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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Retrieving Biko: A Black Consciousness critique of whiteness

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There is an important history often neglected by genealogies of ‘critical whiteness studies’: Steve Biko’s Black Consciousness critique of white liberalism. What would it mean to retrieve this criticism in the context of white anti-racism in the post-apartheid era? Said’s (2003) contrapuntal method proves useful here as a juxtaposing device whereby the writings of a past figure can be critically harnessed, travelling across temporal and ideological boundaries to interrogate the present. Four interlinked modes of disingenuous white anti-racism can thus be identified: 1) a fetishistic preoccupation with disproving one’s racism; 2) ostentatious forms of antiracism that function as means of self-promotion, as paradoxical means of white self-love; 3) the consolidation and extension of agency through redemptive gestures of ‘heroic white antiracism’; 4) ‘charitable antiracism’ which fixes tolerance within a model of charity, as an act of generosity and that reiterates the status and role of an antiracist benefactor.

**Keywords:** Biko; Black Consciousness; whiteness; anti-racism; post-apartheid

#### **The name of Biko**

A name starts to function as a ‘master-signifier’ when, despite the predominance of a general ‘preferred meaning’ it is put to strategic use by diverse interest groups. This is not necessarily a situation to be avoided: such moments of hegemony indicate that a legacy is alive and well; that a given heritage, no matter how contested, has become a part of the popular imaginary of a given culture. Nonetheless, in such instances one is

justified in asking what routinely ‘falls out’ of the legacy in question, what particular elements – indeed, what *discomforting* aspects – are consistently removed by such processes of hegemonic assimilation.

The name of Biko has become something of a master-signifier in South Africa today; it is touchstone for many instrumental uses; it acts as an emblem of credibility, as a marker of moral, political and cultural capital. This should perhaps come as no surprise. The 12<sup>th</sup> of September 2007 of course marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Biko’s death at the hands of apartheid state’s security police. This date was marked by a resurgence of interest in Biko’s work and politics (Mngxitama, Alexander & Gibson, 2008, Van Wyk, 2007). More than an icon of the anti-apartheid liberation struggle and of Black Consciousness thought in South Africa, the name of ‘Biko’ however now functions as a more encompassing signifier with a properly global range of associations. ‘Biko’ provides, amongst other things: the inspiration for the establishment of an ‘Afro Space [radio] Station’; the name of a variety of popular songs (by Bloc Party, Peter Gabriel and others); the name of a Brazilian research organization (the Steve Biko Institute, Salvador); the logo and image of a line of popular apparel (T-shirts, handbags); even the name of a fictional space-ship in Star Trek (the U.S.S. Biko). We have thus a situation akin to what Edward Said (2000) describes in his account of ‘travelling theory’: the inevitable dilution of revolutionary thought as it is transposed from one strategic context and value-system to another. The above set of examples leads us perhaps to the same conclusion, namely that such a diverse range of borrowings cannot but lead to a potential neutralization of the name in question. Thabo Mbeki’s (2009) comment that many latter-day admirers of Steve Biko ‘seek to redefine him by stripping him of his revolutionary credentials’ (p. 113) thus seems justified.

Two possible objections arise in response to the attempt to retrieve Biko. Firstly, the gesture of designating the true use of a name is often itself an ideological operation, a means of appropriating the name to one’s own particular cause. This poses the question, to which I hope to return, of my own agenda in returning to Biko. Secondly, there is the contention that although the retrieval of Black Consciousness thought is all well and good – and consonant with calls to prioritize indigenous knowledge systems – it remains a *historical* task, cut off from more immediate and pressing social, economic and bio-political agendas of the post-apartheid present. This argument gives rise to a challenge: how might we productively retrieve aspects of

Biko's Black Consciousness thought today, particularly so with a view to exploring issues of (anti)-racism today in the post-apartheid context?

### **Contrapuntal reading and de-radicalization**

The revitalization of early critical or literary works is a favoured theme of Edward Said's. As is well known, Said offers up the notion of the contrapuntal as a way of reading pertinent texts from a different era, as a means of disrupting the normative assumptions delimiting current conditions of understanding. It helps here to refer directly to Said's (2003, p. 25) own account of his contrapuntal retrieval of the work of figures that he believes deserve to be read as intrinsically worthwhile still today:

My approach tries to see them in their context as accurately as possible, but ...I see them [also] contrapuntally...as figures whose writings travel across temporal, cultural and ideological boundaries in unforeseen ways... Thus later history reopens and challenges what seems to have been the finality of an earlier figure of thought, bringing it into contact with cultural, political and epistemological formations undreamed of by...its author... [T]he latencies in a prior figure or form [can]...suddenly illuminate the present.

Our attempt in what follows should thus be to listen with a double-ear, to hear Biko not only obviously in terms of the time, the place and the context in which he wrote, but precisely as if what he wrote was also directed at the post-apartheid and postcolonial present.

