

*Journal of American Studies*, 44 (2010), e23. doi:10.1017/S002187581000054X

Y. G.-M. Lulat, *United States Relations with South Africa: A Critical Overview from the Colonial Period to the Present* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008, \$52.95). Pp. 632. ISBN 978 0 8204 7907 1.

Two moments. The first took place in 1966 – a letter from South Africa’s Washington ambassador, discussing the state of United States–South African relations:

Could Paul Kruger have avoided war with England and yet retained the integrity of the Republic? Will we be able to avoid an armed clash with the United States – or an armed clash with the United Nations strongly backed by the United States – and still retain our integrity? There is a parallel between the period preceding the Anglo-Boer War and conditions prevailing today.<sup>6</sup>

The second, a report submitted to the UN Office of Public Information by an Indian official in 1967, lamenting anti-apartheid activism at the UN. “The United Nations should not indulge in propaganda – for itself or any of the positions taken within the Organization. Thus, public information activities [must remain] information activities in the true sense of the word, not a selling operation in any kind of disguise.”<sup>7</sup>

Neither of these moments has a conceptual place in the world constructed by Y. G.-M. Lulat. They underscore the messy contradictions of the historical record – the animosity underlying Afrikaner–American relations, and the disagreements within the Afro-Asian bloc about anti-apartheid efforts at the UN. In *United States Relations with South Africa*, ambiguity does not exist – whites were too busy conspiring with one another to disagree, and nonwhites were unquestionably unified in the fight against South Africa. Stripped of pretense, this book offers a neo-Marxist summary of secondary material on America’s historical relationship with South Africa. In the right hands, this form of synthesis can be illuminating and powerful, casting historical moments within long-term trends and structures. In the wrong hands, however, it can be clumsy and derivative – a device to buttress two-dimensional morality plays that erases the complexity of the past. *United States Relations with South Africa* falls solidly into the latter category.

The book opens with a jargon-laden introduction that attempts to outline Lulat’s unified theory of the universe. Claiming to mix “traditional narrative history” with “Khalidunian interpretive historical analysis,” the author positions his work “at the interdisciplinary interstice of political economy and sociology in which the motor of history is viewed as an outcome of, in the last instance, materialist forces – but whose operationalization is to be found in the dialectic of the structural/ideational binary” (xxi). Even more, Lulat promises to bridge the “positivist” and “normative” divide by engaging “the dialectic in the base–superstructure dyad, and ... the

<sup>6</sup> Relations with the United States (Secret), 13 August 1965, Departement Van Buitelandse Sake 1/33/3, Verhoudings met die Verenigde State var Amerika, Volume 1, Archives of the South African Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>7</sup> G. L. Obhrai to J. Rolz-Bennett (emphasis in original), 9 August 1967, Series 0196, Box 12, File 6, United Nations Record Office.

dialectic between the Gramscian approach to critical theory, and that of the Frankfurt School” (xxiii). Lulat’s thesis on United States–South Africa relations, when it comes, is broad enough to have little concrete meaning – the United States has sought to “humanize capital” throughout its history and blacks have fought a “racialized struggle” in South Africa.

The subsequent 570 pages of text frequently lose sight of how these claims relate to each other or to the historical record. Organized in four sections – entitled “Economic Relations since 1680,” “Political Relations since 1799,” “African American Involvement since 1800,” and “Future Relations” – each chapter summarizes pieces of the secondary literature, with “epilogues” attached that explain Lulat’s views. Anyone familiar with the scholarship of William A. Williams and Walter LaFeber, or more recently the work of Michael Hunt, Paul G. Lauren, and Thomas Borstelmann, understands that economic-centered interpretations of American influence that accommodate race’s causal power are hardly novel in US foreign-relations history. Lulat’s attempts to shadow this interpretive tradition are hampered by his tendency to veer off-topic and discuss extemporaneous, contemporary issues. The resulting text provides a unique window on Lulat’s worldview – complete with appendices that explain his attitudes on national interest, morality, intellectuals, and identity politics – but an immensely confusing historical narrative, difficult to follow and frustrating to read.

Lulat seems aware of this problem, begging the reader’s patience in his opening pages. But it is hard not to marvel at *United States Relations with South Africa’s* editorial excess. Written in ten-point font with half-inch margins, the book is a sprawling testament to the bloated, self-indulgent synthesis. Those who lack any familiarity with the literature on United States relations with South Africa may find the bibliography and chronology useful. The rest of us will be disappointed.

*Ohio State University*

RYAN IRWIN