



**Recaps of Center Events**  
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## **“Every Secret Thing?” Racial Politics in Ansuayah R. Singh’s *Behold the Earth Mourns* (1960)** A lecture

Antoinette Burton  
(History, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)  
March 11, 2010  
Curtin Hall 368

**A**s part of the Visiting Scholars Interdisciplinary Series: The Global Modern, Antoinette Burton (History, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) delivered her paper, “Every Secret Thing?” Racial Politics in Ansuayah R. Singh’s *Behold the Earth Mourns* (1960),” to an attentive audience in Curtin Hall 368 on March 11.

Little noticed when first published in 1960, *Behold the Earth Mourns*, now heralded as the first Indian novel in South Africa, currently exists as part of a new, “unmarked” generic category: “struggle literature in the service of heritage history.” This category also includes contemporary memoirs such as Gillian Slovo’s *Every Secret Thing* and Mamphela Ramphele’s *Across Boundaries*, as well as Imraan Coovadia’s novel *High Low In-between*. Burton attributes this renewed interest partly to the run-up to South Africa’s hosting the 2010 World Cup, though 2010 also marks the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the first indentured Indians to South Africa, as well as the 50th anniversary of the novel’s publication.

Yet for Burton, the novel moves beyond a “reclaimed” history of Indians in South Africa. She sees the landscape of the novel not as “monochromatic surfaces” across which Indians travel, but as “a highly racialized topography

through which Indians move in concert, and sometimes in collision, with black South Africans.” Attending to the interracial modes of engagement not only “destabilizes the history of progressive Indian development,” it helps to underscore the multidimensionality of racial formation in South Africa and it addresses how these racial politics are embodied in gender terms. With her project, then, Burton would like to challenge the notion of *Behold the Earth Mourns* as “a struggle literature only for Indians of South African descent” and, in so doing, to “repurpose it for conversations about how to read and write histories of Indo-African solidarity from the 20th Century.”

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***Behold the Earth Mourns* presents “a highly racialized topography through which Indians move in concert, and sometimes in collision, with black South Africans.”**

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The novel, set in the tumultuous 1940s, tells the tale of a transnational marriage between a well-off, cosmopolitan Bombay woman, Yagesvari Jivan-Sinha, and a Durban man, Srenika Nirvani. Srenika’s father is from the first generation of Indian settlers in South Africa, following the arc

from indentured laborer to trader to owner of sugar cane fields. Before he marries, Srenika, an idealistic young man disillusioned with the state's racist policies—e.g., the 1946 Asiatic Land Tenure Act restricted the areas in which Indians could live—joins a group of Gandhi-inspired Passive Resisters. During a protest march in the streets, Srenika is arrested and jailed. Through this trial by fire Srenika comes to realize that he's now mature enough to marry, where the coded word "maturity" means "to move beyond politics." Yet in marrying Yagesvari, Srenika simply moves from a confrontation with colonial politics to a "politics of conjugality": the two marry in Bombay but South African law does not allow the entry of brides from India.

While Singh does not depict scenes of collective African action like that of the Indian Passive Resistance, she does register the impact of Africans upon Indian political activity by plotting African characters very centrally. In an historical context where many Indians saw black Africans in racially negative terms, at least in part because they feared that "a racist state wished to combine the two communities to a similarly subordinate and dispossessed state," *Behold the Earth Mourns* suggests how and why Indian racial and political coherence developed through the work of Africans in this struggle.

Although Srenika is convinced that his political education is self-made—a combination of his own internal struggle and an ongoing ideological battle with his brother, a successful businessman—the novel itself offers an alternative explanation through the character of Serete Luseka, Srenika's longtime black African friend. Serving as a realist to the idealistic Srenika, Serete teaches Srenika not only survival skills—he helps Srenika navigate prison culture after their arrest during the street protests—but he also offers Srenika contrapuntal arguments that help Srenika refine his own political thought.



Natal Indians planning acts of passive resistance to segregation laws. Photo: Nat Farbman/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images Dec. 01, 1946 [www.life.com/image/50505955](http://www.life.com/image/50505955)