I may not be the best person to attempt such a contrapuntal re-reading of Biko. More than once I have been made aware, by students and colleagues, that my reading of Biko is perhaps necessarily skewed, distorted by my background, as if there is an epistemological break present in a given white South African's reading of Biko's essays. There are in fact two pitfalls here. Firstly, the danger of replicating precisely what Biko warns against, the liberal white subject's re-representation of black critique, that is, the situation of me speaking for, or over Biko, of using him to my own ends. Secondly, and perhaps more insidiously, there is the prospect here of my own performative attempt – in expressing a fidelity to Biko – to demonstrate, to implicitly prove, my own non-racism. Neither of these are charges that I can fully exculpate myself from. As will become apparent as we continue, many of the critiques I go on to develop in this chapter pertain directly both to this chapter itself.

Said's ideas on the contrapuntal go beyond the provision of a reading methodology. The contrapuntal is essentially a juxtaposing device whereby one overlaps – for aesthetic or political effect – two or more incompatible historical, textual, or musical themes. For Said (2003) it is more than just a means of generating a critical sensibility - it is also a way of apprehending overlapping 'territories of experience', especially so in the case of one who simultaneously occupies two radically different cultural worlds. Part of what is useful about this method, this mode of experience, is not just that it upsets the present, but also that it draws attention to the *domestication* of the past and the *de-radicalization* of certain figures.

This is pertinent in the case of Biko, and in the case of many black resistance leaders. For example, a recent Associated Press Report, *MLK's Legacy Is More Than His 'Dream' Speech*, emphasizes how aspects of King's less popular political commitments – his opposition to the Vietnam War, his insistence that poverty and militarism needed be considered part of the problem of US racism – have been filtered out of public memory. King of course is responsible for some of the most famous words in U.S. history: "I have a dream...". The third Monday of each January in the U.S. is, furthermore, Martin Luther King Day, an extraordinary mark of commemoration. These remembrances of King stand in stark contrast to his declining popularity at the time of his death, to the oft-neglected fact of his radicalism in attacking the exploitative nature of racialized capitalism. What is my point here? In many instances the institutionalization of such a heroic figure occurs as part of a strategy of amnesia. This is a memorialization which works as a means of forgetting. We have a selective focussing-in on an isolated element which enables a wiping-out of a far more disconcerting ensemble of surrounding elements. After all, as Henry Taylor (2008) comments in the same report (*MLK's Legacy Is More Than His 'Dream' Speech*), how many people can recall what followed on in Martin Luther King's most famous speech, what came after the words 'I have a dream'...?

### **The object which proves that it is not so**

In psychoanalysis there is a term which describes this operation – in which we see a great investment in a certain object or person taken out of a disturbing context, and that is then memorialized, instituted in a way that enables us to forget, in a manner that protects us from a far more threatening situation. We can treat the "I have a

dream” refrain, much like Martin Luther King Day itself, as a fetish. That is, they are a way of proving that something is *not so*. They are a way of proving for white America that it is somehow not racist, that a line has been drawn between itself and its racist past. This extraction of one given iconic figure, which occurs as a means of allowing a far more disconcerting context to be forgotten, is thus an exemplary case of how *not* to retrieve Biko.

We are now well placed to identify one of the modes in which certain forms of white anti-racism run aground.<sup>1</sup> I have in mind the desperate reiteration of one or two examples from one’s personal history that do the job of ostensibly proving one’s non-racism. We have thus a kind of selective aggrandizement of certain behaviours occurring in the face of something far harder, indeed, traumatic, to confront, such as the fact of one’s own complicity in racism. This is a fetishistic form of anti-racism which relies on some or other heroic and often-revisited object, activity or memory to do the job of proving something not to be the case. This, moreover, is never simply a private process, but is typically performed before a public of some or other sorts precisely as a means of ‘making a name’, gaining strategic advantage, of lending an exceptional status to the person in question. Importantly of course, whereas minor instances of resistance against apartheid come to take on a heroic value in the case of whites, similar such infractions and resistances were simply part of the everyday life for black subjects under apartheid.

A brief example: I recently received a proposal for a PhD focussing on ‘the role of a new generation of students in the post-apartheid era in re-shaping the social dynamics of South Africa’. Now to be fair, it is not absolutely clear that the students in question are meant to be white students, so we should not leap in to criticize too quickly. Those familiar with Biko’s critique of white liberalism will however immediately grasp what is potentially problematic here. This example illustrates two tactics of white anti-racism which typically go together: firstly, an attempted demonstration of non-complicity; secondly, an instance of the re-centering of whiteness. It is useful here to refer directly to Biko, who suggests that such gestures show up the real underlying motivation of this sort of anti-racism: the attempt to portray an image of one’s self as non-racist. White liberals, he says (1978, p. 23)

waste lots of time in an internal sort of mudslinging designed to prove that A is more of a liberal than B...[They]...try to prove to as many blacks as they can find that they are liberal.

