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Rozena Maart in Conversation with Jane Anna Gordon

ROZENA MAART: Can you tell us a little about your schooling – both formative and later years – and what led to your interest in political theory and your book’s subject matter?

JANE ANNA GORDON: I will speak first to what was really formative and second to how I came to political theory because, in many ways, by entering into political theory as a field, happened much later. When I think about my own scholarship, it is apparent that there were three really formative dimensions. The first was my situation: my parents are both South African, and they were both only children. So, whenever the school year would end, we would travel to South Africa to spend time with and later care for their elderly parents. I regularly travelled as a small child between Chicago, in the United States and Cape Town, South Africa, with some time spent in Kommetjie (a small town along the west coast of the Cape Peninsula). This was in the 1970s and 1980s. (I was born in 1976.)

ROZENA MAART: Wow . . . I just got goosebumps, not in terms of your age but the year you were born and what the year 1976 means to me.

JANE ANNA GORDON: Yes! The hegemonic way of talking about the United States was that we, as a country in the 1980s and 1990s, were ‘beyond South Africa’, that apartheid was part of the United States’ past. But Chicago at the time was – and it still is – the most segregated city in the United States, including cities in the U.S. South. And so, I was always much more struck by the radical similarities of these places that were supposed to be so different. But as I was a child, these were mainly formative impressions of the effort to create an anti-Black world and a radically segregated society, how that looked and felt, and then all of how it was resisted.

The second formative experience took place at the school I attended before university, the Lab School, which began as an experimental project of U.S. pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. It moved away from those origins in all kind of ways, but it remained based in Hyde Park, a stone's throw away from the University of Chicago. Most of the students who attended the school were faculty kids, and so they were very international and academically 'tuned-in'. It was also a place where some Black middle-class members and Black upper-middle class of south Chicago sent their kids. Even while the school moved quite far away from many of John Dewey's principles, it remained a place where what we were taught remained a focus of conversation and deliberation. When we were in high school, there was only one Advanced Placement class or class that was considered college-level. It was a class in United States history, and it was taught by the only teacher who was an avowed political conservative. He taught a class that reflected his commitments and priorities: he thought the 1960s marked the decline of the U.S. nation. In response, a group of Black parents of Black students at the school organised and demanded that the school institute an African American history course that students could take to fulfil the national U.S. history requirement. They fought for it, and they won. What was striking about this was,

- (a) that the parents had fought;
- (b) that they had won; and
- (c) what transpired afterwards.

I don't know if she spoke for others when she did so, but one of the history department teachers actively discouraged non-Black students from taking the course. So, for instance, I was told, 'you're a strong student; don't take that class'. This was even though it was clearly a superior course to the generic, basically White-U.S. history course. And so many of us ignored the counsel and took the class anyway. Many teachers at the school had some relationship with the University, and so, within our History department, several teachers had done advanced research in History. But none of them either felt or was deemed equipped to teach the new course. They hired a University of Chicago PhD who had been teaching at Malcolm X College. And at Lab, he taught us the course that he taught at Malcolm X College. This meant we had a university-level African American history course taught to us in high school. It became foundational for everything I have done since. I still have my books

from the course. I still have my notes. In terms of thinking about my own pursuit of an education, that experience was formative: the sense that you don't just accept curricula; you ask questions about the limitations and then try to do something about them; that doing so may require a fight and that a lot is revealed in the fight about what people ultimately value.

The third, formative experience was being the daughter of Jewish South Africans. This oriented how I think. I am not an expert on South Africa in a scholarly sense and do not know the country as a local or as an insider. Still, when I think about who was prized by my parents, they were usually heroes of the larger anti-apartheid struggle. I had heard the name Steve Biko before I really knew who he was and I heard of Chris Hani but my dad, especially, really stressed the role of Jews who had been involved in the anti-apartheid struggle. It was in response to this that my daughter, Sula's middle name is Ruth. It is for Ruth First and Ruth Gottschalk. I grew up idolising journalists and intellectuals and lawyers who had committed to fighting apartheid their primary ones and who saw doing that as an expression of being Jewish.

When I went to university, I didn't study political theory in a formal sense at all. I took courses in history and education and Jewish Studies and Religious Studies. I very deliberately avoided Political Science and Philosophy. I had heard from my folks – and they were right – that Political Science was a profoundly conservative field; historically, it had much more to do with the U.S. State Department than with anything liberatory. And with Philosophy, I expected that through it I would only encounter white men's work and that their ideas would be radically decontextualised or very abstract in the wrong sense, not in illuminating ways.

