Ethnographies of Power


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Nationalism is central to Gillian Hart’s current work and so I was surprised to discover that the words ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ do not appear in the index to her 2002 book *Disabling Globalization*. When I asked Hart why and when she started thinking about nationalism, she paused and then, unsurprisingly, told me a story that involved a friend from Ladysmith. In December 2003, Hart and her friend went to a meeting where Jacob Zuma, then deputy president of the country and of the African National Congress (ANC), was received by an adoring crowd. When Zuma sang his trademark ‘Awuleth’ Umshini Wami’ (Bring Me My Machine [Gun]), she realised his surging popularity was bound up with the ways he invoked the liberation struggle and connected with deeply held popular nationalism. While others on the left were disdainful and dismissive of both popular support for Zuma and the rise of nationalism, Hart realised something was going on that was important to understand. So began more than a decade of provocative research on nationalism, research that is ongoing to this day.

This story of Zuma encapsulates how Hart’s long-term ethnographic work in Ladysmith and Newcastle grounds her research and how her quest to understand the current moment and its many prior determinations allows her to interrogate theoretically and politically
important processes obscured by existing conceptual frameworks. Hart’s interest in nationalism is not only or even primarily theoretical. Her political interest in understanding nationalism drives her theoretical work. As new political issues emerge (or more typically erupt), she engages with activists across the political spectrum, tests out her ideas in public lectures and newspaper articles, and stretches her thinking about nationalism as she seeks to develop concepts adequate for understanding the contemporary conjuncture.

In this chapter I present the development of Hart’s thinking on nationalism, locating this in relation to the political transformations in South Africa she was responding to, as well as her engagements with political developments and ideas from elsewhere (India and the United States, in particular). I cluster Hart’s writing on nationalism into three broad thematic phases that emerge chronologically but inform and interweave with one another as ideas are carried forward, articulated with new ones and at times quietly abandoned. I then discuss how my own research on the everyday nationalism of reclaimers of reusable and recyclable materials at a Soweto landfill engages with, complements and presses beyond Hart’s work on nationalism.

**Phase one: Nationalism, populism and the rise of Jacob Zuma**

Hart first began to grapple with nationalism in her article ‘Changing Concepts of Articulation’ (2007) and her 2007 Antipode Lecture – ‘The Provocations of Neoliberalism’ – subsequently published in 2008 (Hart 2008). Her insights after the December 2003 meeting mentioned above were prescient. In the subsequent years, President Thabo Mbeki came under increasing attack by the ANC’s Alliance partners – the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) – for his elitist approach and neo-liberal policies. Support for Zuma continued to increase. Even though he had been tried for rape and had numerous charges of
fraud, corruption, racketeering and money-laundering against him, in 2005 the ANC’s National General Council forced Mbeki to retain Zuma as the deputy president of the ANC after Mbeki dismissed him from the same position in government over the corruption charges. Subsequently, at the 2007 ANC national congress, Zuma ousted Mbeki as the president of the ANC and in 2008 (after the completion of Hart’s articles) this was repeated in parliament as Zuma ascended to the presidency of the country.

The fact that Hart came to nationalism through her interest in struggles for hegemony within the Alliance had important implications for how she approached the subject. In this first phase of her work on nationalism, Hart focused on what she refers to as two ‘key-words of the ANC alliance’ (Hart 2015b, 49) – the national democratic revolution (NDR) as the first stage of the SACP’s two-stage theory of revolution (establishment of non-racial bourgeois liberal democracy first, socialism second) and the ‘national question’. In addition, she increasingly engaged with debates related to populism in order to interrogate the relationship between popular support for Zuma and nationalism (see chapter 7 in this volume for a discussion of Hart’s work on populism).

