, to divert from reality, to allow a temporary escape that slow[ed] down the raising of awareness" (Tcheuyap, 2010, p. 25). Apartheid legislation required comedy to take a non-political stance, which meant that for the most part, comedy served the interests of the ruling National Party, and if it was subversive, it had to do so in a creative and subtle manner. In short, humour in the apartheid context worked as "a form of escapist pacification; that is, a means of distracting society from the brutality of the apartheid regime and the socio-political tumult of the country" (Donian, 2022, p. 2).

Popular Afrikaner comedians of the apartheid era, such as Jamie Uys and Leon Schuster, "naturalised White superiority by representing Whites as heroes paternally governing the Blacks, who are negatively represented as subordinate, reprobate and 'Other' – and thus unable to function in a modern society or govern themselves, making them the centre of comedic ridicule" (Norton, 2015, p. 8 in Donian, 2021 p. 4). Films that targeted black audiences, known as scheme-B films, were generally of poor quality because they were produced by amateurs who wanted to make money through the government's policy of promoting black films. More importantly, the comedies produced through these programmes served to pacify blacks through what Donian (2021, p. 5) calls "soporific entertainment". The humorous thread in these films revolved around the assumed backwardness of black people, the tension between modernity and tradition, and the rural (black) and urban (white) divide. Black people were thus the subject of derogatory jokes about cultural differences between whites and blacks.

Throughout the history of South Africa, at least from the time of the Union to the present day, humour has worked both in service of, and against, power. The question that has troubled the South African polity for the longest time is that of race. During apartheid, the question was what to do with the black colonised majority and how to ensure that their status as subjects could be normalised and routinised. Thus, the apartheid state used humour to perpetuate stereotypes about black people and promote colonialism's civilising mission. That is why early South African writers, including those perceived as liberal such as Oliver Shreiner could not comprehend a future where Africans could self-govern without the guidance of their white masters (Krebs, 1997). This line was accentuated following the establishment of apartheid in 1,948. As Johns (2009, p. 234) notes,

> the arbiters of white power in South Africa allowed comedy to restore and preserve social hierarchy, not to break it. Comic programs sanctioned by the state, both officially and unofficially, maintained traditional racial divisiveness and social elitism […] while also projecting this vision into the future.

In white narratives of the time, humour related to black people was based on misconceptions, fabrications, and downright ignorance. Most of the white writers and comedians who made fun of black people in their writings and comedic productions knew very little about black lives, given that apartheid did not allow any meaningful contact between different racial groups.

In an article titled "No Laughing Matter? Humour and the performance of South Africa", Crigler (2018) traces South Africa's social history of humour through the country's key historical periods, namely the Union of 1910, the apartheid regime of 1948, and the democratic dispensation of 1994. For Crigler (2023), the year 1994 shares similarities with 1910 in that both were inspired by the ideas of racial integration and multiculturalism. The humour of the Union period, as depicted in Stephen Black's novel, *The Dorp,* shows the complexities of bringing together the different races, particularly the English and the Afrikaners. Crigler (2018, p. 164) argues that "Black's humour in *The Dorp* is rooted […] in people's refusal to change and adapt to circumstances, even as the world continues to change rapidly". The humour, therefore, targeted the absurdity of racial thinking which divided people in ridiculous ways. The Afrikaners and the English could not patronise the same theatres because of their political differences. As it was during the Union period, humour that targets white supremacist ideologies is also prevalent in the post-apartheid period. Popular comedies such as AI Murray's comic documentary *Why Does Everyone Hate the British Empire?* and Lesego Tlhami's *Coconut Kelz* productions target the absurdities of apartheid's racial infrastructure in contemporary South Africa. While Murray generates his humour by mocking remnants of apartheid racist logic found in museums, Lesego Tlhabi shows how race and racist thinking continue to shape identity and inter-racial relations in contemporary South Africa. At the same time, films such as Jamie Uys' *The Gods Must be Crazy* sought to entrench the apartheid ideology of separatism by casting black people as primitives who belonged in the bush while Leon Schuster's post-apartheid film *Mr Bones* shows South Africa as a transformed society "populated by fun-loving people" bound together by "a spirit of ubuntu" (Crigler, 2018, p. 167) that transcends the crass materialism of the neoliberal economic order.

