

the South African predicament
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WAITING THE WHITES OF SOUTH AFRICA



INGENT CRAPANZANO

WAITING

— THE —
WHITES
OF
SOUTH
AFRICA

Vincent Crapanzano



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WAITING

BOOKS BY VINCENT CRAPANZANO

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Waiting: The Whites of South Africa

FOR
TESGEMARIAM ABEBE
AND
RUDOLPH SCHMIDT,
WHO DIED

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There are a great many people in the United States, Europe, and South Africa whom I should like to thank. To protect the identity of the people with whom I worked in South Africa, I have chosen not to name them. I have decided, therefore, not to name the Europeans and Americans who have also helped me with my research. They will all understand, I am sure. My research was supported by grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the City University of New York BSC-CUNY Research Award Program.

All personal and place names have been changed to protect the identity of those with whom I worked in South Africa. Other changes have also been made to protect their identity.

INTRODUCTION

Waiting is about the effects of domination on everyday life—not the everyday life of people who suffer domination but of people who dominate. It treats a minority, the whites of South Africa, who make up roughly 16 percent of the population of the country, and who systematically control the fate of the remaining 84 percent. It is not about the sources of economic, political, and military power or of their display; rather, it is about the discourse of people who are privileged by that power and, paradoxically, in their privilege victims of it. My concern is with social entrapment—with the way in which a people's understanding of themselves, their world, their past, and their future limits their possibility. Potentially, there is a tragic dimension to entrapment, but tragedy demands a kind of consciousness that is generally lacking in white South Africa. In that South Africa what could have been tragedy is often little more than a tale of self-indulgence, cowardice, and bad faith.

Insofar as possible, I have allowed the white South Africans with whom I lived and worked as an anthropologist to tell their own stories in *Waiting*. I have accompanied those stories with my own—my observations, explications, and interpretations. I have tried to re-create something of the cacophony of my—the—South African experience. In structure, *Waiting* came to me to resemble a novel—novels, as the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtine observed,¹ are in essence plurivocal. This plurivocality, the cacophony, the

baroque quality, if you will, of social reality is often sacrificed in ethnographic and sociological description to a theoretically inspired classicism. I do not mean to deny the "classical" dimension of social life, its symmetry, its simplicity, and its consistency. I do mean to call attention to the fact that symmetry, simplicity, and consistency are often lost to the social actor through the baroque texture of his everyday life.

Loss, of course, is not without moral implications. At least, this is the case in South Africa, where the discourse of whites describing themselves and their world is weighed with their rationalizations. It carries its own contradictions. It asserts at once privilege, domination, hierarchy, and a common, egalitarian fellowship of men and women in Christ. "Race" is the primary category through which the contradictions are mediated, but other categories, figures, and images play a role. These include "biological inheritance," "evolution," "blood," "culture," "background," "education," "mentality," "intelligence," "personality," "God's will," "the Tower of Babel," and "the unequal distribution of grace." They all figure in the talk of the average white South African and enable him at times, though not always, to avoid the moral implications of his discourse.

The people in *Waiting* come mainly from a little village north of Cape Town. They are English- and Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans who live in ease—some in considerable luxury—in one of the oldest European settlements on the African continent. In many respects they are unique; indeed, they pride themselves on uniqueness. But their discourse is similar to that of other white South Africans. They may speak a dialect, as it were, but their "dialect" is not incomprehensible to the rest of South Africa—or, in many respects, to Europeans and Americans.

The Republic of South Africa is about three times the size of California, and it has a population, including the population of the homelands, of about 28.6 million people,² which is broken down in South Africa's official racial classification into four groups.* There