### **Anticipating ‘critical whiteness studies’**

It is this problem, the ‘re-centring of whiteness’ as it appears even in the critique of racism, that I want to focus on as we continue. It provides an answer to the question of how we might retrieve Biko today, that is, by returning to an element of his work often neglected: his critique of whiteness, what he terms ‘white liberal ideology’, or more directly yet, his attacks on certain forms of white anti-racism. My contention is that Biko’s critique of whiteness anticipates, and in some senses improves upon, many of the central arguments that would emerge in the later domain of ‘critical whiteness studies’.

A useful contemporary backdrop to our retrieval of Biko comes in the form of Sara Ahmed’s (2004) seminal paper *Declarations of Whiteness*. Her article provides a valuable means of orientation: it both introduces key moments in the history of whiteness studies and draws out many of the limitations of this area of scholarship. In response to the question of ‘why study whiteness?’, Ahmed (2004) offers the reply that it is a crucial component of anti-racism; it can make apparent insidious forms of white hegemony and emphasize aspects of white racism and privilege not otherwise brought into critical visibility. Of the multiple possible genealogies of whiteness studies we should, for Ahmed, opt for one which treats the work of black feminists as its starting-point, prioritizing thus the black critique of whiteness. Although in principle I agree, I would like to extend her proposed timeline, to try and demonstrate how Biko’s critique of whiteness contains in germinal form many of the arguments that would be explored by a later generation of authors.

Ahmed (2004) opposes the black critique of whiteness to the more recent and fashionable studies by white academics (Frankenberg, 1993, Dyer, 1997) who like to emphasize how whiteness operates as invisible, as an implicit cultural norm or framing position. She is aware of how the study of whiteness may ultimately end up lending support to that which it had hoped to critique. The dangers here are easy enough to anticipate: one might end up ‘substantializing’ whiteness, re-centring it as a fixed category of experience, thus reifying it, lending it an essence (Fine, Powell,

Weis & Wong, 1997), treating it, as Garner (1997) cautions, not so much as a set of social relationships but as *on object in itself*.

What this means is that the project of showing up the ostensible invisibility of whiteness will not be enough, just as the attempt on the part of white academics to try and ‘step outside of whiteness’ cannot, in and of itself, be adequate. After all, as Ahmed (2004) repeatedly emphasizes, whiteness is only invisible to those who inhabit it; the very act of turning a critical gaze upon the whiteness can operate to place it once again centre-stage. As such something more unsettling, more genuinely destabilizing is required in the analysis of whiteness.

### **White terror**

There are aspects of Biko’s writings which do target the normalizing factor of whiteness, attacking its role as a cultural bench-mark from which judgements of deviance, beauty and morality can be made. Black consciousness he says, seeks to undo the lie that ‘black is an aberration from the “normal” which is white’ (1978, p. 100). This entails an awareness of how radically divergent material living conditions come to take on a psychological and moral value; coming thus to provide the basis for intuitive attributions of inferiority and superiority:

...the Black man in himself has developed a certain state of alienation. He...attaches the meaning White to all that is good... [This situation] arises out of living...it is part of the roots of self-negation which our kids get even as they grow up. The homes are different, the streets...so you tend to begin to feel that there is something incomplete in your humanity, and that completeness goes with whiteness. (pp. 100-101)

Clearly these are not comments which risk reifying whiteness, or white experience; they maintain no redemptive end-point, no hope of tacitly reconsolidating white agency. We see in fact in Biko qualities of the trope of *whiteness as terror* which would prove so important for African-American authors such as bell hooks and Toni Morrison for whom the history of slavery and white supremacy is not easily forgotten. Whiteness is accordingly thus assigned the values of brutality, inhumanity and capricious violence:



There is such an obvious aura of immorality and naked cruelty in all that is done in the name of white people... in South Africa whiteness has always been associated with police brutality and intimidation...[with] general harassment... The claim by whites of a monopoly on comfort and security has always been so exclusive that blacks see whites as the major obstacle in their progress towards peace, prosperity and a sane society. Through its association with all these negative aspects, whiteness has thus been soiled beyond recognition. At best...blacks see whiteness as a concept that warrants being despised, hated, destroyed and replaced by an aspiration with more human content in it. (1978, p. 77)

These are comments that a liberal white sensibility would prefer to forget; it is for this very reason important to dwell upon them. Biko's thoughts introduce a discordant note into post-apartheid platitudes of the rainbow nation; they disturb the ideals of a liberal multicultural model of integration that systematically favours some over others.

