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Forum on Connie Field's Documentary Film, *Have You Heard from Johannesburg: Seven Stories of the Global Anti-Apartheid Movement*. *Diplomatic History* 36:5 (November 2012): 785-814. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/diph.2012.36.issue-5/issuetoc>

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Review by **Eric J. Morgan**, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay

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Last summer I made a cross-country trip to British Columbia to interview Peter Davis, a documentary filmmaker, on his contributions to the global struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Davis focused a number of his films on South Africa and apartheid, including *The White Laager*, a moving exploration of the Afrikaners' complicated past. Over tea in his quiet home in Vancouver, I asked Davis why he had become involved in the anti-apartheid struggle as a filmmaker, at one point even risking detainment and expulsion from the country for filming illegally in South Africa. He paused at my question, then laughed and said, "I don't know! For some reason, [apartheid] offended me.... It also seemed [a situation] that one could do something about.... I thought it was possible to make a difference, to raise public consciousness."<sup>1</sup> Davis was one amongst thousands across the world who felt the same way: that they—far removed from South Africa and apartheid, thousands of miles away from separate development and Bantu education, from torture and pass laws and forced removal—could do something real to confront critical global issues of democracy, justice, and racial equality that were so threatened by South Africa.

The global anti-apartheid movement was a massive, sprawling, and sometimes disjointed struggle, pursuing the same ends but often in disparate ways. It took place in numerous arenas and forums, from the local to the national to the global to the imagined. Given the morass of actors, campaigns, nations, and organizations involved, a comprehensive scholarly history of this half-century struggle is probably impossible. But, as all the reviewers note, Connie Field has done a great service by offering a true transnational approach to this complicated history in her film *Have You Heard from Johannesburg*:

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Peter Davis by the author, 2 June 2012, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

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*Seven Stories of the Global Anti-Apartheid Movement* . Perhaps the series is too long and at times uneven, as several reviewers note, but clearly this work sets the bar very high not only for documentary filmmakers, but for historians as well. Yet Field's film and the insightful reviews of her work caused me to think deeply about both narrative and the thorny issue of historic inevitability, which seem to be the subject of two major critiques offered by the reviewers.

One enduring problem with the history of social movements, particularly as portrayed in documentaries, is that they are often triumphalist in nature and tone. Too often in such narratives we are presented with a Manichean drama that fails to unpack the complexity of the human experience. In his review, Ryan Irwin astutely points out that apartheid itself is hardly discussed throughout the film, other than in moralistic black vs. white terms. What, Irwin asks, was apartheid? Is it not essential to understanding the struggle against apartheid to first understand the system itself? I was curious to know if Field attempted to, or even wanted to, understand the mind of the Afrikaner. Do we see in her film, for example, the struggles of the Afrikaner with the British throughout the nineteenth century, and the shaping of Afrikaner history, culture, mythology, and language? It appears not, as apartheid is a dramatic foil rather than a complex historical amalgamation that defied simple stereotypes. As Irwin notes, apartheid is portrayed through the eyes of the international movement rather than its architects, further reducing the story to a good vs. evil narrative. He asks an important question: "Would investigating ambiguity muddy the moral clarity of the anti-apartheid struggle?" (796). In a word: yes. Irwin also captures an essential component of the anti-apartheid movement: that it meant different things to different people. This story is at one moment a struggle for liberation, but also a story about racial equality, as well as human rights, and the Cold War. Reconciling these various disparate lenses is work that remains to be done.

In her response to the reviews, Field makes one assertion that I find troubling. She writes, "In film work, your task is to create a story that will reach a broad audience. In order to make a good film that will keep an audience's attention, a compelling narrative must be structured; thus, the stories were constructed around characters striving to obtain a goal. Accordingly, I did not include many of the issues that divided various groups (810)." Such a statement is remarkable, as it simplifies a very complicated story that needs more, not less, introspection. Why is it not possible to create a compelling narrative that presents a complicated story? Field is defensive over Simon Stevens' critique that the African National Congress (ANC) emerges in her narrative as the sole arbiter of change, which is certainly possible given that Field chose to omit the internal struggle, which is as much a part of the story as anything else. Stevens writes, "Combined with very light narration, the result is, in effect, an authorized history, or collective memory, of the global anti-apartheid struggle" (798-799).