*In this book, I have followed the common usage of the whites with whom I worked. "Whites" or "Europeans" refers to Caucasians and people like the Japanese, so-called honorary whites, who have all the rights and privileges of the whites. "English" usually refers to English-speaking white South Africans. "Coloureds," occasionally "Browns" (Afrikaans *bruins*), designates people of mixed descent. "Hottentots" and "Bushmen" are sometimes included in popular usage. "Asians"

are 20.7 million Africans, or Blacks; 2.6 million Coloureds, or people of mixed descent; 800,000 Asians; and 4.5 million whites. Sixty percent of the whites are Afrikaners (descendants of seventeenth-century Dutch, German, and Huguenot settlers), and the rest are English-speaking. There is considerable hostility between the two groups. The present government and bureaucracy are almost entirely in the hands of the Afrikaners. Until recently, the English-speaking whites—including about 130,000 Jews—had virtual control of the private economic sector. The Asians, whose ancestors were indentured laborers brought to South Africa in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, are almost entirely Indian. Seventy percent are Hindu, 20 percent Muslim, and 8 percent Christian. Their principal languages are Urdu and Gujarati. Most of them live in the province of Natal. The Coloureds, who live principally in the Cape Province, are the descendants of whites and of slaves imported from Madagascar, tropical Africa, and Southeast Asia, and local Khoikhoi (Hottentots) and San (Bushmen). Most speak Afrikaans and are members of the Dutch Reformed Church.* They have almost no ties with traditional African cultures. The Black population, over two thirds of which is rural, can be divided into four ethnolinguistic groups: the Nguni, the largest, which includes the Xhosa, the Zulu, the Swazi, and the Ndebele; the Sotho, the second largest; the Venda; and the Tsonga. There are important cultural and linguistic differences between these groups, differences that are stressed by the South African government in its divide-and-rule policy, but are attenuated by a common opposition to the present Nationalist government. About two thirds of the Blacks are nominally Christian. They are by far the poorest people in the country.

South Africa occupies a semiarid plateau, separated from a narrow coastal strip by a long escarpment. Twenty-one percent of the coun-

or "Indians" is used for the descendants of Indian and Chinese indentured laborers. "Blacks" refers to the Bantu populations of the country. "Africans" and the derogatory terms "Bantus" and "kaffirs" are used by some whites. I have not adopted the convention of some authors of referring to "non-whites" as "Blacks" and to the Bantu peoples as "Africans." This was not common usage in the Cape. My use of these racial terms should in no way be construed as an acceptance of them. They are, to use the anthropological jargon, "native categories."

*About 70,000 of them, known as Cape Malays, are Muslims and in some ways are treated as a separate group.

try gets less than eight inches of rain a year and another 47 percent between eight and twenty-four inches. Droughts, as in the last few years, are frequent. There are no navigable rivers, few forests, and the animal life that greeted the first European settlers has been pushed back into the most marginal areas. The climate is mild—people in Cape Town like to say they have a Mediterranean climate—the soil is often rich, and the country has immense mineral resources, seventy of them exploitable. Gold—the country's main source of foreign income—and diamonds are the most important of these resources, but there are also rich deposits of copper, iron, manganese, asbestos, coal, silver, beryllium, antimony, uranium, tin, vanadium, chrome, and platinum in the country. As far as anyone knows, there is no oil in South Africa, although some off-shore finds have recently been made south of Mossel Bay.

With such vast mineral resources, a high level of industrial development, and a very considerable agricultural potential, South Africa is an important economic power. Its gross national product accounts for over 20 percent of the GNP of the entire African continent. South Africa produces 90 percent of the continent's steel and generates as much electricity as the rest of Africa together. (Its recoverable coal reserves can supply more energy—a total of 1,300 trillion megajoules—than Saudi Arabia's oil reserves, which can produce about 1,000 trillion megajoules.) The country has advanced communication and transportation systems—more telephones and automobiles than the rest of Africa. It not only feeds itself but exports food to other countries in Africa and to Europe. Its ports are important links in international trade. The United States, Great Britain, West Germany, France, and Japan account for almost two thirds of South Africa's trade. (The United States has replaced Great Britain as South Africa's biggest trading partner; in 1981 2.7 billion rand* of American goods were sold in South Africa and 1.3 billion rand of South African products were sold in the United States.) South Africa has recently increased its trade with Israel, South Korea, Taiwan, and several South American countries. In 1982 its exports to other African countries were worth 926 million rand, and its imports were valued at 329 million rand. Foreign investment in

*The rand is the official South African currency. At the time of my research, the value of the rand ranged from about \$1.30, the first year, to \$0.90 the second year. On November 5, 1984, it was valued at \$0.56.

