

THE PAST IN THE PRESENT: WRITING THE SOUTH AFRICAN GANDHI*

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The standard narrative of Mohandas K. Gandhi's years in South Africa, from 1893 to 1914, suggests that his path to freedom fighter and political leader was set in motion when he was thrown off a train at the Pietermaritzburg station shortly after his arrival in Natal. As a political leader in South Africa, Gandhi developed his unique method of political resistance, Satyagraha, which he used to challenge successive white minority regimes and returned to India as a Mahatma to free his country from British rule. As South Africa achieved non-racial democracy, Gandhi transformed from a symbol of India's freedom struggle to a heroic South African liberation leader as well. In 2016, Ashwin Desai and I published a critical history of Gandhi's years in South Africa that did not take for granted the idea of the Mahatma as a "great man" but examined him as a discursively produced leader. The book created a political storm, caught as it was between rising black African nationalism and Indian ethnic chauvinism in South Africa. While a critical response was expected, the severity of the backlash, mainly from the general public, came as a surprise. This article analyses the reaction to the book, seeks to understand why the criticism of this icon received such a hostile reaction, and reflects on the personal consequences of venturing into the public domain with the book.

Mohandas K. Gandhi spent most of the years between 1893 and 1914 in South Africa¹ where he led the struggle of Indians for equal rights as British citizens in a context where white settlers, as was the case with their counterparts in places like Australia, New Zealand, and Canada in the 1890s, were agitating against the "Asiatic Menace" and passing laws to restrict Indian trade, immigration, residential, and voting rights. During his stay in South Africa Gandhi founded two *ashrams* (religious retreats), namely Phoenix in Natal in 1903 and Tolstoy Farm in the Transvaal in 1908; started the newspaper *Indian Opinion*; experimented with his diet; embraced *Brahmacharya* (celibacy); and developed his practice of *Satyagraha*, popularly known as non-violent or passive resistance, which he put into practice in the Transvaal from 1906. However, for many, it is the stirring strike of 1913 in which Gandhi led thousands of Indian men, women, and children in protest against the state's restrictive policies that remains the abiding memory of his South African years.

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If asked, most South Africans are likely to state that Gandhi's first name was "Mahatma," which, in fact, was an honorific title bestowed on him after his return to India.² This reflects the fact that Gandhi's later achievements are mirrored on the South African period where he is presented as a political figure who transformed into a Mahatma by the time he left the shores of South Africa. For example, when a Natal Indian Congress (NIC) delegation visited India in 1989 to discuss impending political change in South Africa, one of its members, Yunus Carrim, told reporters that the delegation "was repeatedly told that India owed an enormous debt to the South African liberation struggle. 'Who knows,' said Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, 'if Gandhiji had not been exposed to the shock of apartheid, Indian history might well have taken a different course?'" (*Post Natal* 1989). More recently, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi described his July 2016 visit to South Africa as a "pilgrimage" for it was here that Gandhi "conceptualized" his politics. It was "the birthplace of Satyagraha" (VOA News 2016). Modi added that "South Africa transformed Mohandas into a Mahatma" (The Indian Express 2016).

Much is invested around the idea that Gandhi's years on African soil saw the making of a Mahatma. In 2016, Ashwin Desai (a professor of sociology at the University of Johannesburg) and I re-evaluated Gandhi's South African years and in particular some of the popularly accepted ideas about his achievements. This article reflects on our entry into the debate on Gandhi's South African years, our attempt to redefine it, and public responses to our work. It undertakes an "ethnography" of the range of reactions to the book and considers the political project of writing history in the present.³ Our study drew us into a fiery storm that was given extra urgency by political currents in present-day South Africa, in particular the attempts to forge a close relationship between India and post-apartheid South Africa, South African President Jacob Zuma's dubious relationship with Indian businessmen, and the relationship between Africans and Indians, which is a bubbling cauldron in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

Historiography of the South African Gandhi

The book drew me reluctantly into the role of "public intellectual." Ashwin Desai has been a public figure since the late 1990s, with his weekly newspaper column, aptly entitled "Agent Provocateur," arousing anger and admiration in equal measure. He appears regularly on radio and television to comment on current affairs and has been involved in the frontlines of worker and community protests. His public work has involved, citing Edward Said (1996, 13) "commitment and risk, boldness and vulnerability." During the same period, I was engaged in publishing my historical work with relatively little publicity. Where my work received media coverage it was mostly positive.⁴ *The South African Gandhi* put me in the line of fire. There are divergent understandings of what constitutes a public intellectual. Hitchens (2008) described such as "someone who makes his or her living through the battle of ideas." Drezner (2008), on the other hand, included in this category anyone who authored "a serious book" that

attracted public attention. Edward Said (1996, 12) stated that “the moment you set down words and then publish them you have entered the public world.”

The South African Gandhi attracted widespread attention and controversy that brought us into the public sphere. While I am not a public figure in the same sense as Ashwin Desai or as defined by Hitchens, the public controversy surrounding the issues raised in the book put me into the public spotlight. In retrospect, I was naïve not to expect such a heated and public response. Gandhi is a highly contentious figure in various contexts, and there have been endless, often polemical, hagiographies and critiques of him. Our study was not undertaken simply to fill a gap in the historiography or jump on any purportedly anti-Gandhi bandwagon. It is the result of careful thought and engagement with the sources and it makes arguments that we believe are pertinent to understanding the colonial past as well as to discuss issues—race, caste, class, religion, and ethnicity—that linger into the present. We have angered many people but as Edward Said (1996, 12) tells us, the purpose of putting ideas out is not to make the “audiences feel good: the whole point is to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant.” So while an academic book, *The South African Gandhi* had a wide popular reception, which provided an opportunity for the public to engage with the issues it raised. But as this article shows, most people had their minds made up and were not even willing to consider the arguments we make.