It is important to emphasize the contrapuntal reading method we have embarked on, so as to avoid the relief which, for some, may come from being able to claim some historical and geographical distance from what Biko is describing. A defensive response to Biko's arguments would seek to qualify this whiteness as *apartheid* whiteness, the inhumanity in question as essentially that of the oppressions of the apartheid state. The problem here is that Biko (1978, p. 76) is speaking not only of the physical oppression of explicit forms of violence, but also of the structural oppressions resulting from capitalist modes of dominance that have historically allowed whites to maintain 'a monopoly on comfort and security'. His words thus clearly have relevance beyond the realm of state-sponsored racist violence, beyond the historical era of apartheid.

Perhaps the most predictable retort to Biko would be to argue that 'whiteness' itself is not a viable category of analysis because it is unwieldy, lacking in differentiation. This is something Biko anticipates; defensive recourse to the ostensibly heterogeneous nature of white society is, for him, part of the problem. 'It may perhaps surprise some people', he writes 'that I should talk of whites in a collective sense', nonetheless

[b]asically the South African white community is a homogeneous community. It is a community of people who sit to enjoy a privileged position that they do not deserve, are

aware of this, and therefore spend their time trying to justify why they are doing so.  
(1978, p. 19)

Read within the context of his time, or of ours, Biko's arguments offers whites no distance from whiteness, no possibility of dis-identification. One might contend that there is a necessary *wounding* of the narcissism of whiteness at work here. He (1978, p. 66) insists that

[Whites] are born into privilege and are nourished and nurtured in the system of ruthless exploitation of black energy... No matter how genuine a liberal's motivations may be, he has to accept that, though he did not choose to [it he was]...born into privilege.

Or, as he puts it elsewhere: 'in the ultimate analysis no white person can escape being part of the oppressor camp' (1978, p. 23).

### **Racial capitalism and non-integration**

While Biko's critique of white racism is clearly focussed on the South African context, it also has, as intimated above, a global resonance. Apartheid represents a particularly brutal instantiation of a racist power structure that can be felt elsewhere in the world:

[T]he black-white power struggle in South Africa is but a microcosm of the global confrontation between the Third World and the rich white nations of the world which is manifesting itself in an ever more real manner as the years go by. (Biko, 1978, p. 72)

The South Africa of Biko's time is thus not so easily separated from the international realm; apartheid indexes a worldwide struggle against power of rich white nations. Furthermore, this white power structure is typically under-written by capitalism itself: 'the colour question in South African politics' says Biko (1978, pp. 96-97) 'was originally introduced for economic reasons':

The leaders of the white community had to create some kind of barrier between the blacks and whites so that the whites could enjoy privileges at the expense of blacks and still feel free to give a moral justification for th[is]...obvious exploitation.

While it is true that a class-based analysis took some time to emerge in the Black Consciousness movement, anti-capitalist critique did become an increasingly important topic in Black Consciousness circles from the mid 1970's on. There is a concomitant shift in language; it is no longer simply the 'white power structure' that is targeted but, as Badat (2009, p. 63) notes, the 'white capitalist regime' and 'racial capitalism'.

Here it is important to reiterate again that Biko's critique is of white *liberals* and that, as Budlender (1991) helpfully reiterates, liberalism is the philosophical underpinning of capitalism. In his prioritization of what will need to be addressed in a post-revolutionary South African society, Biko (1971, p. 2) thus speaks together of capitalism and 'the whole gamut of white value systems'. Or, as Biko's colleague Diliza Mji put it: 'Apartheid as an exploitative system is part of a bigger whole, capitalism' (cited in Badat, 2009, p. 63). It is for this reason that Mngxitama (2008) remarks that whereas anti-*racialism* produces gestures of integration and de-categorization – tending to accommodation within existing societal and economic structures - true 'anti-racism seeks to end the world as we know it' (p. 10).

### **Narcissistic anti-racism/white heroism**

The apparently radical nature of the whiteness-as-terror, autonomy-of-whiteness and 'white capital' themes is thus crucial; it prevents the heroic re-centring of whiteness prevalent in many of the more ostentatious forms of white anti-racism. Here one might cite the case of how Biko was taken up within the realm of British popular culture, questioning how he became something of a white preoccupation. Moving away briefly from the South African context, we may attempt here to engage an aspect of Biko's critique of whiteness precisely *against* the prospect of certain white appropriations of Biko.

In the 1980's both Peter Gabriel and Simple Minds recorded versions of 'Biko', the anti-apartheid song Gabriel had written about Biko's death. Gabriel performed the song, at Live Aid before an audience of 25 million people. Despite the obvious political potential of such an act, it is difficult not to feel a slight sense of unease in watching this footage today, in an era where such political anthems are less in vogue. It seems harder now to deny that such a performance holds Gabriel himself

up to the limelight, securing for the singer and his audience a kind of anti-racist social capital. One might adopt a psychoanalytic perspective here, by asking whether such a gesture, no matter how well-intentioned – and which certainly can be read as a laudable form of consciousness-raising – does not risk tipping over into an instance of ‘anti-racist narcissism’. We should not be blind to this possibility: that at the very moment in which one is fully immersed in publicly applauding the sacrifice, the heroism of an other one is simultaneously reaping the rewards of the attention thus called onto one’s self. Although he directs his comments at white South Africa, Chabani Manganyi’s (1973, p. 17) words nonetheless seem pertinent here: ‘liberalism can only be a form of narcissism – a form of white self-love’.