When my husband, Lewis Gordon, read through my work and pointed out themes that ran through it, I realised later that I actually had studied political theory, just through a different lens and of a different kind. I had studied the political theory of people focused primarily on historical and educational questions. I came to political theory in a round-about way in the sense that I didn't know that it was what I was looking for and what I had been trying to understand.

After I graduated, when I was working at the university, I took a political theory course. At Lewis's urging, I took a particular class in political theory to see if it was something I liked. Before it, the scholars I'd read were Frantz Fanon and Karl Marx. I had never read Plato or Aristotle or Machiavelli

or Rousseau or any of those other folks. I loved it and I realised it offered a vocabulary for addressing the kinds of questions I had been asking all along.

ROZENA MAART: So much comes to mind here. Something that really annoys me about the District Six Museum is that it is completely inaccurate in its portrayal of who lived in District Six. Xhosa people were living in District Six; there were also Jewish people living in it. One reason for that is because Jewish people couldn't own property in the CBD (the Central Business District) of Cape Town. One part of District Six, a whole block that ran from Hanover Street almost into the CBD, was mainly Jewish. These were families involved in the printing profession. I mention one person, Mister K, in my 'No Rosa, No District Six' short story, in the collection *Rosa's District Six*. This was a man who called himself Mr K because his name was Mr Kahanovitz. I take people to the District Six Museum and let them experience the space that has been curated for visitors and tourists, but in my opinion, they have created a grossly inaccurate image. My grandfather was Xhosa, and he lived there; there were lots of Xhosa-speaking people who lived there, and there was an area where Jewish people lived. It appears, from listening to what guides tell visitors and by the display of photos to depict what life was in District Six, Xhosa residents and Jewish residents were written out of the narrative.

Moving on to the next question, what was the impetus behind writing this book? Did you have an 'ah-ha' moment when you knew that you needed to write a book that brought statelessness and contemporary enslavement together?

JANE ANNA GORDON: I wish I could say that there was one clear 'ah-ha' moment. There were lots of little ones. And then one bigger one toward the end. When I began doing this project, I thought it would be a book on contemporary enslavement. I hadn't planned to conjoin that with what became the statelessness portion of the text. I came into the discussion of statelessness by invitation. Ramón Grosfoguel, Eric Mielants, and Lewis Gordon organised three conferences in Paris for over three years. One focused on global anti-Semitism, one was on statelessness, and one on global anti-Blackness. For the statelessness one, Ramón contacted me. I had just finished my PhD; I was a newly minted PhD in political science and political theory. Ramón asked if I could attend the meeting and offer a theoretical overview of the issue of statelessness. Everybody else who was coming, in a way that is much more

characteristic of the study of statelessness, was focused on a particular instance of it rather than on an overarching framework that brought each of the instances together. I thought this was daunting but also important. Through my political theory coursework, I knew about Hannah Arendt's classic discussion and the international law that emerged from World War II. These were useful to an extent, but they didn't say much or anything directly to all of the other instances of people who had been made stateless in their own homes; people who had been made stateless through processes of colonisation. And so, I began to try to figure out how to put Arendt and the international law discussions into conversation with these other instances which were far more global in their reach; far more numerically relevant than the case of European Jews in World War II. I stumbled upon a book which helped. It was James B. Minahan's *The Encyclopedia of Stateless Nations*. In encyclopedia form, it was a thick book that listed nations of people who considered themselves to be stateless. Everywhere in the world was represented. I thought this was what I needed to begin to reconcile an account of statelessness that treats it as an exceptional failure with another for which statelessness maps the Euro-modern world's creation. A formulation that really helped was in Vine Deloria Jr.'s *Custer Died for Your Sins*, where he argues that what Europeans did in the Americas began internal to Europe itself. He reminded readers that European nation-states' formation also rendered all kinds of nations of semi-sovereign people stateless through forcible incorporation. Soon after, I began to think about how statelessness as a mode has many different faces. One is the familiar one of pushing people out. Still, another is by forcing people to be inside, on terms instead of their own, which sever alternative forms of relationship between territory and belonging. That was how I entered into the issue of statelessness and how I began to understand it as a necessary lens for thinking about how political institutions had radically failed to but could connect land to political belonging.

