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The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela

Edited by RITA BARNARD (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014), 317 pp. £17.99.

Claim No Easy Victories: the legacy of Amilcar Cabral

Edited by FIROZE MANJI and BILL FLETCHER JR (Dakar, CODESRIA and Daraj Press, 2013), 499 pp. \$25.00.

Ruth First and Joe Slovo in the War Against Apartheid

By ALAN WIEDER (New York, Monthly Review Press, 2013), 390 pp. \$23.95.

News of the passing of South Africa's former president Nelson Mandela, 'Madiba' as he was colloquially known, was announced to the world late on 5 December 2013, following a protracted death-watch over an aged and ailing ex-political prisoner, champion of African national liberation, and international icon of social justice. Joe Slovo, a comrade in the liberation struggle and subsequently Minister of Housing in Mandela's first democratically elected South African government, had died of cancer nearly two decades earlier, on 6 January 1995. Both men died at home, 'peacefully' as obituaries are so often wont to tell it, following lifetimes, one interrupted by prison and the other by exile, fighting valiantly against the violence of apartheid and colonialism. As Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall describe it, a bitter hallmark of Mandela's decades in prison had been the 'missed burials and duties to the deceased' of other fallen comrades – such as Amilcar Cabral and Ruth First – both victims of assassinations perpetrated by representatives of the regimes whose residual imperialism in Africa these fighters had resisted. Cabral was killed on 20 January 1973, just months before Guinea Bissau's independence from Portugal, following a lifetime of anti-colonial struggle as an agricultural engineer and a political thinker of national liberation across Africa. Ruth First, Cabral's contemporary and Joe Slovo's wife, outlived the leader of the PAIGC by nearly a decade, only to die on

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17 August 1982, shattered by a letter bomb sent to her from Pretoria in her office at the Center for African Studies of the Eduardo Mondlane University in newly independent Mozambique, like Guinea Bissau just emerging from centuries of Portuguese rule. Four lives, that is, and four deaths: one struggle? Or multifarious conflicts?

Three recent volumes commemorate the lives – and the deaths – of these twentieth-century heroes of African national liberation. The essays appear, however, some four decades later, in the prolonged aftermath of liberation, that is, and are each significantly, if variously, inflected by the critical insights afforded by a reflective hindsight. Published just scant months after the demise of South Africa's former president, the essays collated in the ironically titled series volume, *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela*, and edited by Rita Barnard, had been prepared almost as if in anticipation of, as accompaniment to, Mandela's last days. With the exception of Barnard's introduction and Mbembe and Nuttall's contribution, all of the essays were drafted necessarily with Mandela's demise still an incomplete transition to what some would hasten to designate a 'post-Mandela' era, not just for South Africa, but continentally, even internationally. By contrast, *Claim No Easy Victories: the legacy of Amilcar Cabral*, edited by Firoze Manji and Bill Fletcher and published by the Africa-based research institution CODESRIA appeared in time to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of Cabral's untimely death. In the same year, 2013, Alan Wieder's biography, *Ruth First and Joe Slovo in the War Against Apartheid*, added importantly to the expanding library of the life histories of champions of the anti-apartheid struggle, even as these icons are recollected as pantheonic figures of an erstwhile era. Each of the volumes, consentaneous as they are, then adopts – and adapts – a particular disposition, both temporal and geopolitical, toward the recuperation of a decisive, if already bygone, era in the contemporary African and global historical narrative, combining anticipation, retrospection, and a critical circumspection regarding the encomium professed by the figures' (still surviving) comrade, Cuba's Fidel Castro, in his 1953 statement from the dock: 'history will absolve me'.

