1 Apropos Exceptionalism: Imperial Location and Comparative Histories of South Africa and the United States

[Stanley] wanted ‘to punish Bumbireh with the power of a father punishing a stubborn and disobedient son.’ The method he chose was to return to Bumbireh and empty box after box of Snider bullets into the ranks of the tribesmen while staying just out of range of their spears and arrows. He claimed to have shot down thirty-three men and wounded a hundred, many fatally. ‘We had great cause to feel gratitude.’ The ‘victory’ had put everyone into excellent heart. ‘We made a brave show as we proceeded along the coast, the canoes thirty-seven in number containing 500 men paddling to the sound of sonorous drums and the cheering tones of the bugle, the English, the American and Zanzibar flags flying gaily in union with a most animating scene.’

Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa*¹

By St Mungo, is there any justice-giustizia in the Globe? Or, is it survival of the fittest and yet another man gone West?

G. V. Desani, *All About H. Hatterr*²

The artist and anti-apartheid activist Breyten Breytenbach has described his forebodings about the direction in which South Africa has been moving recently. In a nutshell, these stem from his fear that having concentrated their efforts on racial oppression radicals may now be unable or unwilling to combat the dangers of a centralized nation state. Breytenbach believes that the fight against apartheid and the hierarchical division of peoples on the basis of race and ethnicity in some ways allowed the notion of the State to go uncontested. The end of capturing the State from the National Party led
anti-apartheid forces to overlook the negatives associated with the State itself. For Breytenbach it has become necessary ‘to put in my plea for doubt and questioning, diversity, the maintenance of our “Ho Chi Minh trail” of underground tunnels of memory and resistance, tolerance, mixing, blending, crankiness, existentialism, humanism, anarchism ... To avoid like the plague the tyranny of “being on the side of the angels.”’ Living in a moment of ‘historical acceleration’, as Breytenbach calls the present in South Africa, still requires that power and those who wield it continue to be opposed.

Breytenbach’s comments represent a political shift made possible by the great transformation that has occurred in South Africa over the last 10 years and in turn reflects the potential for a reinterpretation of the history of this region. On the basis of his fears, one could argue that if the next 20 or 30 years witness a struggle over federalism in the Republic and the pitting of new groups against the centralized state, then a new interpretation focusing on state formation may gain ascendency over one founded solely on racial categorization. Certainly, the increasingly violent conflict between the African National Congress and Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi’s Inkatha movement suggests that a more nuanced interpretation of racial division is required than one would expect, given the centrality of the white/black division enshrined in apartheid. As other political transformations occur in South Africa we can expect historiographical changes similar in magnitude to those witnessed in the United States over the last 100 years in the interpretations of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

The beginnings of a reassessment of South African history can be found in the analysis of the National Party’s success in the Western Cape in the first democratic election of 1994. William Finnegan has shown that this victory was not the result of shortsightedness among ‘so-called coloureds’ voting for their former oppressors simply because of their racial antipathy for black South Africans. Not only were the ‘coloureds’ political decisions made on the basis of National Party offerings and the failures of the African National Congress (so that their votes were as reasoned and sensible, perhaps, as any vote cast in the United States), but also there were important historical antecedents to the coalition refashioned between ‘coloureds’ and Afrikaners. Indeed, according to Finnegan, ‘Relations between the Afrikaners, the self-consciously “white” descendants of the early Dutch settlers, and the coloureds have for centuries been both tangled and intimate.’ Drawing on the recent work of historian Hermann Giliomee, he continues: