BOOK REVIEW

Response to Derek Hook’s Apartheid’s Corps Morcele, in (Post)apartheid conditions

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I would like to begin by applauding and expressing my great appreciation for the tremendous amount of knowledge that I have gained from reading and spending time with Hook’s work. The chapter encourages us to shift the gaze as he invites
us to trouble and problematise the issues of race privilege and Whiteness when we speak about and theorise them in our work; he introduces the psychoanalytic as a pulse, a haunting, an absence, a presence, in social psychological theorising, which must be the grounds upon which we understand the words spoken, actions taken, the unsayable. My own work joins Hook at the spot of the unsayable . . . but more about that later.

In this text, and his other work, Hook zooms in and highlights the complex nature of race and racism and shows how, for example, it is not just about the fantasy about being black, but embodying blackness and how in that way the psychic and the physical cannot be separated. For Hook, the fantasy of the black body continues to be a “troubled” space. His numerous examples of how the black body was perceived and “used” in apartheid South Africa offers insights into the embodied and symbolic nature of racism and oppression in general.

His analysis and critique links to the arguments made by many who follow the school of the theory of representation which highlights how representations are not simply out there, but penetrate, circulate, and contaminate; repeat across the intergenerational, metabolised as natural. But, what of the politics of representation? What of the violence of representation? For whom/and on whose body are these representations cast into the global winds? For a vivid example, let me return to South Africa, May 10th 2012 —many years post-apartheid— to understand how the black body continues to contain racist fantasy and to understand how black subjectivities respond to these images . . . With this, I would like to offer a short example:

On 10th of May 2012, an exhibition (by artist Brett Murray) entitled Hail to the thief II was opened at one of the galleries in Johannesburg South Africa. One of the painted pieces on display was that of the country’s current President, Mr Jacob Zuma with his genitals exposed. One of the aims of the piece was to represent and highlight a corrupt, greedy, and power-hungry government. This immediately caused an uproar and led to protests outside of the gallery with people demanding that the piece be taken down. For many, this represented and served as a reminder of the oppression that many suffered under apartheid. A reminder of the many black bodies that were tortured/humiliated/dismembered and generally never treated with dignity; not simply a representation, but a haunting. This was perceived as being disrespectful not only to the president, but to the nation at large. One could argue that the wounds that many people still carry with them were exposed, and this was an example of what I call the psychology of suffering, the intergenerational weight of the ghosts of apartheid for whites and blacks that live in our culture and our bodies.

In my own work, I have looked at this notion of the psychology of suffering, and various ways in which people tell or narrate personal stories of suffering. I compare the narratives produced in three contexts, or tongues so to speak: in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, through personal narratives as told by black South African women and the making of personal embroideries in an embroidery
collective of South African women. Bringing together these different ways of telling, I attempted to highlight the complex nature of expressing pain. This process was revealing and continues to be troubling as we think about how suffering can be expressed.

In some ways, Derek and I have taken on a similar task; I have interrogated the varied, tortured paths of telling, but Derek has provoked, I think, a complex conversation about what happens once we tell, once we speak the unspeakable, and how much it depends on who is telling and who is listening. Through photographic images and with a psychoanalytic lens, Hook’s work offers us another way to think about how pain and the violation of the body can be problematised. It is crucial to note that psychoanalysis by its nature can sometimes offer the comfort of distancing oneself from the “object” of analysis. For me, using “projection” to explain the violent action of whites against blacks is problematic or perhaps partial, because the fantasy was accompanied by actual harm being done.

At this point, I would like to offer a self-reflection of what it was like for me reading this chapter. For me, the mutilated/dismembered black bodies are not a “fantasy”, for I am the object of the fantasy discussed in this chapter; my father, mother, grandmother, and grandfather are the objects of this fantasy. I would like to flip the notion of “a scene that cannot be seen” that Hook speaks of for a moment, and argue that reading about or seeing dismembered black bodies is bringing to light images that should remain “unseen”. This brings me to the issue of audience. When embarking on our scholarly pursuits it is crucial to keep in mind who the intended audience is. Which audience do we anticipate? For example, is the chapter intended for the black South African, the white South African, or the international reader? I raise these questions not with critique alone but a recognition that the subject is now reading, embodying, shaking off the page. We might all think about these dynamics for they are deeply social psychological dynamics within our work and the audiences who are being spoken about, the audiences who are reading, the audiences who are circulating/teaching the images. These are crucial questions to think about because context and audience determines how the content will be received; how representations circulate, tremble, cause violence, and are resisted. The repetition compulsion taken up even in critical psychology can operate, unwittingly, as an act of what Thomas Teo would call “epistemological violence”. And yet, we are all implicated in this as we seek to create a transnational project of critical psychology that dares to expose what has been buried, to say the unsayable. I am in agreement with Butler, as quoted by Hook in the chapter, that “to expose the victim further would be to reiterate the crime, so the task would seem to be a full documentation of the acts of the perpetrators ... without intensifying the exposure of the victim”. This is our work. Thank you Derek for providing an opportunity to open yet another conversation that is crucial to our discipline, and our interventions in a world of injustice.
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Puleng Segalo is presently employed as a lecturer at Unisa where she teaches both undergraduate and postgraduate students in community and social psychology. Her research focuses broadly on issues of historical trauma and suffering, gender, power, sexuality, and how these interplay. She is inspired by and draws heavily from critical feminist theories and narrative research approaches.

REFERENCES