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Originally published in Journal of community and applied social psychology, 16 (3). Pp. 207-232 © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

You may cite this version as:

Hook, Derek (2006). 'Pre-discursive' racism [online]. London: LSE Research Online.

Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/archive/00000957>

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# 'Pre-discursive' racism

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## ABSTRACT

This paper makes the case that discourse analytic approaches in social psychology are not adequate to the task of apprehending racism in its bodily, affective and pre-symbolic dimensions. We are hence faced with a dilemma: if discursive psychology is inadequate when it comes to theorizing 'pre-discursive' forms of racism, then any attempts to develop an anti-racist strategy from such a basis will presumably exhibit the same limitations. Suggesting a rapprochement of discursive and psychoanalytic modes of analysis, I argue that Kristeva's theory of abjection provides a means of understanding racism as both historically/socially constructed and as existing at powerfully embodied, visceral and subliminal dimensions of subjectivity. Kristeva's theory of abjection provides us with an account of a 'pre-discursive' (that is, a bodily, affective, pre-symbolic) racism, a form of racism that 'comes before words', and that is routed through the logics of the body and its anxieties of distinction, separation and survival. This theory enables us, moreover, to join together the expulsive reactions of a racism of the body to both the personal racism of the ego and the broader discursive racisms of the prevailing social order. Moreover, it directs our attention to the fact that discourses of racism are always locked into a relationship with 'pre-discursive' processes which condition and augment every discursive action, which escape the codifications of discourse and which drive the urgency of its attempts at containment.

*Key words:* discourse analysis; racism; affect; bodily experience; psychoanalysis; 'pre-discursive'; abjection; hate

What can we make of the way in which discourses not only constitute the domains of the speakable, but are themselves bounded through the production of a constitutive outside: the unspeakable, the unsignifiable? (Butler, 1997, p. 94).

## INTRODUCTION

In the white world the man of colour encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema... My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recoloured, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is ugly, the Negro is animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly... All around me the white man, above the sky tears at its navel, the earth rasps under my feet, and there is a white song, a white song. All this whiteness that burns me... (Fanon, 1952, pp. 112-113).

One cannot but notice the prevalence of the body in Fanon's (1952) *Black Skin White Masks*, black bodies in particular, as they are contrasted against insignias of disembodied whiteness. A recurring motif of traumatized corporeality grounds the text's phenomenological concerns with racism and reiterates the violent physicality of racism's colonial forms. The notion of 'corporeal malediction', the disjunction, in other words of a particular corporeal schema (of inhabiting a 'black' body) in a given historico-racial schema (of the racist white world) is offered as a means of conceptualizing the brutal psychological effects of racism (Fanon, 1952). The 'meta-physics' of racism are read into the natural features of a hostile, white world; the hatred of this racist world, correspondingly, is read back into the experience of a mutilated, radically objectified body. There is something difficult to fathom in this disconcerting mismatch of physical and psychological properties: a disjunction that obeys no strict demarcation between ideology and bodily experience, between the stereotypes of racist discourse and its effects on an embodied psychology. More than a phenomenology of the black body, more than a corporealization of the psychological violence of racism, Fanon's writing mimics the 'bodilyness' of racism, reminding that however advanced its forms, racism never loses its localization in the body (see also Gordon, 1997).

What I have in mind here, and what this paper is concerned with, is an awareness of how racism often manifests as a kind of *bodily logic*, an 'operation of repulsion' that retraces bodily operations of expulsion at a psychological and subsequently symbolic level. I have in mind here a racism of fearful bodies, a bodily localization of racial fear that manifests in the racist's violent 'psycho-visceral' reactions to the racial other. I, like Fanon, am concerned with the virtual omnipresence of the body in racism, but whereas

he focuses on the bodily effects/affects of the victim of racism, I seek to explore racism as a *mode of reactivity* that has been routed through the dreads, aversions and nausea of the body. My focus, in short, is on an embodied form of racism that is played through, and substantiated by, the body's economy of separations and distinctions. Here, following Marion Iris Young (1990b), the task is to emphasize that the body must not 'fall out' of the analysis of racism; we need to apprehend those habituated symptoms of avoidance, aversion, disgust or discomfort – bodily reactions, bodily symptoms of racism – exactly those evasive structures of oppression *that lie beneath discursive consciousness*. My aim is thus to engage with those facets of racism that exceed discursive explanations, to offer a grid of analysis able to grasp the irreducibly corporeal aspect of racism. I hope to offer a conceptualisation of a form of racism that takes hold, and is *fixed* as a kind of bodily logic that defies rational and discursive logic and that comes to assume a naturalizing bent in the process. What is it about the tenacity of prejudice, we might ask, that pre-empts discourse, that routinely disrupts attempts at discursive containment?

### **CRITICAL IMPERATIVES IN THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF RACISM**

My objectives here should be contextualized within the frame of critical social psychological studies of racism. As suggested above, my particular goal in this respect is to make the case for a line of theorization that complements discursive/constructionist approaches to the study of racism, a line of theorization that may both supplement the critical instruments that this perspective has supplied us, and that may direct our attentions to its potential blind-spots. Although it may seem unnecessary to rehearse the benefits of the discursive approach to the analysis of racism in social psychology, briefly doing so helps to situate my argument and to signal my endorsement of such an approach. As critics such as Bulhan (1985), Foster (1991, 1999) and Howitt & Owusu-Bempah (1994) have noted, attempts within psychology to isolate racism to the aberrant subject or to faults of cognition effectively turn a problem of social power into a problem of individual psychology. Social cognition and self-categorization theories make for two cases in point; these

are theories, which, by contrast to discourse analysis, have come to “portray prejudice as an inevitable outcome of human cognitive structure” and have thereby “excused racists from being accountable for their attitudes and behaviours” (Augoustinos & Reynolds, 2001, p. 21). As Leach (2002) has pointed out, much classical social psychology views racist activity as “a function of weak personality, biased perception or ethnocentric categorization.... [ultimately locating] prejudice in the individuated person rather than in societal practices and institutions” (p. 440). Such an individualizing frame of reference not only absolves society as a whole from the responsibility of racism, it also avoids approaching racism as a *normative* condition of a given society, the ideological *fiat* of which is that racist norms in a given society are implicitly normalized (Bulhan, 1985; Dalal, 1998, 2001, Howitt & Owusu-Bempah 1994). The discursive conceptualization avoids converting the social and political dimensions of racism into a set of internal psychological processes – avoids transforming them into the information processing mechanisms of individuals, as Henriques (1984) puts it – and as such avoids abstracting racist ideation and behavior out of their immediate social, structural and institutional environments (Condor, 1988; Edwards, 2003; Rapley, 1998, 2000; Van der Berg, Wetherell & Houtkoop, 2003; Van Dijk, 1987, 1992; Wetherell, 1996; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Importantly then, not only does the perspective of discursive psychology endeavor to show how racism is linked to processes of social, political and economic domination and marginalization, it also sheds light on how such phenomena come to be naturalized within society at trans-individual and extra-personal levels (Billig, 2001; Durrheim & Dixon, 2000; LeCouteur & Augoustinos, 2002; Verkuyten, 1997, 1998). These benefits notwithstanding, it remains crucial, even from the position of a loyalist, to explore the limitations of such an approach, limitations that would appear to center on its inability to conceptualize racism in its least ‘signifiable’ aspects. I have in mind here a mode of racism not primarily representational or institutional in form, a form that is often less than conscious or intentional in nature, a racism of immediate response and of apparently unmediated affect. This is a racism that need not take verbal form, that is realized in impulses, played out in aversions and reactions of the body; a racism that appears to remain as of yet unconditioned by discourse.

This challenge, I should emphasize, is as theoretical as it is political. It is theoretical in as much as racism is a complex and over-determined set of phenomena that elude easy, or intuitive, conceptualization. And it is political in as much as we cannot properly apprehend racism if we have failed to adequately understand what sustains it, what lends its potent affective qualities, what supports its most visceral aspects. One might refer to Miles (1989) in this respect, who, speaking of the relation of theory and practice in the fight against racism, notes, “if the analysis is wrong, then it is likely that the political strategy will not achieve the intended objectives” (p. 5).