In her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela*, Rita Barnard identifies the figure at the centre of the critical meanders as a 'man of the twentieth century, viewed in its global complexity as an era of radically incomplete and uneven modernity'. She acknowledges the transitional, temporal, even temporising, companionate assessments that will make up the volume, not only addressing as they do the 'processes whereby [Mandela] shaped himself, his country, his continent, and the world', but determined as well to 'confront the fact that narrative, the revisiting of a biography that has assumed the character of a sanctified national allegory, can hinder as much as help the discovery of new insights'. Divided into three sections – 'The Man, the Movement, and the Nation', 'Reinterpreting Mandela', and 'Representing Mandela' – *The Companion* follows a more and (or) less chronological order in the arrangement of the contributions solicited from select but distinguished participants in the development of the

South African many-storied twentieth-century narrative, from anti-apartheid struggle to post-apartheid recidivism. Part one is biography-focused, with historian Philip Bonner rendering the 'antinomies' of Mandela's life story, the constructive (and sometimes disconcerting) tensions between the familial and the political, party discipline and individualistic tendencies, consistency and impetuosity, and between flexibility and intransigence, a rendering that largely culminates with Mandela's 'removal [in 1963] to Robben Island'. Literature professor, David Schalkwyk, takes up in turn a philosophical examination of the impact of those decades in prison on South Africa's future president, both emphasising the 'recognition of the communal burden of selfhood in prison' and exposing the much-heralded 'myth of Robben Island as a unified community'. Sociologist Deborah Posel concludes the first section with a probing examination of the discourses of 'magic' and 'miracle' that made – and continue to remake – the man's image, from the Free Nelson Mandela Campaign of 1980 through the 1995 Rugby World Cup to the emblazoning of Mandela's image on South Africa's 'currency'. The second part of the *Cambridge Companion* takes up the question/s of how to (or not to) 'interpret' Nelson Mandela, from his complicated relationship with 'tradition' (Zolani Ngwane) to his disputed endorsement of militarism, and violence, in the anti-colonial struggle and the contest for national liberation (Jonathan Hyslop). These two essays are mediated by Adam Sitze's discussion of 'Mandela and the Law', with its discerning and provocative inquiry into the impact of 'fifty years of legal studies' on the world leader, particularly in an age that witnessed the transition from the paradigm of national liberation to the prioritisation of human rights, a topic reprised from an 'Africanist view' by Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovo in his recounting of 'Mandela's presidential years'.

Finally, almost dialectically, the volume's third section turns to the not-then, but now, posthumous efforts at 'representing Mandela', an icon who, according to Daniel Roux, in his 'role as a cosmopolitan celebrity', 'accounts for and abridges a long and complex history'. Whether in film and television (Litheko Modisane) or by way of media images (Lize Van Robbroeck), Mandela is reviewed as a harbinger of the dangers of the 'commodification of nationalism in the new South Africa', a 'banalization' that 'threatens', according to Van Robbroeck, 'to undo his exemplary potential'. Reflecting on 'Mandela's mortality', Nuttall and Mbembe describe this 'banalization' – especially in the iconic face on South Africa's national currency – as turning 'Mandela into a fiscal thing ... [the] conversion of a moral debt into a monetary asset', an asset that remains nonetheless unequally distributed. With the advantage of a narrow window of hindsight, the pair of critics are also able to comment on the unseemly and disturbing 'controversies that arose from the preparation for [Mandela's] final passing and burial'. To whom will the legacy go? Habeas corpus. In her afterword, Rita Barnard finally describes Mandela as a 'celebrity with a difference'. But what might yet make that difference?

And indeed, for the editors of *Claim No Easy Victories*, compiled forty years after the death of the author of the titular words, the legatees are still contesting