Important here also is Richard Attenborough’s (1987) *Cry Freedom*. Although the film is ostensibly about Biko, or the relationship between Steve Biko and the liberal journalist Donald Woods, it ultimately becomes a story of white heroism. The second half of the film is devoted to Woods’ escape from South Africa, and the role he plays in alerting the world to the conditions under which Steve died. The same can’t be said about Attenborough’s earlier (1982) film *Gandhi*. There the point is made very didactically that a break must be enforced, that Gandhi must part with one of his most trusted English comrades if the anti-colonial struggle was to be brought about by Indians themselves. A comparison of these films is revealing. A narrative centred on the life of a heroic Indian man and his political struggle is enough to sustain *Gandhi*, to make it both dramatically and commercially viable. The same approach does not suffice in *Cry Freedom*, where the struggle against apartheid must be told in the terms of a black-and-white relationship; a white hero, a white perspective, must play its part. This is a trope with which we are by now familiar with, from John Briley’s (1987) novelistic treatment of the Biko-Woods relationship, appropriately sub-titled *The story of a friendship*, to James Gregory’s account of his time as Mandela’s jailer: *Goodbye bafana: Nelson Mandela, my prisoner, my friend*. Returning though to *Cry Freedom*: the film’s screenplay is heavily reliant on Woods’s (1987) *Biko*; we have thus a kind of Woods-ification of Biko, another contribution to the longstanding tradition of whites who make a career out of their involvement in the struggle, out of their very anti-racism, their critique of whiteness.

This is a critique which, quite obviously, I am not immune to. What emerges here is the difficult issue of complicity in what one critiques, the prospect, in other words, of one’s investment in precisely what one attempts to distance one’s self from.

Returning though to the theme of white anti-racist agency: although Biko does not explore the topic of white anti-racist heroism in any great detail, he (1978, p. 66) most certainly is scornful of the white insistence on maintaining agency and prescribing roles for blacks within the anti-apartheid struggle:

Not only have the whites been guilty of being on the offensive, but, by some skilful manoeuvres, they have managed to control the response of blacks... Not only have they kicked the black but they have also told him how to react to the kick.

He is (1978, p. 20) likewise dismissive of the idea of a shared struggle:

Nowhere is the arrogance of...liberal ideology demonstrated so well as in their insistence that the problems of the country be solved by a bilateral approach involving both black and white.

We have already identified one mode of a disingenuous white anti-racism: the tactic of fetishism whereby one ‘disproves’ one’s racism on the basis of a certain act or object. To this tactic we can add two more. Firstly, ostentatious forms of anti-racism which function as forms of self-promotion, as paradoxical means of extending white narcissism. Secondly, types of anti-racism which enable a re-centring of whiteness, aiming to consolidate and extend white agency, typically – although not exclusively - through acts of white heroism or self-sacrifice.

### **White declarations**

We are now in a position to introduce Ahmed’s most important argument in her critique of whiteness and whiteness studies. Ahmed is interested in admissions of racism, whether they take place in the context of institutional declarations of bad practice, or in certain styles of confession or apology, in which past historical injustices must be spoken out as a precondition of salvaging a particular identity. We are witnessing today, as she puts it, a shift towards a ‘politics of declaration’ which for many suffices as an adequate gesture of anti-racism.

Such declarations, for Ahmed (2004, p. 1), involve a fantasy of transcendence ‘in which ‘what’ is transcended is the very ‘thing’ admitted in the declaration’. In basic terms: I admit to my racism so as to exculpate myself from my racism, to prove

that I am essentially a well-intentioned non-racist because, after all, proper racists do not know that they are racists. Something is thus performed - a confession, an apology, an admission - but it is not fully translated into an action, it remains stuck at the level of speech-act, this is what Ahmed has in mind with the notion of the non-performativity of anti-racism. I disagree with her here inasmuch as within the strict terms of speech-act theory something *is* performed here, precisely the performance of an avowal, a declaration, an apology – which itself *may* indeed have some limited value – although, and here I certainly do agree with her, it remains in and of itself wholly inadequate.

