

Checking the Post: Derrida and the Apartheid Debate

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There is no one, single deconstruction. Were there only one, were it homogeneous, it would not be inherently either conservative or revolutionary, or determinable within the code of such oppositions. That is precisely what gets on everyone's nerves As deconstruction is inherently neither 'conservative' nor the contrary, the political evaluation of each of the gestures called deconstructive will have to depend, if it is to be rigorous and in proportion to what it is addressing, upon analyses that are very difficult, very minute, very flexible with regard to the stereotypes of political-institutional discourse (Derrida 1988:141).

The text of *apartheid* continues to be an important source of critical investigation and contention within contemporary South Africa because of the history of race classification whose effects and affects counter-sign the constitution of a democratic post-*apartheid* South Africa. This paper is an investigation of Jacques Derrida's intervention into the debate on *apartheid* in the mid 1980s. Although my own discussion of the debate will proceed through analysis of the three major texts informing the debate—that is, Derrida's 'Racism's Last Word', Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon's response, 'No Names Apart: The Separation of Word and History in Derrida's "Le Dernier Mot du Rascime"', and Derrida's scathing rejoinder, 'But, Beyond ... (Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon)'—I will

not follow the debate to the letter. As the text of the debate on *apartheid* neither begins nor ends in *Critical Inquiry* I will variously draw from other contributions. At issue are four major questions.

Firstly, I examine how the misunderstanding of the deconstructive reevaluation of the question of '(con)text' informs the debate. Secondly, I argue that Derrida's gesture in 'Racism's Last Word' is not an attempt to (dis)place the text of *apartheid* as distinctively South African. His gesture is not, as it were, a characteristic reticence or denial of the question of complicity by the metropolitan intellectual. Thirdly, prompted by the interpretive violence of the interlocutors—which should not be separated from the emotive subject of the debate—I consider the question of an 'ethics of discussion' to which Derrida elsewhere states his commitment. Finally, I discuss the denigration of deconstructive practices as unethical, apolitical, conservative or anti-revolutionary, and the related question of the demand made by some commentators that Derrida explicitly declare his politics in the conventional terms of political philosophy, or even political activism.

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In her translator's note to 'Racism's Last Word', Peggy Kamuf gives a brief genealogy of the paper and reminds the reader that it was a translation of 'Le Dernier Mot du Rascime', which was written for the catalogue of an international art exhibition against *apartheid*. The particular purpose of 'Le Dernier Mot du Rascime' was, then, to introduce the project of the travelling exhibition, described by the organisers as awaiting (in transit) and seeking to hasten the day when it could be 'presented as a gift to the first free and democratic government of South Africa to be elected by universal suffrage' (1985:290). Derrida's own reckoning of the exhibition is that it is not a presentation, as nothing 'is delivered here in the present, nothing that would be presentable'. His opening (textual) analysis of *apartheid* begins with the appeal that it remain,

from now on, the unique appellation for the ultimate racism in the world, the last of many. May it thus remain, but may a day come when it will only be for the memory of man ... Confined and abandoned then to this silence of memory, the name will resonate all

by itself, reduced to the state of a term in disuse. The thing it names today will no longer be (1985:291).

Derrida argues *that* the name has never been translated in other languages possibly signals a lexical defence and submits that the untranslatability of what is named (by) *apartheid* constitutes 'a violent arrest of the mark' within the abstract realm of 'confined separation' (1985:292). The consequent corruption by the word of this separated separation into what he calls 'a quasi-ontological segregation' is due precisely to its hypostatisation or essentialisation of being apart.

For Derrida, the outrage of this political idiom, extreme though not dissimilar to other racisms, lies in its naturalisation of segregation. 'A system of marks', [racism] outlines space in order to assign forced residence or to close off borders. It does not discern, it discriminates (1985:292). *Apartheid*, then, is also 'the last' for the pageantry of its political constitution; its status as the only racism 'on the scene that dares say its name and to present itself for what it is: ... a juridical racism and a state racism' (1985:292). It is precisely for this reason Derrida argues *apartheid* is a 'European 'creation' and goes on to expose the complicity of a large part of Europe with *apartheid*. Despite the 'symbolic condemnations' of the Pretoria regime issuing from Europe, he analyses a number of the contradictions of the geopolitical/ economic/ theological discourse informing the text of *apartheid*. For Derrida then, the complexity of this text, its alterity as such, which resists most conventional forms of analysis—here, dialectical reason and humanism coming for particular censure—is precisely what 'calls for another mode of thinking'¹.

In their response, 'No Names Apart', it is clear that McClintock and Nixon locate their complaint against 'Racism's Last Word' in the second part of their title: 'The Separation of Word and History in Derrida's "Le Dernier Mot du Racisme"'. It is not so much that they doubt Derrida's 'signal opposition to the South African regime', for they recognise in their introduction that his paper 'is tendered as a call to action' (1986:140).

¹ In order to evaluate an attempt to read *apartheid* in deconstructive mode, I will return in the conclusion to this paper, to Aletta Norval's *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse* (1996).

(Neither is it insignificant that they choose to refer to his paper by the antecedent French title that appears in the catalogue of the exhibition—which I will return to later.) However, they find, in what one (in error) could call the ‘philosophical’ tenor of his arguments, the preponderance for merely examining ‘certain metaphysical assumptions’ without pointing ‘to something *beyond* the text, in this case the abolition of a regime’ (1986:140). They argue Derrida’s gesture lacks an analysis of the diachrony and politically formative functions of the discourses of South African racism. This deficiency requires a serious consideration of what they call his ‘method’. Their prognosis of the latter is that it ‘entails, in particular, pondering the political implications of both his extended reflection on the word *apartheid* and his diffuse historical comments’ (1986:140). In their understanding at least, the remedy is probably that of the enterprising ‘historical materialist’:

For to begin to investigate how the representation of racial difference has functioned in South Africa’s political and economic life, it is necessary to recognize and track the shifting character of these discourses. Derrida, however, blurs historical differences by conferring on the single term *apartheid* a spurious autonomy and agency (1986:140).

This is precisely why they find it necessary ‘*to part ways with him*’ (e.a.) in order ‘to face the challenge of investigating the strategic role of representation’ by examining *apartheid* ‘in the context of developing discourses of racial difference’ (1986:141). A differential reading of their phrase, ‘to part ways with’, could of course highlight that this phrase is symptomatic of their whole reading strategy. That is, what McClintock and Nixon part ways with here (but also from the beginning of their paper) is nothing short of reading ‘Racism’s Last Word’. As such, ‘No Names Apart’ is not a ‘response’; the texture of a response is one of responsibility, of duty, to reading. Derrida suggests as much in his rejoinder when he states that they ‘quite simply *did not read* [his] text, in the most elementary and quasi-grammatical sense of what is called *reading*’ (1986:157).

To be sure, I will not be parting ways with ‘Racism’s Last Word’, choosing rather, to read it *partially* with their response. This strategy is then

not only rhetorical, but also has the pragmatic effect of saving space by introducing some of Derrida arguments from his rejoinder, where he himself already closely reads 'No Names Apart'. *Partially* then, in both senses of this term: it both already prejudices and i(nte)rrupts McClintock and Nixon's arguments, and disjointedly, thus incompletely, reads Derrida's response. Their 'politically' interested refusal to read is, once again, motivated by, for them, the necessity of chronicling and periodising the changes to the rhetoric, ideology and lexicon of racism in the official discourse of the South African regime:

If an examination of South Africa's representation of racial difference is to be at all *politically* enabling, the changing hegemonic functions of the word *apartheid* and its kindred terms must be investigated in the context of an active, social language (1986:145, e.a.).

As I will show, and as Derrida himself argues, the 'enabling politics' McClintock and Nixon refer to are other than the politics that motivate their response.

McClintock and Nixon challenge the accuracy of 'Derrida's claim that South African racism is "the only one on the scene that dares to say its name and present itself for what it is"' (1986:141f) and therefore find misleading his reference to *apartheid* as the 'order's watchword'. Surprisingly, this is in spite of their reference to *apartheid* as the name of South African racism: 'South African racism has long since ceased to pronounce *its own name*' (1986:142, e.a.). That is, McClintock and Nixon acknowledge that '*apartheid*' is precisely the name (for itself) that South African racism seeks to disavow. Though they seek to deny it by delineating the disappearance of the name from the official discourse, McClintock and Nixon's acknowledgement that *apartheid* is the name of South African racism is precisely contained within their phrase 'its own name'. Indeed one could also argue that by italicising the word '*apartheid*' within the terms of their own response, McClintock and Nixon concur with Derrida's argument on its 'apartitionality' and 'untranslatibility'. The particular function of italicisation would here be the foregrounding of a certain typographic metonymy.

Finally, McClintock and Nixon are satisfied that their own response and analysis does not separate ‘word and history’, given that they have regarded ‘with a historical eye the uneven traffic between political interests and an array of cultural discourses’ (1986:154). For them, it is precisely due to his inattentiveness to ‘racial and class difference’ and a largely singular attention to the ‘solitary word *apartheid*’ that his ‘method’ carries no ‘strategic force’. Whence issues their assertion that Derrida’s singular attention to the ‘solitary word *apartheid*’ blinds him to the nuances of its historicity? As I have illustrated, Derrida is precisely aware of the complexity of the text of *apartheid*. In part, what seems to authorise McClintock and Nixon’s complaint against Derrida’s gesture in ‘Racism’s Last Word’, is a pre-theoretical apprehension of the ‘historical’ and what constitutes the ‘political’. That is, they appeal to the historical as mere datum or archive and the political as self-evident quotidian episteme. It thus seems—and Derrida argues this much in his response—that McClintock and Nixon’s complaint is directed at their conception of ‘post-structuralism’ rather than to Derrida’s text in particular.

Not content to disguise his ire, Derrida’s belligerent rejoinder identifies a number of fundamental reading errors in McClintock and Nixon’s response, which he argues is exemplary for it reflects the willed interest of both the ‘Left’ and the ‘Right’ ‘to represent deconstruction as a turning inward and an enclosure by the limits of language’. On both sides of this ‘political’ divide the impatience with deconstructive practices arises from the (denegated) recognition that the latter,

are also and first of all political and institutional practices ... [that create the space for and even necessitate] the most open kinds of political (but not just political) practice and pragmatics

....

But that is no reason—on the contrary—to give up reading books and writings still found in libraries. It is no reason to read quickly or badly or to stop learning how to read otherwise other texts—especially if one wants to better adjust one’s political strategies (1986:168f).

It should be clear that Derrida's remarks in the above—and this is consistent with the whole texture of his rejoinder—highlight the bitterness that characterises the debate. His damning suggestion here is that the disciplinary and institutional politics to which McClintock and Nixon's response adheres, (uncritically) follows the logic of *apartheid*. Derrida's rather severe assertion underscores the question of an 'ethics of discussion', a discussion to which I will later return.