Drawing on Neville Alexander (2002), Hart notes that the NDR and the two-stage theory had long been the subject of withering critique by the left outside of the Alliance (Hart 2007, 85). However, she argues:

Precisely because the NDR remains a live and influential social category, it is insufficient simply to point to its analytical inconsistencies and political shortcomings, and then set it aside. What needs to be grasped more fully is how meanings of the NDR have been redefined and articulated as part of the hegemonic project of the ruling bloc within the ANC, along with how and why these meanings have become an increasingly vociferous site of struggle and contestation within the ANC Alliance and in grassroots politics. (Hart 2007, 86; emphasis in original)
Debates on the NDR were, indeed, alive within the Alliance. However, although Hart referenced grassroots politics, this was not the subject of her analysis and she did not interrogate whether the NDR resonated with or animated understandings and struggles on the ground and, if so, how. Instead, Hart’s analysis of the NDR focused on contestations within the Alliance that took the relevance of the NDR (or at least invocations of it) in the forging of the post-apartheid nation as given, and she analysed it on these terms.

Hart focused on two related ways that the Alliance considered the NDR central to the forging of the post-apartheid nation. First is that, for the SACP, South Africans could only become a single nation (that is, within their understanding, the national question could only be resolved) in the context of the NDR (Slovo 1988, 25, cited in Hart 2013b, 57). Second, within the logic of the SACP, the NDR would establish the basis for a struggle for socialism. Within the two-stage theory, the NDR required the creation of a non-racial, liberal, bourgeois democracy that not only left capitalism and capitalist exploitation intact, but promoted their further development, including the development of a black bourgeoisie. As Hart’s work on nationalism developed, she increasingly drew on Frantz Fanon’s analysis (1963) of the betrayals by the national bourgeoisie in what the SACP referred to as the first stage, the tremendous potential dangers of their self-interested nationalism, and the possibilities of an alternative national consciousness rooted in a new humanism (Hart 2013b, 2015a).

For Hart, this discussion made clear that, far from purely ‘political’, the conceptualisation of the nation in the NDR could only be understood and debated in relation to capitalism and class struggle. Hart emphasises this point when she argues that post-1994, each new ANC policy needs to be framed as a reformulation of the NDR, as the NDR ‘makes the case for accommodation to the inequalities of post-apartheid capitalism as a transitory phenomenon, to be superseded by an ever-receding second, socialist phase’ (Hart 2015b, 49). Hart argues that each redefinition of the NDR was also a ‘re-articulation of race,
class and nationalism’ that advanced specific racialised class interests within the Alliance, as well as more generally (see chapters 7 and 8 in this volume for a discussion of Hart’s work on ‘articulation’). The shift from the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) to the more thoroughly and overtly neo-liberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macro-economic strategy in 1996 was therefore a ‘consolidation of conservative forces bent on working in alliance with white corporate capital to create a black bourgeoisie nominally more responsive to “development”’ (Hart 2007, 93). Simultaneously, and of necessity, ‘this redefinition of the NDR embodied a powerful drive to contain working-class pressures, along with a sharp disciplining of the left within the ANC Alliance’ (Hart 2013b, 184).

On the basis of this analysis, Hart was able to return to her initial question regarding support for Zuma within the Alliance. She argues that as COSATU and the SACP increasingly opposed Mbeki’s neo-liberal economic and social policies, ‘the NDR [became] a site of increasingly vociferous contestation’ (Hart 2015b, 49). According to Hart, COSATU and the SACP rallied around Zuma because he expressed support for their vision of the NDR and the post-apartheid nation, which encompassed their framing of the economy and class struggle. While not specifically articulated by Hart in this way, support for Zuma was also bolstered as he cultivated the impression that under his presidency, COSATU and the SACP would regain status and power in the Alliance lost during Mbeki’s presidency (Hart 2007, 2008).

Turning her attention to the surging popular support for Zuma, Hart shifted from a focus on the forging and meaning of the nation in terms of the NDR to analyse how Zuma ‘tapped into’ popular nationalism. To do so, over the course of several publications, she developed a particular understanding of the relationship between populism, nationalism, class, race and gender (Hart 2007, 2008, 2013a, 2013b). From Ernesto Laclau’s early work on populism (1977), Hart took the crucial argument that rather than reaching beyond class, populism is always articulated with it (although not to any specific class, hence its
relevance to myriad political projects). Laclau’s argument that appeal to the masses via populism is crucial when a new fraction of the ‘dominant block’ seeks hegemony was profoundly relevant to analysis of Zuma’s populist strategy (Hart 2007, 92–93; 2013b).

