the others write, and that most can grasp what the others say, suggests there is something about 'English' which is not identical with its concrete manifestations.

Furthermore, Owomoyela’s suggestion that “Africans who wish to create in words could cultivate the art of oral performance” perpetuates the myths that Africans lacked a written tradition and that all European societies were literate. To dismiss such a proposition one need only cite the fact that ancient Akan had its own script and English had no script of its own. It is easy to forget that once we were all among the illiterate, especially if we learned to read and write when very young. Most normal humans will, inevitably, speak unless quite extraordinary deprivations are imposed on them. But there is nothing inevitable about learning to read and write: either someone teaches us or we do not learn, and if there is nothing to teach, we cannot learn. Writing represents not only what has been spoken, but what has been experienced, imagined, or thought.

The preceding observations notwithstanding, what Owomoyela has been able to demonstrate in this book is what Native American scholar Paula Gunn Allen noted in 1992: “the position of power for a true Warrior is the Void. It is from the Void that all arises and into that Void that all returns.” Indeed, Owomoyela’s essays seem to have arisen out of the creative void in a multitude of African voices, a complex of modes, and he appears to be quite aware of his connection to Africa’s human wisdom. He allows us to confirm that neither “mainstream” nor “center” is where Westerners have claimed it to be. Subversion, dissidence, and acceptance of the self as marginal are processes that maim African philosophy and deflect us from our purpose. They are the means that support and maintain the West, feeding its hegemony with our energies, our attention, and our strength. Thus, the way for Africans to liberate themselves from oppression and injustice is to focus on their own interests, creativity, concerns, and community.

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Because 1912 saw the founding of the organization known today as the African National Congress (ANC), it is considered a watershed in the history of black nationalism in South Africa. The early 1950s, when the ANC first organized mass resistance, mark a similar defining point. By choosing 1912 and 1951 as the parameters for his study, this book might seem to be covering familiar territory. However, African nationalists are not the principal subject here. Instead, Paul Rich “brings the state back in” as an actor in history of black politics and gives it center stage. He shows how it developed into a body able to exclude the majority of citizens from full participation in society. South Africa is unique, he argues, because it accomplished this exclusion by modernizing a colonial structure, the apparatus for administering “natives.”
The segregationist state first roused black politicians with the Natives Land Act of 1913. Educated and land-owning blacks organized in response, but their willingness to entertain the idea of equitable territorial segregation weakened opposition to inequitable policies. Over the next few decades the ANC floundered while its leaders attempted to work within the evolving structures of segregation. In the early years, the liberal black elite retained patience with the state because of a discrepancy in segregationist policy: the color-blind and property-based franchise in the Cape Province. Perhaps this franchise was a mixed blessing. Preserving it became the preoccupation of the elite, and Rich argues the franchise functioned “as a break on the emergence of mass-based African nationalism” (p. 64).

This franchise never led the South African state toward engaging black elite voters in the political process. Rather, a segregationist bureaucracy emerged in the Native Affairs Department (NAD). Rich makes a strong contribution by showing how the NAD was motivated not just by segregationist ideology, but by the desire to entrench its own power, for it was competing with the Department of Justice for state authority vis-à-vis Africans. The Department of Justice promoted a system of direct rule through local magistrates, but the NAD gradually displaced it with South African versions of indirect rule. Indirect rule was consistent with increasing segregation, and the separate administration for blacks was intended “to contain the political pressure that were likely to result from... the implementation of territorial segregation” (p. 33). Yet instituting indirect rule became problematic. The most significant attempts were in Natal province but the Zulu paramountcy was in no condition to bear the responsibility.

Territorial and administrative segregationism triumphed with the passage of the 1936 Hertzog Bills. The legislation enlarged the NAD, mandated additional land purchases for Africans and abolished the non-racial Cape franchise. It diverted African political representation to an advisory body, the Natives Representative Council (NRC). Members of the black elite protested the loss of the franchise, but rather than organizing mass politics or boycotting the new system, they attempted, fruitlessly, to exert influence through the NRC. With this end of the relationship between black voters and a trustee government, the interactions between black activists and the state became more confrontational. Older members of the black elite were not immediately radicalized, but a new generation of politicians challenged the state. Social and economic changes during WWII, as well as the leadership of white communists, helped inspire action on pass laws and other labor and community issues. These activists had some success, in the Alexandra Bus Boycotts of 1943 and in organizing mine workers during WWII. Most significant were rural protesters who opposed the policy of “Betterment,” a coercive program of agricultural extension and conservation on African reserves. Given that Africans had so little land and that what they had was overused, Betterment was critical to the success of territorial segregation. The NAD moved cautiously on Betterment, for protest against it shook the compliant political system it was trying to create.

In this context, members of the NRC became bolder. Unfortunately their forum became less significant. The NAD was continuing its struggle for prominence in the South African state, and this agenda precluded incorporating, or even regularly consulting, Africans in decision making. In 1946 the NRC recognized that its efforts were futile, that it had, in the words of one member, been talking to the government on a “toy telephone.” In protest it suspended itself. The temporary suspension occurred during a strike of African mineworkers,