I had been thinking about slavery in very different terms. When I first learned that there was contemporary slavery, I was surprised. I was then embarrassed that I had been surprised because it should have been clear to me that there was such a thing. In response, I had assumed that what I was going to do was a very straightforward text about contemporary slavery and how it was built out of the grammar and the continued legacies of racialised slavery rather than being, as some seemed to suggest post-racial. What surprised me was that the people I have always considered my primary intellectual and political allies – and who still are – *hated* the designation 'contemporary

slavery'. Many rejected it out of hand; others insisted it was a misnomer and a really politically dangerous one. So rather than studying contemporary slavery, tracing its connection to older forms and seeing what was new and different, I found myself wrangling with these objections. I thought they were really important, but also wrong. I began to think about how an institution will be similar and different depending on its circumstances. Of course, enslavement will look different in the twenty-first century's political-economic conditions than it did in those of the sixteenth or seventeenth or eighteenth. Many objections to studies of contemporary slavery were really objections to how White activists, primarily in England and Western Europe, had mobilised discussions of it. In many of those discussions, they seemed to turn political attention away from the ongoing legacies of racialised enslavement rather than pointing out that this newer form was a continuation of them. As I worked through those debates, I realised that if statelessness was about the failures to connect land and political membership, discussions of slavery are clearly about failures to connect labour to political membership. As such, I realised that these were two related faces of the same coin.

But the big 'ah-ha' moment for me, which I hadn't realised at the start, was that the two phenomena are fundamentally tied. These are not just two faces of Euro-modern failures, which was the premise with which I began. If you are a stateless person, you are vulnerable to all kinds of exploitation and unfreedom, including enslavement. And then, on the other side, if you've been an object of racialised enslavement, it is highly likely that even once formal, *de jure* abolition has been achieved, that you actually live in a continued condition of *de facto* statelessness. So, for instance, I think many of the conditions facing Black people in the Americas really are ones of statelessness. That was a framework of understanding that I hadn't grasped before putting the two pieces of phenomena together.

Lastly, the political theoretical questions that exploration of both statelessness and contemporary enslavement really raised were about consent and viable political institutions. If you put these questions, which face the vast majority of humankind, front and centre, what are our political obligations? What is it that institutions can do to foster connections that have been severed? What does meaningful consent look like?

ROZENA MAART: In trying to find books with a similar title, I found very few that engaged with statelessness and enslavement in the same text. Can you

talk a little about whether this was an impediment you faced during your research, and/or whether this impacted your ability to obtain a publisher for which your title may have posed a problem in the sense that they had very little to market it against?

JANE ANNA GORDON You are not wrong at all. I try really hard to be as exhaustive as I can be in research fields. I am trying to gain entrance to, and I couldn't find anything that explicitly puts statelessness and contemporary enslavement together. The closest thing that I know of is the *Statelessness and Citizenship Review*, an online journal published in England. They have a symposium in their most recent issue on the theme of statelessness and slavery. They saw the symposium as a call to think about these two issues together. I was invited to write for it because I was the one person who had done that at that point. I think the reason for the absence has everything to do with some of your initial questions, which is that many of the people who do work on either statelessness or contemporary enslavement are advocates and practitioners. In many cases, the best way to be effective is to arm oneself with the most comprehensive knowledge of a particular case. A lot of the people doing the best work on these themes are looking at individual instances. As a result, when I would say to someone that I was working on statelessness, they would ask, 'in which country or region?' That tends to be how the scholarship is undertaken. The same tends to be true with enslavement. Many people focus on very particular, historical instances: the trans-Atlantic in this period or Indian slavery in that period. There is much less work than links, and there is a lot of fear that when you do the linking, you will be very superficial about the specific cases. With contemporary enslavement, many scholars focus on a particular form of enslaved labour or a particular place where people are enslaved. People have a view of the larger whole, but there are such urgent matters that many are really focused on the legal interstices that they have to negotiate to empower people. It follows from their commitments that they have to be highly specialised. But in many ways, I see the work of political theory as thinking these things together in ways that I hope can enrich our practice on the ground. I was very appreciative when *Statelessness and Citizenship Review* approached me because it suggested that making some of these linkages might be useful to practitioners.

I would add that what I am trying to do is very informed by a move in contemporary U.S. Indigenous scholarship which is to put it and Africana

Studies into a greater and deeper discussion and to say that the distinction between land dispossession and labour dispossession has been rendered too neatly; that they have always been intermingled and much more complexly implicated with one another. I see myself as trying to mirror that move within these other literatures connected but also discrete.

In terms of publishing, I was incredibly fortunate. I had an editor who had an ‘ah-ha’ moment and thought that of course, these themes should be in conversation within a single text. I was very fortunate because he is a very unconventional editor who has always been rooted in the social sciences and open to philosophy and theory and intellectual history. A lot of what he sees himself as doing is creating new grounds for different kinds of questions. For him, the absence of a competing book is not a liability so long as the proposed book can make clear that it is offering something new. Therefore, this made a compelling case for the book’s value rather than on showing where it belonged in an existing terrain. The push for me was to make the text very readable to many people because there wasn’t already a constituted audience for it.