However, rejecting Laclau’s Althusserian position that within populism people are constituted as subjects and hailed from above, Hart drew on Ari Sitas’ argument that ‘“Zulu-ness” must be viewed as a negotiated identity between ordinary people’s attempts to create effective and reciprocal bonds (or functioning cultural formations) out of their social and material conditions of life and political ideologies that seek to mobilise them in non-class ways’ (Sitas [1990] 2010, 266). Her former student (and co-editor) Mark Hunter’s arguments, rooted in long-term ethnographic analysis, provided important insights into how Zuma was able to present himself as a respectable patriarch to a wide range of poor, black South Africans, including women, even in the context of his rape trial (Hunter 2007, 2011; Hart 2008, 2013a, 2013b).

Hart argues that the national question played a central role in enabling Zuma to connect with his emerging constituency’s understanding of their daily lives and the state of their liberation and the nation. While her discussion of the national question and the NDR focuses on how the Alliance answered the question, here Hart focuses on how the national question ‘conjures up struggles against colonialism and imperialism, the indignities and violence of racial injustice and dispossession, the sacrifices and suffering embodied in movements for national liberation, and the visions of social and economic justice for which many fought and died’ (Hart 2013b, 156–157).

Hart observes that these issues had been submerged during the transition, but were revitalised by Zuma who ‘positioned himself as a hero of national liberation’ and as the ‘rightful heir’ of the struggle (Hart 2008, 692). Informed by Liz Gunner’s insightful work (2008), Hart argues that when Zuma launched into struggle songs (and in particular his signature song ‘Awuleth’ Umshini Wami’), he was seen as championing a struggle that was ongoing. She highlights that Zuma
presented and represented a vision of the nation starkly different to that of Mbeki. Zuma’s nation was not the domain of intellectuals. It included people who, like him, were not formally educated and were ‘by implication extremely smart’; celebrated and promoted ‘traditional’ Zulu values and practices; and was rooted in a powerful, militant masculinity (Hart 2008, 692). In ‘Exposing the Nation’, Hart (2013a) draws on moving and deeply insightful media articles by Amukelani Chauke (2012), Justice Malala (2012) and S’tembiso Msomi (2012) to grapple with the profound social divisions that were revealed and exacerbated by Brett Murray’s depiction of Zuma’s exposed genitals in his painting *The Spear*. Hart argues that the painting reopened the wounds of crucial, unresolved aspects of the national question and generated tremendous popular support for Zuma, contrary to the artist’s intended critique.

However, emphasising that hegemony is always contested, Hart is quick to remind her readers that tapping into popular understandings also threatened both Mbeki’s and then Zuma’s hegemony, as ‘service delivery’ protests and ‘escalating struggles over the material conditions of life and livelihood are simultaneously struggles over the meaning of the nation and liberation, as well as expressions of profound betrayal’ (Hart 2008, 678).

**Phase two: De-nationalisation, re-nationalisation and the South African transition**

The publication of *Rethinking the South African Crisis* (Hart 2013b) heralded the second phase of Hart’s work on nationalism. As the title suggests, she continued working through many of the key issues and concepts from the first phase. However, the focus of her analysis shifted and broadened. In her earlier work, Hart studied nationalism and conceptions of the nation in order to better understand struggles for hegemony by and within the ANC and the Alliance. In the second phase, she engaged with the nation and nationalism as part of her efforts to gain
deeper insight into the post-apartheid transition. This required Hart to interrogate and theorise the nation and nationalism in new ways.