Writing the South African Gandhi: The Historiography

Early accounts of Gandhi are understandably hagiographic as they were written by his friends or supporters, such as the Reverend Doke (1909), Polak (1910), and the French spiritualist, and art critic Rolland (1973). Such works are gushing in their praise of Gandhi. Many subsequent works relied heavily on Gandhi’s *Autobiography* and *Satyagraha*. While there are many who see life stories as being “imbued with an extra dose of ‘truth’” (Arnold and Blackburn 2004, 3), as Markovits (2004, 46) states, both the *Autobiography* (1948) and *Satyagraha* (1961) are problematic because they “were written in the 1920s, more than ten years after Gandhi’s departure from South Africa, entirely from memory, without the help of written notes, and serious doubts exist as to the reliability of such personal memories uncorroborated by other testimonies.” Sanghavi (2006, 23) also argued that Gandhi’s *Autobiography* is “not a reliable source of history” as it was written from memory and is “full of misremembering of earlier events and experiences” and “reconstructed conversations that are expository rather than factual.” Yet, through these works Gandhi attempted “to take charge of all subsequent representations of his own life, and to impose an interpretation in terms of his spiritual quest which ought not to be seriously questioned afterwards” (Markovits 2004, 46).

Gandhi’s autobiography and the glut of biographies and life histories of him are unusual in the sense that scholars of South Asia have traditionally “been neglectful, at best wary,” of this genre (Arnold and Blackburn 2004, 2). Part of the reason for eschewing biography is that Orientalists valorized Indian society

rather than the individual, “confidently assuming that articulate individuality was a hallmark of the West” (Arnold and Blackburn 2004, 5). But Gandhi was no ordinary person and is arguably the most discussed and written about individual in Indian history.

Among South African scholars, Fatima Meer’s two well-known works, *Apprenticeship of a Mahatma* (1970) and *The South African Gandhi* (1996) are effusive in their praise of Gandhi. *Apprenticeship of a Mahatma* was published to commemorate the centenary of Gandhi’s birth. The foreword for the book set the tone. Author Alan Paton wrote that Gandhi’s “twenty-one years in our country was an apprenticeship for the stupendous task he was to set himself, and that was nothing less than liberation of India. Gandhi succeeded — one might almost say single-handed, though he would not have liked such a statement — in liberating India from the rule of Britain” (Meer 1970, 3). *The South African Gandhi* is a collection of Gandhi’s writings. In the introduction to the book, Ismail Mahomed, appointed Chief Justice of South Africa in 1996, stated that there was a “celestial leap when he [Gandhi] entered the shore of Natal.” Mahomed describes Gandhi as “a universal man, timeless in impact” and “a super soul” (1996, 21). Meer emphasized Gandhi’s important role in South Africa where the mass of Indians “were debilitated by manifest illiteracy” and were unprepared “to cope with the demands of the rapidly emerging technology with which the country sought to meet its increasingly sophisticated mining, agricultural and industrial needs.” Gandhi, “within the space of a few brief years succeeded in wielding this community of relatively recent immigrants” (1996, 23).

A rare exception amongst studies of Gandhi’s South African years was Swan (1985), who critiqued the existing historiography that suggested that political agency resided in Gandhi as the sole representative of Indian South Africans. Swan brought other actors to the fore that either worked with or challenged Gandhi. She also argued that Gandhi’s focus was almost exclusively on the trading classes and that he did little for the mass of Indians.

The post-apartheid period has yielded a number of works by Indian authors on the South African Gandhi. On the whole, they have a clear political agenda and portray his relationship with Africans as one of collaboration toward the common political goal of social and political equality. A good example is Reddy and Gandhi’s (1993) collection of Gandhi’s speeches on South Africa in the years between 1914 and 1948. They were writing the book, they state, “on the eve of the centenary of his [Gandhi’s] visit to South Africa and at a time when we, in India, can look forward to fruitful and friendly relations with a new South Africa. It will, we hope, promote greater understanding between the peoples of India and South Africa whose national movements have been intimately linked for almost a century” (1993, 6). Reddy and Gandhi write that in South Africa “ex-indentured labourers, tradespeople and professionals looked upon him [Gandhi] as the one who ministered to their personal, professional and political needs” (1993, 31). The South African years “left a deep and lasting impression on Gandhiji and influenced the Indian national movement he was to lead. [It was] a frame of reference for the direction of the struggle in India” (1993, 5). This

narrative ignores aspects of Gandhi's political project and virtually erases the agency of the indentured, something amply illustrated in my earlier book with Desai, *Inside Indian Indenture* (Desai and Vahed 2010).

A troubling aspect of some of the work by Indian academics is the "erasure" of Africans from this history. Ramachandra Guha's *Gandhi before India* (2013) portrays Gandhi as transforming into a cosmopolitan anti-colonial fighter during these years. Guha claims that Indians "should really be considered to be among apartheid's first victims" (2013, 92) and because they "were better educated and better organized [than Africans], some Indians could more actively challenge the facts of white domination" (2013, 12). Guha also writes that Africans "were uneducated and dispersed through the countryside. There was, however, an incipient threat to the political and economic dominance of the Europeans. This came from the Indians, and more particularly the 'passenger' Indians" (2013, 92). Guha adds further that "in so far as it was Gandhi who led the first protests against the racial laws, he should really be considered as being among apartheid's first opponents" (2013, 12).

Other Indian academics have also pushed this argument. Rajmohan Gandhi, the great-grandson of the Mahatma, wrote in his 2006 study that Gandhi's "platforms in the opening decades of the 20th century were stepping stones . . . to a future politics of an African-Indian alliance in South Africa. . . . The Indian struggle was paving the way for an African struggle" (R. Gandhi 2006, 172–73). Rajmohan Gandhi repeated this line in 2015 when he wrote in the *Indian Express* that "the struggle for Indian rights in South Africa paved the way for the struggle for black rights" (R. Gandhi 2015).

When held up to close scrutiny, these sentiments write out of history the centuries-long oppression and resistance of Africans to the colonial wars of dispossession in Southern Africa. Africans have been victims of racial persecution since white settlers first landed at the Cape in the seventeenth century. Not only were they subjugated by the barrel of the gun but the colonial system imposed taxes to force them off the land and into a dehumanizing migrant labor system or into urban areas where they were subject to abuses far more severe than those imposed on Indians. And Africans confronted white rule in various ways long before Indians arrived in Southern Africa. This attitude of Indian scholars toward Africans needs further exploration since it does not appear to be isolated. Both Gandhi and subsequently his son Manilal also felt that Africans were not ready to engage in passive resistance.⁵

The Desai-Vahed Version

The South African Gandhi challenged some of the taken-for-granted views about Gandhi's South African years. The book originated with our interest in the iconic 1913 strike. While the strike has received wide coverage, we were interested by the fact that it was sandwiched between rebellions by white and African miners on the Rand, protest over passes by African women, a strike by white railway workers and the passing of the Land Act in 1913 which

dispossessed Africans of most of their land. The Indian strike has been written about in isolation from the general upsurge of protest and the state's brutal responses. Also ignored is that the government dealt much more violently with disturbances by white workers than it did with Gandhi.