I was recently introduced to a convention of vital importance to many Australian scholars when discussing aboriginal rights, particularly so in public settings. The convention in question is a declarative act, the acknowledgement of aboriginal sovereignty in relation to Australian land. Now, as in the case of any speech-act, much depends on the contingencies of *who* is making the statement; *how* it is said; *what* it is done by saying it (that is, its illocutionary force, its function as a speech-act); *who it is received by* and how; and *what set of effects it gives rise to*.<sup>2</sup> Bearing all of this in mind, and considering also that this is a convention that both aboriginal and non-aboriginal Australians adhere to, one may appreciate that this *can* be a meaningful and politically important declaration. Then again, there is also the possibility that such a speech-act may be read as – however well-intentioned – an exemplary example of a *saying* but a *not doing*. In many instances such a concession is one by which the declarative subject (say the upwardly mobile, non-aboriginal land-owner) never really stands to lose – the land is not presumably going to be given back – although they do stand to *gain* something, namely the status of a politically-sensitive, penitent subject. All too often – or so it would seem - there is something incomplete about such measures, certainly given that they typically fit perfectly with existing structures of benefit. One acknowledges the social asymmetries that one has benefited from (assuming of course that one is a beneficiary), thus alleviating a portion of guilt, whilst continuing to enjoy these privileges indeed, consolidating them at a higher level by virtue of one's awareness, one's self-reflexive stance.

This is the type of critique Ahmed directs at whiteness studies itself, the idea, simply put, that by saying I am white, I am somehow not white, or less white because of it, the end result of which is that I achieve some distance from whiteness. There are interesting parallels to be found in Biko; he points to how white liberals attempt to

distinguish themselves from whiteness, to create a pretend difference, a pseudo-distinction. We have here a similar structure: an appeal to criticality, to an imaginary outside position, which allows this subject to win on two fronts. Here it is once again worth quoting Biko (1978, pp. 20-22) at length:

[White] liberals, leftists...are the people who argue that they are not responsible for white racism...these are the people who say that they have black souls wrapped up in white skins... They want to remain in the good books with both the black and the white worlds... They vacillate between the two worlds, verbalizing all the complaints of the blacks beautifully while skilfully extracting what suits them from the exclusive pool of white privileges... [The white liberal] claims complete identification with the blacks... [H]e moves around...white circles...with a lighter load, feeling that he is not like the rest of the others. Yet at the back of his mind is a constant reminder that he is quite comfortable as things stand.

### **Charitable anti-racism**

If we read Biko and Ahmed together we might suggest that today's version of 'I am a progressive liberal, I am against apartheid' is 'I admit how the systematic oppressions of apartheid racism benefited me, I am aware of my own latent racism, but I am going to give something back'. Let me offer a fictional vignette. A white South African colleague returns from abroad after attaining considerable success in his chosen career as entrepreneur. His objective is to re-locate to South Africa, to purchase a large area of land in a beautiful part of the country, and to fund this by resuming links - long since established by his family - to an industry, let us say mining that has been founded on long-standing structures of apartheid exploitation. How might such an agenda be made viable, especially given the evident contradiction here between the perpetuation of historical patterns of racialized privilege, and post-apartheid goals of transformation and re-distribution?

The colleague in question might begin by declaring openly that he has profited in multiple ways from an inequitable system but that he now wishes to make amends, to contribute in a meaningful way to the country, to participate in processes of reconciliation and structural change. This would mean that his involvement in the aforementioned industry would need include a charitable dimension and, furthermore, an instance of symbolic redress. A limited profit-sharing scheme in which previously

disenfranchised workers become part stakeholders would be one prospect here, as would the setting up of a trust fund of sorts, a scholarship programme, or an anti-racism research programme of significance to the organization itself. Such initiatives could then, potentially, be converted into social capital; reported upon, disseminated in a way that publicizes this ‘proof of change’ as widely as possible. Historical privileges of whiteness are thus consolidated; business can go on as usual with the added gained of an improved moral standing. The benefits of whiteness can thus be converted into the currency of anti-racism.

This seems a poor basis for transformation, for types of historical redress and anti-racism, certainly so inasmuch as they are premised on the promotion of forms of white narcissism. What I am referring to as ‘charitable’ instances of anti-racism do not result in a levelling of the playing field, in a necessary increase in the equality of society, but instead in the affirmation of a different order of privilege. They involve a trade-off: the declaration of a past racism – or admission of racialized privilege - is offered on condition that the speaker, the agent of the declaration, is able to claim the position of the redeemed subject, or gain something by way of liberal social capital.

It would be false of me to try and distance myself from the ‘giving something back’ discourse. It makes for one of the dominant modes of a repentant whiteness today, one of the more habitable means of occupying a position of racialized privilege. Moreover, I think it is important to signal again the *contingency* that underlies the declarative gestures that Ahmed focuses on. There is as such the possibility that such declarations or gestures can be genuine – indeed can be accepted in good faith - that they need not always slip back into patterns of pre-existing structural privilege. There is not a kind of unconscious hypocrisy behind every apology or mode of redress. As Ahmed puts it, ‘The desire for action, or even the desire to be seen as the good white anti-racist subject, is not always a form of bad faith...it does not necessarily involve the concealment of racism’ (p. 57). There is however, a remaining problem, the fact such forms of anti-racism often come to be fixed in the mode of charity.