ROZENA MAART: The absence of published books and articles exploring these themes together says something about what we are not doing. Hopefully people will take it up. On page 5 of your text, you note: ‘As with statelessness, enslavement, historically and in the present, is not a radical exception. Indeed, enslavement is such a constant feature of human history – one that implicated so much of our species – that it is its eradication or relative transformation that requires explanation’. Can you talk a little more about this?

JANE ANNA GORDON: Sure. The best way to answer this, is perhaps: I teach an undergraduate course at the University of Connecticut called ‘Black Political Thought’. It’s a course that aims to be global in the sense that we end with Steve Biko and Amílcar Cabral and Aimé Césaire and Fanon and Es’kia Mphahlele. Still, we really begin in the seventeenth-century Americas with narratives written by enslaved men and women. The second generation that we explore is immediately following formal abolition, when you have a range of Black American thinkers essentially asking ‘why us? Why was it our community, by which they mean diasporic Africans, who were enslaved for four centuries in the Americas? Why wasn’t it somebody else?’ The question is often coming from a sense of shame and self-blame. ‘What is that we did that made it we and not any other community?’

In that period, there were two primary answers. The first was: ‘we’re not alone. We’re not unique. If you look at the world’s history, it is amazing the range of people who have been enslaved. And it is amazing how similar their circumstances were to ours’. And so, you’ll see texts that list Hebrew Israelites, that list Slavs, you name it. The point was to say: ‘we’re a lot like all of these other groups who faced this condition. We were not exceptional in our weakness. Their enslavement was achieved through similar tactics; they resisted it in similar ways; they faced similar forms of discrimination’. The point is to make the condition faced by some Africans like that of many other groups and point out that it’s not radically unique.

The second answer is to note: ‘We are unique, but not in the sense suggested by the question’. This answer says that Europeans travelled to Africa long before they began enslaving Africans. When they travelled to Africa, what impressed them was how developed Africa was – the robustness of the continent’s many civilisations, the scale of and innovation of their infrastructure – what they actually experienced was *envy*. Therefore, the argument goes: ‘we were selected for enslavement because they wanted these things, our things, and they wanted to call them their own. They wanted our labour, our resources, our ideas, but to call them European and to accrue all of the benefits’.

ROZENA MAART: It’s some of what I say to students: you don’t colonise people because they are poor; you colonise them because they are rich!

JANE ANNA GORDON: What I always say to my students is that I think both are true. On the one hand, the vast majority of human beings living today have ancestors who were literally enslaved or in some kind of forced or fundamentally unfree labour position. And a lot of the techniques of exploitation used across circumstances were indeed similar. At the same time, there was something radically unique about Africans’ experience through racialised enslavement. I end up lingering with exploring these answers because of the way they register with non-Black students. Many non-Black students come to the classroom, thinking that slavery is a Black issue. Black people alone had to deal with it and who still deal with its psychological, economic, and political consequences. Part of what I am doing is to say ‘no, your people did also face this, if in a different way’. I know some people use this move conservatively, to say ‘others faced these conditions and now they are thriving, what’s wrong with you all? Why can’t you shake off the effects as they did?’ That’s not what

I am doing. What I am saying is that the turn to Africa was historically contingent. And it did have to do with the fact that Africans offered the world a fortune. But it is partly to de-individualise the sense of self-blame for what it is that transpired. It is also to say that the scope of slavery is massive; it is not a side issue that only Black people need to think about; it is at the core of human history informing how we think of freedom and indebtedness and collective thriving. When thinking about what political institutions need to do, historical and ongoing enslavement should be the focus. It should be the focus because slavery aims to create the exact opposite of political relations. As such, it crystallises what we should be trying to achieve.

ROZENA MAART: Usurpation, invasion, occupation, enslavement, forced labour, and settler colonialism offer an account of the early stages of colonisation in South Africa, later to be followed by massacres, extermination, forced removal and displacement of various communities. I found your book insightful on so many levels. I wanted to ask you if you could reflect on aspects of your research that speak to the South African condition, and the place where we are currently, that is, a place of continued decolonisation? With some of the scholars from the United States who come into South Africa, they want to go to key places in a similar way that they want to go to Gorée Island when people go to Senegal. I wanted to organise a walking symposium to take a group of national and international scholars to the District Six spots, like where Jewish people lived in District Six and to understand what it means within the many layers of histories; to take people to Cape Point, but also to take people to different parts of the country where there has been displacement. People understand enslavement and see it as something that happened at the Cape, but they don't know, for example, that various communities were just wiped out or that they were completely displaced. And so, you have some of the questions and arguments, 'Why are the people from the Eastern Cape in the Western Cape?' Well, why do you think? There are many histories of displacement that were never covered adequately in our history books or through the news. It's like talking to students about the Namibian Holocaust or genocide (depending on the account of the historian that offers the most fitting description of the atrocity) between 1904 and 1907; about how many Nama and Herero people were massacred, starved, put in concentration camps and exterminated. This was done in the name German colonialism and German imperialism. This was of course the work of the Second Reich and used Africans is their testing