South Africa has been shrinking in real terms over the past few years, but since the Reagan administration began its policy of "constructive engagement," United States investments there have increased—by 13 percent in 1982. Foreign investment totaled 32.5 billion rand (or 46 percent of South Africa's gross domestic product) in 1981. Sixty-eight percent of this investment was accounted for by Western Europe, with Great Britain contributing the most. United States direct investment that year was 2.8 billion rand. The South Africa government itself controls 47 percent of South Africa's fixed capital stock and contributes 26 percent of the country's gross domestic product. Many of the largest industries, the parastatals, are owned and run by the government. (ARMSCOR, an arms development and production corporation, is one, and ISCOR, an iron and steel company, is another). South Africa's military is modern, disciplined, and, despite an international arms blockade, well equipped.

South Africa is a parliamentary democracy with a racially limited franchise. Afrikaners have dominated the government since 1948, and despite the recent creation of largely symbolic Coloured and Asian parliaments (but no Black parliament), political control of the country remains in the hands of the whites. In fact, the white executive president now has near-dictatorial powers. At the time of my research in 1980 and 1981, there were four main legal white parties: the far-right Herstigte Nasionale Party (HNP), whose membership is almost entirely Afrikaner; the governing right-wing National Party (NP); the New Republic Party (NRP), essentially a conservative English party, though called centrist; and the "liberal," largely English-speaking Progressive Federal Party (PFP), usually referred to as the Progs. In February 1983, an Afrikaner cabinet minister named Andries Treurnicht defected from the National Party in protest against the creation of a tricameral parliament and started a fifth party, the Conservative Party (CP). Since Treurnicht's defection, the National Party has been strengthened by some English conservatives. It is too soon to judge the Conservative Party's influence, or the influence that Coloured and Asian parties will have in the new government. Most Coloureds and Asians boycotted their first elections in August of 1984. Blacks, of course, have no power.

South Africa has four provinces: the Cape of Good Hope Province, which is the largest; the Transvaal; the Orange Free State; and Natal, which is the smallest. Pretoria is the administrative capital;

Cape Town, the legislative. The Appellate Division of the Supreme Court, the highest court in the republic, sits in Bloemfontein, in the Orange Free State. (The law is Roman-Dutch.) South West Africa, or Namibia, which was a German colony mandated to South Africa by the League of Nations after World War I, is still administered by South Africa, although the United Nations has ordered that it be granted complete independence. It is an area of considerable—and continual—fighting. South Africa also includes ten homelands, or Bantustans, of varying constitutional status and political integrity. Essentially a continuation of an African “reserve” system, instituted under the Union in 1913 and amended in 1936, these homelands are crude categories meant to control the influx of Blacks into “white” South Africa. They “solve” the Black problem by declaring Blacks to be citizens of homelands, in which supposedly they have full political rights and responsibilities. Apart from Blacks who were born in a white urban area or who have lived there legally for the last fifteen years or who are dependent on someone in one of these categories, Blacks can only be employed in white urban areas on a contractual basis and do not have the right to bring their families with them. The homelands have to accommodate 36 percent of the total South African population (52 percent of the Black population), with only 13 percent of the country’s land.* The land they do have is generally poor; the governments are corrupt. In 1980 they produced 3.4 percent of South Africa’s total gross domestic product. The homelands have been especially hard-hit by the recent drought. Poverty is acute and relieved only by remittances from contract workers and by limited South African government transfer payments. (The proportion of destitute families—families without any income, land, or cattle—rose from 5 percent in 1960 to 13 percent in 1980.) According to a recent report,³ 80 percent of the homeland population—roughly 8 million people—live below a stringently defined poverty level, and despite the fact that South Africa is considered an upper-middle-income country by the World Bank, it ranks forty-seventh in life expectancy at birth and sixty-fourth in infant mortality out of 117 non-Soviet-bloc countries. In real terms,

*Homeland populations have more than doubled in the last twenty years—largely from natural increase but also from the forced removal of Blacks from white areas. The percentage of Blacks living in white rural areas fell from 35 percent in 1950 to 21 percent in 1980.