To be sure, the scant criticism and commentary there is on the present debate, is to varying degrees united in the assessment of McClintock and Nixon's response as (not) completely missing the point—although I am not asserting that this consensus somehow renders their response wrong in advance. The chronologising of the lexical denegations of *apartheid* in the discourse of the South African regime does not constitute in any way a critique of Derrida's gesture in 'Racism's Last Word', as he himself undoubtedly (and quite forcefully) illustrates in his response. There are four major questions that the debate raises which I would like to expose more closely here.

The first of these is none other than the question of (con)text. It should already be clear that for Derrida the context and mode of his appeal are quite determined, thus his assertion that McClintock and Nixon's misapprehension of this leads them to 'take a *prescriptive* utterance for a *descriptive* (theoretical and constative) one'. This does not mean, as Paul Cilliers seems to think in 'On Derrida and Apartheid', arguing with himself in the most confused fashion, that Derrida's justification of the appeal constituted in the first line of 'Racism's Last Word' is an attempt to extricate prescription from description. Derrida is precisely aware, as Cilliers himself acknowledges, that the distinction between prescription and description is irreducible:

It is prescriptive concerning the *name* of the ultimate racism, but the statement is descriptive of what the ultimate racism *is*, namely Apartheid (Cilliers 1998:81).

Cilliers' objection is thus unclear. For Derrida, 'although it is not limited by the form of descriptive observation, [his] "appeal" in no way contradicts the

historian's truth' (1986:158)². Thus, the mistake or 'enormous blunder' that McClintock and Nixon make is the degree to which they take his 'appeal' to be *only* a descriptive utterance.

Cilliers usefully notes that the 'context in which McClintock and Nixon, as well as the rest of us, encounter 'Racism's Last Word' is *not* in the catalogue, but in the pages of *Critical Inquiry*, an academic journal' (1998:80). He adds,

there is nothing wrong with an academic article, especially one with an ethical focus, in the form of an appeal. The point here is that Derrida was, *by his own lights*, a little more than unfair to chastise McClintock and Nixon for not realizing what the *correct* context of his text was—a context that should apparently have fixed their reading of the text (1998:80, first e.a.).

'By his own lights' then, for Cilliers seeks to argue that Derrida is in contradiction with his own assertion in 'Afterword: Toward an Ethics of Discussion' (the Afterword to *Limited Inc*) which reflects on, among other things, an earlier debate with John R. Searle. Here, Derrida asserts that 'the simple recalling of a context is never a gesture that is neutral, innocent,

² So too is Rosemary Jolly's objection in 'Rehearsals of Liberation: Contemporary Postcolonial Discourse and the New South Africa'. She argues, 'the academy needs to accept as its crucial project the task of promoting a language that ruptures the division between the prescriptive and the descriptive on which Derrida's defense of 'Racism's Last Word' rests. The acceptance of such a language would mean that the theoretical would no longer be confined to the descriptive and opposed to the prescriptive, as it is in Derrida's formulation' (1995:24). Jolly even goes so far as to add that Derrida's 'error' reflects Stanley Fish's claim 'that, theoretically, his own arguments have 'no consequences'—despite his extraordinarily public persona' (1995:28). However, as I have shown, Derrida nowhere commits such an 'error', nor does he claim that his arguments have 'no consequences'. Derrida acknowledges McClintock and Nixon's assertion that his text is of 'limited strategic worth', but asserts that the strategic worth of his text 'would be far from nil' (1986:157).

transparent, disinterested' (1988:131). However, to remain faithful to reading Derrida or to remedy what he sees as a contradiction, Cilliers would have to contextualise Derrida's above statement:

The reconstitution of a context can never be perfect and irreproachable even though it is a regulative ideal in the ethics of reading, of interpretation, or of discussion. But since this ideal is unattainable ... the determination, or even the redetermination, the simple recalling of a context is never a gesture that is neutral, innocent, transparent, disinterested ... The putative or pretended ... reconstitution of a context always remains a performative operation and is never purely theoretical ... [It] may not be something 'politically suspect' to be sure, but it also cannot be apolitical or politically neutral (1988:131f).

Perhaps I did not need to reconstitute the context of Derrida's statement to the extent that I have in the above quote. For Derrida already states, in the fragment supplied by Cilliers, that what is at issue is 'the simple recalling', or as the rest of the quote affirms, the 'putative or pretended reconstitution of a context'³. Derrida's own comments to McClintock and Nixon about the criterion of context are far from simple and putative. They are not merely a supposedly apolitical theoretical gesture but a political evaluation, however overdetermined. Derrida does not affirm, as Cilliers offers, anything like 'the *correct* context of his text—a context that should apparently have fixed [McClintock and Nixon's] reading of the text'. No, not fix their reading of the text, but to some extent inform their reading, especially since, as Derrida reminds, they 'are concerned not to dissociate words and history' (1986:157). In a not merely superficial sense then, Niall Lucy correctly assesses that McClintock and Nixon's reference to Derrida's paper 'by its

³ Of course then, my own recalling of the context of Derrida's statement is not arbitrary. It serves to pre-empt and modify the discussion of Cilliers and Jolly's respective (though coterminous) assertions that Derrida's meditations in 'Racism's Last Word' and his rejoinder effectively place *apartheid* 'over there, in South Africa', and that it sought to construct South Africa as the 'atavistic other'.

(original) French title in the catalogue and not by its (translated) English title in *Critical Inquiry*’ problematises the chronology of ‘the object of their critique in relation to the critique itself’ (1995:2). Their reference to the French title of ‘Racism’s Last Word’ is significant, for it bears directly on the question of (con)text.