ground for the Holocaust they later perpetrated in Europe against mainly Jewish people. For all of those reasons, I thought what your book does is open up ways for me to rethink the South African situation, especially with the Cape, and think about those kinds of interconnections. What we have in South Africa are provinces. In the United States, you have states, like the state of Arizona or the state of New York. I wanted to make sure connections are being drawn or people can draw connections to South Africa because we have provinces. When you talk about statelessness, you don't necessarily mean a country, like a particular geographical country. As such, I wanted to think about how people could think about that in the South African context. As you've said, you're not a South African historian, but I think we need to have more history of the country's colonisation. I think there isn't enough. It's only been twenty-six years after 1994, and we haven't done as much as we need to. People are finding new things.

Until recently, I had only gone to UCT [the University of Cape Town] once in my life in 1980 when I interviewed for a place in the drama school. I wanted to do drama. I knew that it was contentious. I knew it was going to be difficult. There was part of me that wanted to see – *would I get in?* This was simply based on what I believed were my skills not about race or wanting to study with White students. It was also part of a fight that teenaged girls have with their mothers. There wasn't drama in any of the Black and Coloured universities. But of course, as soon as I did it, I withdrew my application. My mother was hysterical. She said I'd play a maid for the rest of my life and would bring shame on my family. Why would I want to do that, I thought? I was there once in the late 1980s and again in 1988 when I went with a friend's partner to look for particular documents and even then it felt surreal. Recently when I went to UCT, it gave me goosebumps. I felt awkward. It was built in the middle of the 1800s when slavery had just been abolished, officially. The colonials used slave labour to build it – people from District Six, and the surrounding Cape. I said this in my opening talk. Two months passed and somebody called me, asking, 'Rozena, are you psychic?' They had just found skeletons at UCT. For two years they had a whole group of archaeologists and historians that made a direct link showing that the skeletons of workers were of people from the enslaved communities in District Six. And I said, 'no, no, it's not because I'm psychic. It's just a logical thing. You're building something in the late 1820s within 2 kilometres of the slave quarter, where I lived and grew up in the 1960s and early 1970s, and you don't think the labour

will come from there? Men from the old slave quarter built your university?’ So, coming back to your book: some of what I read in your book made me think about what had happened in South Africa. I am new to KZN [KwaZulu Natal]. I used to visit Durban as a child. My grandmother had various distant relatives who we visited here when I was a young child. My grandfather had various relatives – cousins of ... ‘this one and that one’, as you say when you’re a kid – that I visited as a child in Mossel Bay and further east, what is now the Eastern Cape; that is where I thought I could live if I did not live in Cape Town. Still, when I meet students here who talk about coming from communities where they had been displaced and dispossessed, I never learned that at school or elsewhere. Well, I don’t know if this is a question for you or something I can speak to. I asked if you could reflect on how your work speaks to the South African condition, especially where we are currently.

JANE ANNA GORDON: I think you’ve offered a fantastic answer. I would only add a couple of things. The first is that if I’ve written the book and it should be useful to specific contexts, especially those like South Africa. When you were speaking, I was thinking about Tshepo Madlingozi’s dissertation (that I hope will soon appear as a book) and his point that, in many ways, in the South African context, what in the U.S. context is separated as issues of land dispossession, on the one hand and labour dispossession, on the other, merge. If you are looking to the United States for resources – only one of many other sites with resources – you need to read both explicitly Black texts and Indigenous texts because each addresses phenomenon that converge in South Africa.

At the same time, much of the new work in Indigenous Studies in the U.S. is arguing that these forms of dispossession merge there as well. Indigenous nations in the U.S. are multiply displaced; they are displaced over and over again. And each time they are displaced, they are rendered incredibly vulnerable to enslavement and situations like it. For instance, there is an amazing scholar by the name of Sarah Deer, who wrote a book called *The Beginning and End of Rape*. The book includes a chapter on trafficking where she discusses the overrepresentation of Native American girls and women in contemporary trafficking but she also asks, ‘how on Earth could you displace and disempower people the way the U.S. has with Indigenous nations and not also be engaged in trafficking them?’ She points out that of course many women were historically trafficked, and children forcibly sent to boarding

schools were vulnerable to all forms of abuse, including forced labour. Therefore, the idea that land dispossession was radically separate from labour dispossession is a myth and a really misleading one that doesn't equip us well to understand our own past. But the same was true for enslaved Africans. All enslavement also involves forced movement. It doesn't have to be across national borders, though it usually is. It can be internal to a region or internal to a nation, but in almost every instance the enslaved are literally uprooted and uprooted psychically. The whole point about an enslaved person is that their claim to their own genealogical kin and these ties having independent meaning and salience is discredited. In other words, in each instance, you see both phenomena, even if in varying degrees. The book aims to offer lenses and concepts and frames that can help to unearth these histories more richly. Many distinctions we've been working with obscure more than they reveal.