## **DISCOURSE ANALYTICS AND RACISM**

If I am to demonstrate the limitations of discursive approaches to the analysis of racism, then I need provide a brief impression of the distinctive preoccupations of such approaches. In this respect I mean neither to provide an extensive overview, nor to conflate a variety of discursive perspectives that maintain important internal differences (for a clearly differentiated synopsis of such approaches see LeCouteur & Augoustinos (2001) and Rapley (2001)).

From the perspective of discursive psychology, racism is to be approached “as an interactional, language-based practice” (LeCouteur & Augoustinos, 2001, p. 230). The analysis of discourse affords us the opportunity, in Rapley’s (2001) terms, to inspect talk, and to thus study how “issues of ‘race’ and ‘racism’ are confected, constructed and contested in actual social practices” (p. 236). The discursive framework enables us to scrutinize the ways in which “realities are constructed and warranted around issues of race and ethnicity in...elite, institutional, and everyday, informal talk and texts” (LeCouteur & Augoustinos, p. 230). As Wetherell puts it: “In this view the derogatory categorizations and group descriptions which form the basis of racist talk are best seen as rhetorical and communicative acts rather than as perceptual or cognitive phenomena” (Wetherell, 1996, p. 220).

It is important here that we not lose sight of questions of social and institutional practice. An important analysis of racism within South African psychology, for example, views racist phenomena as elements of “a set of ideas and discursive and material practices aimed at (re)producing and

justifying systematic inequalities between ‘races’” (Duncan, et al, 2001, p. 2). Similarly, Wetherell and Potter’s important (1992) study defines racist discourse as that “which has the effect of establishing, sustaining and reinforcing oppressive power relations between those defined as racially or ethnically different” (p. 70). While their analytical focus is “on meanings, conversations, narratives, explanations, accounts and anecdotes” they are careful to acknowledge that the study of racism should not be equated merely with the study of certain statements of talk and writing:

[R]acism is [not] a simple matter of linguistic practice. Investigations of racism must also focus on institutional practices, on discriminatory actions and on social structures and social divisions (1992, p. 3).

Van Dijk, another prominent proponent of discourse analysis (1984, 1987, 1993b, 1998), is similarly cautious not to reduce racism to the analytical domain of the textual. Discourse, he (2002) advances, is one type of discriminatory practice among others. He provides a delimited definition of discourse as “a specific communicative event, in general, and a written or oral form of verbal interaction or language use, in particular” (2002, p. 146). It is clear from his approach – an approach that favours the technically sophisticated analysis of structures of discourse and linguistic devices - that racism is bigger than discourse alone:

Theoretically my approach to the discursive reproduction of racism analyzes discourse as an interface between macro and micro levels of racism (that is, between racism as a system of ethnic group dominance and racism as everyday discriminatory practice), between social actions and cognitions (again at the micro and macro levels, namely as actions and ideologies of groups or institutions, and as actions and attitudes of social members)...such insights should contribute to a broader multidisciplinary study of contemporary racism (van Dijk, 1993a, p. 98).

As is apparent from this quote, van Dijk’s approach allows a greater consideration of cognitive functioning – memory processes and other social cognitions – than does the approach of, say, Potter & Wetherell (1992).

Miles (1989) provides an important benchmark within the broad range of discursive approaches. He defines racism as “a process of signification” (p.

3) that works by attributing meanings in a way that creates rigid systems of categorization. Here, racism is understood as a specific discourse which involves (i) particular representations of real or imagined somatic features and (ii) attributions of negatively evaluated characteristics. These processes are supported by 'racialisation', a dialectical process in which social relations between people have been structured by the signification of certain human characteristic in ways that construct differentiated social collectivities. Miles (1989) insists that "the concept of racism should be used to refer only to what can broadly be called an ideology" (p. 3), ideology here understood as referring to any discourse that represents human beings and the social relations between them in a distorted manner: "ideology is a specific form of discourse" (p. 42).

By limiting the concept of racism, which he asserts must be "defined as representational phenomenon" (p. 79), Miles thus runs the risk of textual reductionism. This problem stems from his concern that "the concept of racism has come to refer not only to imagery and assertions, but also to practices, procedures and outcomes, often independent of human intentionality and specific ideological content" (p. 3). In fairness, one should note that Miles is motivated by the question of analytical accuracy – "the analytical value of [the] concept [of racism] is determined by its utility in describing and explaining societal processes" (p. 77) - and by the dangers of insidiously reifying exactly those discursive entities ('race', attributions of 'whiteness', 'blackness') that a critical analysis of racism should attempt to deconstruct. Regarding the first of Miles' reservations, one can only suggest that a different analytical framework needs to be devised exactly so that those practices, symptoms and behaviours that seem to be independent of intentionality and ideological content can be brought into critical visibility. Regarding his second reservation: yes, we must remain constantly vigilant that our frame of analysis is able to deconstruct the idea of 'race', and that terms like 'race' are often insidiously essentialized even in our critical analytical use thereof. However the fact of the constructed nature of such categories does not mean that we should foreclose supplementary (non-discursive) forms of analysis that offer different explanatory routes to just how



such constructions are consolidated and substantiated at ‘pre-discursive’ levels.

Clearly then, not all discursive conceptualizations are as prone to reducing racism to the textual, that is, to acts of representation, to rhetoric, to signification. Nevertheless, one might counter, there remains, perhaps as an inherent tendency of discourse methodology, the risk of a reduction to talk, and with it, an overwhelming analytical prioritisation of words and significations over and above contexts, institutions and associated social practices. This is the gist of Hammersley’s (2003) critique of the “methodological severity” of much discourse analysis (see also Nightingale & Cromby (1999) on the problems of reducing social life to linguistic or verbal phenomena). Whether the frame of discourse analysis is extended ‘outwards’ so as to include issues of social structure and material practice, or ‘inwards’ to consider more carefully the role of cognitive functioning – each of which, one might argue, cannot be directly accessed through the critical scrutiny of texts – there are at least three fundamental factors of racism which remain conspicuously absent. These are factors, emphasized in my opening reference to Fanon, that remain fundamental to the lived experience of racism: embodiment, affect, and that experiential domain that we may refer to as the ‘pre-discursive’, i.e. that which comes before words, that which is not easily contained or assimilated into the symbolic domain of speech, language, signification. (In what follows I will refer to these three factors collectively with the label of ‘pre-discursive racism’).

Each of these factors remains crucial in Fanon’s pained and frequently lyrical, indeed, *poetic* attempts to illustrate the more visceral devices of racism. They remain, however, absent from the analytical work of the above analysts, precluded from an epistemological frame that prioritizes textual data. None of this is to deny that there is much to be gained from a line of scrutiny that recontextualizes the ostensibly extra-discursive - the body, the domain of emotion, insidious social significations, and so on – through a textual lens, thus demonstrating their historical and ideological locations within the world of representation. As Foucault (1981) advances, the showing up of the discursive qualities of the supposedly extra-discursive remains an urgent critical exercise (see Hook, 2001). This notwithstanding, it would seem that

there are serious limitations to a mode of critical social psychology which a) hopes to analyse social phenomena exclusively within a textual frame, b) neglects those insidious factors of racism that I have highlighted above, preferring to grapple only with those phenomena of racism that can be accessed with the tools of discursive scrutiny.

## **RACISM BEYOND WORDS**

Racism, I have recently argued, is a phenomenon that is as *psychological* as it is political, *affective* as discursive, *subjective* as ideological (Hook, 2005a). As a series of authors have recently cautioned, we cannot explain prejudice and bigotry as merely sets of representational content, as simply the effects of asymmetrical social structure, as only conscious beliefs and political effects (Cheng, 2000; Seshadri-Crooks, 2000; Žižek, 1998). For Lane (1998), racism's irrational forms "elude explanation by sole reference to either conscious precepts or social history" (p. 2). Shepherdson (1998), similarly concerned with the limits of constructionism and historicism, questions whether issues of 'race' can be adequately grasped as only a matter of "discursive effect or...purely through symbolic formation" (p. 44). The full significance of the concept of 'race', he (1998) argues, remains irreducible to the analysis of historical and discursive context; to understand racism we need in addition an awareness of the *psychical representations* of 'race', only then can the peculiar tenacity of this concept be addressed. Winnubst (2004) extends this observation by noting that psychoanalytic theory provides the tools with which to answer "what social constructionist approaches assume but never adequately account for", namely the fact of "how race attaches to individual bodies and psyche...while simultaneously operating through a trans-social logic" (p. 43). Her criticism of social constructionist/discursive approaches is blunt:

[I]f it is though the embodiment of race that racism works, then the conception that race is socially constructed is, in its ability to articulate the complex processes of embodiment, insufficient to diagnose the mechanisms and structures of racism (Winnubst, 2004, p. 43).