The second critical issue raised in the debate, related to the first, is question of whether Derrida’s appeal has the effect of (dis)placing *apartheid* as ‘an untranslatable name for the evil perpetrated by *them*, “*over there* in South Africa”’ (1998:82), as Cilliers argues—or as Jolly asserts, seeks to construct South Africa as the ‘atavistic other’ (1995:19f). Cilliers however, who positions himself as ‘sympathetic to the strategies of deconstruction’, admits that some ‘aspects of this reading may seem too deliberate ... and are perhaps at times unfair’ (1998:83) and as such offers that Derrida could with some justification defend against them. Once again, it is not difficult to ascertain precisely why Cilliers should pen his text of complaint against Derrida’s gesture in ‘Racism’s Last Word’. For Cilliers hastens to add that his ‘target is not the person Jacques Derrida, but those who preferred to see apartheid as something perpetrated *only* by a specific group of (white, South African) people’ (1998:83).

Given that Cilliers himself argues that Derrida is not one of ‘*those* [metropolitans] who preferred’ (e.a.) to extricate themselves from *apartheid* his precise objection is against no one in particular. But then again ‘those’ who sought to displace *apartheid* as specifically South African are never named. Consequently, the rhetoric of Cilliers’ objection could be seen as effectively arguing the opposite of what he contends he is asserting—for Derrida is exclusively named. It soon becomes clear that Cilliers’ interest is to motivate for a species of geopolitically disseminated *apartheid*: ‘there is a serious danger involved in reserving the notion of apartheid for that specifically South African thing’, and, ‘Apartheid, as a modernist strategy to structure and control, was never confined to South Africa’ (1998:85). Of course, but only to a point. A point to which I will soon return, as it goes directly to Derrida’s articulation of *apartheid* as a ‘unique appellation’. As I have alluded, Jolly is also concerned that *apartheid* not be seen as phenomenally South African.

Jolly considers the rhetorical effects of Derrida’s gesture in ‘Racism’s Last Word’ as,

analyzed in the context of [its] performance, [to be] radically at odds with its stated goal, the condemnation of racism ... This plea certainly invites readers to be complicit in the text's condemnation of apartheid, but it does so by appealing to South Africa as spectacularly other (1995:19).

Jolly's problem is thus located in the exhibition: 'The authority of the art exhibition, once used to construct the other, must now deconstruct it' (Jolly 1995:20). Rather than an ethico-political intervention, she argues that Derrida's text is 'neocolonial', as it simultaneously invites the reader to 'condemn' and 'dissociate' herself from *apartheid*. For Jolly, Derrida's assertion 'that the aforementioned exhibition exposes and commemorates, indicts and contradicts the whole of a Western history' is indicative of his anxiety not to afford the audience 'the comforts of such dissociation' (1995:20). However, it should be clear that Jolly elides Derrida's own arguments about the exhibition. To recall: for him, the exhibition, 'beyond the present of the institutions supporting it or of the foundation that ... it will itself become ... neither commemorates nor represents an event' but rather, it calls forth or 'commemorates in anticipation' (1985:298f). Christopher Fynsk's discussion is instructive on this point:

Thus the exhibition, *exposition* in French, presents nothing that is, Derrida says, describes or illustrates nothing present—since truth is no thing that is; if the exhibition *exposes* a present, it does so in projecting upon a future of which it presents no images. The exhibition does not work in the manner of a representation of any kind, or points beyond, for example, its various representations of atrocious suffering in South Africa (1989:4).

Derrida's formulation of *apartheid*, as 'the unique appellation for the ultimate racism in the world, the last of many' should be clear, although Cilliers continues to be baffled:

We are still trying to figure out *why* anyone would refer to apartheid in South Africa as the 'ultimate racism' without condemning, referring, or comparing it to any other specific form of

racism ... why, for what reason, would someone transpose the worst evils of racism onto a single term, and then situate that term in one specific context *outside* of himself, even if he is correct on a purely descriptive level? (1998:85f)⁴.

To be sure, already in 'Racism's Last Word', Derrida offers *apartheid* as 'the essence at its very worst—as if there were something like a racism par excellence, the most racist of racisms' (e.a.); or a page later, '*Apartheid* is famous, in sum, for manifesting the lowest extreme of racism' (e.a.). That 'as if' and 'renown'—or as he offers in 'But Beyond ...', 'the history of *apartheid* (its 'discourse' and its 'reality', the totality of its *text*)' (1986:165)—is precisely what Derrida asserts no serious historian can call into question. As this is insufficient for Cilliers, Lucy puts it quite succinctly:

What if the word 'apartheid' is so saturated with history, like the word 'Auschwitz', that it seems to stand apart from history and to stand in for the ultimate form of its type? ... Each word is the extreme form of a (different) same ... only on the basis of the *history* that each records and which separates it from other words. For although there are other forms of racism, there is no *single* word for the injustice of all racisms that bares the history of the word 'apartheid' (1995:16f).

However, I should state my own reservation regarding two points Derrida makes in his appeal. The first of these is his reminder that *apartheid*,

is also daily suffering, oppression, poverty, violence, torture inflict-

⁴ Cilliers also argues that the terms of Derrida's rejoinder make it possible to read 'Racism's Last Word' as 'an example of an attempt by the West to deny their complicity in perpetrating apartheid themselves'. However, it is strange that his assertion is not modified in the least by a reading of the 'post-script' to Derrida's response. Here Derrida forwards two cursory reasons why *apartheid* is also an 'American problem'. Of course Cilliers has read the 'post-script', for it is indeed here that he finds the quote he decontextualises, 'over there, in South Africa', and on which his deliberate reading rests.

ed by an arrogant white minority (16 percent of the population, controlling 60 to 65 percent of the national revenue) on the mass of the black population (1985:293).

