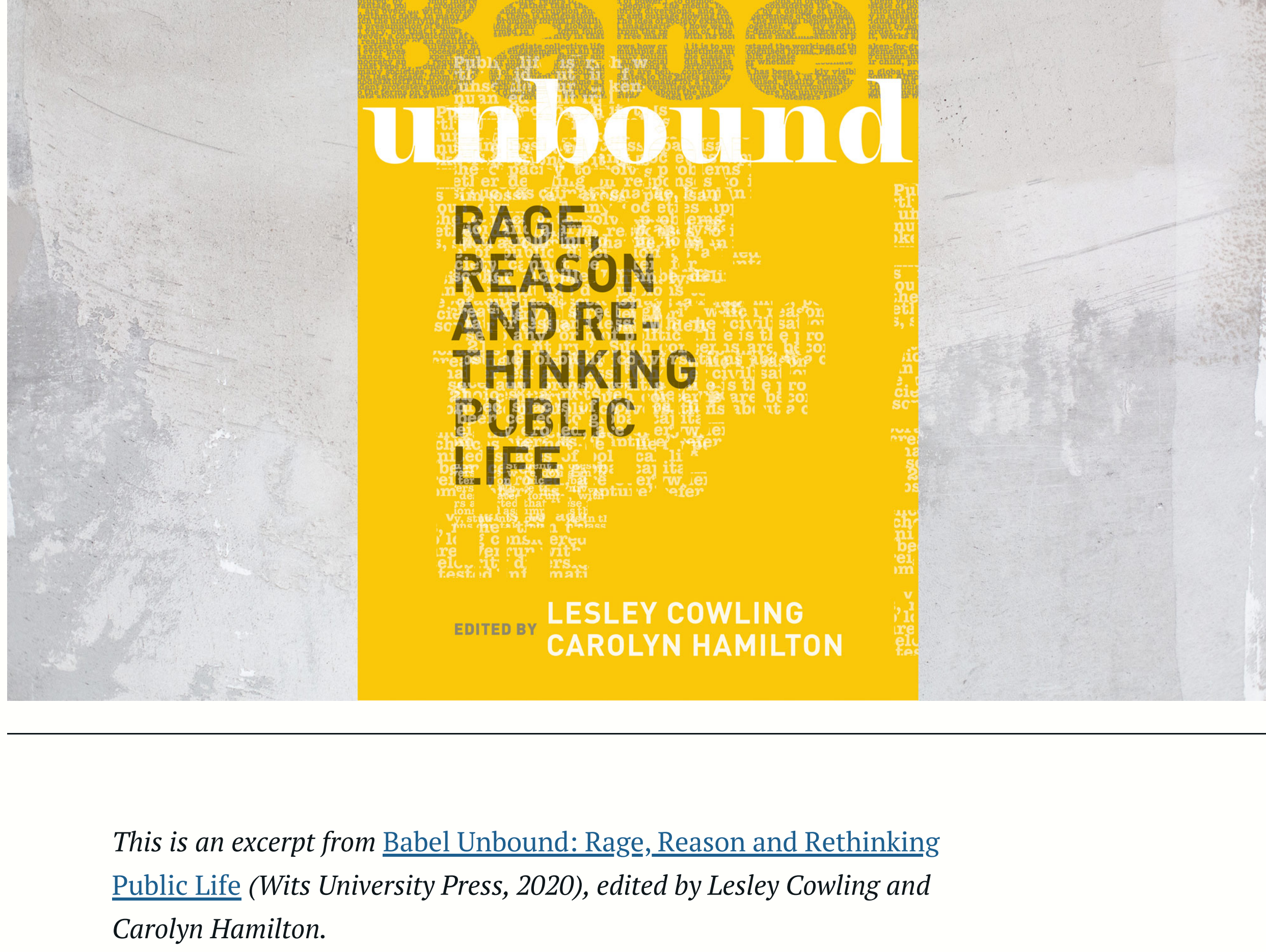


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The protests at universities starting in 2015 ruptured what is sayable in the South African public sphere, shifting the over-reliance on rational, critical modes of argument.