Although the apartheid regime was repressive, subversive political comedy thrived. The plays of Athol Fugard, for example, used humour to mock apartheid legislation. In his play, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, Fugard mocks how the apartheid state's repressive laws forced black people into criminality to secure legal status in the city. Sizwe Bansi adopts a dead man's identity document to legalise himself in the apartheid city. Fugard's other play, *Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act*, ridicules apartheid's attempt to police sexuality, while highlighting the absurdity of apartheid bureaucracy which forced those who were involved in interracial love to make ridiculous confessions or fabricate stories to avoid arrest. Protest theatre, such as that of Athol Fugard, exposed, through humour and satire, the atrocities of apartheid and the creative ways that black people adopted to circumvent the repressive laws.

The use of humour as an instrument of resistance was not only evident in theatre but also in everyday conversations. Tessa (1997) writes about how Xhosa-speaking domestic workers used humour to satirise their conditions of work and the behaviour of their white employers. The humour, which was often satirical, "expose[d] the injustices of segregation and apartheid as well as the arrogance and ignorance of Whites" (Tessa, 1997, p. 2). Black people resorted to humour and laughter to cope with their predicament. In an article that explores humour as a tool of liberation, Maluleke (2021, p. 328) argues that "for a people under siege and […] under the yoke of oppression, humour and laughter seem such a wasteful luxury to cultivate and nurture". However, in the dark days of apartheid repression, humour became a source of inspiration, a means to divert attention from the grinding suffering that black people endured. Maluleke further intimates that both Nelson Mandela and Steve Biko used self-deprecating humour in their writings not only to highlight the extent to which the system had dehumanised black people but also to lighten their suffering and avoid wallowing in despair. Steve Biko once humorously suggested that the black man spoke his mind in the toilet, but once he came out, his face "brighten[ed] up in sheepish obedience […] hurrying in response to his master's impatient call" (Biko in Maluleke, 2021, p. 330). In his sermons and speeches, Desmond Tutu used humour to humanise both the oppressor and the oppressed. Tutu's humour was a part of his ubuntu philosophy, and its intention was to bring people together and to encourage them to share their humanity by laughing together rather than at each other. This is contrary to the philosophy of apartheid which sought to separate people based on their skin colour. Tutu's Van der Merwe jokes not only poked fun at the two antagonistic racial groups (black and white) but also sought to foreground their shared humanity. One of Tutu's Van der Merwe jokes that Maluleke (2021) shares can be considered emblematic of South Africa's race problem. It tells the story of

> […] two South Africans, Van der Merwe and Dlangamandla, [who] happen[ed] to befriend each other while living in the USA, where, at some stage, they got into big trouble and were convicted of a capital offence. They were given the choice of an electric chair or the rope. Van der Merwe went first and chose the electric chair. He was strapped in and they pulled the switch. Nothing happened. This was repeated three times, and they decided to reprieve him. As he went out, Dlangamandla was next in the queue [and seeing his "comrade" marching out, he inquired as to what had just happened]. Van der Merwe told him: "The damned thing doesn't work. Choose the rope!"

This story is not only a multilayered cultural joke but also a sharp diagnosis of South Africa's poisoned race relations. Van der Merwe's advice to his friend to choose the rope shows that their friendship is not genuine. Van der Merwe is a fake friend looking for an opportunity to bring his black friend down. Tutu made these jokes not only to show that there is need for racial integration in South Africa but also to create an atmosphere conducive for reconciliation.