Psychoanalysis, she proclaims, provides opportunities to articulate how race is historically and socially constructed and yet, nevertheless, individually embodied. Clarke (2003) expresses similar reservations over the recent preponderance of sociological/discursive analyses of racism, many of which fail, in his estimation, to address a series of core issues:

[F]irst, the ubiquity of forms of discrimination and *the affective component* of hatred; second...the sheer rapidity, *the explosive, almost eruptive quality* of ethnic hatred... Third...the *visceral and embodied nature* of racism... Finally, the *psychological structuring* of discrimination...the psychological mechanisms that provide the impetus for people to hate each other (2003, pp. 2-3, *my emphasis*).

What unites all of these accounts is the imperative to account for what Selznick & Steinberg (1969) have called 'the tenacity of prejudice', that is, racism's notorious recalcitrance in the face of historical, discursive and institutional change. To paraphrase Lane (1998): conventional emphasis on racism's material and discursive history tends to ignore this phenomenon's *impalpable forms*; to consider racism as merely the outcome of "cultural fixation or residue of historical prejudice is not sufficiently helpful" (p. 3) he advances. "It remains for us to interpret this phenomenon's astonishing intransigence" (Lane, 1998, p. 3), to grapple with racism uncanny logic of return, as Žižek (1998) puts it, with the fact of apparently growing levels of intolerance, racist hostility and hatred even in societies where equality and democracy have become enshrined ideals.

## **PSYCHOANALYSIS IN POLITICAL MODE**

To adopt a psychoanalytic perspective is not to relegate discussions of racism to the register of the singular, to condemn them to irretrievably individualistic modes of conceptualization. Neither is it to fix the topic of racism within a 'vernacular of deviancy' which views racist phenomenon as no more than a psychopathological form, or as the maladjustment of isolated subjects. This is not to say that earlier psychoanalytic engagements with racism have not been guilty of both such reductionisms, of thinking racism as effect and expression

of internal psychological dynamics (firstly) and/or attempting the 'pseudoconcrete' application of specific clinical categories (paranoia, compulsive neurosis, hysteria, etc.) to racist phenomena (secondly) (see Dalal (2001) for a definitive critique of such trends in the history of psychoanalytic conceptualization, but also Cohen (2002) and Frosh (1989) for thorough critical overviews of psychoanalytic engagements with racism). As hardly needs reiterating: these are trends of analysis that we should be constantly vigilant of if we are to apply psychoanalysis in a political mode and direct it towards the agenda of social critique. We likewise need remain aware of a series of standard criticisms aimed at psychoanalysis as "a discourse of modernist, bourgeois, European origins" which has all often "tended to describe psychology in terms of universal frameworks that ignore cultural and historical specificity" (Bergner, 1999, p. 222). By making universalizing assumptions of this sort, by perpetuating Western assumptions of its own origin and remaining unaware of its own ideological complicities, psychoanalysis has certainly been applied in ways which legitimate/naturalize versions of oppressive politics (Cohen, 2002; Winnubst, 2004). Critiques of this sort have been well documented, particularly in reference to postcolonial theory (Campbell, 2000; Khanna, 2003; Macey, 2000b; Moore-Gilbert; 1997; Young, 2004) and critical studies of race, gender and class (Abel, 1990; Bergner, 1999; McCulloch, 1983; Pajaczkowska & Young, 1999; Rustin, 1991; Spillers, 1996), two general domains of study in which the call for a 'rehabilitated' application of psychoanalytic theory has been at its strongest.

A cross-section of recent psychoanalytic work on the topic of racism (Bhabha, 1994; Cheng, 2000; Clarke, 2000, 2003; Hook, 2005b; Riggs & Augoustinos, 2004; Seshadri-Crooks, 2000; Winnubst, 2004; Žižek, 1998) avoids the above pitfalls of de-contextualization and psychological reductionism. Work of this sort has situated itself explicitly in the field of social and political commentary (rather than remaining within the individualizing realm of clinical diagnostics) and has focused its attentions on the interrelations between desire, fantasy, affect (on one hand) and questions of social/symbolic structure (on the other). Such critical applications of psychoanalytic theory have remained attentive to the interpenetration of psychological and structural factors, focusing on the "complex and often

painful transactions between the psychic and the social” in the words of Pajaczkowska & Young (1999, p. 198), aware that psychological operations (identification, disavowal, projection, desire) do not occur in a historical vacuum or beyond the reach of forceful discursive practices.

In the introduction to *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, Christopher Lane (1998) retorts to claims that psychoanalysis is a necessarily ahistorical or depoliticizing instrument of analysis. “What could be *more* political than of fantasy” he asks, “when it determines the fate of entire communities, nations, even continents” (p. 7). More directly yet: “We cannot comprehend ethnic and racial disputes without considering the implications of psychic resistance”, or unless we “engage critically with the fantasies organizing the *meaning* of racial and ethnic identities” (1998, p. 1). What is required then, to summarize the mode of critique I am advocating, is neither an account that looks simply to isolated subjects themselves, in a way that is cut off from the historical and symbolic realms they occupy, nor a focus on those symbolic structures abstracted out of their relationship with human subjects. We need instead to understand something of “the complicated relationship between subjects and their symbolic structures” (Lane, 1998, p. 2).

## **RAPPROACHEMENTS OF DISCURSIVE & PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM**

Psychoanalysis would seem to have particular bearing on our current focus of ‘pre-discursive’ racism, certainly inasmuch as it understands the body as a ‘surface of experience’ from which the ego gradually emerges, and certainly given the attention it pays to pre-symbolic, affective and unconscious modes of experience. My intention – to be quite clear – is not to simply replace discursive/constructionist understandings of racism with those of psychoanalysis. I am arguing, by contrast, for a strategic rapprochement of discursive and psychoanalytic frames. I mean this not in the sense of simply assimilating the terms of one system into the theoretical frame of the other - as in the case of Billig’s (1999) attempt to reformulate the idea of repression within the theoretical vocabulary of discursive psychology - but rather in the vein suggested by Henriques *et al* (1984) in *Changing the Subject*. Venn motivates in this text for “a theory of discourse which recognizes the

investment of power and desire in the discursive process” (p. 151). This, clearly is not to recommend an unconditional endorsement of all psychoanalytic conceptualisations; rather it is to make the claim that the “domain of the unconscious, of invisible desires and feelings is central to any account of subjectivity” (p. 151).

One cautious example of such a rapprochement might be seen in Rose (1982), who discusses how social regulation is frequently managed via the register of desires and through the instrumentalization of pleasure. Adams (1982) similarly raises the question of an analytics of desire as a crucial aspect of social critique. Although discursively produced, and requiring social and historical contextualization, the issue of desire – like that of fantasy, anxieties, and deep-set fears - remains an important factor in the explanation of social power (Adams, 1982). A more sustained reference to psychoanalytic theory as a means of reading power is to be found in Homi Bhabha’s (1994) scrutiny of colonial discourse, particularly in his influential elaboration of the racist stereotype as following the logic of fetishism (for an expository treatment see Hook (2005b)). Seshadri-Cooks (2000) likewise draws on psychoanalysis as means of tackling the persistence of the discourse of race; she utilizes Lacanian notions of sexual difference to posit whiteness as a ‘master signifier’ around which a racist system of differences comes to be organized. Khanna (2003), similarly aware of the problematic universalism of much psychoanalysis, nevertheless insists on its importance “as a reading practice that makes visible the psychical strife of colonial and postcolonial modernity” (p. 2). Riggs (2005) takes up a similar approach in advancing the prospects of psychoanalysis as a ‘post-colonising’ reading practice able to render visible foundations of white belonging, and their relation to ongoing acts of colonial violence. (For examples of social psychological applications of psychoanalysis in discourse analytic treatments of racist texts, see Billig 1997; Frosh, 2002; Frosh, Phoenix & Patman, 2000; Riggs & Augoustinos, 2004; for discussion of psychoanalysis as a means of reading texts, see Parker 1997a, 1997b, 2002).

