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Everyday acts of repair in postcolonial South Africa

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The Work of Repair: Capacity after Colonialism in the Timber Plantations of South Africa



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Thomas Cousins' *The Work of Repair: Capacity after Colonialism in the Timber Plantations of South Africa* is a profound contribution to contemporary anthropology and postcolonial studies. Focusing on South Africa's timber plantations – particularly those in KwaZulu-Natal – Cousins unpacks the layered, lived experiences of plantation workers, revealing how people navigate histories of violence and the ongoing structural precarity of post-apartheid capitalism. Central to his inquiry is the concept of *amandla*, a Zulu term encompassing power, strength and capacity. Rather than approaching it as a simple political slogan or a generalised measure of ability, Cousins positions *amandla* as an ethical substance – a diagnostic and a method through which individuals sustain life, care for others and endure within oppressive systems.

The book's intellectual and ethnographic force lies in its refusal to cast repair as either resistance or restoration. For Cousins, repair is not merely about fixing what was broken in the past, but about engaging in ongoing, relational acts of care, creativity and adjustment. Drawing on Foucault's idea of ethical substance and Jasbir Puar's critique of the biopolitics of debilitation, he explores how capacity is governed and distributed by corporate and state institutions. Simultaneously, he foregrounds how workers reconfigure this capacity in deeply personal, embodied and moral terms.

This argument is developed through rich ethnographic detail, rooted in extensive fieldwork with 14 women in the plantations of Shikishela and Mfekayi. Cousins uses these encounters to build a sociography of *amandla* – a mode of analysis that highlights how the work of repair unfolds not in grand gestures, but in quiet, often unseen acts of endurance and relational care. These encompass not only labour, but also eating, healing, praying and forming alternative kinships – practices that are both ethically charged and politically significant.

Each chapter of the book offers a distinct lens on the interplay between repair, capacity and postcolonial life. In Chapter One, Cousins examines labour power and bodily endurance, situating physical labour – like the arduous task of debarking trees – within broader questions of health, value and moral management. He details how nutritional interventions such as the 'Food4Forests' programme aimed to make bodies more productive, while workers themselves blended these with traditional practices of sustenance and healing.

Chapter Two extends this inquiry by historicising the plantation as a labour regime. Using the concept of topology, Cousins shows how power operates spatially and relationally, and how labour is reproduced through complex interactions between institutions, kinship and biography. The plantation emerges not simply as a site of extraction, but as a place where historical violence and contemporary neoliberalism converge – and where the work of repair continuously unfolds.

In Chapter Three, Cousins turns to *umshado wokudlala*, or the 'game of marriage' – a ritualised practice through which women critique and parody dominant norms of marriage, kinship and gender. This embodied, playful, and often queer practice allows participants to reimagine their roles and relationships, opening space for emotional sustenance and political reflection.

Chapter Four focuses on the use of curative substances that defy easy classification as either pharmaceutical or traditional. Here, Cousins situates the gut as a critical site of transformation, where healing is enacted not just biologically but ethically. In the context of South Africa's HIV/Aids crisis, the ingestion and circulation of these substances reflect broader practices of relational care and the politics of bodily survival.

The final chapter, Chapter Five, brings together the book's conceptual threads by exploring the social topologies of plantation life. Cousins identifies three distinct yet overlapping forms: colonial cartographies that shaped identity and space; networks of HIV surveillance that render certain bodies hypervisible; and the imaginative world-building of children. These topologies underscore how the plantation functions as a fractured terrain where labour, health and sociality are intimately intertwined. Rather than treating *amandla* as a fixed trait, Cousins presents it as a potentiality – a capacity that emerges through proximity, improvisation and shared vulnerability. This leads to his articulation of a vicinal politics of repair: an ethic rooted in immediate relations and the often precarious labour of sustaining life together.

In the conclusion, Cousins revisits the central claims of the book, reaffirming that repair must be understood as an ongoing, open-ended process. He offers no tidy resolutions. Instead, he asks readers to reflect on the incomplete, entangled nature of ethical life after colonialism. *Amandla*, as he shows, is not merely a form of resistance or an assertion of agency; it is a way of inhabiting the world – one that acknowledges both fragility and the capacity for renewal.

Methodologically, Cousins draws on a robust ethnographic toolkit, including participant observation, interviews, historical research and community engagement. His approach enables a textured and intimate portrayal of the plantation as a space shaped by corporate power, gendered labour, illness and care. The book's engagement with theory is equally rigorous, weaving together Marxist, postcolonial, feminist, queer and actor-network perspectives into a fluid and grounded narrative.

In sum, *The Work of Repair* is a groundbreaking study that challenges static notions of power, resilience and suffering. Cousins redefines repair not as the undoing of damage, but as the careful and creative reweaving of life amid persistent harm. His work not only deepens our understanding of South African plantation labour but also broadens the scope of what anthropological scholarship can and should do. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of

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those often marginalised, this book offers a compelling argument for the importance of interconnection, inclusivity, and attending to the nuances of everyday life in ethically engaged anthropological inquiry. Ultimately, Cousins demonstrates how these everyday acts of repair, grounded in cultures of interconnection and inclusivity, offer valuable insights for

theorising incompleteness and conviviality, not only in South Africa and other postcolonial settings, but globally as well. This is an essential text for scholars in anthropology, African studies and postcolonial theory – and for anyone interested in how people survive, care and imagine alternative possibilities in the face of systemic injustice.