ROZENA MAART: I find your work on Rousseau fascinating in both *Creolizing Rousseau* and *Statelessness and Contemporary Enslavement*. Rousseau is very present in your new book, especially in the chapter on consent. I tend to read the contents page, introduction, references and bibliography at the start of my reading of a book to get a general sense of the book before I delve into it. On page 91, you note: 'The project of making people literally into slaves – whether or not it is ever completely achieved – involves taking someone who has consciousness, and will, that could otherwise give or withhold consent and making it immaterial. To enslave is to take a creature capable of freedom and put these enabling qualities entirely in the service of another so that the slave is literally a tool or arm of another's purpose. In these cases, to resist the obliteration of one's independent, evaluative point of view is met with violence'. Slavery in South Africa took place over three centuries – from the middle of the 1600s at the Cape, right into the 1800s and early 1900s in Natal. This was several decades after the British officially abolished slavery. Many scholars argue that the indentured labour of Indians in Natal was not slavery. Hugh Tinker, in his book, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830 -1920*, argues that it is, and it rests on what we consider our definition of slavery. Can you talk a little about definitions of slavery and enslavement and how misleading they can be, especially in our current era in South Africa where young scholars are trying to decolonise the older, European-based, curriculum and develop ones that address the neglected and hidden aspects of South African history?

JANE ANNA GORDON: One of the big debates in slavery studies is whether you can define slavery that crosses time and context; whether there can be a transhistorical definition of enslavement. Many historians say ‘no’; if you group everything under that term, you are creating things that aren’t alike as if they are substantively similar in ways that create problems. When they stress this point, they’ll often talk about mistranslation or terms in Indigenous or vernacular languages that are translated as ‘slave’, but ‘slave’ is not really the equivalent. Many also emphasise that the role of the slave really did vary across societies. In some cases, you might enslave someone so that they could serve in the role of kin rather than primarily as a unit of labour. As such, many people talk seriously and very usefully about why we shouldn’t seek out or use transhistorical definitions of slavery. I am on the other side of that debate. We do need to proceed carefully, but you really can. One of the reasons is expressed well in an observation made by Joel Quirk: it may be true that there were important differences among slave systems, but members of each were perfectly good at exchanging slaves. The purchasers may have been using enslaved people for different purposes, but they had no problem treating slaves with different origins as equivalents. I think that is basically right. We shouldn’t flatten the differences, but there is enough substantive likeness that, with care, you can talk about slavery across time.

There is a huge difference between whether people are enslaved in imperial or non-imperial societies. One of the crucial differences is that in non-imperial situations of enslavement, there is often a much greater sense of contingency around who becomes an enslaved person. For example, if enslaved people are prisoners of war, there remained a palpable sense that, if the war had gone the other way, who were enslaved and who were enslavers could have been reversed. The greater sense of fluidity in who could become an enslaved person mattered hugely for the situation of the slave and whether they could expect an actual post-slave situation.

Another key distinction is between what I would call ‘colour-seeing enslavement’ and racialised enslavement. For instance, enslavement in the Arab world was colour-seeing: this was a huge and internally diverse domain. Many distinctions were made about what Nubian women should do or the purposes best suited to Mediterranean men. Colour and nation, always gendered, were understood to correspond with particular abilities and forms of value. So, these systems were definitely colour-seeing or colour-aware, but

they were not racialised as the trans-Atlantic slave trade would be. So, distinctions of those kinds are useful, but I think they still function coherently under the umbrella of enslavement.

What I would then say in terms of indentured labour specifically is many of the people, like Kevin Bales, who were first trying to put the issue of contemporary enslavement on the global table, did it by radically distinguishing it; by insisting on how slavery was distinct from exploited labour and different from wage slavery. Slavery was not just about exploited labour in the extreme. For the sake of making contemporary slavery appear, Bales really emphasised how enslavement was unique. That was a necessary move in the 1990s. In our moment, there are aspects of that point that remain true, but the resulting insights are only useful if we put them back in connection with other forms of exploited labour. If there is something unique about slavery, it has to illuminate those other related forms with which it shares much in common.