This does perhaps highlight an oversimplification of the political allegiances or otherwise, of the white minority in South Africa, and seems to somewhat paint all white South Africans as identifying with *apartheid*. Also, in a certain sense, everyone (some more than others) suffers under *apartheid*; something like Fanon's exposition of the alienation and, obsessional neuroses and psychoses sometimes suffered by both the coloniser and colonised in colonial social relations, or the tortured and the torturer during the armed struggle for liberation⁵. Nevertheless, one could also see Derrida's assertion as an appeal to the empirical fact of the effects of the renowned and obsessive juridico-legislative apparatus that was *apartheid*. As such, this (unpleasant) assertion could be rescued by reference to the fact that Derrida also states, 'that a *certain* white community of European descent imposes *apartheid* on four-fifths of South Africa's population' (1985:294, e.a.). Of course one could still complain about the unclear specificity (or homogenising tendency) within that 'certain white community', as well as the reference to four-fifths.

Derrida's statement that 'the white resistance movement in South Africa deserves our praise' is, however, more problematic. I agree with Cilliers to the extent that he notes that the above statement implies 'a divide between those worthy of praise and those who feel that they are in a position to hand out praise' (1998:85). Certainly, the meting out of praise 'is not the same as declaring one's solidarity', but it does not necessarily imply, as Cilliers goes on to offer,

that some have the ability to escape the messiness of interaction with the other, to reach some higher ground where they are morally safe (1998:85).

For to claim this Cilliers has to temporarily forget the ethico-political impe-

⁵ See Fanon's comments on the effects of the violence of decolonisation in his psychiatric case studies at the end of *The Wretched of the Earth*, in the chapter entitled 'Colonial War and Mental Disorders'.

rative of the text of an appeal, which he himself earlier acknowledges in both that Derrida's approach is 'ethical through and through' (79) and that Derrida takes a 'firm ethical position on an abomination' (83). No 'escape from the messiness of interaction with other' then, if one already acknowledges an ethical relation—which, of course, is already a declaration of solidarity. In this view, to commend the merits of white resistance can be seen as supplementing the ethical relation—as recognition (or appeal) that white resistance, whose 'members' constitute part of the juridico-legislated 'beneficiaries' of *apartheid*, might hasten its end.

It should be clear that I have not discussed the question of the texture of Derrida's response—its 'style', its 'rhetorics'. For some critics, Derrida's response is not responsible, as it does not remain faithful to the 'ethics of discussion' that he proposes in the 'Afterword' to *Limited Inc*⁶. This can be seen in among other things, the texture of his response (its infantilising and unkind terms), and his reiterated contention that McClintock and Nixon 'have no serious objections' to make to him.

There is perhaps the need to recall, as Lucy does, that 'not all debates are necessarily productive or transforming; not all debates are conducted with good will' (1995:19). For Cilliers then, there is a contradiction between Derrida's reiterated charge that McClintock and Nixon consistently read him in 'bad faith' given his 'bad faith' reading of them, and his commitment to an 'ethics of discussion'⁷. Reed Way Dasenbrock's paper, in 'Taking it Personally: Reading Derrida's Responses', does not specifically examine,

the exchange with McClintock and Nixon over *apartheid* in detail

⁶ 'I think it is possible, if not for McClintock and Nixon, then at least for some other readers [of Derrida's rejoinder], to be a little more than unhappy with *how* Derrida did what he did in this case. In sum, his reaction was not responsible' (Cilliers 1998:83).

⁷ A prior occurrence of the question of an 'ethics of discussion' was illustrated in the earlier encounter between Hans-Georg Gadamer and Derrida—see *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter* (1989). See also Gadamer's later disappointed reflection on the encounter, which Derrida characterised as a 'non-event', in *Gadamer in Conversation: Reflections and Commentary* (2001:61f; 66-69).

since the substance of this exchange is at some remove from the more technical debates over meaning and interpretation on which the others focus (1994:264)⁸.

However, Dasenbrock is given to argue that Derrida is either in contradiction, or that he is a 'recanting revolutionary' (273). For Dasenbrock, any assertion or complaint of 'bad faith' reading issuing from Derrida is counter to his earlier insights about authorial intention and textuality; most notably, the manner in which Derrida reads Searle in *Limited Inc.* That is, Dasenbrock's complaint is directed at Derrida's insistence on an 'ethics of discussion' and his assertion of the necessity to read in 'good faith'. However, in order to declare a contradiction here, it is necessary to ignore Derrida's thinking on ethics. Geoffrey Bennington is relevant here:

Ethics, then, is ethical only to the extent that it is originarily compromised or contaminated by the non-ethical ... [T]he chance of avoiding the worst violence is given by a compromise involving an acceptance of, and calculation of, the lesser violence ... In this case, Derrida will say that ethics is essentially *pervertible*, and that this pervertibility is the positive condition ... of all 'positive' values (the Good, the Just, and so on) ethics enjoins us to seek (Bennington 2000:42).

In this view then, his commitment to an 'ethics of discussion' does not preclude their 'pervertibility'. Nor does it entail a contradiction of the kind asserted by Dasenbrock⁹. It is not so much that Derrida's rejoinder

⁸ This assertion is untenable, for I have already illustrated that the exchange with McClintock and Nixon is itself quite technical and is at its core a debate about meaning and interpretation. See Niall Lucy (1995:7); and although at times apparently and self-admittedly reductive, see Fynsk (1989:4).