over 50,000 children die each year of hunger in South Africa—almost all of them children of color and most living in the homelands. Only one of the homelands—the tiny Qwaqwa, with a population of about 50,000—consists of a single, contiguous territory. The other nine homelands are scattered over 200 separate areas. Four of the homelands—Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda, and Ciskei—have been granted “independence” by the South African government. None of them have been recognized as “independent” by anybody else. All polls indicate that the Black population of South Africa would prefer a single multiracial democratic South Africa to any of the “homeland” alternatives. Chief Gatsha Buthelezi of KwaZulu, one of South Africa’s most important leaders, and Enos Mbeuzi of KaNgwane, the Swazi homeland, have been most vocal in refusing “independence” for their homelands. Tens of thousands of Africans have been arrested for illegally entering “white” South Africa from their homelands.

The homelands are one of the many monstrous creations of apartheid. Since the Nationalists came to power in 1948, they have elaborated a body of often contradictory, easily manipulated, certainly discriminatory laws, regulations, and agencies that serve to maintain *baasskap* (“bosssdom”), or white supremacy.⁴ Based on previous laws and regulations, crudely rationalized by a romantic-nationalistic philosophy of separate development, or apartheid—“apartheid” means “separateness” in Afrikaans—these laws, regulations, and agencies systematically determine a person’s rights and privileges on the basis of his or her racial classification. Apologists for apartheid insist that the Population Registration Act of 1950, the cornerstone of apartheid, which assigns every person to a racial group, is a law of differentiation and not of discrimination, since all South Africans, whites as well as non-whites, are classified.* They argue that by permitting each group to develop “in its own time and in accordance with its own predispositions,” apartheid provides the only realistic basis for a truly plural society. They sometimes support their argument by reference to the Tower of Babel, a sign, they say,

*Similar arguments have been advanced for other “cornerstones” of apartheid: the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949, which forbids marriages between Europeans and non-Europeans; the Immorality Acts of 1950 and 1957, which outlaw sexual relations between whites and non-whites; the Group Areas Act of 1950, revised in 1957 and 1966, which provides the basis for residential and business segregation; and various acts concerning freedom of person, speech, and assembly.

of God's desire to preserve a pluriracial, pluricultural, polyglot world. (White South Africans, especially Afrikaners, often substitute culture and language for race.) They attribute many of the world's problems to racial mixture—to ignoring God's "commandment" to respect separate identities. Many of them are messianic and actually see in apartheid a new social order that, according to God's will, will eventually spread to free the world of its serious social problems.

The most blatantly discriminatory policy in the country is the government's refusal to give the vote to Blacks and, until recently, to the Coloureds and Asians. But there are many more discriminatory practices, and they affect the everyday life of non-whites. The Black Areas Consolidation Act of 1945, the misnamed Black Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents Act of 1952, and the Black Labour Act of 1964 all restrict the movement of Africans. Unlike whites, Coloureds, and Asians, all Blacks are required to carry a reference book, or pass, with them. A policeman can demand to see that pass at any time and for any reason. A Black without a pass is open to arrest and return to his or her homeland. Other legislation, symbolized by the SLEGS BLANKES OR WHITES ONLY signs, limits access to restaurants, railway cars, buses, taxis, beaches, elevators, movie houses . . . Although no legislation specifically forbids integrated sports, most sports are in fact segregated. Schools, universities, and hospitals are segregated. (Facilities are, of course, much poorer for non-whites than for whites.) Other legislation—most notably the Internal Security Act of 1976 (based on the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950), the Sabotage Act of 1962, and the Terrorism Act of 1967, which restrict the civil liberties of all South Africans by permitting arbitrary banning and detention, by restricting the freedom of speech and information, and by limiting association and assembly—serves mainly to reinforce the most discriminatory policies of apartheid. These policies are complemented by illegal pressures, threats, harassment, sabotage, and personal violence.