Our close reading of Gandhi's *Collected Works*,⁶ however, pointed to a complex story of the strike and we expanded the scope of the study to cover his entire stay in South Africa. We asked ourselves, what would Gandhi's legacy have been had he died in 1914?

We argue that the South African Gandhi had conservative ideas on caste, race, and gender; and that he went beyond just seeing Indians, Africans, Coloreds, and Whites as groups but saw them as groups in hierarchical relationships. It is this conservatism, ironically, that may have helped him win the support of Indians in South Africa, who were marked by their own religious, racial, language, ethnic, caste, and patriarchal prejudices. He remained true to Empire and kept the struggle of Indians separate from that of Africans. His political moderateness facilitated a settlement with the South African government in 1914 that left most of the issues facing Indians unresolved.

On the question of the indentured, we maintain that citing a few reports in *Indian Opinion* about the ill-treatment of the indentured does not alter the fact that for much of his time in South Africa the indentured were outside of Gandhi's radar. He included the repeal of the tax on free Indians, which was the main grievance of the indentured population, amongst his demands in 1913 but it was an after-thought in response to the South African government's alleged promise to moderate Indian nationalist leader Gopal K. Gokhale during the latter's 1912 visit to South Africa that the tax would be repealed. Short-lived political parties that emerged in Natal between 1908 and 1912, the Natal Indian Patriotic Union and the Colonial Born Indian Association, had as their basis the repeal of the tax because the NIC had not taken up this issue. In any case, the South African government was happy to relent on the tax because the Solomon Commission of 1914 found that few Indians were paying it and the authorities had no means of enforcing it (Desai and Vahed 2016, 257–61).

One of the most contentious issues is Gandhi's decision to keep the struggle of Indians separate from that of Africans and Coloreds.⁷ Even when Black South Africans⁸ faced a common threat as the entities that would make up South Africa were moving toward Union, Gandhi was not part of the joint African, White and Colored delegation that went to London in 1909 to agitate against a white dominated Union. Instead, he went as part of a two-man Transvaal Indian delegation that worked closely with former colonial officials in London to seek a few concessions for Indians. Even though it was clear by now that a color line had been drawn across the British Empire and that there was little possibility of gaining concessions within the status quo, Gandhi's faith in Empire remained firm. In 1899 he volunteered to assist the British as a stretcher-bearer during their war against the Afrikaners; in 1906 he volunteered when the Zulu rose in revolt against the settlers in Natal; and he recruited soldiers to take up arms for the British in the First World War (Desai and Vahed 2016, 50–3, 101–5, 280–4).

Gandhi had a firm belief in Empire and its ability to eventually incorporate all of its children. He felt that Indians, as a minority, could not seek political power in South Africa and should work to gain concessions within the existing status quo. In defending Empire to make his case for Indians in South Africa, Gandhi put himself in the unpleasant position of having to defend brutal aspects of imperial rule in the country. He also accepted the principle of white minority rule so long as Indians were granted a few rights and privileges.

Why did Gandhi remain aloof from Africans? This is a complex issue. Gandhi came from a conservative middle class family that was part of the British ruling order in Gujarat and he was not immune to the nineteenth century racial science hierarchies. He argued that Indians, as Aryans, should not be placed on the same footing as Africans since they were civilizationally on par with Europeans. Even though Gandhi's views on Africans transformed over time, and he changed the terminology that he employed to refer to them, he never envisioned unity between Indians and Africans. As late as 1939, he insisted that Indians keep their struggle separate from that of Africans (Desai and Vahed 2016, 302).

With regard to *Satyagraha*, we show that the masses who joined the strike in 1913 did not adhere to Gandhi's philosophy on non-violence but in fact engaged in acts of violence, and that it was the violence associated with the strike and the international publicity that it attracted, that forced the hand of the government to reach a settlement with Gandhi (Desai and Vahed 2016, 212–40).

Finally, much has been made of Gandhi's 1914 settlement as the magna carta of Indian South Africans. An analysis of that agreement, however, shows that he accepted a virtual end to further Indian immigration to South Africa, agreed to restrictions on the inter-provincial movement of Indians within the country, and conceded that whites would be the "predominating race." In short, he accepted the second class status of Indians. The government, for its part, agreed to recognize Indian marriages so long as they were not polygamous, and scrapped the tax on free Indians (Desai and Vahed 2016, 264–67).

How should Gandhi be remembered? We argue that while Gandhi does not have to be considered racist for rejecting an alliance with Africans, the fact that he was willing to accept a few privileges for Indians within a white-dominated government means that his place among the pantheon of anti-apartheid fighters is up for debate.

Reaction to the Book

The South African Gandhi generated incredible anger. Some backlash can be expected when a narrative differs from what people accept and expect. The reaction was magnified because of the "sacrality with which his [Gandhi's] South African career tends to be treated, together with an understandable yet nonetheless selective Indian diasporic struggle/heritage narrative, which means that seeing both his relations with Africans and the landscape of Indian-African relations more generally is a huge challenge" (Burton 2016, 11).

The manner in which the book was introduced to the public caught me unprepared for the swift reaction that followed. The *Washington Post* (September 3, 2015) ran a feature entitled “What did Mahatma Gandhi think of black people?” The article focused on some of Gandhi’s racist statements about Africans and was accompanied by a short video, which added shock value (Lakshmi 2015). The comments thread for the article exploded, with the reactions divided between those who did not view the information as new, those surprised by the information but took it as evidence of Gandhi’s humanity, and those who denied the validity of the report. In reaction to the *Washington Post* story, a South African activist friend who runs a popular History website wrote to me on September 5, 2015: “the international press is distorting the argument and linking it to (Arundhati) Roy’s issue of untouchables. This distortion is being picked up by black nationalists and racists of all hues. Keeping (Gandhi’s) Indian and African struggle separated needs to be unpacked and you need to come out and make a statement.” The public frenzy led to this friend urging me on September 7, 2015, “I think that you need to put things out now!”