Ultimately such an approach can lead to a narrative that promotes the inevitability of history. Yet it was not inevitable that apartheid would end, or end when or how it did, or

that the many sacrifices of activists throughout the world would finally be rewarded. One question that I would like answered is why so many activists throughout the world took on such risks for a cause that was anything but guaranteed to succeed? Indeed, one could make a strong argument that for all of the global activism, for all of the sanctions and boycotts and protests across dozens of nations, anti-apartheid activists achieved remarkably little for a very long while. Yes, apartheid came to an end, but not for 84 years following the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. And so I wonder whether apartheid truly ended due to the activism of students or activists in the United States or Australia. Were divestment and sanctions, a major component of Field's work, really all that important in ending apartheid? Many within the struggle itself did not support sanctions. Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the leader of Inkatha and the Zulu people, for example, was an ardent opponent. F.W. de Klerk, the last of the apartheid leaders, thought sanctions were ineffective, and hindered change. In his autobiography, de Klerk writes:

On the whole, I believe that sanctions did more to delay the process of transformation than they did to advance it. They further isolated South Africans from the enormous change agent represented by Western cultural and political influences. At a time when our own universities, students, artists and scientists were ripe to become proponents of change within our own society, they were cut off from the very influences that could have encouraged them to play this role. The reality is that isolation, sanctions, and unbridled criticism seldom persuade people to change their positions. In our case they created a natural resistance amongst white South Africa individuals and companies and often made them less willing to consider change. The National Party won more than one election by appealing to the resentment that many whites felt against the international community – and particularly the United States – for their role in imposing sanctions against us. Most importantly, sanctions impeded economic growth, which I believe was by far and away the most important change factor in South Africa.<sup>2</sup>

It is also ironic that the United States' Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986, roundly hailed as critical legislation that brought the South African government to its knees, was actually rather conservative in both its language and effects. Interestingly, its champions included several conservative Senators, such as Jesse Helms, who included language in the act denouncing the armed struggle and the ANC's perceived ties to global communism.<sup>3</sup>

Mark Bradley also underscores the issue of Field's straightforward narrative, noting, "Nor

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<sup>2</sup> F.W. De Klerk, *The Last Trek – A New Beginning: The Autobiography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 70-71.

<sup>3</sup> See Thomas J. Redden, Jr., "The Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986: Anti-Apartheid or Anti-African National Congress?" *African Affairs* 87: 349 (October 1988): 595-605.

does Field provide much critical distance on her subjects.... On such crucial issues as the ANC's turn to armed struggle, Field only lightly explores misgivings within the ANC and differences with other local actors that might have usefully complicated her story about how armed struggle was perceived globally" (807). In her response Field argues that the armed struggle of the ANC "made perfect sense" (812). Perhaps it did, but such a view has always presented a somewhat ironic portrait for me: the global anti-apartheid movement, at least in part, supported the use of violence against a violent regime, even though the South African government was never going to be toppled through armed resistance. How did the global movement reconcile the use of violence, when the enemy it was fighting against used such violence to oppress its people? It is also ironic that it was, finally, talking and negotiation, rather than civil war and armed struggle, that finally brought an end to apartheid and the birth of a multiracial democracy in South Africa.

The forum on Connie Field's seminal film caused me to ask these questions, particularly as I consider using parts of the film in my own courses. A simplified past is, ironically, exactly what the South African government itself created during apartheid. Afrikaners were in their mythos God's chosen people; according to this vision, their utopia was founded upon racial superiority and the abuse of black labor was not only an inevitability, but also righteous. But understanding struggle is not merely about vilifying the perceived enemy, or simplifying a narrative to present a clear moral imperative, but rather involves delving deeply into the internal processes that define what struggle most often is. The former is easy; the latter asks us to take on much more difficult questions about ourselves, in the case of apartheid asking why so many people throughout the world felt compelled to act. My friend Peter Davis told me that apartheid offended him and that he, like so many others, needed to act. Perhaps the anti-apartheid struggle, then, tells us more about the actors in this global history than about South Africa or apartheid or decolonization, about the need for humans to be a part of something at least once in their lives that is larger than themselves.

**Eric J. Morgan** is an Assistant Professor in Democracy and Justice Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. He has published articles on the United States and South Africa in *Diplomatic History*, *Enterprise & Society: The International Journal of Business History*, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, and *Passport: The Newsletter of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations*, and is a contributor to the *Dictionary of African Biography*. He is currently working on two book projects: a study of transnational anti-apartheid activism in the United States and South Africa and a volume on globalization and Sub-Saharan Africa, co-authored with Andrew J. DeRoche. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Colorado at Boulder.

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