### **Doing good/Humanitarian violence**

I have long been intrigued by Winnicott’s (1949) warning to psychoanalysts that granting extra time to their patients is an unconscious expression of hatred. The idea



of course being that an aggressive impulse is defended against by means of conversion into its opposite. A similar warning can be drawn from Lacan's (1992) *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, his injunction there being that one should maintain a pronounced distrust of the motivation to do good, to be charitable. Why so? Well, we might answer, there is a reiteration of status that follows on from being in a position to give; a tremendous symbolic value accords such a position; furthermore, numerous ego-gains follow on from the other's recognition of my goodness.

Reiterating the role of a benefactor entrenches a subservient position of those *whom good needs to be done to*. The act of charity can be said to create a subject and an object, the giver and the 'object group' to whom the giving occurs. We have thus the generation of a set of reliant and needy subjects, whose status as disempowered is affirmed in what we might refer to as 'the violence of charity'. What we see replicated then is a subject-other dynamic not dissimilar to that of racism itself. As in colonial racism we have one category of subject who acts, who changes history as an agent, and another, to whom things are done, and whom does not acquire the status of an able historical agent. As Biko (1978, p. 23) would remind us, we are not far here from the assumption that *they* are the problem:

[Liberals have] the false belief that they are faced with A black problem. There is nothing wrong with blacks. The problem is WHITE RACISM and it rests squarely on the laps of white society.

I remember some years ago a report in the British media in which an African country struck by famine rejected a donation of clothes from a charitable organization, complaining that not enough brand labels were included. Rather than succumbing to the response that the report was clearly designed to trigger – the angry dismissal of these beneficiaries as ingrates - one should see this as a properly ethical gesture. It was ethical in a precise sense, in that it brought out the latent aggression contained within the charitable act of giving. Put differently, it showed up the relation of gain underlying the symbolic pact of charity. This is an object-lesson in how quickly charity flips over into aggression, particularly so when what is implicitly requested in the act of charity - the recognition of the status, the benevolence of the benefactor - is denied. After all, if one is not narcissistically invested in one's own image as benefactor, then what is so offensive about the refusal of the gift?

What proves difficult for white subjects of privilege is not so much the injunction to admit one's privilege, or even to confront one's own latent racism, but to forego both the narcissistic gains in doing so, the symbolic rewards of being recognized to have done so. To do the work of anti-racism – and indeed the acknowledgement of racism - without the lures of these two kinds of benefit is to realize that it is not the task, the prerogative of the privileged to give something to the other. It is to realize that there is a certain work of equality and redress, but that it doesn't fall to me to benefit from it, that it is not my prerogative to be the giver, the agent of help, of a charitable giving.

It helps us to be aware of the rewards that accrue to the subject who declares their whiteness, their (past) racism, their position of racialized privilege. Such benefits - the rewards of narcissistic gain, of recognition, of symbolic capital – make it clear that many instances of anti-racism are more self-serving than they may at first appear. Pertinent as these remarks are, do they not set the bar too high in respect of a prospective 'ethics' of anti-racism? To dissolve the dimensions of narcissism and recognition would surely be to dissipate much of the motivation of anti-racism? I hope that the falsity of such an argument is by now totally apparent. Anti-racism cannot be based on a model of charity; tolerance is not something which can be given. This is another point anticipated by Biko: anti-racism cannot be a gift, an act of generosity. If it were then there would be a systematic privileging of certain subjects. After all, only certain subjects are in the position of being able to covert their racism into the currency of anti-racism, to reap thus the redemptive benefits of charitable anti-racism. A meaningful anti-racism is not one which remains preoccupied with validating, redeeming, or consolidating of the identity the anti-racist subject. It is not the project of ameliorating guilt.

There is thus good reason to call to a halt gestures of white redemption, to preempt and disenable such enactments of penitence, particularly so if they function to re-instantiate images of white exceptionalism. This argument is nowhere better stated than in Mngxitama's (2009) response to the question of what should be required from whites in response to apartheid's ongoing legacy of racism. Mngxitama (2009, p. 25) comments that "for myself, as a black person, I don't want:

1. Acknowledgement of whites' culpability
2. Disclosure and remorse for what happened during colonialism and apartheid

3. I wish for no dialogue
4. Whites owe me no apology or washing of feet
5. Please, not another conference on racism
6. No pledges confirming our collective humanity

### **Guilt superiority**

Before closing, let me respond to a foreseeable criticism. The argument can be made that I exemplify each of the critiques I have put forward, that, despite myself, I repeatedly enact the failure of my own position. On the one hand there is the charge that I fall prey to the tactics of an attempted ‘ex-nomination’ of myself from racism and whiteness alike, that I simply repeat at a higher level what I critique, and do so via a false separation of myself from various other ‘declarations of whiteness’. This of course returns us to the issue raised at the beginning, namely of my own tacit agenda in attempting to ‘retrieve Biko’. Aligned to this there is a sense that a narcissistic self-concern still predominates here, and that it is this – a form of white guilt - that ultimately provides the compass of the critique in question.