To be sure, what is involved in rapprochements of this sort is not merely the critical or historical contextualization of psychoanalysis; what is required, by contrast, is speculation “about how particular discourses set parameters

through which desire is produced, regulated and channelled” (Henriques *et al*, 1984, p. 220). This is a two-way process. The content of desires - like that of particular anxieties, phobias and depressions - must be viewed as neither timeless nor arbitrary, rather as historically specific, contingent upon a backdrop of particular discursive practices. However, the discursive-historical frame must not simply dominate the analysis; to do so relegates the unique explanatory potential of psychoanalysis to a descriptive role within discursive theory. As Henriques *et al* (1984) argue, the positioning produced through the force of such discursive practices will in itself provide only a partial answer to how power intersects with subjectivity:

[T]he relation between the workings of the unconscious of any particular [subject] with respect to positions in any particular practice is not one of simple recognition and acceptance. That is, *we need to understand the motivational basis through which such an uptake [of discourse within unconscious desire] is produced* (Henriques *et al* (1984), p. 222, *my emphasis*).

What is equally called for thus is an explication of how discursive relations enter, and become reciprocally intertwined with, the production of the ‘faculties’ of desire, fear, anxiety, and fantasy in the first place (Henriques *et al*, 1984). The double imperative here, to reiterate, is to investigate how power and desire (or fear, anxiety, fantasy) are *simultaneously produced* (firstly) and produced at least partly within the machinery of a subjectivity that is not entirely accessible to rational discursive consciousness (secondly). Such a description provides the precise co-ordinates within which I would place the objectives of this paper. I though am more concerned with the underside of desire, with the operation of fear in its most radically affective, embodied and pre-symbolic capacities, indeed, with the simultaneous production of power and fear, *with how discourse enters into and becomes consolidated at the level of ‘pre-discursive’ mechanisms of subjectivity*.

## **RACISM AND ABJECTION**

What is called for then is an account of embodiment and affect that entails a strong social and political dimension, and that is able to explain something

about pre-symbolic (or visceral) reactivity. The particular theory I have in mind is Kristeva's (1982) notion of abjection, a psychoanalytic account that has been utilized precisely as means of challenging the explanatory limitations of social constructionist/discursive accounts of experience (Foster, 1996; Hook, 2002). Oliver (1993) has made use of the concept precisely as means of pointing out an ontological domain that both precedes and exists in opposition to the realm of language and the 'symbolic'. (The 'symbolic' here refers to the broad realm of social order, signification and law that makes discourse possible). The body is indispensable in this theory; the ego is never wholly autonomous its corporeal basis - indeed, it is the body within this account which stakes out the limits not only to the physical experience of the subject, but to social identity as well. Based as it is on such a prioritisation of the body, the theory of abjection offers an extraordinary set of insights not only into the 'physicality' of the phenomena of racism - its bodily fascinations and anxieties, the visceral quality of its most primal reactions - but also into the linked qualities of psychological and indeed symbolic survival that seems to underwrite its affects. This is a mode of explanation, furthermore, that endeavours to grapple with the extremities of non-verbal experience. It tries to grasp the depth of hatred that racism is able to incur, to understand the threat to body, ego and culture that such a formulation of affect seems able to consecrate. Based, as it is on a constitutive kind of fear, on a form of horror that is at the same time a kind of incoherence and dissolution, the notion of abjection enables us to think a theory of racism that is based on boundary threats, on threats to the physical, psychological and symbolic integrity of the racist subject.

It is important to signal from the outset that this is as much a social theory as it is a psychological theory of embodiment. Kristeva's (1982) discussion of abjection presents us with an interesting interchange of influences: it is based as much on Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis as it is on Douglas's groundbreaking study of cleanliness and defilement, *Purity and Danger* (2002), whose anthropological and sociological insights Kristeva rearticulates, as Grosz (1994) notes, within a psychological and subjective register. Moreover, Kristeva's theorization of abjection, much like Fanon's own strategic use of psychoanalysis, might be said to be concerned with how



psychoanalysis itself has 'sublimated' questions of politics and racism. Neither Fanon nor Kristeva extends an orthodox version of psychoanalysis; both in fact query certain of its fundamental suppositions. The analytical efforts of both writers make us aware that despite powerful unconscious factors, racism is not something that can be adequately understood merely at this level, that indeed, racism is also worn on the surface of consciousness.

The theory of abjection has been surprisingly under-utilized in theorizing racism – with the notable exception of Oliver (1993, 2000)) - especially so within the domain of social psychology. It is true that Young (1990a, 1990b) makes some useful comments connecting abjection to racism, but she, like others who refer to the term in a chiefly descriptive rather than analytical capacity (see for example McClintock, 1995), offers no sustained discussion of the conceptual and political utility of the underlying theoretical basis of the notion. This is my objective in what follows, an exposition of central tenets of the notion of abjection with a view to commenting on how applications of this concept may enlarge the field of critical social psychological analyses of racism.

## **A DYNAMICS OF DEGRADATION**

The literal meaning of abjection (in Latin *ab-jicere*) is to cast off, or out. In speaking of the abject we have in mind the contemptible, the repugnant, the wretched, that which is unwanted, filthy, contaminating. In Butler's (1990) terms, the abject, at its most literal, designates "that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered "Other" (p. 169). "Degradation, as state and purpose", as Herbst (1999) puts it, "lies at the core of the term 'abject'" (p. 15). *Abjection* then, as verb, should be understood as an operation: the powerful visceral reaction to a given stimulus that is then denigrated, rejected, expelled. The *abject*, on the other hand, as noun, should be understood as the apparent source of such reactions and affects, that abhorrent, uncontained and indefinable 'thing' which elicits avoidance, repulsion, sickness, disgust.

Abjection, to be sure, is a forceful reaction, one that entails responses of expulsion and denigration. It is this level that Butler (1993) has in mind

when she refers to abjection as an 'operation of repulsion'. Both a form of recoil and of response, of repugnance and of reflex action, abjection, it should be remembered is always activity, *action* as much as it is disgust. There is an immanent relation to action in the subject who experiences abjection, an immanent relation to a variety of demonstrative acts and potential violences, symbolic or otherwise, that will keep the source of abjection at bay. What is it though that gives rise to abjection? Those experiences, simply put, in which one undergoes the unsettling sensation of not being able to distinguish 'me' from 'not me'. Abjection as such is a 'border-anxiety'; an urgent response that arises in order to separate one's self from what is perceived to be a contaminating quality, a quality that threatens the distinctions of self.

The abject, insists Kristeva (1982) is not directly knowable. One detects its presence chiefly by virtue of the visceral, indeed, the *bodily* responses it induces - palpable anxieties of disgust, avoidance, and repulsion. Clearly this is not a primarily discursive sensibility; we are not here concerned with racism as a form of "knowledge", but rather with a "primal" response that pre-empts (and sometimes overrides) such discursive responses. The abject is above all that which *threatens*, that which plagues and disturbs identity, system and structure. What we see in responses of abjection is the desperate attempt to reaffirm a kind of ego-coherence, an attempt loaded with the exaggerated affect that comes with the reflex urgency of the wish to divide self from the other.

The original and primary 'surface' of the abject's realization is the body. For psychoanalysis, as is well known, the body is the multi-zonal site for the earliest instances of cultural exchange and socialization, the template for the developing ego; "the boundaries of the body", after all, "are also the first contours of the subject" as Butler (1990, p. 169) puts it. Amongst the most primal (and powerful) abject "objects" (or stimuli) are those items that challenge the integrity of one's own bodily parameters – blood, urine, feces, etc. – those bodily products once undeniably a part of me that have become separate, loathsome. These detachable parts of the body

retain something of the cathexis and value of a body part even when they are separated from the body. There is still something of the subject bound up with them – which is why they are objects of disgust, loathing, and repulsion as well as envy and desire (Grosz, 1994, p. 81).

Two points should be made here. Abjection is always the flipside of desire; there is always a prospective intimacy and attraction to that socially undesirable quality that comes to be classed as abject (hence the strength and imperative of the reflex to expel). Secondly: the experience of abjection is never complete. The ego's attempt to achieve autonomy through separation-individuation is always a struggle against exactly those borderline "objects" that defy me/not-me categorization and that threaten to dissolve the integrity and separateness of 'self' along with the broader social system of identity of which it is part. The notion of abjection always carries with it the element of crisis: "Taken to its logical consequences, it is an impossible assemblage of elements, with a connotation of a fragile limit" (Kristeva, 1988, p. 135-136). This draws us to the realization that, at some level, abjection remains an impossible process, something that is not lost on the subject. As Kristeva comments, abjection is "a revolt of the person against an external menace...a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of impossibility of doing so" (1988, p.136), hence the desperation, one might suggest, of the incessantly repetitive practices of abjection.