the differences over the inheritance – intellectual and political – of Amílcar Cabral. ‘Why’, ask editors Manji and Fletcher, ‘shine the spotlight on personalities who, in their time, marked their own epoch?’ In their rationale for the 2013 collection of reminiscences, analyses, and prognoses invigorated by the fortieth anniversary of Amílcar Cabral’s assassination, the two writers suggest that it is just that the ‘current crises of African democracies coincide with a simultaneous crisis in representation and political leadership’, a crisis marked, as they point out in their introduction, by the very fact that Cabral’s mausoleum in Bissau is now ‘so heavily guarded’ and of such restricted public access. ‘What’, ask Manji and Fletcher, ‘do the military fear?’ It is hardly fear, however, that animates the thirty-eight contributions to this volume, subtitled ‘the legacy of Amílcar Cabral’. The essays in the first section, which carries the same title, range widely in assessing the merits of Cabral’s life work and assigning blame for his brutal elimination at the hands of a comrade-turned-collaborator with the Portuguese colonial regime. Nigel Gibson, for example, compares Cabral’s thinking on African liberation with the work of Frantz Fanon (a comparison made repeatedly throughout the volume, reminding readers of the trends in Euro-American academic curricula that foreground one intellectual to the neglect of another). Samir Amin is less sanguine about the contemporary consequences of Cabral’s influence, decrying the ‘comprador’ governments that have since succeeded the liberation struggle, a critique seconded by Ameth Lo who reflects that ‘Cabral’s assassination only serves to indicate the tip of the iceberg’. If Carlos Schwarz, emphasising the struggle hero’s training as an agronomist, elaborates Cabral’s contribution to thinking ‘development centred in agriculture’, Richard Lobban recalls an Africa that was once a ‘battle ground for proxy forces in the Cold War’. Both Reiland Rabaka and Nigel Westmaas focus on Cabral’s seminal address, ‘The Weapon of Theory’, whereas Grant Farred unravels some of the lineaments that connect Guinea-Bissau’s independence struggle with the indigenous conflict in Portugal itself, described in the work of novelist José Saramago. Returning to Cabral’s assassination and echoing perhaps Amin’s pained notice, Aziz Simone Fail recalls the fallen hero’s own words, ‘If I am ever murdered it will be from within our own ranks. No one from outside can destroy the PAIGC. It will take one of our own to do it.’ For Fail, ‘Amílcar’s assassination opened up a pernicious Pandora’s box of impunity. Fratricides, pogroms, civil war and even old scores stalk the corridors of power’.

For all that such historic betrayals still stalk, however, the present and future prospects of the now long independent nation-states of the erstwhile colonised African continent, the subsequent sections of *Claim No Easy Victories* recollect the more positive influences of Amílcar Cabral, for whom there were no ‘easy victories’. After all, as Lewis R. Gordon, however bitterly, reminds the reader, there is ‘so much to learn from Africa’s presumed failures’, or, as Jacques Depelchin more instructively inquires, ‘what is it that, systematically, has not been dealt with as it should have been’, a question taken up in the conversational exchange ‘between

two generations' – the Cabral and the post-Cabral – staged by Augusta Henriques and Miguel Barros. William Minter, however, completes the titular words, 'claim no easy victories', adding Cabral's first clause to the admonition, 'tell no lies'. The final five sections of *Claim No Easy Victories* address the perduring, if conflicted, authority of Cabral in the still developing, no less contested, arenas of women and emancipation, pan-Africanism, culture and education, and African American struggles. Angela Davis provides the closing, forward-looking, remarks to Cabral's reproof to 'claim no easy victories': 'imagine the horizons of freedom in far broader terms than were available to us through what we now call "civil rights discourse."'

