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**PREFACE**

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In South African history writing circles, quite possibly the most disturbing development over the last few months has been the fire at the University of Cape Town and the partial destruction of the African Studies archives. Many words have since been written about the fire, the loss and the state of the archives in South Africa. Our lead essay for this issue, written by Clare Larkin (“The University College of the North, Student Politics and the National Union of South African Students, 1960-1968”), is based on research in the Special Collections of the Jagger Library at the University of Cape Town. The loss of the archive reminds us of our fragile connections with the past, or, more precisely, a complex past. Larkin’s lead essay focuses on student politics in the 1960s, shortly before the revival of resistance to apartheid that came with the emergence of Black Consciousness, the growing prominence of Steve Biko and Ric Turner as critical voices in South African politics and society, and the resurgence of a powerful labour movement in Durban. Larkin tracks student politics in the years before this *renaissance*. Plotting trajectories and alliances that at once challenge the bigger narratives in the history of South African student politics and are simultaneously obscured by developments in the late 1960s. These fine grains are the kind that allows history to stand up against the simplistic marches of nationalist historiography, a strong but worrying trend not only in South Africa but also elsewhere on the continent. When the archives fall to destruction, dramatically by fire as at the University of Cape Town, or more prosaically to neglect, we sever these connections to complex pasts.

This issue is the last that I shall edit. Along with the current editorial collective, we have tried to reposition this journal to publish articles

from across the continent that somehow contributes towards elucidating the material, political, ideological, cultural and sometimes the linguistic moorings of a Southern history. I believe that we can report some success in achieving this goal and also in publishing the work of a new generation of Africanist historians. There are, of course, areas where we would like to see growth: thematic histories that span different countries on the continent, for instance, histories of film or engineering or consumption; we would also like to see a stronger focus on the eastern parts of the continent; on race and diasporic connections, to name but a few. The COVID pandemic which has not only dominated everyday life and society across the continent for much of the past year, but is also the subject of a historiographic essay published in the journal in 2020, furthermore invites us to think about the conceptual, and methodological grounds for a history of the present. Matteo Grilli has been appointed, the new editor-in-chief and the bulk of the editorial collective and the editorial board will remain in place. In short, as the journal goes forward, there is room both to build on some of the developments that have characterised its recent history and to incorporate new innovations. Thank you for your support, engagement, and constructive criticism since we relaunched the journal as the *Southern Journal for Contemporary History* in 2019. I will be following the directions that the journal takes with great interest and trust that you will too.