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Anger, pain and the body in the public sphere

South Africa is going through a moment of powerful political rupture. This rupture is not so much with the apartheid or colonial past as with the immediate democratic past, which has failed to deliver on its promises of equality for all and lacks a credible rupture with the apartheid past. South Africa's rate of protest since 1994 has been alarmingly high, underlining how dissatisfied people are with the post-apartheid condition and how little they trust the process of waiting for government to deliver on its promises. Although students at formerly black universities have been protesting for years, since 2015 university students on other campuses have joined this rumbling revolution and explicitly made "decolonisation", racism and dealing with the past very much part of the protest discourse. While these sites of protest and struggle are crucial for understanding the dissatisfaction with the continuance of the apartheid past, the public sphere is as serious and important a site of struggle for agenda-setting and new ways of knowing, talking, paying attention and getting a hearing.

All speech works from a regime of truth. According to Michel Foucault: "Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. 'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'regime' of truth ... The political question, to sum up, is not error, illusion or alienated consciousness or ideology; it is truth itself." Within the current political battles (for recognition and attention, for education, for proper services, for full citizenship and humanity), we also see a battle to change the regimes of truth that enable speech, to outlaw some types of speech and introduce others. We also see a powerful resurgence of racist, misogynist, fascist speech rooted in an older regime of truth (which until now has been somewhat silenced by the regimes of "constitutional democracy" and "human rights for all"). Importantly, the often unspoken rules of engagement in the public sphere – which have relied on common-sense notions of allowing everyone a voice, "playing the ball, not the man", "raising the quality of the argument, not shouting louder", and so on – are being tested strenuously. Under these conditions, it seems that either critical rationality must fall or we must find very different ways of making arguments and persuasive statements, and hearing and listening. The imbrication of the operations of the present public sphere in the apartheid and colonial pasts has to be interrogated. The persistence of civilising governmentality must be assessed. And attunement to the positionality of speakers and listeners with widely varying experiences, knowledges and power must become an important consideration.

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The debates that go on in the South African public domain are primarily a battle over regimes of the sayable. If one pays attention to what is said on social media – primarily, but also in the agenda-setting, mainstream media – one hears young, black activists and intellectuals directly addressing the sayable and the unsayable and setting new terms for debate by speaking overtly about the how of the debate. This is evident in, for example, Thando Mgqolozana's 2015 challenge to the "white" literary establishment in South Africa about its race-biased structures, evident particularly in publishing companies and their outputs and in its pre-eminent spaces of talking – literary festivals. In addition to powerful, new, young voices demanding space and time, we also see strong statements about what these new voices will not be doing. They will not educate those who do not work to understand the new terms of engagement and its topics. They will not reassure those who find the new style of engagement abrasive or overly angry or unsubstantiated or unreasonable. They will not respect the old rules of engagement that demand deference to certain styles embedded in another regime of truth.

Certain features have become evident in the South African public sphere (and these are echoed in other parts of the world where such contestation is happening):