Neither opportune in the immediately posthumous way of *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela* nor so commemoratively timed as is the anniversary publication of *Claim No Easy Victories*, Alan Wieder's biographical *Ruth First and Joe Slovo in the War Against Apartheid* is timely nonetheless in its extension of the bibliography of anti-apartheid memoirs and reminiscences, even as time runs out for such personal recapitulations. With a foreword by the late Nobel-prize winning South African novelist, Nadine Gordimer, who died just half a year after the book's publication, Wieder's biography of First and Slovo is, as the author disciplinarily describes himself, the work of an oral historian, emphasising that he 'wanted the heart of this book to be Ruth and Joe's stories told through the voices of the people who knew them'. Those 'people', First and Slovo's comrades in struggle, colleagues at work – and in play – and coevals in the transitional process from imperialism, through decolonisation, and into what has been described by critics as neocolonialism, or neoliberalism, are listed in an appendix. It is a veritable roster of struggle veterans that identifies the 'sources', at once personal interviews and bibliographical references, for Wieder's compelling recounting of the 'partnered lives and separate paths of Ruth First and Joe Slovo'. Less a study of the continued influence of the two Slovos, Wieder's dual biography chronologises the counterpoint of two divergently intersecting, if intimately shared, careers. From Ruth's investigative journalism and Joe's legal defence of black South Africans in the 1950s, through their political exile in London beginning in the 1960s and their professional bifurcations as re-writer of history and historic fighter and strategist respectively through the 1960s and 1970s, to their departures, separated by more than two decades, from the scenes of South Africa's struggle, Wieder pays powerful and poignant tribute to another (alongside Winnie and Nelson Mandela, Albertina and Walter Sisulu, and Hilda and Rusty Bernstein) of South Africa's 'remarkable couples'. Only Joe would live to die in a post-apartheid South Africa; Ruth instead was murdered by apartheid's agents just kilometers short of the South African border but a full twenty years before liberation, in her university office in Maputo, Mozambique. Wieder summarises the still vexed – and vexatious – debate over the circumstances of the assassination, whose duplicitous culprits, Craig Williamson and Roger Raven, eventually received amnesty from South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

The apartheid regime killed Ruth First because they knew that ideas were important. They killed Ruth First because she organized an international conference that questioned the authority and actions of the South African state. They probably also killed Ruth because she was an easier target than Joe and the regime knew that her murder would devastate Joe Slovo.

At the time of First's death in 1982, the couple was sharing a peripatetic life, with Ruth having relocated from London exile to an academic post in Maputo and Joe juggling responsibilities for the operations of the ANC's armed struggle as leader of Umkhonto we Sizwe. According to Wieder, 'As Ruth was collaboratively building the Center of African Studies, Joe was beginning to organize the Special Operations Unit of the South African underground.' Ruth First's remains are still interred in Maputo's main cemetery, together with other ANC comrades killed in the Matola massacre, whereas Joe Slovo was buried in his native South Africa where he died of cancer, serving as South Africa's Minister of Housing under the singular presidency of his comrade-in-arms Nelson Mandela. Single-authored, so to speak, and thus different in register from either *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela* or *Claim No Easy Victories*, Wieder's *Ruth First and Joe Slovo in the War Against Apartheid*, with its disciplinary dependence on personal interviews, similarly contributes vitally to the post-apartheid collective revisioning of the record of struggle and the rewriting of the roll call of participants in and partisans of Africa's twentieth century struggle for independence. If the title to Wieder's study, its emphasis on the 'war against apartheid', emphasises a focus on South Africa, his main protagonists, Ruth First and Joe Slovo, like their contemporaries and comrades, Nelson Mandela and Amílcar Cabral, led international lives. Their legatees – and the readers of these books – might well take note for the globalised contentions that have since ensued and continue to challenge even the very thought of an 'easy victory' in a changed inter-, trans-, multi-national world disorder: 'tell no lies'.

University of Texas at Austin

BARBARA HARLOW

Another Politics: talking across today's transformative movements

By CHRIS DIXON (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2014),
384 pp. Paperback

Chris Dixon's *Another Politics* is a gripping and politically productive engagement with an important current of contemporary Left thought and activism, a current that is increasingly labelled 'anti-authoritarianism'. Coming to public attention in periodic actions like Occupy Wall Street and the Pelican Bay Prison hunger strike, this current is broad enough to include a wide range of ideas, actions and activists groups, many of which operate at some distance from the media limelight. What defines this current, for Dixon, is partly a shared set of refusals, a set of '-antis' that he lists as anti-authoritarianism, anti-capitalism, anti-oppression and anti-imperialism. Movements

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