The book created a massive storm and was covered in such international publications as BBC India, Al Jazeera, *The Indian Express*, *The Hindustan Times*, *Outlook India*, *Economic Times*, *Huffington Post*, and *The Wire* even before it was released. Locally, newspapers ran the story with such street placards as “Was Gandhi a Racist?” Although Gandhi’s attitude to Africans forms one theme in the book, race was and largely remains virtually the only issue associated with it. We were criticized long before anyone read the book through personal e-mails, social media, and opinion pieces and letters to local newspapers and besieged by local and international media outlets for comments and opinion pieces about the book.

Reaction to the book ran the gamut from those who saw it as part of an ongoing campaign to discredit Gandhi, to others that accused us of seeking to make money through sensationalism based on lies and fabrications, and we were blamed for creating racial tensions between Africans and Indians. I learnt that being a historian who writes about a community in which he or she lives is different from writing about a distant community where criticism would likely take the form of attacks in the social media or critiques in academic forums but there may not be the same day-to-day consequences. I avoided public engagements for many months because the book was invariably brought up as a topic of discussion, often aggressively. Some people that I have known for a long time completely ignored me to record their displeasure. A medical doctor/writer who once invited me to speak at a book club and who sought my counsel on several occasions with regard to getting his work published, snubbed me when I offered a hand shake at a conference on the Indian diaspora in Durban in November 2016. This same individual, when asked on social media whether he had read the book, responded, “one does not have to have AIDS to know that it is dangerous for you.”

Given the coverage of the book in international media and the spate of letters and articles in the local press, Desai and I had to decide how best to handle

the public response. We were both in the middle of teaching (the semester runs from July to November) and it would have been impossible to respond to every criticism. So while we could conceivably have countered each letter, we did not have the time to do this, nor did we see any benefit in doing so for it quickly became apparent that what people believed mattered more to them than the historical reality and that it would be difficult to change long held perceptions.

Crownshaw (2010, 4) states that history and memory see the relationship between past and present differently. For history, the “past is everything that precedes the present, and that is deemed . . . to have contributed to making the present what it is.” This relationship is reversed from the point of view of memory where “it is the present that produces the past, through an effort of the creative or analytical imagination.” The created past is not a “continuation of the past that has been, but the past that makes sense for the present” (Phillips 2013, 27). Furthermore, the climate in which historians work also influences what they can or cannot say. As Subrahmanyam (2015) states, “history for some is almost a belief, like a religion, a set of ‘facts’. The professional historian is thus up against this ‘religious’ approach to history. There is of course always a tension between history and memory but today in India there is an aggressive attempt to deny the professional historian and his/her practice any space.” What applies to India is applicable in many contexts.

Although it was difficult to remain silent when people were simply wrong, we chose not to respond to the many letters published in local newspapers. We also saw little point in responding to a now retired former academic like Betty Govinden, who has been a friend and colleague for many years, as we know her to hold staunchly to Gandhian values, and did not want to drag out our differences with her through the local press. On the other hand, we responded to occasional columnist Nirode Bramdaw and Sociologist Dasarath Chetty, as their views are influential locally among many middle class, educated Indians and had to be challenged. We also took the opportunity to respond in the international media so that the global reading public was fed both sides of the argument. It was mostly Desai who, as mentioned, has long been a public figure, who responded publicly. I kept a low profile though I did participate in the public forums organized to debate the book, which are discussed below.

Among the criticisms we encountered was that we were “instruments” in an on-going Brahmin campaign against Gandhi. An academic friend suggested that we confront the politics of our Indian publisher because Maharashtrian Brahmins and Tamil Brahmins “were one of several communities in India that never forgave Gandhi (for reasons that vary from one community to another, though it will suffice to say that in each case Gandhi dislodged them from the centre).” *The South African Gandhi* was “part of this ‘revenge of the Brahmins’ upon Gandhi.” We were reminded that Gandhi’s “assassin was a Maharashtrian Brahmin; indeed, every assassination attempt on his life was by a Maharashtrian Brahmin, though the penultimate attempt on Jan 20 was made by the Punjabi refugee Madanlal Pahwa, who was however acting at the instigation of Godse & Co.” We were reassured: “The politics of the publication of your book is the one that I am addressing here, not the merits or problems of the book itself.”

This perception may in part be due to the fact that B.R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* (2014), with an introductory essay by Arundhati Roy, "The Doctor and the Saint," which is highly critical of Gandhi, was published by the same company. Although we began our study long before we met the publisher, the anger at our book is likely partly related to the perception that it is part of the continuing critique of Gandhi by Dalits on the question of caste and untouchability. At the World Conference on Racism in Durban, South Africa, in 2001, the "National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights" sought to present caste discrimination as equivalent to racial discrimination despite objections from the Indian government. In critiquing Gandhi's views on race, we were seen as taking up the Dalit condemnation of Gandhi's racism against all Black people, whether Indian or African.

There were also suggestions that we were distorting the evidence in order to seek fame or fortune. Bramdaw (*Mercury*, November 17, 2015), for example, pointed to self-gain. He wrote that "Desai and Vahed chose the more controversial and profitable route of sensation." If Bramdaw understood academic publishing he would know that few academics derive financial gain from their work. Actually, we usually waive royalties in order to keep the price of our books down. "Bharat Vala beevee28@hotmail.com" made a similar accusation in an e-mail dated September 4, 2015:

The authors, Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, supposedly professors, have no wisdom and foresight, they are trying to discredit Gandhi and trying to elevate themselves, but sadly for them, history cannot be rewritten, they are fools and charlatans, both of them will be **laughing stocks in the community**. At times it's better to keep silent or not write mis-information, these two authors have not learnt that lesson as yet.⁹

The accusation that we were selectively using information to fabricate Gandhi's South African years was taken up in local KwaZulu-Natal newspapers. One writer, Mohamed Omar, stated that we were "economical" with the facts and suggested that Gandhi's *Autobiography* was "well worth a read." Omar reached this conclusion without reading our book since the letter was published in the *Sunday Tribune* on September 20, 2015 and the book was released on October 2, 2015. Ismail Moolla, another correspondent, wrote that Gandhi had stated in his book, *My Philosophy of Life* that "all men are born equal in the eyes of God" and that our book was, therefore, "an insult to Gandhi's followers." Had Gandhi been alive, Moolla continued, "they would not have dared to accuse him of being a racist." He called on the public to "treated (the book) with the contempt it deserves" (Moolla, *Sunday Tribune* November 8, 2015). There were many letters along these lines, while others took the view that since Nelson Mandela had praised Gandhi and Martin Luther King was inspired by Gandhi, our book had to be based on lies.