Perhaps because of her focus on the meaning of the nation for the Alliance, in the first phase Hart had not fully elaborated her own understanding of the nation and nationalism. In *Rethinking the South African Crisis*, she introduces and draws on Manu Goswami’s relational, spacio-historical understanding of nationalisms that focuses ‘on the processes, practices and meanings entailed in the production of specific – but always interconnected – national spaces in relation to wider global conjunctures’ (Hart 2013b, 17). Resonating with Hart’s approach in the first phase, Goswami argues that analysis of specific nationalisms requires ‘sustained elaboration of the dialectical relationship between material, social, and cultural fields and the experiential contradictions and lived practices of individuals and social groups’ (Goswami 2004, 6). For Hart, understanding the nation and nationalism in the context of the South African transition therefore required analysis of South Africa’s specific history of colonialism and apartheid, ‘the lived interdisciplinarity of everyday life’ (Goswami 2004, 6) and the globally interconnected historical geographies of South African capital.

Arising out of this approach, Hart then developed the dialectically related concepts ‘de-nationalisation’ and ‘re-nationalisation’ through which she analysed the transition. In ‘Political Society and Its Discontents’, Hart explains that de-nationalisation ‘includes the extremely conservative package of neo-liberal economic policies set in place in 1996 but also precedes and extends beyond it’, as it ‘highlights South African corporate capital’s post-1994 efforts to resolve its accumulation crisis by restructuring and de-nationalising its operations’ (Hart 2015b, 48). This strategy was tailored to address the specific form of capital’s crisis, which was rooted in what Ben Fine and Zavareh Rustomjee (1996) refer to as the ‘Minerals-Energy Complex’ (MEC). Forged in the late nineteenth century around large-scale minerals extraction and related industries, the MEC is deeply dependent on cheap coal-based energy and underpins white monopoly capital’s
domination of the South African economy (Hart 2013b, 159–160). As the MEC is predicated on the gross exploitation of migrant, black, male labour, both the MEC and the crisis were shaped by the ‘historical and geographical specificities of southern African racial capitalism and settler colonialism’ (Hart 2013b, 7). De-nationalisation emerged out of and deepened racialised dispossession, humiliation and exploitation, giving them new form in the present (Hart 2015b). This is why Hart argues that de-nationalisation signals ‘the simultaneously economic, political and cultural practices and processes that are generating ongoing inequality and “surplus” populations, and the conflicts that surround them’ (Hart 2013b, 7).

Hart argues that while de-nationalisation re-established secure conditions for accumulation by white South African corporate capital (2013b, 165), it was insufficient on its own, as capital also needed the ANC to contain the fallout from the resulting dispossession and deepening immiseration (2014b). De-nationalisation was therefore accompanied by re-nationalisation, which encompassed efforts ‘to produce a new nation, and how these play out in multiple arenas of everyday life’ (Hart 2013a, 65). Re-nationalisation incorporated and further developed Hart’s earlier analysis of the roles of the NDR and the national question in the forging of the nation. In addition, it also included: 1) the early 1990s non-racial ‘rainbowism’ of Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and 2) ‘Fortress South Africa’ – a concept borrowed from Jonathan Crush (1999) that captures the state’s anti-immigrant legislation, policies and practices, as well as vigilantism, police abuse, detention of non-South Africans and xenophobia (Hart 2013b, 8).

According to Hart, rainbowism and Fortress South Africa represented an effort to forge the nation by creating a common identity among all South Africans within the context of bourgeois hegemony, and othering and rejecting those from elsewhere (other parts of Africa, in particular). However, just as Hart notes that invoking the national question and NDR could lead to a deep sense of betrayal and
opposition, she draws on Sitas’ analysis of the TRC to argue that while rainbowism and the TRC facilitated the transition (in the specific form that it assumed), they also fostered deep opposition (Sitas [1990] 2010). Hart observes that they ignored and could not address the historical and ongoing dispossessions, indignities, painful memories and exploitation with which the majority of the population continue to live (2013b, 168–171; 2014b). Indeed, rejection of rainbowism and the TRC exploded in the 2015 and 2016 #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student uprisings. Hart therefore argues that dialectical analysis of de- and re-nationalisation illuminated both the form that the transition took, as well as the sources of its instabilities.

**Phase three: Conjunctural nationalisms**

More recently, Hart is focusing on nationalism itself as she works to develop a relational analysis of the contemporaneous resurgence and intensification of ethnic/religious nationalism and populist politics in South Africa, India and the United States. In keeping with her understanding of the inseparability of theory, politics and methodology, this extension of her work on nationalism is rooted in developments in each of these three interrelated spheres.