## **ABJECTION AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE**

In abjection then we have something like a 'force-field' of identity, one in which two particularly potent sets of affect - hate and fear – exist in combination. They are intertwined in a protective way, so as to secure the integrity of a given structure, be it bodily, psychical or social in nature. Why this potential line of explanation is so pertinent is that it gives us some grasp on what often seems the most difficult quality of racism to understand: the sheer and unswayable irrationality of the fear and of the hatred directed at the 'racial other'. This is one quality discursive accounts struggle to explain, the very 'why' of extreme irrational racist affectivity (the 'costs' of affectivity that is, even in the absence of any rational, discursive or material gain). Importantly

however, the affectivity that the notion of abjection hopes to explain does not remain at a solely psychological level of conceptualisation. Abjection is a forceful physical, psychical and symbolic response, an expulsive reaction on all of these levels, a violent attempt at restitution of an apparent affront to wholeness be it of the body, of identity, of socio-symbolic structure. Hence Kristeva's description of abjection as "an extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic" (1988, pp. 135-136). Further yet:

Abjection is coextensive with the social and symbolic order, on the individual as well as...the collective level...one encounters it as soon as the symbolic and/or social dimension of man is constituted...abjection assumes specific shapes and different codings according to the various "symbolic systems" (1982, p. 68).

The ontology of the social Kristeva utilizes here - perhaps unusually for many orthodox forms of psychoanalysis - does not prioritize individual complexes above the consideration of history, culture, social forces. Indeed, abjection, as both process and condition, occurs typically in unison with and as means of recapitulating the existing social formation:

The process of *abjecting* [an operation]...is an active one in which one party rejects, banishes, degrades or in some way denigrates another party; the state of *being* *abject* [a condition]...is what follows an act of abjection: it is a disposition, a place of exclusion... Without exception, the party that does the abjecting is the one in a position of power...while the one degraded is robbed of power and the right to societal inclusion (Herbst, 1999, p. 16).

Butler (1993) makes the same point when she asserts "the notion of abjection designates a degraded or cast out status within the terms of sociality" (p. 53). As I hope is becoming clear then, the 'pre-discursive' bodily rationalities of abjection provide us with a series of 'instinctive' reactions upon which particular political logics may be transposed. Here we may identify a link to broader sociological and social constructionist accounts. Onto the seemingly natural order of divisions and distinctions that occurs along the parameters of the body (and ego) we may be able to discern a distinctive trace, the imposition that is of a series of constructed differentiations between subject

and abject, differentiations that would hence hope to attain a kind of corporeal objectivity, a kind of primary ontology. This would seem to tell us something about the pernicious and deep-seated qualities of certain forms of racism: what we have here is a form of racism that has been encoded into a set of 'sub-discursive' bodily responses, a racism, put differently, that has been written into a natural series of physical reflexes and divisions.

The compatibility of the notion of abjection with constructionist/discursive accounts is crucial here: there is no one 'primordial' or original abject. Abjection, for Kristeva (1982) possesses no intrinsic object. As Weiss (1999) emphasizes, the abject is that intolerable, contaminating thing, that historically-variable 'entity of threat' that can include "other people...an infinite number of phenomena" (p. 57). Concurring, Butler (1993), uses the notion of the abject to designate "uninhabitable" and "unliveable" zones of social life - zones populated by those who do not qualify as full subjects of that particular social order - whose function is to circumscribe the domain of those who *do* qualify as full subjects. There can, in short, be no abject other than that which is socially determined. Adding to this, it is important to note that the abject is always an abstract quality, transferable along the lines of family likeness across a variety of objects. This poses considerable complications for the ego: the abject "thing" cannot simply be subsumed into the dialectics of self-other, ego-object strategies of identification.

The abject is precisely that which continually disallows the prospects of any correlative objects, symbolic or otherwise, through which "I" would be able to assume a kind of detachment and autonomy. Any number of possible objects, people or environments across an unspecified yet limited grid of associations may 'manifest' the abject for the subject; a fact that helps us in grasping something of the generalizability of racist sentiment. This is a useful consideration in view of the associability of racial hatred across a broad variety of apparent characteristics of the 'racial other'. The notion of abjection, in other words, understands that the 'logics' of hate of racism needs no definitive or singular object; there is no one single feature, rather multiple shifting elements of 'blackness' (to take Fanon's (1952) example), each of which is 'abjectionable' for the white racist. I should note here that the

underlying grid of such associations is not itself 'pre-discursive', but is instead necessarily supplied by a social sphere of political values and norms, by discourse. This though is not to say that the immediacy of affect and response in abjection is not - after the fact of socialization – experienced in a 'pre-discursive' way, routed that is, along 'pre-discursive' channels. (It is for this reason that I use scare-quotes throughout in referring to the 'pre-discursive', so as to acknowledge the practical difficulty of separating the (discursive) contents of racism from the affective, bodily and pre-symbolic processes that inscribe its values in a seemingly 'pre-discursive' capacity).

The underlying threat of the abject for Kristeva (1982) is the threat of death. The abject is always associated with some kind of deathliness, she insists, it always evokes the primal fear of the ultimate dissolution of ego. This gives us an appreciation of the emotional stakes in processes of abjection; the volatility of such phenomenon - as would seem to be the case in forms of racism – stems from the fact that a potential dissolution of subjectivity is apparently being threatened, a kind of wiping away of the individual coherence of the subject. The direness of this threat must be understood in conjunction with the role abjection plays in the constitution of human subjectivity. Butler (1989) here makes an important contribution in her Foucauldian critique of Kristeva's theory - which at times, she claims, drifts towards a solely negativist conception of power – emphasizing that within any given social formation abjection must function as an integral *productive* aspect of identity. So, abjection, for Butler, even whilst always associated with the threat of dissolution, is always equally concerned with a project of self-definition, with the task of ego-construction (the substantiation of identity, in other words), processes that are of course taken up and consolidated at the level of social structure. In understanding abjection we need prioritise not only the 'threatening outside', but also the role of a 'loathsome inside', those elements of the self that must be ejected. The productive processes by which subjects are formed, she insists – and the pertinence of her description to the dynamics of racism here is obvious - requires the "simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings...who are not yet "subjects," but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject" (Butler, 1993, p. 3). This zone of uninhabitability

constitute[s] the defining limit of the subject's domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which – and by virtue of which – the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life...the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitute outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation (Butler, 1993, p. 3).

We best grasp these dynamics of subject constitution once we have understood the nature of the relationship between the processes of abjection, on one hand, and the structure of the symbolic, on the other. The theory of abjection, that is to say, is also an account of the means by which a subject takes on a speaking position within the world of language, law and culture that Kristeva understands as the symbolic. Here I would argue that we take the lead of Winnubst (2004) who prefers to speak about a specific and historicized cultural domain – the ‘cultural symbolic’ - rather than to slip into abstract descriptions of the universal structure of language. (The political values and institutionalised norms of white South African during the apartheid regime provides us with a prospective example of such a ‘cultural symbolic’). If we do this, we have at our disposal a theory of enculturation that may be adapted to tell us something about the processes through which subjects come to be differentiated in particular historical and discursive locations. Moreover, we will have a theory able to tell us something about the violent dynamics that lend a degree of fixity (that is, rigidity, a ‘buttoning-down’ of subjectification) to the positioning of subjects within given discursive regimes

## **SEMIOTIC AND SYMBOLIC**

Although I prefer not to delve too deeply into the details of Kristeva's account of infant development (for an authoritative accounts see Gross, 1990a; Grosz, 1989; also Lechte, 1990; Oliver, 1993), it is useful to briefly refer to her distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic. Each of these categories refers to a distinct dimension of subjectivity that Kristeva takes to be foundational to all speaking subjects. The developmental progress of each such subject, she argues, involves the necessary transition from a type of

subjectivity governed by the former to a subjectivity governed by the latter: it is in the course of this transition that the abject first arises.