Ela Gandhi, Gandhi's great granddaughter, again likely without reading the book, accused "academics" of presenting a "preconceived" narrative through the "meticulous sifting of information." She offered an "objective approach which is

the hallmark of a good academic and researcher” (E. Gandhi, *POST* September 23–27, 2015). She cited a few reports in *Indian Opinion* about the indentured or Africans to suggest that Gandhi was concerned about both constituencies. But, as we argue this does not counter the overall picture of Gandhi’s stay in South Africa. And while she denied that Gandhi harbored racist ideas, another of his grandchildren, R. Gandhi (2015), an academic himself, stated that his grandfather’s legacy would help to solve the world’s problems even “if we assume that between 1893 and 1914 Gandhi was prejudiced about Africa’s blacks and backed British imperialism.” These sentiments reflect Gandhi as an idea, one that is hard to counter at the present time. And as Maclean (2016, 693) states, in India itself, “the importance of non-violence [is stressed] in asserting an Indian exceptionalism, which proved to be a valuable epistemological asset in the absence of hard power in the decades after Independence.”

Another argument we often heard was that Gandhi should be situated in the context of his time and not judged according to present-day standards. Kolge (2016, 88), for example, stated that it was unfair to

judge the past by present-day standards. What we may regard as offensive today – sexist, or racist, or casteist, for example – might have once been socially accepted terms. For example, those who are aware of the use of the word “Kaffir” by Europeans and Indians settled in South Africa in the late 19th and early 20th centuries cannot regard Gandhi as racist for using the word to describe African natives, though in South Africa today the term is regarded as racially offensive.

These same critics, however, are not prepared to judge other colonial overlords “according to the times.” Was the South African Gandhi a man of his times or a Mahatma? It cannot be both. The “man of his times” argument falls short in another respect; there were others in South Africa who organized against British imperialism and agitated for African rights while Gandhi sided with the British. The likes of Olive Schreiner and Elizabeth Molteno, and Bishop John Colenso and his daughters Francis and Harriette, despite their own limitations and racial blinkers, were advocates for the Zulu in the face of British imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And Gandhi’s contemporaries were aware that a term like “kafir” was a problematic one to refer to Africans. Russell, in his 1899 *History of Old Durban* writes that “it is misleading and insulting to call all natives ‘kafirs’” (1899, 492). Yet, Gandhi used the term at least until 1910 (M. K. Gandhi 1999, vol. 1, 183).

With *The South African Gandhi* attracting so much publicity, we attempted to constructively discuss the issues raised in the book and organized two public forums for this purpose. The Xubera Institute for Research and Development held a seminar at the Hilton Hotel in Durban on October 22, 2016. Amongst those in attendance were Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who is the leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party; Mac Maharaj, Robben Island prisoner and longstanding member of the African National Congress (ANC); Ravi Pillay, KwaZulu-Natal Human Settlements and Public Works MEC; and Phumulani Mfeka of the Mazibuye African

Forum (MAF). Entitled “Gandhi Decanonized,” the seminar drew a large audience. Following our presentations on the book, the seminar was “hijacked” as the ensuing discussion focused mostly on alleged present-day African anger at Indian racism and Indian economic monopolization at the expense of Africans.

There was robust discussion on this issue, with members of the MAF arguing that Gandhi was a racist who taught Indians to be racist; Indians exploited African as workers and customers on a daily basis; and they controlled the economy since most businesses and professionals in the townships were Indian-owned. Ravi Pillay and Prince Buthelezi, amongst others, put up strong counter arguments but the meeting ended with Zweli Sangweni and Phumulani Mfeka of the MAF stating that they were merely giving a “friendly and timely warning” of what was happening on the ground as they feared that race riots were imminent. Prince Buthelezi, whose party was guilty of not-so-subtle threats against Indians in the 1980s, stated that despite Gandhi’s shortcomings, Gandhi remained his hero. The *Daily News* of October 26, 2015 carried a report on the seminar under the headline “Desai takes on Giant of History. New Book Claims Gandhi was a Racist,” once again emphasizing the explosive issue of race while ignoring other arguments in the book (Rondganger 2015).

The Centre for Civil Society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal held a seminar at Ike’s Books on November 27, 2015 to debate the book. Speakers included Ashwin Desai; Betty Govinden, a retired academic from the University of KwaZulu-Natal; Crispin Hemson, the director of the International Centre of Non-Violence at the Durban University of Technology; and Andile Mngxitama, a founder of *Black First Land First*. Desai reinforced the key themes of the book, Mngxitama called for dialogue over burning issues like the land question; Hemson essentially argued that whatever his shortcomings, Gandhi’s ideas were more relevant today than ever; and Govinden insisted that the book did not portray the multifaceted personality that Gandhi was.

Govinden, in fact, wrote a three-part response to the book in *POST* (November 4–8, 9–13, and 18–22, 2015), a newspaper aimed primarily at an Indian South African readership. Her argument was that the book was polemical and lacked a “nuanced, measured and modulated approach that balances the positive and negative aspects of Gandhi’s South African years.” Rather than focus on minor details of Gandhi’s life, she added, we should stress his “broader qualitative impact.” What Desai and I have been puzzled by is why all these critics were silent when Guha (2013) published a one-sided biography that was complementary about Gandhi and dismissive of Africans. In contrast, the only other response to the book in a local newspaper by an academic was that by Dilip Menon, Mellon Chair in Indian Studies at the University of Witwatersrand, who concluded that the book “makes a convincing argument” (Menon, *Daily News*, December 23, 2015).