⁹ Despite assertions of contradiction by detractors and (some) commentators alike, for Derrida on why 'it should be possible to invoke rules of competence, criteria of discussion and of consensus, good faith, lucidity, rigor, criticism, and pedagogy', see Derrida (1988:146) in 'Afterword'.

responds to McClintock and Nixon, but rather that theirs is not a 'response' as such. That is, as Lucy asserts, their 'response' is 'irresponsible'. Lucy is correct in noting that the belligerence of Derrida's response illustrates him losing 'patience with those who (in 1986, still) read him so perversely ... that they have clearly not registered at all the significance of the word "text"' (1995:20). Derrida might argue his response involves 'an acceptance of, and calculation of, the lesser violence' compared to McClintock and Nixon's own. He does indeed argue this when he charges that 'the effect [McClintock and Nixon] want to produce is quite determined, but in order to arrive at it, [they] are willing to put forward any kind of countertruth'. In this view, his rejoinder is an extreme form of the manner in which they presume to give him a lesson on history and politics.

Finally, the opposition to deconstruction (in general) or, as McClintock and Nixon figure it (and in this they are not alone), something called Derrida's 'method' (in particular)—on the supposed basis that it is 'apolitical' or that its implications are 'politically suspect' and thus supposedly 'textualist'—forms part of a desire (by both those opposed and some sympathetic commentators) for Derrida to explicitly declare his politics. I agree with Bennington's suggestion that what these commentaries fail to grasp is precisely the trajectory of Derrida's thought. The demand is for Derrida not to largely deal with questions of politics, ethics or justice obliquely, as he admits¹⁰. This would require that he enunciate the political of his thought through the inherited terms and modalities of a tradition of (political) philosophy whose hierarchal oppositions and very 'oppositonality'—Bennington's term (2000:9)—he has spent his intellectual

¹⁰ For Derrida's own discussion of why deconstruction *seems* to deal with the questions of justice (and thus of politics, ethics, responsibility and duty) obliquely, see 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"' (1992:9-10; 15-16). For commentary on how 'the political' is figured in Derrida's thought, see Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political* (1996). For a lengthier discussion of 'the political demand' (made of Derrida) or the 'political imperative' within humanities scholarship see Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida* (2000:18-33), and Niall Lucy, *Debating Derrida* (1995:72-98).

career questioning; concepts whose nonessentiality and deconstructibility he has already attempted to demonstrate.

Catherine Zuckert's discussion in 'The Politics of Derridean Deconstruction' is an example of this 'political demand', here articulated in accusatory mode. She argues that far from being 'radical', Derrida's work 'has an anti-activist, if not strictly speaking conservative thrust'. Zuckert then turns tack and argues that if Derrida's work 'is not conservative ... [then it is at least] profoundly anti-revolutionary' (1991:354f). Although I hope to have sufficiently demonstrated it in my analysis of the debate, perhaps I need only recall Derrida's reminder:

There is no one, single deconstruction. Were there only one, were it homogeneous, it would not be inherently either conservative or revolutionary, or determinable within the code of such oppositions (1988:141).

In her own manner, Zuckert follows McClintock and Nixon in what Lucy offers is 'the one (mis)taken-for-granted assumption about Derrida's work ... is that it bears no relation to pragmatic politics' (1995:1). Why the oblique, indirect address of the questions of politics and ethics? Because for Derrida, in a logic he already sets out as early as *Of Grammatology*, ethics, like justice, is an experience of the impossible. This aporetic moment of undecidability is necessary if an ethics is to be true to its name; that is, if it is to exceed mere calculation or subsumption to some prior rule, norm or case.

Can it still be said that Derrida's work or deconstructive practices in general are lacking in 'political implications' (or otherwise apolitical), and say nothing on 'ethics'? Certainly. Only if the deontological responsibility to read with rigour and patience is ignored in favour of partisan politico-institutional imperatives. Only if the ostentatious reference to 'politics' is enough, by itself, to insure some sort of self-congratulatory radicality. That is, only if the inherited concepts of politics and of ethics are to remain unquestionable, occupying, as Bennington's exposition on Derrida thought testifies, a position of 'transcendental contraband' (2000:19). To ask the question of politics and of ethics is not in itself already political or ethical—that is, cannot propose or institute a politics or ethics. It precisely exceeds proposition and institution, in striving, as Bennington notes, 'to keep open

the event of alterity which alone makes politics possible and inevitable, but which political philosophy of all colours has always tried to close' (2000:33). But how useful is this in a postcolonial context?

Of course Derrida's intervention into the debate on *apartheid* is not articulated in the familiar terms of postcolonial theory. However, it is possible to argue—and I have shown that Derrida suggests this—that *apartheid* is the manifestation and crystallisation of a particular instance of the European imperial and colonial mission in South Africa. As an intervention into the text of South Africa, Derrida's text and the debate that it initiates, seems to highlight the kinds of issues with which postcolonial theory engages. 'Racism's Last Word' irrupts into the purview of '(post)coloniality' not merely as a reading of the text of *apartheid*, but in large measure as an ethico-political call for the demise of *apartheid*, a summoning of a future responsibility to the memory of its anteriority; it illustrates how deconstructive reading practices might be useful for postcolonial analysis¹¹. Nevertheless, I should have stated from the outset that I do not wish to reclaim or refashion Jacques Derrida as a postcolonial theorist. The following paragraph is precisely an attempt to put the latter assertion under something like a probative erasure; an attempt to post the Derridean text—all the while not forgetting that 'Jacques Derrida' is both the corpus and the person.