After the publication of *Rethinking the South African Crisis*, Hart increasingly turned to Indian scholars interrogating the rise of Hindutva (Hindu nationalism). Aijaz Ahmad’s work on the emergence of Hindutva (2000, 2015) and Himani Bannerji’s attention to masculinity in the making of Hindutva (2006) were particularly influential (Hart 2014a, 2015b). Hart took note of India and South Africa’s common roots in British imperialism, as well as their contemporaneous moves in 1990 to neo-liberal capitalism, increasing inequalities and surplus populations, expansion of democracy in terms of race and caste, and intensifying expressions of nationalism. She concluded that a comparative analysis of nationalisms in the two countries could illuminate the specific forms of nationalism in each, as well as the broader forces that
underpin them (Hart 2014a, 2015b). Narendra Modi’s election as the Indian prime minister in 2014 sharpened parallels with nationalism and populism in South Africa, as well as the political stakes and potentialities of a relational study (Hart 2016, 375–376).

Hart soon expanded her comparative analysis to include the United States. She had long written and spoken (including in her DS100 first-year development studies course) of how Bobby Kennedy’s 1966 speech at the University of Cape Town illuminated parallels between South Africa and the United States rooted in their shared histories of settler colonialism, slavery and racialised dispossession. In ‘The Provocations of Neoliberalism’ (Hart 2008, 679), she also highlights how Kennedy’s analysis played an important role in her development of the method of relational comparison (see chapter 3 in this volume for a deeper discussion of relational comparison). Donald Trump’s election in 2016, and the ways Trumpism resonated with the national exceptionalism, juxtapositions of race and class, and nationalist populism that were so central to South African politics, established the importance for Hart of including the United States in her comparative study of nationalism and its relation to populism (Hart 2018).

Conducting this analysis required Hart to deepen her method of relational comparison to become a more thoroughly conjunctural comparison (2016). This methodological innovation speaks precisely to the requirement that Hart’s Marxist method places on her to develop methods of inquiry and concepts adequate for the specific task at hand. Hart first proposed the method of conjunctural comparison at a 2014 public talk at the University of the Witwatersrand’s Centre for Indian Studies in Africa (2014a). Drawing on a range of Indian and South African authors, she argued against the dominant approach of comparing the two countries through Partha Chatterjee’s ideal type concepts of ‘political’ and ‘civil’ society (2004). Instead, she deepened her engagement with Goswami’s relational theory of nationalism, and in her 2016 Progress in Human Geography Lecture at the Association of American Geographers annual meeting (published in the journal later that year)
clarified that conjunctural comparison entails ‘bringing key forces at play in South Africa and other regions of the world into the same frame of analysis, as connected yet distinctively different nodes in globally interconnected historical geographies – and as sites in the production of global processes in specific spatio-historical conjunctures, rather than as just recipients of them’ (Hart 2016, 373).

Everyday nationalism at a Soweto landfill

I began thinking about nationalism in South Africa soon after Hart, but for quite different reasons. My PhD dissertation explored how the 2008 global economic crisis was produced and contested at the Marie Louise landfill in Soweto. Given my training in feminist political economy, when I arrived at the landfill I expected to focus on articulations of race, gender and class. These were important, but I soon realised that nationality was the key power-laden social relation (with which the others were articulated) at Marie Louise, and that a very specific understanding of the nation and a very specific form of nationalism were central to the production of the crisis at the landfill.

Marie Louise lies on the boundary between the black township of Soweto and the historically white municipality of Roodepoort, both of which are now part of the Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality. Marie Louise is one of four functioning landfills owned by the City’s Pikitup Waste Management Utility. It was opened in 1993, on the cusp of democracy. Despite legal prohibitions, high fences and security guards, reclaimers fought their way into the landfill and began working there soon after it opened.