Contextualizing the Reaction

There is always a gap between what happens in the past and the historical narrative about it because historical reconstructions depend on the sources

available as well as how they are selected and interpreted. As Kathrine Verdery points out, people display “ambiguity, multivocality, or polysemy” while they are alive and after their death their lives

are open to many different readings... One’s assessment of them depends on one’s disposition, the context one places them in, the selection one makes from their behaviours in order to outline their “story,” and so on... Their complexity makes it fairly easy to discern different sets of emphasis, extract different stories, and thus rewrite history (Verdery 1999, 29).

No one, not even Gandhi, has been able to control how he has been interpreted or what he means to people the world over (Amin 1985). Historians select and interpret data from a vast body of information. While their viewpoints influence the final narrative we believe that we have been true to the sources and refute any assertions that the book is a “hatchet job.”

While historical contestation is to be expected, some of the reactions to *The South African Gandhi* are time and place specific. Perceived rising anti-Indian sentiments among Africans provide one explanation for the public response. Thus, for example, an email from online2328636@telkomsa.net, dated October 23, 2015, stated:

I am really shocked that you & Dr Desai have chosen such an appropriate time to come up with a book labelling Gandhi a racist etc. etc.[sic] Wow, well done... Did you not think that something like this could ignite violence against Indians? Come on Prof, see the bigger picture. You have really taken away all the credit I have given you with your previous works that added value. This one is a disaster just waiting to happen. But at least you & Dr Desai will get the credit if things turn ugly.

A year on and these race tensions persist. During August 2016, for example, there was intense discussion in the media as to whether Indians benefited from apartheid, as several economists suggested in a front page report in the *Daily News* (Nxumalo and Mngoma 2016, August 11, 2016). Dawie Roodt noted that “it is a sweet time for Indians” who should not benefit from black economic empowerment and affirmative action policies because they were doing very well. Bonke Dumisa stated that the discrepancy in performance between Indians and Africans in the post-apartheid period “was a sensitive issue that must be discussed; however, . . . if one tried to raise the issue, you are branded a racist.” The report spawned numerous responses from Indians who pointed to the humble origins of indentured migrants and insisted that Indian economic progress was due to the “hard work” of their forebears. The economists’ assertions, many Indians feel, were deflecting attention away from the economically dominant white class. Indians argue that they were equally exploited under apartheid, contributed fully to dismantling white minority rule, and should be entitled to the benefits that accrue to “Blacks” in the post-apartheid period.

Vino Nair, manager at a Durban chemical factory, pointed to the relationship between Gandhi and John Dube, Gandhi’s contemporary and neighbor,

who founded the *Ilanga* newspaper and was the founding president of the South African Native National Congress, which later became the ANC:

Gandhi and Dube were contemporaries and shared a friendship. Gandhi also selflessly organised medical supplies for wounded Zulus in their war with the British as there were British medical staff who refused to care for the Zulu wounded. So clearly, from the first political leader to represent Indians in this country, we have had a close association with our African brothers. This association continued throughout the fight for liberation in South Africa (Nair, *Post* August 24–28, 2016, 13).

We show in *The South African Gandhi* that there was minimal contact between Gandhi and Dube and that the so-called non-racial struggle in subsequent generations involved a tiny segment of the population. On the contrary there has always been suspicion of Indians among segments of African political groupings and occasional explosive outbreaks of race violence. This historical reality clearly matters little to ordinary Indians who on the defensive.

In this context of rising African nationalism in South Africa, it is judicious for Indians to point to a long and peaceful coexistence between African and Indian. A global symbol like Gandhi can improve the standing of Indians in South African society. As Verdery states, “dead bodies have properties that make them particularly effective political symbols. They are excellent means for accumulating something essential to political transformation: symbolic capital” (Verdery 1999, 29) Criticizing Gandhi means the loss of an important symbol for a community that feels increasingly marginalized.

Bramdaw suggested that the book was fueling race tensions and questioned its publication at a time when anti-Indianism was being ratcheted up (*Mercury*, November 17, 2015). Writing a book is a multi-year undertaking and we began this project around 2012. South Africa changed markedly in this period with higher unemployment, xenophobic attacks, and an endless cycle of service delivery protests. There is never a good time to tackle a difficult subject but the argument that the book is the cause of racial tension inadvertently implies that Africans would attack Indians on the basis of what happened a century ago while ignoring material conditions in the present. This exposes the fragility of the post-apartheid non-racial project.

It is absurd to blame the book for the current race tensions. There has been latent and open tension between Africans and Indians since the nineteenth century. There were race riots in 1949, Gandhi’s Phoenix settlement was sacked in 1985, a blatantly anti-Indian song, “amaNdiya,” was a hit in townships across South Africa in 2002, and the anti-Indian MAF has been active in KwaZulu-Natal since around 2012. African attacks on Gandhi long predate our book. In 2003, for example, Reginald Legoabe wrote that “Gandhi never thought much of African people” (*City Press* November 9, 2003). In 2007, Yousuf Deedat, son of a well-known Muslim preacher, circulated several thousand copies of a booklet by Velu Annamalai, *Gandhi: A Stooge of the White South African Government*, which depicts Gandhi as an “Indian version of Hitler” (Govender 2007). In April

2015, before our study was released, Gandhi's statue was vandalized in Johannesburg by African protestors demonstrating with placards reading "Racist Gandhi must fall" and the hashtag #Ghandimustfall was circulated on social media (BBC News 2015). And the MAF, in a widely circulated e-mail of July 12, 2016, entitled "Mohandas Gandhi was the architect of Indian cultural supremacy & racism in South Africa," written by Phumulani Mfeka, quoted extensively from Gandhi's own writings and Michael Edwardes' book *The Myth of the Mahatma* (Edwardes 1986). There is no mention of our work. Mfeka's searing critique of Gandhi included a veiled threat to Indians:

The indigenous African people who are employees of Indian owned businesses in various sectors, are largely inhumanely exploited, abused and sexually violated. The indigenous African people have absolutely no meaningful ownership, management or control of the economy of the province, the very same ingredients which brought about 1949 and 85.

The past is very much in the present, for some of these critics of Indians see a natural continuation between Gandhi's views on race and those of Indians in South Africa a century later.