Opposition to apartheid tends to be fragmented and disorganized, and it is often symbolic. This is in part the result of government strong-arm tactics. The African National Congress (ANC), the oldest and most popular opposition movement in South Africa, the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), and many other opposition groups are banned. Interracial associations that can be construed as political in intent are illegal. Important Black leaders, such as Nelson Man-

dela, Walter Sisulu, and Govan Mbeki of the ANC, are in jail; others, such as Steve Biko, have died in jail or have been killed; and thousands more have been summarily arrested, detained without trial, harassed, and banned. White anti-apartheid activists have also been arrested, detained, harassed and banned.* In February 1982, Neil Aggett, a union organizer, died in the custody of the security police. Ruth First, a longtime opponent of apartheid, was killed by a letter bomb in Mozambique in 1982. Joe Gqabi, the chief ANC representative in Zimbabwe, was assassinated there in 1981. ANC headquarters in Lesotho, Mozambique, and Swaziland have been raided repeatedly by South African soldiers over the last few years, and these raids, as well as economic pressure, have forced South Africa's neighbors to clamp down on the ANC in their territories.⁵

In part, too, the fragmented character of the opposition has to do with the different interests of whites, Coloureds, Asians, and Africans. Among Blacks, tribal differences play a role, but presumably not as great a role as the government would have it. (Differences are, of course, accentuated by the homeland policy.) There are also important differences in political and ideological sophistication between urban and rural Blacks and across generations. There is internal conflict in the ANC and between the ANC and other Black organizations, such as Chief Gatsha Buthelezi's Zulu-based Inkatha, which is the largest Black movement in South Africa today.⁶ Although some Coloureds and Asians identify ideologically with the Africans, many are afraid of becoming objects of Black rage if and when the Blacks come to power. They think, for example, of the Indians—Ugandan Asians—who were brutally forced out of Uganda in 1972 by Idi Amin Dada. And—despite the courage and obvious dedication of a lot of anti-apartheid whites—their opposition is often tempered by the fear of losing privilege, of possible

*According to *The Economist* (March 17, 1984), between 750 and 800 people were in detention. The minister of justice, Kobie Coetsee, reported in February 1984 that 385 people (15 whites, 5 Coloureds, 2 Asians, and 363 Blacks) were serving sentences for acts against state security. As a result of pressure from the United States, the number of banned was reduced in June 1983 from 66 to 12. As of March 1, 1984, 56 people have died in detention since 1963, when the detention laws first went into effect. Since the riots that broke out after the elections for Coloured and Asian members of parliament in August 1984, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of people detained and arrested. According to the *New York Times* (November 8, 1984), between January 1 and November 1, 1984, over 1,000 people were detained and another 2,000 arrested.

violence in the event of a Black takeover, of government harassment, or of the “communists” they see behind the ANC and other Black organizations.* Politically, whites against apartheid are represented by the Progressive Federal Party, and the Progs are very much an “opposition” party, with a poorly articulated platform and very little real power. There are also a number of white organizations in the United Democratic Front (UDF), which was established in January 1983 to oppose the Botha government’s constitutional reforms. A sort of umbrella group, representing some 575 organizations, UDF has been able to maintain thus far its multi-racial character. Its fundamental aim is to do away with the group areas and the homelands in order to create a united democratic South Africa. It is opposed by some Black groups, and of course by many whites.

Despite the constant talk of change, of imminent bloodbath, of takeover and revolution, despite protests, boycotts, strikes, and acts of terrorism—the bombing of the SASOL coal-to-gas conversion plant in the spring of 1980, the bombing of the Koeberg nuclear power station in the winter of 1982, the bombing of Air Force headquarters in Pretoria in the fall of 1983—and despite the changes in South Africa’s parliamentary system, it is my impression that South Africa today is caught in a deadened time of waiting. For most whites, waiting is compounded by fear; for most Blacks, however great their poverty or despair, waiting is illuminated by hope, by a belief that time is on their side. For the Coloureds and Asians, there is both fear and hope in waiting. What is clear to me—after many months in South Africa and many more months thinking and writing about South Africa—is that in the very ordinary act of waiting, particularly of waiting in fear, men and women lose what John Keats (in an obviously different context) called *negative capability*, the capability of so negating their identity as to be imaginatively open to the complex and never very certain reality around them. Instead, they close off; they create a kind of psychological apartheid, an apartness that in the case of South Africa is institutionally reinforced. In such circumstances there can be no real recognition of the other—no real appreciation of *his* subjectivity. He becomes at once a menial object to be manipulated and a mythic object to be feared. He cannot be counted in his humanity.

*Many whites have an unrealistic fear of communism—a fear that is encouraged by the government.