In the book I compare literal enslavement with wage slavery and, more relevant to your question, with the situation of guest workers. In many ways, the guest worker's situation is almost identical to the situation of the enslaved person but for the fact that guest worker programmes, at least in the U.S., hire people who volunteer to enrol in them knowing full well the exploitation that will follow. The initial point of entry is not one of kidnapping or fundamental deceit or brutal force. Likening the two is to acknowledge a basic, historical point, which was that with legal abolition in the British colonies and the U.S., everyone who had been benefitting from enslavement saw guest worker and indentured labour programmes as the next best option and often called them 'barely masked slavery'. So as far as they were concerned, what they were getting from these programs was roughly equivalent.

The point of exploring what is specific to slavery is to point out, in these other forms, what they do and don't share. Enslavement crystallises what's going on in a whole variety of other forms that are linked and related. With guest workers specifically, when I say they are so much like slaves, what I mean is that in their status in the United States, they are literally attached to their employer. They have no independent political or legal standing in relationship to the state. Their employer determines whether or not they can stay in the receiving country and on what terms. Their employer is the only voice that describes the behaviour of the person who is the guest worker. The relation is entirely unilateral, and the whole point is to secure labour for a society that doesn't have to recognise the guest worker's labour as a

contribution made *by them*. They can labour and labour and labour and feed a nation, which has no consequence for their voice, standing, or presence in the receiving nation. The programme policies require that the guest worker come into the receiving nation unattached, without kin, and spend the most vital years of their adulthood labouring. If they develop any health problems that would appear as liabilities, they are shipped home. In every political sense, the guest worker has no pathway to citizenship. In political terms, they have almost everything in common with an enslaved person. Still, for the fact that they sign a paper requesting entry and when they are deported (often for engaging in acts of protest and dissent), they often sign back up to return as opposed to being kidnapped and put in the vessel of a ship.

In many ways, I think the work of Hugh Tinker is on the money in the sense of saying: you think that trans-Atlantic slavery is distinct because it was, but we empower ourselves if we see what in it continues and how it is remade and if we use the linkages as bases for crafting new forms of solidarity.

ROZENA MAART: That is a wonderfully detailed reply. Let me turn to page 126 of your text. Here you note: ‘While being stateless and being enslaved are extreme situations, neither predicament is radically exceptional. As Hannah Arendt warned in the aftermath of World War II and Ayten Gündoğdu observed more recently, exceptionalising the condition of statelessness made the nation-state then and makes the human rights framework now appear more viable than they actually are’. Can you talk about this a little more? I am also trying to think through the decolonisation projects of various communities in South Africa, as well as the most recent mass protest in the United States starting with the death of George Floyd, which spread across the globe, and where for example in the UK and Holland, protesters focused on removing statues in the likeness of those slave traders that they felt had inflicted all forms of injustices against them and the people whose lives they ruined. Can you talk about the implications of consent on the current forms of enslavement and how we move the decolonial agenda forward?

In the UK, in many cities along the two coasts, like Liverpool, the focus for the protesting youth was to throw statues in rivers. For me, it was fascinating to see #BlackLivesMatter world-wide and current antiracism actions turn their attention to the histories of enslavement. They were not beating anyone up; they were not ‘fighting’ with anybody, as protestors are often portrayed. They were on a protest march, and when they encountered a

statue of somebody who was involved in the slave trade, they determined, ‘let’s get rid of it’. In South Africa, with #KingGeorgeMustFall, at UKZN, #RhodesMustFall, which started at UCT, the students at the time felt, ‘how can we be in a space and be reminded of all the things King George V had done and Cecil John Rhodes had done?’ I remember chatting to some of our students, Ayanda, Phezu, Nkosinathi, and a few students from that group. King George V was the last emperor of India, and Natal (the name of this province during apartheid) was the last pillar of the British Empire. So yes, students had every reason to want to remove these statues from spaces of learning and spaces that reeked of reminders of their brutal colonisation.

I am thinking of your book concerning various decolonial projects here in South Africa, whether they are the families of the Marikana massacre (communities at Lonmin’s Marikana platinum mine), or people who live in different parts of the country that have gone through different forms of dispossession. There was a march recently that was called from Johannesburg to Stellenbosch. About twenty activists hitchhiked and walked for about three weeks to this one area where there’s been a new settlement that’s been in the news. There’s been a big movement to take back the land of people living in shantytowns and it’s mainly in big cities around Johannesburg and Cape Town. So, my question was really about thinking through the George Floyd protests that spread worldwide and how young people especially sought to remove these that were a reminder of slavery.