In September 2016, a year after the release of our book, there were calls for the removal of Gandhi's statue from the University of Ghana. Some again blamed *The South African Gandhi* for the protest in Ghana. Bharat Vala (beev28@hotmail.com) mailed us on October 10, 2016:

Sadly, and shamefully, two South African university professors [Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed], have published a controversial book to discredit Gandhi, this has resulted in a distorted message being broadcast to the world, resulting in a new Gandhi statue being removed in Ghana, this is a direct message to the two professors and other dark evil forces out there. No amount of falsehood can reverse the good that Gandhi did for the world, Good will always win against Evil.

The petition calling for the removal of the statue mentioned Gandhi's views on race and counselled Africans that it was "better to stand up for our dignity than to kowtow to the wishes of a burgeoning Eurasian super-power" (Maclean 2016). The call for the removal of the statue should be seen in the context of Indian (and Chinese) penetration of Africa, with the BRICS countries parcelling Africa out amongst themselves. *The South African Gandhi* is not the cause of Afro-Indian tensions, whether in South Africa or elsewhere on the continent. Rather than blame the book, critics should look at the behavior of Indian tenderpreneurs¹⁰ and others colluding with African politicians in corrupt practices, which is feeding into and reinforcing negative stereotypes about Indians.

Gandhi's legacy in South Africa lives on through the Gandhi Development Trust (GDT), established in 2002 to promote "Gandhian thought and values" whose core is "a peaceful, just and non-violent world." One of its trustees is Ela Gandhi, Gandhi's great granddaughter. Ordinary people construe a critique of Gandhi as an attack on the work of the GDT itself. Given that the promotion of

peace is one of the GDT's key objectives, the backlash is comprehensible. According to Squires (2007, 62)

certain establishments – the academy, schools, readings groups, peers and the critics – have the power to enforce particular interpretations of texts. Interpretation is reliant on what might loosely be called collective feeling, or more politically, group coercion. Interpretation thus needs a community to formulate and sustain it. The power and persuasiveness of each of the communities is what then produces the text's cultural meaning.

If we substitute the figure of Gandhi for texts, Squires' argument is equally valid. Most people refuse to countenance that Gandhi could have been anything but a flawless saint, a view reinforced at the present time on occasions such as Gandhi's birthday, assassination, and India's Independence Day. For example, on January 30, 2017, the GDT, the Consul General of India, and the Gujarati Hindu Sanskruti Kendra held an interfaith prayer and memorial lecture to mark Gandhi's assassination. Ela Gandhi and Ravi Pillay, the KwaZulu Natal MEC for Human Settlements and Public Works, amongst others, wrote on Gandhi's values and positive contributions in local newspapers. In her article entitled "Gandhi's teaching live on," Ela Gandhi defined these values as including localized industrial development, a government that takes care of the needs of its people, environmental care, meditation, non-violence, and compassion. She hoped that these "powerful gifts" would not be lost by "the character assassin's pen" (see *Post* February 1–5, 2017), a veiled reference to our book.

Given her high public profile on issues of justice many human rights activists wondered how Ela Gandhi would react to the visit to South Africa of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in July 2016. Modi was the Chief Minister of Gujarat when around 2,000 Muslims were killed in that state in 2002. Aside from his alleged role in the riots, Modi's policies are antithetical to many Gandhian teachings, including some of those outlined by Ela Gandhi above. Modi also inaugurated a website promoting the works of V.D. Savarkar, the right wing Hindu nationalist who espoused violence and was allegedly involved in plots to murder Gandhi. It was Modi's party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), that hung a portrait of Savarkar in the Indian parliament in 2003, an occasion boycotted by Congress. Modi was welcomed to Phoenix without reference to the atrocities in Gujarat. This prompted Shiv Visvanathan, a professor at the Jindal School of Law, to write:

I was appalled and agitated when I saw Ela Gandhi welcome him to Phoenix Farm. I was reminded of a comment by a historian who said, "today every party rewrites history"... The Right, especially the RSS, was opposed to Gandhi and had little to do with the national movement. There was an even greater irony in Modi's trip as the RSS, of which he was a *pracharak* (full-time worker), was opposed to Gandhi. I do not know what Modi thought while he sat in the wood-planked train. But, I was wondering whether at that moment the RSS and its ilk thought of apologising to Gandhi and the nation for the assassination (Visvanathan 2016).

Ela Gandhi's welcome to Modi must be seen in context. This is a time of increased ethnic chauvinism amongst Indians in South Africa. The rise of India, the emergence of Hindu nationalism, and the figure of Narendra Modi are important to many in the Indian diaspora. Modi and his BJP government have been invoking the name of Gandhi, despite their historical differences, and many homes in South Africa bear portraits of Gandhi, revered by some as a spiritual figure. Modi received a rapturous reception from thousands of Indians across South Africa, a sign of their attachment to "Mother India." There are consequences for speaking "truth to power" under these circumstances.

Conclusion

The power of Gandhi is very strong in South Africa. Few South Africans, for example, know much about Gandhi's contemporary and ideological rival B.R. Ambedkar or for that matter others who were active against British rule in the 1920s and 1930s, such as M.N. Roy, Bhagat Singh, Ram Chandra, V.D. Savarkar, and J.P. Narayan. Gandhi's status in South Africa is due to his stay in the country, the close relationship between him and those who dominated Indian South African politics in subsequent generations, and his contribution to the freedom struggle in India, as well as the relationship between the Congress movements in South Africa and India. Gandhi's reputation, of course, extends beyond South Africa. This is due, Maclean (2016, 694) states, to

Gandhi's prominence on the global stage in the 1930s, his posthumous award as "Man of the Century" from *Time* magazine, and the endorsement of his politics in the form of an award-winning, epic film (in Richard Attenborough's 1983 biopic *Gandhi*) . . . [and] recent initiatives of the Indian government to place statues of the Mahatma in prominent global cities, from the former imperial capital of London to Sydney. . . . In the context of the Cold War, a series of anti-state insurgencies, and now an interminable "War on Terror", narratives endorsing non-violence have an understandable appeal.