Contrary to the assumption in almost all literature that the global economic crisis impacted on reclaimers (and other informal workers) as an outside force, Marie Louise was already deeply integrated into global circuits of capital. Global commodity markets governed the prices for the recyclables salvaged there and some recyclables from the landfill were sold as far afield as China and India. The global economy was an integral
part of how Marie Louise was constituted as a site for the production of value (rather than the commodity cemetery it was designed to be). What was required, therefore, was a dialectical analysis of how the crisis and reclaimers' value struggles transformed each other.

It is here that the centrality of national identity and nationalism came into sharp relief. Although the original reclaimers at Marie Louise were South African, by the time of the crisis 41 per cent were Zimbabwean. Global prices for recyclables crashed with global commodity prices in late 2008. Buyers at all levels of the value chain were forced to sell their materials for a fraction of what they paid for them. In order to insure itself against future price drops, when the largest purchaser of scrap metal salvaged at Marie Louise reopened, it reduced the prices that it paid by a larger proportion than the decrease in the price that it received. The small buyers at Marie Louise did the same – not just for scrap, but for all materials. Reclaimers therefore experienced a disproportionate fall in income. They had significant potential bargaining power, as many of the small buyers were completely dependent on them. However, instead of uniting to fight for higher prices, South African reclaimers evicted the Zimbabweans so that they could maintain their income by salvaging more recyclables.

As Hart was one of my supervisors, my engagements with her facilitated my ability to ‘see’ the nation and nationalism at the dump. Her work and our conversations as we both grappled with nationalism made me conscious of the crucial importance of denaturalising the facts that the reclaimers identified and mobilised on the basis of nationality (which is key to my understanding of nationalism) and that South African reclaimers wielded power over Zimbabweans at a landfill where they had no formal authority. Hart’s method of critical ethnography provided a route through which I was able to follow Goswami’s injunction to ‘reconstruct the “historical labour of dehistoricization” that had enshrined the nation form as natural’ at the landfill (Goswami 2004, 20), and to be attentive to intertwined social, political, cultural and economic determinations as I did so.
My reconstruction tracked back to the specific history of how and when the original South Africans first began to reclaim at the landfill. As noted above, the South African reclaimers had fought their way into the landfill and transformed it into a resource mine at the very moment that South Africa was formed as a democratic nation, and they understood themselves and their own actions within the context of this conjuncture. Rather than passive recipients of freedom, the reclaimers frequently cast themselves as freedom fighters who had been actively involved in the struggle for their own liberation and that of the country. This identity was bolstered when advocate George Bizos (who had represented Mandela and many other struggle luminaries) successfully represented them in a court case against Pikitup and the City. One reclamer explained how their association with Bizos affected their status, saying: ‘It made a huge difference. A huge difference! I mean, Mr Bizos used to represent prominent leaders here and activists. So, we felt very honoured and people were respecting us.’ In the eyes of many of their fellow residents, the reclaimers were transformed from ‘scavengers’ worthy only of revulsion and contempt to valiant militants in the lineage of Mandela who were fighting for socio-economic transformation and liberation.

The court victory prevented Pikitup from implementing its plans to remove reclaimers from the landfill and grant a private company the exclusive right to extract recyclables at Marie Louise. This was widely interpreted to mean that the original reclaimers ‘owned the dump’. This understanding was quickly adopted by the large number of Zimbabweans who began arriving at Marie Louise in 2005–2006 after fleeing the economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe. One newcomer explained, as if it were fact, ‘They do own it because they fought for the dump and they won the case in court.’

The arrival of so many new reclaimers began to affect the original reclaimers’ access to recyclables and income. Building on the landfill’s foundational myth, the South African reclaimers deployed their claim to a place within the nation to claim control over both the
space of the landfill and the non-South Africans who worked there. Explaining why they should have greater rights to materials at Marie Louise than Zimbabweans, one South African reclamer stated: ‘We fought for this garbage … so we are the ones who should be working here, not the people who are coming from outside, because we are the ones who are voting.’

As at that time the South Africans could not create a physical border to prevent new people from entering the landfill, they entrenched a shift system that established a spatio-temporal border inside Marie Louise – the ‘South African shift’ worked from 9 a.m. until 2 p.m., while the much larger ‘Zimbabwean shift’ could only work from 2 p.m. until 5 p.m. The shift system was so effective that a central part of being Zimbabwean at the landfill meant being temporally, as well as spatially, confined. The extent of control over one’s time therefore became a key component of citizenship at Marie Louise.