2

One can leverage a deconstructive reading of the discourse of colonialism in a reading that would demonstrate deconstruction as already in decolonisation. Perhaps the movement of such a reading would, among other things, trace in the discourse and reality of colonialism, and its counter-discourses—what Derrida in his text on *apartheid* calls 'the totality of its text' (1986:165)—something like the call of decolonisation as a call to

¹¹ 'In the different texts I have written on (against) *apartheid*, I have on several occasions spoken of 'unconditional' affirmation or of 'unconditional' 'appeal'. This has also happened to me in other 'contexts' and each time that I speak of the link between deconstruction and the "yes"' (Derrida 1988:152).

justice, and an appeal for an ethical relation with the Other in the dismantling of colonialism. Here, decolonisation could be seen as a ‘paragon’ for deconstruction. In what is more than a strained metaphor—given Derrida’s sometime reminder of his Franco-Maghrebian status—decolonisation and deconstruction (or Fanon and Derrida) would, in this reading, meet somewhere on the scene of the Algerian movement for liberation. In proposing such a reading, I am of course relying heavily on Derrida’s enunciation of the deconstructive engagement with/to the question of ethics and justice, in his essay ‘Force of Law: The “Mystical Foundation of Authority”’ (1992). The conditions of possibility for the reading of decolonisation I have sketched would have to be mindful of not uncritically deploying some set of procedures labelled deconstructive. It would have to heed the following:

The difference of other cultures is other than the excess of signification, the *différance* of the trace or the trajectory of desire. These are theoretical strategies that may be necessary to combat ‘ethnocentrism’ but they cannot, of themselves, unreconstructed, represent that otherness. There can be no inevitable sliding from the semiotic or deconstructionist activity to the unproblematic reading of other cultural and discursive systems. There is in such readings a will to power and knowledge that, in failing to specify the limits of their own field of enunciation and effectivity, proceed to individualise otherness as the discovery of their own assumptions (Bhabha 1983:197).

In reading Homi K. Bhabha’s caution against the grain one could note that Robert Young’s *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990), is precisely (although partially) such a reconstitutive analysis of the conditions of emergence of poststructuralist theories in general, and Derrida’s work in particular. Here, Young already offers something like the possible reading I offered for apprehending deconstruction as already in decolonisation. Young himself acknowledges that it is not merely the aforementioned title—taken from a chapter of Derrida’s *Margins of Philosophy* (1982)—that he gleans from Derrida’s work. For Young, the point missed by criticism of Derrida’s work that asserts Derrida merely

reinscribes the hegemonic discursive authority of the West or that his work involves only the critique of ‘Western metaphysics’ as such—and this, I recall, is precisely the criticism expressed by McClintock and Nixon—is that his critique of logocentrism is at once also a critique of ethnocentrism (see Young (2004:49). Young thus has recourse, in the opening of *White Mythologies*, to highlight the colonial provenance of what came to be known under the rubric of ‘poststructuralism’:

If so-called ‘so-called poststructuralism’ is the product of a single historical moment, then that moment is probably not May 1968 but rather the Algerian War of Independence—no doubt itself both a symptom and a product. In this respect it is significant that Sartre, Althusser, Derrida and Lyotard, among others, were all either born in Algeria or personally involved with the events of the war (2004:32).

Young’s essay, ‘Subjectivity and History: Derrida in Algeria’, as the title undoubtedly suggests, is a singular engagement with the assertion he set out earlier, in *White Mythologies*. Here, Young is concerned to argue for Derrida to be seen as a postcolonial theorist and for poststructuralism to be apprehended as ‘Franco-Maghrebian theory’ (2001:414). That is, Young’s task is to illustrate the historical links between the philosophers and theorists who came to be known as poststructuralist and Algeria, or the war for Algerian independence. Derrida was there, Young argues, on the scene of the unthinkable violence that was the Algerian Revolution:

Others, such as Fanon and Lyotard, went to Algeria to work or on military service and became actively involved with the revolution ... and saw Derrida frequently when he had returned to Algeria to do his military service there (2001:414).

Young is at pains to assert that Derrida’s marginality, as part of the ‘Jewish’ population of colonial Algeria, further meant that his identity was cut through by ambivalent identification within colonial relations (see Young (2001:425-26).

The Jews live in ... an in-between limbo world in which on the one hand they identify with the colonizer with whom they can never be fully assimilated, but whose life they try to live in abject mimicry, while on the other hand they remain always condemned to live the life of the colonized (2001:422)¹².

In this homiletic manner, Young hopes to demonstrate that Derrida's work—even in its earliest articulations—is distinctly postcolonial.

From the first, then, your target was, we would say these days, western globalization, conceptual in form but material in its effects, and the eurocentricism of western culture (Young 2001:412).

In this vein, the poststructuralist interrogation of,

the idea of totality was born out of the experience of, and forms of resistance to, the totalizing regimes of the late colonial state, particularly French Algeria (415).

This re-vision of the conditions of possibility of deconstruction is aimed particularly at postcolonial intellectuals who reject postcolonial theory as 'Western', and therefore incapable of answering to the questions of the 'Third World'—incapable of partaking, to paraphrase Ato Quayson, in the native's discursive modalities.

I would suggest that although Young's essay is an important historical intervention into the debate about the eurocentricity of postcolonial theory, what remains disquieting is the possible slide towards conflation that occurs in Young's effort to reclaim deconstruction as postcolonial. Thus although Young acknowledges the differences between the anti-colonialist discourses of liberation and poststructuralist deconstructions of the ideas and ideals of Western philosophy and culture, they are too easily enunciated together in the following:

¹² Given Young's claim for Derrida's colonial Algeria connection, he could have included Fanon's analysis of Jewish Algerians in *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, 'Algeria's European Minority' (1989:153-157).