Whereas the apartheid state used humour to pacify black people and divert their attention from the hardships of everyday life, in the post-apartheid period, humour is usually deployed to right the wrongs of the past and to promote social transformation. Donian (2021, p. 10) observes that "as the country moved towards democracy, humour showed significant potential to serve as a palliative for increased tension and anxiety surrounding political, racial, ethnic and class transformation". The end of apartheid gave way to what Donian (2022, p. 1) calls the "comic revolution", which saw the proliferation of comedy shows and performances by black comedians. This comedy revolution was a direct consequence of "the demise of the apartheid State, the end of its brutality, surveillance and censorship, and the emergence of a free and democratic South Africa" (Seirlis, 2011, p. 513). Comedians such as Trevor Noah and Loyiso Gola took advantage of the democratic space to reflect on South Africa's socio-economic and political landscape. With apartheid laws having been repealed, the comedians were free to poke fun at all racial groups. Comedians from formerly marginalised groups

> capitalis[ed] on their new-found political freedom to provocatively stretch the limits of what could be laughed about in the country, pushing the boundaries on contemporary and quintessentially South African issues such as apartheid, race, the AIDS epidemic, social inequality, class, politics and governance, and corruption and crime. (Donian, 2022, p. 3)

While humour by black comedians has become bold and fearless, white humour, especially humour about Afrikaners, has become self-deprecating. Whereas black comedians are generally more visceral in their approach to race, culture and politics, most white comics are "more readily marked by jocund humour and political (albeit not always socio-cultural) disavowal" (Donian, 2022, p. 12).

Meanwhile, stereotypes of the apartheid era continue to provide fodder for the comedic performances of black comedians such as Loyiso Gola and writers such as Niq Mhlongo. In Mhlongo's (2004) *Dog Eat Dog*, for example, the protagonist, Dingz, takes advantage of white guilt and the country's legacies of racial financial exclusion to secure funding for his studies at Wits. The white Registrar is too eager to project himself as progressive and pro-transformation that he falls victim to Dingz's choreographed tantrum and web of lies. As it was during apartheid, black people are often humorously depicted as criminals and rapists, while coloureds and Indians are portrayed as fake versions of whiteness, mocked for their liminal position in the post-apartheid state

– not black enough to benefit from black economic empowerment policies nor white enough to benefit from the "old money" of the apartheid period. Rajesh Gopie's play, *Out of Bounds,* for example, narrates the story of an Indian young man who is ashamed of his *charou* (Indian black) identity and hopes to leave his people's backward ways and pass for white. Hansen's (2005) article, "Melancholia of Freedom: Humour and Nostalgia among Indians in South Africa", explores how some parts of the Indian community are caught between an oppressive apartheid past, which offered them economic opportunities, and a post-apartheid present, which segregates them based on race.

The above-cited representations suggest that Indians and Coloureds have been victimised on both sides of 1994 – an issue which features in contemporary South African comedy. Hansen's "The Melancholia of Freedom" (2005) points to a love-hate relationship between Indians and apartheid which has become a productive space for generating humour about Indian identity in post-apartheid South Africa. In Rajesh Gopie's *Out of Bounds*, for example, humour emerges from the absurdity of being nostalgic about an oppressive system in a moment of freedom. In this context, humour becomes a "medium for reflect[ing] on the past, the bewildering present, and a very uncertain future" (Hansen, 2005, p. 298), especially for those who happen to be on the wrong side of history.