This does not mean that we should exempt Gandhi from criticism in light of what he subsequently achieved. As Perry Anderson (2012) counsels, "as a historian, one has to take cool stock and not skate over [things] as Gandhi's apologists continually do." It is probably less problematic for someone like Anderson, based in the USA, to offer a critique of Gandhi as it may not have the same impact on the quality of his day-to-day life as it would on someone living within predominantly Indian communities.¹¹ For example, 2017 marks the hundredth anniversary since the end of indenture. A conference is planned in Durban to mark the occasion. The organizers approached the Indian consulate to be partners but this fell through when it became known that Ashwin Desai was one of the participants. The conference organizer explained in an e-mail dated January, 31 2017 that "there has been a significant amount of reaction to the book on Gandhi; the local community has been very loyal and respectful of Gandhi's

contribution to both SA and India and there are strong sentiments in this regard.”

We found it difficult to challenge entrenched beliefs and long-held narratives and to engage in reasonable debate about Gandhi with many in our community. But as Thapar (2014, xiv) states, “if the past is to be called upon to legitimize the present, as it so frequently is, then the veracity of such a past has to be continually vetted. In speaking for the relationship of the past and present we seldom stop to think how much of our present hangs on what we assume to be the actual past.” There is a great deal of denial about Afro-Indian relations, for example, both historically and in the present, and by raising some “inconvenient truths” about the Gandhian period, we hope that once passions have cooled, the book will facilitate open dialogue about race in the past and in present-day South Africa.

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Notes

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1. The Union of South Africa only came into being in 1910. The four territories that made up the future South Africa were the Cape Colony, Natal, Transvaal, and Orange Free State. For the sake of convenience, this article makes use of “South Africa” even when referring to the period before 1910. Around 150,000 Indians were imported to Natal as indentured migrants between 1860 and 1911, with free migrants, mainly Gujaratis, following in their wake from the 1870s. Once Natal was granted Responsible (self) government in 1893, white settlers passed legislation that curbed Indian immigration and imposed restrictions on those who settled in the country. Indian resistance was spearheaded by the NIC, which Gandhi founded in 1894.
2. Mahatma is a Sanskrit word which means “great soul.” This title was bestowed on Gandhi by Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore in 1915 after Gandhi referred to him as “Gurudev” (one who emanates “spiritual light”).
3. This article deals mostly with immediate reaction in social media, online responses to reports on the book, and newspaper reports. Desai and I are gathering academic reviews of the book and will respond to those, either as a journal article or as an addendum if a second edition of the book is released. Examples of this include Edward Said’s addendum in the second edition of *Orientalism*, which is a response to critics; and Perry Anderson’s defense of *The Indian Ideology* and Kama Maclean’s response to criticism of her book on Bhagat Singh, both of which are cited in this article.
4. There are two exceptions. In 2013, I published a biography of a religious figure, Ahmed Deedat (Vahed 2013a), which certain of his family members were unhappy with and made this known through the press. I also published a book of biographies of Muslims involved in the anti-apartheid struggle (Vahed 2012) which one individual critiqued in the press on the grounds that I was singling out activists on the basis of religion. On both occasions, the wider public took little note of the dispute and these episode did not prepare me for the reaction to *The South African Gandhi*.
5. Gandhi wrote in 1917 that “this great people (Indians) overflows with faith. It is no difficult matter to lead such a matter on the right path of satyagraha” (in Desai and Vahed 2016, 71). On the other hand, A. M.

Cachalia, Gandhi's compatriot in the Transvaal, explained that "the natives of South Africa need many generations of culture and development before they can hope to be passive resisters. ..." (in Desai and Vahed 2016, 70). When the ANC was discussing plans to launch a Defiance Campaign at its December 1951 conference, Manilal Gandhi told delegates that the Congress movement was not ready for Satyagraha as many ANC followers were "impetuous" and lacked the necessary discipline for such a struggle (in Vahed 2013b, 70). This attitude toward Africans needs further exploration since it appears to go beyond Gandhi. Ranajit Guha, for example, wrote in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Resistance* that the tendency of Africans to turn toward priests, saints or prophets to "mediate" their anti-colonial resistance "was symptomatic of a consciousness that proved far too feeble to cope with its own project and left it to be completed by the intervention of a superior wisdom. ... In colonial India this particular type of mediation played a less conspicuous part in mobilizing for rebellion. ..." (Guha 1999, 273). While not casting aspersions on Guha, it appears that a more systematic analysis of Indian writing on Africans is warranted.

6. The *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* is the most widely used source on Gandhi and has come to be known by the acronym CWMG. Although it is a compilation of Gandhi's writings, as Maclean (2016, 692) points out, it is "regarded as a primary source and not as the selective and often happenstance collections that [it is]." That there are several editions of the CWMG confirms this. The version used for our study is the 1999 electronic edition.
7. "Coloured" is a peculiarly South African term that refers to people of mixed origin who possess a combination of European, Asian, Khoisan, and/or Bantu ancestry.
8. In South Africa, the term "Black" is used to refer in the collective to Africans, Coloreds and Indians.
9. While some historians may be uncomfortable about analyzing social media responses in an academic article such as this, anonymous trolling and venomous attacks are now part of many online discussions about historical figures and issues and, more importantly, this has immediate and personal repercussions for historians and the way in which they practice their craft. Chaturvedi (2016) and Subrahmanyam (2015), for example, have addressed this issue in the South Asian context. Subrahmanyam (2015) writes that "Indian trolling is known to be highly vitriolic. ... Those who are real people with real emails and real names are totally censored, but anonymous people are empowered to say whatever they want. ... We are becoming a society of cowards. That is a terrifying idea."
10. This is a peculiarly South African term that refers to those who enrich themselves through securing Government tenders, often through corrupt practices.
11. This is not to suggest that Anderson was not subject to criticism and abuse. The letters to the *London Review of Books* following the publication of his essays were trenchant in their critique of him. Anderson subsequently published the essays in the form of a book, *The Indian Ideology*, which led to a response by Chatterjee et al. (2015), which one of the anonymous reviewers of this article described as "some of the harshest attacks on Anderson I have seen in many years." Anderson (2015) published a second edition of his book in which he responded to the critiques. However, the point I am making is that living within a predominantly Indian community meant that the controversy affected my daily activities, such as attending social events or the gymnasium because of the likelihood of being confronted about the book's contents.

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