A significant number of newly arrived South Africans were placed in the ‘Zimbabwean shift’ and were aggrieved that they were caught on the wrong side of the border. Reaffirming the relationship between nationality and rights at Marie Louise, one exclaimed: ‘The time they were fighting cops here, I was not here; I was still at school. They were fighting, I do understand, they were fighting. But my question was that, okay, we understand that you were fighting, but even our Mandela, he did fight, not for only his family, but for everyone in South Africa, more especially those who were oppressed. So were we supposed to leave school to come for a fight?’

Despite being in the ‘Zimbabwean shift’, these South African reclaimers retained privileges rooted in nationality. Unlike Zimbabweans, when spots opened up in the ‘South African shift’, they were able to move there and by the time of the eviction most had received cards from the morning shift committee that enabled them to stay.

The South African reclaimers’ actions were shaped by national government policy that limited the rights of Zimbabweans in the country and cast them as a threat to economic security. They also took place in
the context of attacks on non-South Africans that occur with impunity throughout the country on an ongoing basis, and which reached a peak in 2008. However, rather than simply enacting identities forged elsewhere and being interpellated into a pre-given nation, the reclaimers infused national identities and the nation with new meanings at the landfill by creating very locally specific rights to trash associated with citizenship.

Zimbabwean reclaimers also were not just interpelled into the nation at Marie Louise. They resented the ways they were framed and treated, as well as the limitations on their working time and income. Many articulated a more pan-Africanist view and thought that all Africans should be treated equally. However, they did not challenge the national boundaries at the landfill or the differentiated rights based on citizenship for a range of reasons. Virtually none of them had been political activists in Zimbabwe. As the majority intended to return home when the political and economic context changed, they did not see it as a permanent workplace. Instead, they viewed Marie Louise as a place to earn money in the meantime and did not want to jeopardise their access. One explained: ‘We do not have any say because we only came here as we are poor, we need to work. So, when you are in a person’s house you have to behave, because you came needing help.’

In addition, the 2008 attacks loomed large in their minds.

My study of everyday nationalism at one landfill provides a number of insights into how we understand articulations of nationalism and political economy, the economic and the political, and the social and the cultural. Reclaimers are often framed as the epitome of so-called human waste, assumed to be cast outside the economy and the polity, and as emblematic of the surplus populations that Chatterjee (2004) confines to political society. The reclaimers’ use of the court and creative reinterpretation and deployment of its ruling belies the distinction between civil and political society. In addition, my study revealed that reclaimers were deeply linked into global circuits of capital and that nationalism and claiming a place within the nation were central to their daily praxis. This challenges both Mbeki’s two economies
thesis (Mbeki 1998) – discussed in chapter 5 of this volume – and the assumption that ‘surplus populations’ are relegated to and governed within a distinct political society where the state makes economic interventions to counter the effects of primitive accumulation (Chatterjee 2004; Sanyal [2007] 2014).

Although Hart included xenophobia as a key component of re-nationalisation, she relied on secondary sources and did not interrogate whether what she was referring to was best understood as xenophobia. My analysis of the multiple determinations of what could easily be categorised as xenophobia reveals that the South African reclaimers’ actions were informed and shaped by how the global crisis refracted through pre-existing locally specific national identities, power relations and the institutions forged to enforce them. Rather than hatred towards cross-border reclaimers, the reclaimers’ actions were animated primarily by the daily praxis of nation building and the establishment of specific rights and powers within the nation at the dump that were deeply articulated with reclaimers’ material interests.

In keeping with other critiques of the de- and re-nationalisation framework that Hart herself has since moved away from, this analysis of everyday nationalism at the landfill demonstrates that the cluster of economic activities that Hart includes as part of de-nationalisation do not just call forth efforts to bind people to the nation. Instead, they are an integral part of forging the nation, as reclaimers worked to form the nation in particular ways as they laboured to shape the form of the global crisis and globalised economic processes at the landfill. In addition, the opening of the economy to global capital and the associated abandonment of the Freedom Charter’s commitments to nationalising the economy are key characteristics of the post-apartheid nation in and of themselves.