The idea of the semiotic is best grasped as the realm of experience that occurs prior to the acquisition of language. Whereas the symbolic is the conscious law-based and language-founded domain of structure and difference, the semiotic is an element of the pre-verbal and subsequently repressed unconscious. Gross (1990a) describes the semiotic as a murky, undifferentiated and narcissistic realm characterized by the lack of distinct borders and clear separations. In the earliest months of life the infant is thought to form a syncretic unity with the mother, and is as such unable to distinguish between itself and its environment, possessing no awareness of its own corporeal boundaries. The child as such is ubiquitous “with no separation between itself and ‘objects’...it forms a ‘primal unity’ with its objects” (Gross, 1990b, p. 34). For Kristeva (1982), this state speaks of the necessity of the mechanism of abjection (as primal process of division, demarcation, exclusion) to the formation of self-other relations, to the basic acquisition of language, and ultimately, to the (relative) stabilization of identity in a particular ‘cultural symbolic’. Macey (2000a) concurs: abjection succeeds in “establishing bodily boundaries by facilitating the introduction between the inner and outer...between the ego and the non-ego” (p. 1). In short, if the child is to enter the symbolic, to acquire language and thereby identity, a form of primal differentiation and separation proves imperative. The expulsion of the abject – in whatever form threatens the nascent distinctness of the infant’s body, ego – is thus taken to be a necessary precondition of entry into the symbolic.

Abjection thus provides “a sketch of that period which marks the threshold of the child’s acquisition of language and a relatively stable enunciative position” (Gross, 1990a, p. 86). The implication of this is that language, and perhaps most pertinently, the subject’s position within a designated ‘cultural symbolic’, is continually problematized by its previous existence, by an existence *prior to an order of differentiation* that a particular ‘cultural symbolic’ has come to treat as primary. Always a function of likeness, a function of a prospective relation of intimacy that is continually disavowed, the abject is a part of the subject that must be continually dispelled but that



can never once and for all be destroyed; it hovers at the borders of a subject's identity, "threatening apparent unities and stabilities with disruption and possible dissolution" (Gross, 1990a, p. 87). As Herbst (1999) emphasizes, the abject is only 'peeled away' from the subjectivity of the developing subject as a result of exclusions and prohibitions set in place by others. This point holds for the structural integrity of both the individual ego and of the cultural symbolic order in which that individual is located. The threat of the abject then is simultaneously: 1) a menace to the demarcations of the body, 2) an affront to the structural integrity of the ego, and, 3) a destabilization of the social and linguistic structuring systems of the subject. Abjection, as such is *the underside of the symbolic*, that which "the symbolic must reject, cover over and contain" (Gross, 1990a, p. 89). The abject's disruption of the boundaries of identification hence occurs at different levels, and understandably so, given that ego-integrity is as much about bodily wholeness as it is about the location conferred by cultural symbolic structures of meaning.

## **THE NERVOUS CONDITION OF DISCOURSE**

I have until now focussed mostly on the abject as it affects the ego and the body. It is important also to consider the role the abject plays in troubling and undermining the cultural symbolic, particularly so, given that it may be at this level that the impact of the abject is most acutely experienced. This is also a crucial point in how Kristeva's theory helps us think about the analysis of racism. Kristeva does not simply overturn discursive accounts, preferring to focus solely on the 'pre-discursive' in the exclusive sense of what comes before discourse; her account is a description of *the desperation of a cultural symbolic pushed to its limits*, a theory, that is, about symbolic forces and the limitations and failings of a given discursive system which is beginning to come apart. The importance of this conceptualization is thus not merely about pointing out the limitations of the discursive frame, about 'topping up' a discursive account with reference to affective, bodily or pre-discursive elements of racism. Its importance lies in showing up how discourse is always locked into a relationship with 'pre-discursive' factors that provide a fuller

means of understanding the dynamics and limitations of discursive processes themselves. Let me develop this argument a little more slowly.

As I have stressed above, the effects of abjection upon the subject cannot be localized exclusively within the domain of the ego. The 'powers of horror' of the abject are exerted more violently at that point of conjunction between ego and social law that we recognize as the superego. Kristeva (1982) expresses this point succinctly: "To each ego its object; to each superego its abject" (p. 2). The horror and sickness of the abject is thus not limited to that quantifiable object that vexes and disturbs the ego; it exerts itself even more dramatically upon the moral-political nerve-centre of the superego, each subject's personalized guardian of the symbolic. The abject then is an attack on the network of discourses; on that 'discursive sphere' that makes up the cultural symbolic in which each speaking subject is placed. In this respect it starts to become clear that Kristeva's is a social theory, a theory, in part, about the operation of discourse within a broader realm that includes extra-discursive elements. Incidentally, this concern with how the abject troubles the cultural symbolic sets Kristeva's theorization apart from the typical ego-to-other line of analysis within which many psychoanalytic applications have attempted to fix the economy of racism (see critiques offered by Cohen, 2002; Dalal, 1998, 2001; Frosh, 1989). This is a useful point in playing up the shortcomings of psychoanalytic perspectives that neglect the structural and constitutive role of discursive practices, and that focus almost exclusively on the level of the ego when it comes to understanding the effects of racism (see Lane, 1998; Rustin, 1991; Žižek, 1998 for criticism of such trends in psychoanalytic accounts of racism).

Viewing racism as a variant of abjection means that we cannot analyse it at the isolated level of an individual's psychological transactions with a field of objects. We must view racism rather in the context of a threat of the abject as posed to a cultural symbolic as a whole. If we grasp the point that the cultural symbolic itself is threatened, that it is in the convulsions of a crisis of its exclusionary ordering systems, then we understand something of the social force of racism that this theory illustrates. This is not to disconnect our discussion from the consideration of 'pre-discursive' factors of racism as realized in the domain of individual experience. To the contrary, it is to plot a

line of continuity between these dimensions of abjection, to suggest (once again) that we need to focus on the relation between the *structure* of the cultural symbolic and the *processes* of abjection. These processes threaten the integrity and stability of the cultural symbolic at the same time that they provide it with the means of exclusion, demarcation and differentiation that prove to be a condition of its possibility. This relation between structure and process is best approached with reference to the limits of language.

Language, like other instances of signification, is a chief instrument of differentiation and demarcation, and is hence of crucial importance in stabilizing that domain of boundaries, discrimination and difference that Kristeva (1982) understands as the symbolic. Abjection, by contrast, is the 'border-anxiety' of a state that knows no such distinctions, no such order. The abject is that threat beyond words which plagues language, that which the ordering systems of the symbolic cannot contain or regularize. It confounds and destabilizes such symbolic systems, disabling the sense-making mechanisms through which I – and the cultural symbolic of a given society – would claim a sense of security and stability. This is the danger that the abject poses to the ordering formation of a given discourse, and, at a higher level of abstraction, to the ordering systems of a particular cultural symbolic: such systems of demarcation and differentiation break down before the threat of a formlessness that cannot easily be objectified. Language is enlisted to contain the abject, to give it a temporary object status, but language always fails and must repeat its attempts at objectification, endlessly reiterating them in the echoing forms of the stereotype, the racist slur, in the fixity of the racial category (Bhabha, 1994; Hook, 2005b). Discourse as such, in the regularity of its categories, in the surety of its reiterated demarcations, is an ally in the attempt to fend off and objectify the abject even though such efforts never prove completely effective. This is why discursive forms of engagement are both absolutely crucial to the analysis of racism but also in and of themselves inadequate to the task. They are crucial because such symbolic attempts at containment - in language, in the codifications of a particular discourse, or in reference to the norms and ideals of the cultural symbolic - are elementary responses to the experience of abjection. Indeed, there is a great volume in the production of discourse precisely at those moments when the abject

seems to intrude. On the other hand, such discourse analytic approaches are also inadequate to the task at hand for they are not able to apprehend *the other side of such discursive operations*. They are not able to grapple with those 'pre-discursive' processes which condition and augment every discursive action, which escape its codifications and drive the urgency of its attempts at containment. Bhabha's (1994) characterization of the nervousness and continual anxiety of racist colonial discourse understands this point. To make such a point, importantly, is not to reduce discourse merely to a function of affect. It is to suggest rather that such a nervous condition is registered in particular discursive forms (the ambivalence of the colonial stereotype and of colonial mimicry for example (Bhabha, 1994)) and – more directly relevant to my concerns here - that discursive regularization sometimes gives way to different modalities of expression.