In addition, Afrikaner characters in contemporary films such as Rob van Vuuren and Louw Venter's *The Most Amazing Show* are depicted as old-fashioned and unwilling to accept transformation – "unattractive bumpkin relics" and "dinosaurs from an unhappy past" (Seirlis, 2011, pp. 515–516). This kind of humour not only seeks to highlight that Afrikaners have lost power but also suggests how they can recover something of their battered image. The position of Afrikaners in post-apartheid South Africa is ambivalent and tenuous because of their historical relationship with apartheid and the economic capital they accumulated during apartheid, which renders them unrepentant beneficiaries of an unjust system. Their position of powerlessness makes them soft targets of some of the most scathing humour in South Africa. Seirlis, 2011, p. 516) posits that "if Afrikaners are something left behind by modern times, something left over from the past, blackness constitutes something with positive associations in the present". Seirlis (2011) identifies two themes that dominate South African humour – what was left *behind* and what was *left over* following the demise of apartheid. What was left behind is the puritanical Afrikaner who has been completely overtaken by the transition to democracy, while what was *left over* is "the character of South African politics and the workings of power" (Seirlis, 2011, p. 529). It appears as if what happened in 1994 was a change of colour from white to black, but the workings of power remain the same. Zakes Mda's novel *Black Diamonds* satirically shows how the end of apartheid has led to the emergence of a black economic elite buoyed by black economic empowerment policies that resemble apartheid's job reservation policies.

Embedded in this complex web of humour, the field of inquiry of our special issue is its use and functions in South African literatures and cultures from apartheid to the present, with our five contributions exploring various dynamics. **Isaac Ndlovu**'s article examines the humour in the blesser-blessee relationships depicted in Angela Makholwa's *The Blessed Girl*. He underscores Makholwa's use of humour and aesthetic play in his analysis by considering, firstly, what he terms humour in *laughing at*, which involves laughing at the protagonist for her vanity and at how she is eventually 'outplayed' by her blesser. Secondly, the research shows that humour is invoked through the concept of *laughing with* the protagonist as she playfully describes the manipulative qualities that enable her to obtain financial and other comforts from her blesser. Ndlovu clearly shows the ways in which humour, contradictions, and the tragic qualities of the blesse-blessee relationships (the protagonist Bontle commits suicide) are located in what he terms "the hyper-capitalist climate of contemporary urban South Africa", a social ill that should be criticised.

Mopailo Thatelo brings in digital media by analysing the humour reflected in political posters on the Social Media platform X from May 2024 to June 2025, with a focus on the 2024-established Government of National Unity (GNU) in South Africa. The study, which acknowledges that visual political humour has evolved over time and now transitioned to new media, highlights the complexity of visual political humour, such as the mediation of entertainment and the communication of ideas about politics, other national issues, and the potential enhancement of democracy. By drawing on the Critical Visual Analysis (CVA) framework, the analysis observes that the humour reflected in the cartoons and visual satire expresses the public's dissent on the GNU and counters the legitimacy of both the African National Congress (ANC) leader and national president, Cyril Ramaphosa, and the Democratic Alliance (DA) leader, John Steenhuisen.

Nonki Motahane and **Zandile Matlolane**'s paper investigates literary humour in the context of queer relationships and societal norms, as portrayed in Niq Mhlongo's stories, "The Stalker" and "Woman to Woman", which were published in *For You I'd Steal a Goat* (2022). The research situates the two literary texts within the short story tradition and specifically emphasises the role of the South African short story in replicating the ensuing changes in the country's social and political landscapes. The study examines how Mhlongo employs humour in the selected short stories to comment on gender, sexual identities, and moral values of the post-apartheid era. Thus, Motahane and Matlolane conclude that humour, in forms that include jokes, satire, and queer gender performances, is used by Mhlongo to expose society's attitudes toward queer sexualities as connected to shame and the marginalisation of such identities, with the overarching artistic objective of disrupting the continued dominance of patriarchal practices and the prevalence of social conservatism in post-apartheid South Africa.