Just as Hart notes that invocation of the struggle for national liberation by the ANC is ‘not just a cynical manipulation from above’ (Hart 2007, 94), it is crucial to note that claiming a space within the nation is more than a tactic to make economic claims. This is because ‘wageless life’
(Denning 2010) is not just about economic marginalisation and poverty, but also entails political and social marginalisation. My research demonstrates that in addition to mobilising to improve their economic situation, reclaimers also mobilised to forge a sense of belonging in the economy, polity and society. Like all of us, reclaimers are complex, multifaceted human beings who seek belonging to and forge their identities within interconnected social, political, economic, cultural and environmental terrains. In different moments different terrains are more prominent, but they are never detached from the others.

Drawing on another key concept from Hart, in addition to looking at the articulation of race, class and gender (Hall 1980; Hart 2007), I argue that we need to interrogate the articulation of the social, political, cultural and economic aspects of our beings, and how as a sense of belonging in one sphere is strengthened or weakened this shapes our pursuit of belonging in the others. Locating this interrogation within an extroverted sense of place will also facilitate exploration of the fact that even as South African reclaimers can deploy their claim to a space within a nation to gain hegemony at the landfill, this does not erase the discrimination they face as people who work with waste in gaining recognition and acceptance as members of the polity at the scales of the city and the nation. Reclaimers must, therefore, continue to struggle at multiple scales and in multiple spheres, starting, perhaps, within the landfill to redress the power-laden social relations they forge between themselves that limit their ability to undertake united struggles at other scales.

**Conclusion**

In a sense, Hart and I focused on the political work of nationalism at opposite (but interconnected) ends of the political landscape. While Hart analysed the role of nationalism and different conceptions of the nation in hegemonic struggles by and within the ruling ANC Alliance, I interrogated their role in struggles over the production of value between
reclaimers at a landfill. The ‘concrete’ that Hart sought to understand led her to populism as a way to analyse how the Mbeki and Zuma factions sought to control and tap into popular nationalism, while my ethnographic fieldwork at the landfill led me to focus on how reclaimers’ everyday nationalism led them to forge the nation at the landfill in ways that were shaped but not determined by official nationalism.

Although Hart and I began our studies of nationalism at different scales and employed different methods, her interrogation of nationalism in contemporary South Africa, method of critical ethnography, focus on how power-laden social relations are produced and articulated, insistence on rising from the abstract to the concrete, and mentorship were crucial in enabling me to conduct my study and develop my analysis of everyday nationalism. Moreover, our work has been complementary, fleshing out different aspects of the complex whole.

In Hart’s more recent work, she is focusing more directly on developing an approach to conduct such holistic analysis. When she gave the prestigious 2018 Vega Lecture at the Swedish Academy of Sciences, she developed a powerful ‘three-level framework’ that ‘incorporates spatio-historical global conjunctures and praxis in the arenas of everyday life, with national level projects and processes of bourgeois hegemony mediating between global forces and everyday life’ (Hart 2018, 4; emphasis in original). She further refined her ‘global conjunctural’ approach in the revised version of the talk published in 2020 (Hart 2020) and is continuing to do so in a forthcoming book. At the current Covid-19 conjuncture, in which advanced capitalist countries’ responses to a global pandemic are characterised by vaccine nationalism, Hart’s nuanced approach to analysing nationalism is more crucial than ever.

NOTES

1 Hart also notes powerful critique from within the Alliance by Ruth First (Hart 2013b, 177–178).
2 See Edward Webster and Karin Pampallis (2017) for discussion of the range of left positions in South Africa on the national question.
At this point, Hart employed the concepts of de- and re-nationalisation as a way to understand how politics were playing out at a local level in both countries. However, by her 2018 Vega talk (Hart 2018), these twin concepts no longer formed part of her theoretical framework for the conjunctural comparative analysis of nationalisms.

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