- A generational rift between the young and older activists. The usual deference and respect accorded to struggle heroes/veterans is suspended. For example, in a radio discussion involving apartheid-era activist Nomboniso Gasa and present-day activist Wanelisa Xaba on CapeTalk 702, each accused the other of lack of respect and listening. Another example is the Electronic Freedom Fighters' (EFF) style of engagement in Parliament, with their strategies of dressing as workers, in red, their use of songs and their persistent use of house rules to interrupt proceedings.
- Extensive use of social media (particularly Twitter and Facebook), not only to organise and make declarations, but also to make news. (It is noteworthy that the university shutdown of October 2015 was almost entirely broadcast as news via Twitter, with weekend newspapers playing catch-up after five days of activity.) Notably "black Twitter" has reached South Africa (after its emergence in the United States), indicating that a certain style and certain communicators are being recognised as devising and owning a public intellectual intervention.
- A strong focus on seizing the control and power over who says what and how. For example, in 2016, Rhodes University first-year student Mishka Wazar told Radio 702 host John Robbie on air that as a white man he could not express an opinion about the furore over hairstyles going on among black pupils at Pretoria Girls' High (discussed in more detail later in this chapter).
- A powerful intersectionality consciousness with overt acknowledgement of the important concurrent positionalities of sexual orientation, gender, race and dis/ability, as well as class (which in this new iteration of struggle is not just the lens of analysis, but often another aspect of positionality or a taken-for-granted condition of blackness that it remains poor and still oppressed).
- A renewed "feminist" consciousness with a powerful local, African inflection, which results in a challenge to "white" feminism and its assumption of the simple solidarity of womanhood.
- An acknowledgement of embodied existence and experiences of pain, accompanied by statements of pain, rage and affect, which often also refuse to engage in evidence-based reasoning. There is an assumption of generational pain, ill-treatment and exclusion.
- Rejection of disembodied, unaffected ways of knowing, which seem removed and theoretical and do not concern themselves with the feelings and lived realities of their subjects. This accusation is made particularly about researchers and theorists based at universities. The code word for this form of paraded knowledge is to "anthropologise" situations and people. This hearkens back to the moment when the discipline of anthropology had to deal with its form of knowledge production on "natives", which was based on and dependent on colonial-era expansion and control.
- Aesthetic and affective responses. Thierry Luescher's research on the Must Fall movements points out that this is a very important dimension of these protests and that it is both "emotive and aesthetic". He points to the performance by student Sethembile Msezane when the Cecil John Rhodes statue was being removed from the University of Cape Town (UCT) campus; the Shackville protest, also at UCT; the Luister documentary at Stellenbosch; and the renaming of spaces and buildings across campuses. As Nomusa Makhubu points out in chapter 9, aesthetic responses also demand that the political be seen clearly in the overtly aesthetic. In this light, Mgqolozana's challenge to literary festivals is to see their imbrication in ways of being white and "civilised" in South Africa and to undo their unquestioned pre-eminence in the literary field.
- Demands for redress and restitution, which return us to the injustices and legacies of the colonial, pre-apartheid era. For example, at a book launch at the Amazwi South African Museum of Literature (formerly the National English Literary Museum) of Bridget Hilton-Barber's account of being jailed for being an anti-apartheid activist, *Student Comrade Prisoner Spy*, an audience member asked why the author did not address the land issue in her memoir of white student activism in the 1980s.

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This style of engagement is not new; it has been gathering force over a number of years. These demands, behaviours and positions are used to insist that the public sphere open up again to new voices, new topics and new styles of representation. This can be seen as a thoroughly good thing because such an opening up to other voices enlarges and includes, thereby making the democratic space more useful, more viable, more possible of being owned by everyone. But, more insistently and importantly, these demands and behaviours also unsettle the public sphere's powerful reliance on a particular rational-critical modus operandi, with its powerful adherence to logos (the argument, the statement) over ethos (the person/positionality from which the statement comes). Some of the tactics used to unsettle the politics of the present also strike at the foundations of not only the public sphere, but also knowledge generation and consolidation based on rational, evidential techniques in the academic sphere. What we can know in a shared, accepted way is critical to making decisions, creating community, holding to social compact (rather than using force) and deciding on the shared future.

The shifts and ruptures in what is sayable in the South African public sphere at the present moment deserve attention, as they enable us, again in Foucault's words, to attempt a "history of the present". Instead of judging the present through the solidified narratives and fears of the past, we need a fearless look at how underlying regimes of truth are being challenged and changed by a new generation of activists and intellectuals stepping into the public domain. Such an examination not only looks into the what and how of statements made publicly, but also at who is operating in the public domain – who is speaking, who is silent and, very importantly, how to listen and create spaces and platforms for attention and attentiveness.

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