JANE ANNA GORDON: As you spoke, I was thinking of the students in the reading group you mentioned and how you said they were very focused on land questions while your generation and mine focused much more on the mind. Statue-toppling, I think, for many people, merges the two. The footage with the toppling of many of those statues shows that the people doing the toppling of statues are mainly the younger generation. They are teenagers and young adults; people who are coming of age or into adulthood. What they’re toppling is an ideal that they were to try to be and to prize. These are also physical markers in the public spaces that they occupy most. So, the statues are a conception of an authoritative, idealised self that functions in an omnipresent and ubiquitous way. It’s *that* that they are toppling. In many ways, they are saying: ‘As we come of age, we are going to have different models and ideals of who we are to be’. The way it connects really explicitly to enslavement and colonisation is that there is a tendency to say that both phenomena were

necessary evils. Many people say, ‘look at what came of them! Look at the wealth, the civilisation. Although you can sit in criticism, you might choose them again if the alternative meant not having these things’. They are saying, ‘yes, we can prize this person because the horrors that they oversaw were a necessary evil that produced the bounty of this place’.

Many of the folks who are doing the toppling are absolutely rejecting that account. This is particularly powerful because many of them are people who are never allowed to slip up at all. There is no room for even the most remote slip-up – being late or not having the money for x, y, z, or misreading a gesture. There is no room to prize one thing and erase the horrific another side, which is always done with prized colonising and Euro-modern White figures. They are always allowed the way out; to only be seen for what is seen as the good they’ve done. And for everything else to be seen as a necessary evil.

In many ways, what many young people are saying is that you can’t build a future without some mistakes and some lamentable things. But recognising this doesn’t excuse it. It does mean that what is called necessary evils should, unlike colonisation and enslavement, actually be *necessary evils*. Neither of those was necessary at all. We could have had a completely different past, present, and future. But when monuments to those figures, in their likeness, tower over us, they are the point of view, the authoritative point of view, that marks and organises the terrain. There is something about their toppling which is an effort to clear the ground to claim responsibility for a different model of what should be prized and how it is that land and mind can meet.

ROZENA MAART: That’s an interesting response. I have an aversion to statues as I find reminders of colonialism more necessary for the colonial than for the colonised. The coloniser needs the statue to mark a victory for itself and for the colonial who stays. The coloniser wants to see, with narcissistic glee, the reflection of the coloniser in the eyes of the colonised who are forced to look, to gaze, to practice the memory of defeat each time they walk by and gaze up at a statue. Statues speak to the engravement of acts of cruelty into stone with the head of the victor as the main emblem of pride for the coloniser, much like the need to have their egotistical heads placed on money. This preoccupation with statues made of stone is very much an act which not only seeks to memorialise colonisation but one that seeks affinity to a religious act such as Moses receiving the commandments, carved in stone, therefore making the statue as though an act of divinity compelled by God. To me statues of the

heads of colonisers always read as a decapitation – and act which removes the head from the body, for the head is the seat of the consciousness, of the mind, that was willful and through a process of conquest, and for which the person is memorialised, put on display, so that the colonised are reminded, daily, of our defeat. It's also a reminder of the 'the head of state' or 'the head of the table', which is mostly the father or dominant man figure in the home.

Historically, in South Africa, there are three or four layers of disciplines or areas of work that people gravitate toward in terms of the contemporary analysis with which activism is marked. For my generation, medical doctors like Fanon, Ché Guevara, Steve Biko, and the very particular readings that influenced them influenced us. They were very instrumental in forging an understanding of the material conditions under which the oppressed lived. There is also the relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre which runs through Fanon and Biko, and with Ché Guevara there is also the Belgian Congo. This is an aside, but did you know that Patrice Lumumba was a *huge fan* of Rousseau?

JANE ANNA GORDON: I didn't know that. I wish I had!

ROZENA MAART: Lumumba was a huge fan of Rousseau. So was my father! Then there are the agronomists, like Amílcar Cabral. There is a whole generation of thinkers on the African continent who did agriculture and economics. And then the lawyers, of course, Anton Lembede, Mandela, Tambo. The literature people, Soyinka, Ngũgĩ, almost emerge at the same time as the medical doctors. That's what gave rise to the anti-colonial critiques. For the literature folks, it was about language . . . the coercion of the coloniser and the methods used, laws, legislation, etcetera whereby we were forced to speak, write and think in the language of the coloniser. . . it was about writing, it was about the imagination, it was about speech. I think it's a cycle and we have come back to the place where our students are now, more than ever, interested in Cabral, in his critique of the land. Maybe the next generation will move back to the lawyers again. But there are people like Tshepo Madlingozi, Joel Modiri, Christopher Gevers, and their peers who are doing phenomenal work in legal theory. They are also legal scholars who do critical race theory, and they come from that tradition.

Thank you, Jane – for a thought-provoking interview.

JANE ANNA GORDON: Thank you, Rozena!