## **THE CONSTITUTIVE OUTSIDE OF DISCOURSE**

In moments of abjection then we are concerned precisely with *the failure of discourse* – with the inability to adequately contain or regularize the object within a given order of knowledge, law and representation. Given this crisis of formalization, we should be surprised neither that there is a great deal of discursive activity - attempts at repairing this crisis - or that such anxious responses of dread and aversion take on expressive forms that seemingly occur 'before' language. Such responses take on the route of 'pre-discursive' or symptomatic forms where the body returns in a field of forceful affects and aversions. These are the dimensions of threat and anxiety that discourse analysis cannot adequately fathom, 're-routings' of social forms of hate that text-based critiques cannot adequately factor into their analyses. Such a dynamics of fear is too consuming to be grasped merely at the level of representational activity, signification or rhetorical rationality.

Let us for the moment apply Kristeva's theory as a means of understanding the potent forms of resistance that a given cultural symbolic system is capable of, that is, as a psychoanalytic theorization of the violent dynamics of discursive structures themselves. The notion of abjection, indeed, is an account that borrows from, or, more appropriately connects the registers

of the body and the ego to tell us something about the potent forms of response *that are the resistances of a given system of structure* whose overall cohesion and intelligibility seems under threat. Just as the individual subject asserts and consolidates an ego (and indeed, a bodily schema) on the basis of a variety of repulsions, exclusions and differentiations, so the cultural symbolic would seem to work as an 'excluding machine' that produces its structural integrity on the basis of what it ejects and repudiates. Here we might briefly pursue the image of the cultural symbolic as a discursive sphere: at the core of such a sphere we might expect to find a tight ideological nucleus binding its system of significations, laws and divisions. Such a gravitational field of values might be assumed to work in conjunction with a centripetal force, a boundary division, or better yet, a *force field* of norms and ideals that exerts a powerful outward charge on whatever appears to threaten the structure and integrity of the whole. What works on the level of the body, it seems, works also on the level of the ego, and on the level of the social formation: in each case a violent repulsion operating with the immediacy and urgency of a reflex action that consolidates a particular order of structure.

We may even press this metaphor further: if such a discursive sphere exerts a continual centripetal force against that which does not fit its system, then might we not assume that these outward forces play their part in reinforcing the structural integrity of the sphere as a whole? Those elements which do not fit its system, which oppose its values would seem to play a vital role in holding this discursive sphere in place, securing its cohesion and ensuring the rigidity of its internal structures and divisions. If this is the case then we are confronted with a different relationship of dependence than we may have expected. If the discursive sphere of the cultural symbolic needs what it excludes to ensure that it assumes a regular and intact form, if it is exactly this constitutive outside that determines its shape, then any given discursive sphere would seem to be reliant on precisely what it cannot assimilate, namely its objects. These extra-discursive elements, best understood here as the 'pre-discursive' factors of racism, would thus appear to function as a condition of possibility for the discursive (much in the sense that the symbolic follows on from the semiotic); they would be the 'limit forms' that determine the contours of a given discursive sphere.

Returning to a more applied focus on the analysis of racism, we might suggest that discursive and 'pre-discursive' factors need be examined together for the simple reason that each forms the other's 'constitutive outside'. Most certainly, the extra-discursive here might be understood as that conditioning, attendant and menacing force – a kind of primal anxiety of formlessness and dissolution – that shadows all discourse, shaping and driving the imperatives of discursive production. What the production of discourse offers, by contrast, is a measure of protection – via its abilities of differentiation, categorization and symbolic containment - against the bodily disturbances, ego anxieties and threats of structural/social disintegration that the abject brings. The analysis of racist discourse as such would seem to proceed best in conjunction with the scrutiny of those 'pre-discursive' elements that condition its limits and with which it remains in a constant and dynamic relation of tension and incommensurability. The scrutiny of such 'pre-discursive' elements may guide us to the weak-points of the discourse in question, helping to show up its areas of utmost density and vulnerability, its areas of blockage and 'unspeakability'. Not only might such an approach mark out where the affective loading of such discourses is at their greatest – directing us to its particular moments of anxiety and repetition and hopefully opening up possibilities for subversion along the way - it might also focus attentions on those points of conjunction where racisms of discourses connect most forcibly to racisms of the body and of the ego.

## **REGISTERS OF BODY, EGO, SYMBOLIC**

What the theory of abjection helps us grasp then about the social operationalization of hate is that any subject category that comes to occupy the position of abject will exert a three-part threat experienced at each of the associated levels of the body, ego and cultural symbolic. One might note in this respect how an analytics of abjection exposes the prospective limitations of psychoanalytic and discourse analytic approaches alike, certainly inasmuch as they focus their attentions exclusively on the level of ego disturbances or symbolic activities, respectively. The fear and loathing of abjection cannot be

consigned to any one of these dimensions of sociality; we are concerned here rather with a nervousness of multiple dimensions that reverberates across a series of interlinked registers of experience. What this suggests is that racist sentiments may be said to persist in subliminal (pre-symbolic, bodily, affective) forms even after they have been confronted at the level of explicit discursive consciousness. Not only is it the case then that discursive forms of racism may be re-routed, given alternative expressive form. It is also possible that once rejected, such discursive sentiments might be rehabilitated at 'pre-discursive' levels; consolidated via the means of bodily and symptomatic experience; re-enacted and *affected* in modes of aversion and reactivity that motivate for discursive formalization. If this is the case, as Young (1990a) argues that it is, urging us to pay more attention to those structures of oppression lying beneath discursive awareness, then the censure and analysis of racist discourse will, in and of itself, prove an inadequate strategy of anti-racist politics.

We need cast our analytic net widely enough to identify a series of distinct but overlapping modes of racism. A base, visceral racism of the body, firstly, invested with anxieties about physical proximity with 'racial others', fantasies of contamination, obsessions with bodily difference. This is a racism of the flesh, in short, replete with symptomatic expressions and affects, a reviling of the other on a 'pre-discursive' basis. Secondly, an *interpersonal* racism: a racism of ego and object, a mode of subjectification best grasped with reference to a series of psychological operations (such as those of projection, splitting, disavowal, identification and so on (for an overview see Clarke, 1999, 2003)). This, it would seem, is a properly psychological dimension of racism, at least inasmuch as we are concerned with forms of racism that have been tied into those ego operations dedicated to possessing a stable, clearly delineated and separable structure of identity. Never merely psychological in nature, we need view racism here, following Frosh (1989) as

something deeply embedded in the psychology of the individual racist... [Indeed] social forces do not operate solely on the structural plane, but become inextricably bound up with the subjective experience of individuals, which in turn contribute to their

perpetuation...[Racism] achieves part of its power through being inscribed deeply in individual psychology (p. 210).

Racism as it is generated and sustained at the level of trans-individual systems of the cultural symbolic, thirdly; the dynamics of abjection are felt here also. Our priority in this respect lies in tracking this disturbance as it is realized in the dimension of ideological force, as it is factored into regimes of representation, knowledge and social practice. We will not be surprised here to find that racism takes on a moral character, a near metaphysical quality: the 'racial other' and all their assumed attributes comes to represent a series of cultural violations. One might speculate here as to the quasi-religious nature of racism – as Kristeva (1982) does in the case of Anti-Semitism – in which the 'racial other' is not merely offensive in respect of their body, mind and culture, but is thoroughly repugnant in view of the positive assault they represent to the moral order of the (racist) world. The 'orb of abjection' notes Kristeva (1982), spreads across the social sphere of morality, religion, politics and culture.

This is not simply to make the routine observation that racism can be analyzed at a variety of different levels of sociality. It is rather to suggest that critical social psychology requires a theory that is able to connect and conceptualize how such dimensions of racist subjectivity may work in powerful arrangements of combination – or no less potent arrangements of mutual tension and contradiction – so as to produce something of the persistence that makes racism such an obdurate social formation.

This returns us to the question of the rapprochement of discursive and psychoanalytic approaches in the analysis of racism. If we are to effectively grapple with the complex relationship between subjects and their symbolic structures as it is realized in racism, what is required is not merely a more historicized version of psychoanalytic critique. This is not just a case of aligning psychoanalysis and discourse analysis such that we are better able to track psychological mechanisms in talk, or to view psychoanalytic processes as enacted in language (Billig, 1999; Georgaca, in press; Riggs & Augoustinos, 2004) although, I hasten to add, these are certainly important critical strategies. I would suggest that what is more urgently required in the



study of racism is attention to a *psychoanalytic theory of the functioning of racist discourse itself*, that is, an awareness of the 'affective economy' of racist discourse and how it is held in place, conditioned by, and always involved in a dynamic relation with those bodily, affective and pre-symbolic components that I have referred to as 'pre-discursive'.