A self-redeeming defence is not what is called for here. True enough, such arguments as advanced by me (regards declarations of whiteness, the ex-nomination of one’s self from racism) perhaps do necessarily fail. This, however, does not necessarily mean that the critical agenda of this paper as a whole runs aground if it succeeds in showing how declarative instances of apparent anti-racism do not always transcend the trappings of narcissistic and symbolic gain. Odd as a conclusion as this might seem, the demonstration of such failings, the very fact of their recognition, may itself prove an important halfway point in an ongoing project of critique.

Furthermore – here yet another variation on the overlap of demonstrated self-critique, narcissism and attempted exculpation – one should remain alive to what is typically enabled even through such admissions of failure. There is a type of grandiose self-absorption exemplified even in the project of pointing out one’s racist failings, a type of ‘heroism of vilification’. As Bruckner (2006) comments, such ‘noisy stigmatizations only serve to mask the wounded self-love’ (p. 49). We should as such be deeply suspicious of politically-correct self-flagellation of this type; for Bruckner it provides simply an inverted means of clinging to one’s superiority. Racism is by no means bypassed in this way; it is rather re-inscribed at a different

level. The extent of white guilt, the enlarged moral responsibility assumed in relation to patterns of racialized privilege, these reiterate once again the importance of white liberal subjectivity which grows in proportion to the amount of culpability it assumes. 'The positive form of the White Man's Burden (his responsibility for civilizing the colonized...) is thus merely replaced by its negative form (the burden of the white man's guilt)' (Žižek, 2009, p. 114). White guilt that is to say, remains a suspect; if linked to politics it remains more often than not a guilt politics aimed at relieving the subject's own discomfort, a political narcissism.

### **Contrapuntal openings**

In what has gone above I made reference above to what might be the wounding of whiteness. I also mentioned that the contrapuntal is a means of overlapping different territories of experience, a potentially unsettling or destabilizing 'opening up'. How, by way of conclusion, might we link these two ideas?

Edward Said offers a curious model of cosmopolitan subjectivity. In approaching this topic, he considers a far broader realm of cultural insularity than that of the white racism and anti-racism we have focussed on. Said is concerned with the discomfort of a continually decentred subject, with the fact that

...for even for the most identifiable, the most stubborn communal identity...there are inherent limits that prevent it from being fully incorporated into one, and only one Identity. (2003, pp. 53-54)

For Said there is ultimately no self-enclosed wholeness of the subject, no security of an identity at one with itself. Such forms of anxious decentring in some way potentially affect us all, and Said takes them to underlie the generation of a spectrum of intolerances and chauvinisms. What thus becomes apparent is that one way of understanding the contrapuntal is *as a wound*, a puncturing of the narcissistic enclosure of self-contained identity.

Said's description of the difficulties, the *pains* of cosmopolitanism is consonant with this idea. The cosmopolitan for him is not to be understood in the terms of sentimental humanism, a beneficent multiculturalism or universal brotherliness. By contrast, it is seen as something far more troubling and

discomforting, something which holds neither the promise of singularity, nor of any “feeling better”. Cosmopolitanism is a lack of closure, a lack of a closure of identity, a lack of a closure of cultural insularity. Like a wound that does not heal, cosmopolitan subjectivity is a kind of painful remaining open, a refusal to close into one. One might link this notion of cosmopolitan subjectivity to psychoanalytic conceptualizations such as Klein’s depressive position or Lacan’s ‘subjective destitution’, both of which foreclose the possibility of narcissistic wholeness and eschew fantasies of transcendence or exceptionalism in favour of something far more fragmented and disconcerting. This then is the essence of the cosmopolitan for Said (2003, p. 54), a mode of subjectivity which is made possible not through ‘dispensing palliatives such as tolerance and compassion’ but by its existence as ‘a troubling, disabling, destabilizing...wound’, from which ‘there can be no recovery...no utopian reconciliation even within itself’.

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<sup>1</sup> Given that I am writing of the post-apartheid context I mean ‘anti-racism’ in a very broad sense, that is, as inclusive of a variety of attempts at integration, redistribution, historical redress, ‘affirmative action’ and so on.

<sup>2</sup> See Gobodo-Madikizela (2003) for an excellent account of the ethical quandaries underlying political apologies in the context of reconciliation.

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