

Robert Ross, *Things Change: Black Material Culture and the Development of a Consumer Society in South Africa, 1800–2020*. Leiden: Brill (pb €55 – 978 90 04 54374 4). 2023, ix + 187 pp.

The anti-apartheid movement in South Africa has conventionally been portrayed as a struggle for political rights, yet, in his new book, African historian Robert Ross instead argues that anti-apartheid was also a struggle for consumption. The white minority regime, through a political-economic system elsewhere aptly described as ‘credit Apartheid’,<sup>1</sup> for decades denied South Africa’s vast Black population the consumption of modern consumer items, such as kitchen appliances, furniture and clothing. In the wake of broader global economic trends, modern consumption at the white end of the apartheid ethnic fissure thrived, however, fuelling consumption aspirations among the Black population. This brought about social tensions that culminated in armed resistance, and, eventually, in the demise of the apartheid system.

An important analytical question that Ross addresses is whether Black South Africans were merely mimicking white consumption styles and therefore developed a derivative consumer culture, or whether they developed something of their own. It is seductive to argue the former. After all, the white minority population fully controlled the national economy and thus the distribution of consumer items to the Black population. Also, Black South Africans during the apartheid decades, who often served in subservient roles such as cleaners, gardeners, guards and nannies, had access to white South African homes. On a regular basis, they witnessed with their own eyes the material evidence of modern consumer society, presenting an ironic case of ‘window shopping’.

Being a historian, Ross probes deeper into the country’s past and discovers something else. Already early into apartheid, Ross shows, marketing companies had discovered that the purchasing power of Black South Africans was steadily rising – though obviously not as quickly as that of whites, but certainly far above levels recorded elsewhere on the continent. Black people spent their wages on consumer items, rather than saving them. Initially, manufacturing companies, typically controlled by non-Black owners and therefore informed by racialized stereotypes and prejudices about Black consumption, began to produce special consumer products for the Black population. These were considered inferior to what was on offer for whites, however. Ross argues: ‘[I]t was not so much a desire to emulate Whites . . . but rather the fear that goods produced for the “Black” market would necessarily be of lower quality, so that it was a false economy to purchase them, rather than the top of the market objects which the Whites were seen as buying’ (p. 106).

The quest for modern consumer items among Black South Africans, especially those associated with status consumption, might have made visible economic differences lurking beneath the surface, as occurred elsewhere on the continent. Eventually this happened, Ross shows, but not during the apartheid decades. Under apartheid, there were few opportunities to signal social distinction through status consumption among Black South Africans as this was felt to be at odds with the need to display

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<sup>1</sup> D. James (2015) *Money from Nothing: indebtedness and aspiration in South Africa*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

communal solidarity, which was needed to make effective 'the struggle'. Social forces related to in-group socio-material differentiation found an expression after 1994, however, with dramatic consequences. South Africa today is fully in the grip of an inequality curse, with a new, socially upward, mobile middle class ostentatiously flaunting their material possessions in the face of a huge, rapidly impoverishing underclass, creating new social tensions in a country that struggles to reckon with a chequered past.

The pursuit of social distinction through prestige goods comes with yet another price. Chiming with Deborah James's important work,<sup>2</sup> Ross shows that private debt drives much of these new forms of consumption. The purchase of expensive prestige goods by aspiring middle classes has been fuelled by the abundant supply of personal credit coupled with limited financial regulation and few checks on private indebtedness. In a process of catching up, driven by a 'desire to impress, and to be considered much richer than one actually is' (p. 153), buying on credit has become commonplace. It is a sobering reality that South Africa now ranks among the most indebted nations in the world today, with little evidence that this might be changing in the near future.

As Ross writes in the acknowledgements section, this book has been long in the making (p. ix). I am happy to comment that waiting for it has been worthwhile. Ross should be especially complimented for transcending his own discipline of historiography with interesting and relevant excursions into the social sciences (he cites sources from anthropology, political science and sociology), and with the casual usage of descriptive statistics, making the book a truly interdisciplinary accomplishment. I therefore warmly recommend it to African studies scholars, but also to those more broadly interested in material culture.

Joost Beuving  
Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands  
Email: [joost.beuving@ru.nl](mailto:joost.beuving@ru.nl)  
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Noni Jabavu, *A Stranger at Home*, with an introduction by Makhosazana Xaba and Athambile Masola. Cape Town: Tafelberg (pb R370 – 978 0 624 08936 0). 2023, 228 pp.

The personal and professional endeavours of South African journalist and writer Noni Jabavu (full name Helen Nontando Jabavu, 1919–2008) intertwine in the columns that constitute *A Stranger at Home*, weaving together the story of her country of origin, South Africa, as well as her extensive travels and sojourns in many different countries. Jabavu grew up in South Africa but received her education in Britain, working later as a journalist and living for extended periods of time with her third husband in Uganda and Jamaica. Later, after divorce, she relocated to Kenya and Zimbabwe. She returned to South Africa right before the transition to democracy and spent her last years there. Jabavu, one of the first female memoirists in Africa, published two autobiographical

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*