Here then the nub of my argument: although 'pre-discursive' symptoms are qualitatively different from their discursive correlates, they remain inseparable from them, an integral part of their mechanics of operation. Such processes make up the 'constitutive outside' of discursive formalization; these after all are the factors that discourse struggles to cover over and to contain: the anxieties, visceral and symptomatic reactions that requires the alleviation of being put into words. Unless we are able to take such 'pre-discursive' factors into account, to see how they underwrite and often exert a driving influence upon racist patterns of signification, we do not appreciate the full virulence, indeed, the full volatility of racist discourse. We do not adequately understand the ways in which racist discourse combines with forces of the body, or the ways in which it links to the most desperate mechanisms of subjectivity and ego constitution. We do not, in short, adequately understand the 'pre-discursive' (affective, bodily) economy of racist discourse itself.

The ultimate incommensurability of bodily experience to words is one way of understanding the limitations of discourse analysis when it comes to racism; the same might be said of the incommensurability of abjection to symbolic/discursive means of containment. These points of failure, where representational or symbolic means of analysis are elided by a visceral, 'pre-discursive' or bodily set of responses should be taken as nodal points in the analysis of racism. Indeed, it is exactly these points of failure that we need to bring into analytical visibility if we are to adequately grapple with the tenacity of racism.

## **CONCLUSION**

I have attempted above to draw attention to the limitations of exclusively discursive accounts of racism and to underline the need to involve 'pre-discursive' factors in critical social psychological accounts of racism. We need

to be able to engage those forms of racism that evade the rules of discourse, grapple with a racism of powerful affective responses, embodied experience, of pre-symbolic reactivity. Kristeva's notion of abjection assists us in this respect. It helps us theorize the role of the body in racism, warning us not to neglect the domain of physicality, perhaps especially so when discursive forms of racism appear to be in retreat. To be sure, the body never 'falls out' of racism; on the contrary, it is just such a nervous body, the body of racialized aversions and dreads that may motivate and underlie many more overtly discursive formulations of racism. One might refer in this respect to the 'sensuality' of racism that Fanon (1952) understood so well: phobias of racial proximity/contact; anxious visceral reactions to the physical presence of racial others; the heightened bodily sense of the 'getting under the skin' ('epidermalization') of racial markers which succeed in overdetermining the subject from without. In the notion of abjection we have a theory of embodiment able to understand a form of racism that is played through, and substantiated by, the body's economy of separations and distinctions. We have, moreover, a conceptualization able to grasp a mode of racism that is routed through affective channels and that maintains powerful links to death, the corporeal limits of the subject, and the constitution of identity.

Pertinent here too are issues of the emotional and ideological intensity with which racist identity is formed, questions, that is, of racism at its most affective, irrational and imaginative. The notion of abjection provides an explanatory perspective on both the extremity of affect and the virulence of response that that accompanies many of the starkest instances of racial hatred. The fact that abjection is always in part *action*, reflexive or reactive *response* helps us understand something of racism's immanent relation to expressivity, it also helps explain why many forms of racism seem forever poised on the brink of demonstrative acts and potential violences, symbolic or otherwise. The vehemence and desperation of much racism is likewise played up by the theory of abjection inasmuch as it stresses that the threat the abject embodies is typically that of the subject's dissolution: what is at stake here is the subject's constitution as a coherent and distinctive body, ego and symbolic entity.

By understanding the operations of abjection as a force-field that maintains the coherence of the ego – a coherence doubly supported by symbolic structure and bodily parameters – Kristeva provides an impressive linkage between the registers of the body, the ego and the cultural symbolic. This enables us to think the interconnection of ‘bodily’ racism, the racism of personal identity and the symbolic racism of social and discursive structures. Racism as such has more than one rallying domain, and functions, characteristically, in a complex combination of forms that lends it an almost uncanny tenacity. What this means – and here the gist of Butler’s (1993) Foucauldian contribution to Kristeva’s theory – is that abjection is not simply a primal process of bodily and ego differentiation, but equally a top-down production of power through which the structures of a given society are affirmed and solidified through the systematic generation of a class of disqualified abject subjects.

I am aware that such extended reference to processes of abjection risks an insidious naturalization of racism. In much the same vein, I am conscious that this theory might be read as supplying an underlying bodily/biological (and hence essentialized) grounds for racist behaviour. It is hence worth reiterating again that there are no essential or fixed abject ‘objects’: those ‘subjects’ or ‘zones of uninhabitability’, which come to count as abject are, as Butler (1993) insists, socially prescribed. ‘Race’, or racialized categories themselves – as would seem clear – have no necessary relationship to the dynamics of abjection. To be quite clear: the theory of abjection cannot be used to motivate for a natural/‘pre-discursive’ basis for the differences that a particular discursive regime comes to treat as primary in its differentiation of subjects. As Young (1990a) insists, the notion of abjection does not explain how that considered abject initially came to assume such a position. Explanations of this sort seem better served by the historical, sociological and constructionist perspectives that I would argue the theory of abjection serves to compliment. Explanations of the dynamics of abjection, by contrast, are better equipped to tell us about how the social differentiations prioritised by a cultural symbolic come to be enacted along potent pre-symbolic, affective and bodily routes of experience.

My descriptive attempts at explaining aspects of racism should not, furthermore, be taken as attempts at 'explaining away', as an insidious justification of such modes of reaction. Whereas the 'dynamics of hate', practices of exclusion, rejection, repulsion and so on, may be considered trans-historical, unavoidable factors of human existence, racism itself cannot. If the theory of abjection essentializes anything, it essentializes the dynamics of disgust, revulsion and exclusion, the processes of expulsion and division that, admittedly, it views as universal and integral aspects of human experience. While such operations of repulsion may be viewed as intrinsic and necessary features of subject formation, this cannot be said of racism. This is a crucial distinction: it is the difference between assuming the inevitability of racism as a form of defense and ego-constitution common to all humans, and the injunction to examine the particular ways in which distinctive forms of hate come to be socially operationalized.

It is perhaps worth reiterating here that the threat of the abject needs by no means be referenced in a 'real' objective state of affairs; indeed, this object-less threat radiates not from any intrinsic qualities of whatever or whoever is considered abject, but rather from a system's (body, ego, cultural symbolic) attempt to consolidate its own wholeness/autonomy/purity. I note this simply so as to guard against what might be read as an implication of my description above, namely that the responses of abjection – and by extension, those of racism - are somehow justified, given the threat experienced in moments of abjection. This threat is best read in conjunction with the psychoanalytic notion of fantasy, with the proviso that despite the depth of affect that it is capable of incurring, its basis in reality is often at best slight.

I would suggest, in view of the possible points of slippage discussed above (racism as 'natural system', the threat of the abject as somehow justified) that we take the precaution of viewing abjection as a *technology of affect*. This denaturalizes racism, emphasizing that there may well be certain routings of affect that seem to exist prior to the intervention of social and symbolic meaning – these are not after all primarily discursive operations – but that are certainly amenable to the exploitation of various political and discursive systems which are themselves reinforced in the process. Abjection as such makes for a particularly potent route for the ideological operation of

racism precisely because of its affective and ostensible 'pre-social' or 'unmediated' nature, because of the fact that it is taken to be non-discursive, immune to the ideological gravity of social processes. This is indeed a pernicious technology, a technology of bodily and psychological differentiation mechanisms (the co-ordination of an 'operation of repulsion' to recall Butler's phrase), which functions in a virtually instinctual capacity to affirm and substantiate structures of the body, of identity and of the cultural symbolic.

As is clear then, the theory of abjection does not simply play the part of a complement to discursive accounts – filling in their gaps by exploring more fully the affective, bodily, personalized elements of racism – it is also the case that abjection is *itself a mean of producing ideological effects*, by which I mean to say that it provides another means of 'encoding', operationalizing, indeed *affecting* processes and meanings of racial hatred and exclusion. As Kristeva puts it: "Abjection, when all is said and done, is the other facet of religious, moral and ideological codes on which rests the sleep of individuals and the breathing spells of societies" (1982, p. 209).

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