Nomonde Ntsepo and **Kimméra Pillay**'s article focuses on the humour in Sindiwe Magona's depiction of domestic workers' experiences in the short story collection *Living, loving and Lying Awake at Night* (1991) which is set in fictional East London during South Africa's transition from apartheid to the post-apartheid era. Their research draws on the traditional concepts of humour, such as the carnivalesque, and conflates these with notions from African feminism to examine the domestic workers' experiences as they engaged in subversive actions against both traditional patriarchy and the remnants of apartheid oppression. Both Ntsepo and Pillay argue that Magona's eight stories employ the technique of 'a forked tongue' and or that of 'double-voiced discourse' to mock the existing racial divisions and other apartheid regulations while criticising the existing patriarchal expectations. Thus, the study provides an insight into the ways black domestic workers used satirical humour to reveal the limitations imposed by apartheid and traditional patriarchy. Accordingly, the authors consider Magona's work foundational to the creation of feminist African humour during the 1990 s transition period in South Africa.

Rosaline Govender and **Simone Govender** analyse selected editorial cartoons by the renowned South African cartoonists Zapiro, Brandon Reynolds, and Jeremy Nell that depict and satirise the violence witnessed during the 2008 xenophobic attacks on foreign migrants. In this examination of visual media, traditional theories of humour and satire are linked to the concept of the carnivalesque to discern how the selected cartoons frame xenophobic violence in South Africa, criticise traditional and political office bearers, and depict the social contradictions inherent in the attacks. Govender and Govender's research highlights the significance of the ironic shift between values such as ubuntu and the attacker's violence on Malawian, Mozambiquan, and Zimbabwean migrants. Both show the dark humour reflected in the cartoons' depictions of the grotesque deaths and frame the spectacle, and hence, the laughable qualities of the South Africans who perpetrated the violence and political figures whose statements are ambiguous and seem to entrench the anti-foreigner sentiments.

Nkosinathi Leonard Selekane completes our special issue with an analysis of the humour mediated in the digital online self-help content available on YouTube. In particular, he examines the archive of videos from the *Babu Dokotela TV Show* which feature a traditional healer persona's guidance on how viewers can heal from the prevalent pain and suffering and extricate themselves from the pervasive poverty plaguing contemporary South Africa. The analysis is framed by a method that inflects concepts of humour and self-help media in light of the premise that self-help media leads to the constitution of satisfaction within the users. What this study reveals is that Babu Dokotela elicits amusement through a variety of techniques, among them jokes, comedic interruptions, parody, code-switching, and multiple visual artefacts, thereby creating a playful tone. The article furthermore emphasises the significance of self-help media, particularly the *Babu Dokotela TV Show*, as a popular cultural text that provides entertainment and offers new approaches to managing pain, misfortune, and misery, while also functioning as a resource for individuals seeking help in achieving personal transformation.

In sum, the various articles in our special issue contribute to the picture of South African humour by not only examining diverse media and literary genres but also by exemplifying humour's critical potential and its ubiquitous connection to politics. From digital political satire and visual criticism of xenophobia to self-help, queer literary narratives, and the experiences of domestic workers in South Africa, humour is used to critique, resist, and overcome unjust power structures while exposing social contradictions. Read together, the articles provide a comprehensive survey of humour and its role in narrating everyday social relations and subverting power. They show that humour in South Africa functions as a moral/ethical barometer of the socio-political context in which it occurs. During apartheid, humour was used as a political tool to sanitise the racial ideology of apartheid and to depict black people as "others" who could not be integrated into modern society. Comedians and writers of this period drew on colonial stereotypes, myths and misconceptions to formulate and disseminate derogatory jokes about black people. Black writers, on the other hand, did not have the freedom to direct their humour on those that wielded state power. As a result, they targeted the everyday experiences of black people in the townships. The transition to democracy, which happened in 1994, ushered what some scholars (Donian, 2022) have characterised as a comic revolution. As **Motahane** and **Matlolane** as well as **Govender** and **Pillay** have demonstrated in their contributions, writers such as Niq Mhlongo and Sindiwe Magona use humour to reveal the harsh conditions of life in black communities and the creative ways these communities adopt to ensure survival. In their works, humour serves not only to entertain readers but also to provoke serious reflection on the new political dispensation in South Africa.

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