Many of those who developed the theoretical positions subsequently characterized as poststructuralism came from Algeria or had been involved in the war of independence. Fanon, Memmi, Bourdieu, Althusser, Lyotard, Derrida, Cixous—they were all in or from Algeria (2001:413).

Not only is Derrida offered as theorising postcoloniality, it would seem that Fanon and Memmi are now also poststructuralist.

It is of course imperative to attend to the historico-political conditions of possibility of work that has come to be called 'poststructuralist'. I cannot in the last instance dismiss Young's historico-political re-visioning of deconstruction. In my reading, however, deconstructive practices, as theoretical demonstrations/interrogations of the questions of politics, ethics, culture, economics, literature or whatever, should stand or fall on the basis of the flexibility with which they facilitate the posing of the latter questions, rather than on their geographical provenance. It should no longer be necessary to state that theoretical interrogations are not self-sufficiently or exclusively theoretical. My reservations here do not yet run counter to my earlier discussion of the question of context. What I remain uneasy with in Young's reading of Derrida in Algeria is the manner in which Young's argument strains towards an assertion of context as the final determinant of Derrida as a postcolonial theorist.

3

What then of South Africa, a country that is in need of urgency? Some perhaps would cry out (and they already do, everyday) a state of emergency. It is, in fact, a country where the National Democratic Revolution—that principle, alliance, and movement for liberation—took place, some might say, without revolution. That is, how quickly it became (necessarily?) married to (others say marred by) democratic-capitalism. Here, we have the socio-economic state policies of Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) and Affirmative Action (AA) 'to address the imbalances of the past' or 'level the playing fields'. On the one hand, to the rural and poor these policies mean, among other things, improving sanitation

through the elimination of the ‘bucket-system’—a euphemism that should never elide the quotidian humiliation—within a timeframe that continues to be officially revised as the state strains to deliver on its mandate.

On the other hand, the rise of a black elite, the embourgeoisement, the creation of a black-capitalist class—somehow the term Black Diamond is coined to identify it. (There is a history that inhabits that term, no less than the coining—who is coining it in South Africa, and why? That history calls for reading.) Here, the current practice of AA has led the Black Management Forum to call for the exclusion of white women from the category of ‘previously disadvantaged’¹³. Here too, on the one hand a chronic lack of human capital—a ‘skills shortage’ in the official idiom—lived by half the working-age population as an unemployment rate of around 42 percent under the broad definition (or the no less salutary figure of around 31 percent in the official calculation)¹⁴. On the other hand, the exclusivity, the barriers to entry, of tertiary education—whether these are seen as economic, linguistic, institutional culture or whatever. Here too, a grave HIV-AIDS pandemic, where the former state president enters an ideological debate about the efficacy and dangers of international (pharmaceutical) prescriptions.

The economy of the text of contemporary South Africa highlighted in the above ruminations is at best, rudimentary. It also deliberately foregrounds the text of the political economy of contemporary South Africa. Perhaps, no less than anywhere else in the world today, South Africa is a country where, to paraphrase Gayatri C. Spivak out of context, one cannot not read the material. Although now, the textuality of the material would be

¹³ The High Court ruling which determined that South Africans of Chinese descent should be explicitly included in the definitions of ‘previously disadvantaged’ in terms of employment equity and economic empowerment legislation, is an interesting direction in South Africa’s socio-political terrain.

¹⁴ See Patrick Bond’s discussion, in *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa* (2005), of what he calls the South African ‘government’s semantic dance’, in its calculation of the ‘narrow’ definition and refusal of the ‘broad’ definition of unemployment in 2003 (2005:263; 363). For similar figures and assertions about South Africa’s economic indicators, see also MacDonald (2006:150-152).

posed as question and thus no longer be (and never really was) self-sufficient in a stasis that would merely appeal to its massively present reality. The postcolonial intellectual as an elite member of South African society is implicated within an order of social and economic relations marked by disparate class and race inequality. In light of this, Spivak's insistence that intellectuals mark their political positionality becomes critical. The South African case necessitates that postcolonial critics realise, following Bhabha, that the urgency called forth in/by the country is also a question of emergence into an otherwise.

Finally, Aletta Norval's *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse* is precisely such an attempt to read the complexity of the text of *apartheid* through an inheritance to deconstruction. The title of her book seems to suggest this much. I should say however that this paragraph is not yet a close critical analysis of the contribution of Norval's contribution to the debate on *apartheid* in South Africa. That is the work for another occasion. Rather, all I wish to comment on is the extent to which this contribution is a critical extension of the insights I have argued are to be gained from returning to the debate between Derrida and, McClintock and Nixon. One would perhaps have thought that given Derrida's own intervention within the latter debate, Norval would have been concerned to meditate upon it and Derrida's gesture in particular, or even the work of deconstruction in general. There is no such meditation or demonstration here. Deconstruction within Norval's project finally appears to be merely titular. Among other things, perhaps the most telling example of this is the extent to which the notion of discursivity is not problematised within her study. I contend that this, when taken together with her final plea for post-*apartheid* South African democracy to be informed by some species of what she calls 'radical pluralism'—whose theoretical basis is not substantively argued—does not begin to exhaust the possibilities of a deconstructive postcolonial analysis of the text of *apartheid* and its wake.

It is for these reasons that I hope to have shown that it is necessary to reread the debate between Derrida and, McClintock and Nixon. To revisit the debate would require something other than the facile institutional and disciplinary politics that informed their response. The debate calls forth a responsibility to the memory of *apartheid* because, as I said in the beginning, the legacy of race classification still informs contemporary South Africa in ways that are not opened up by obstinately orthodox reading practices. To

say the debate highlights the deontological responsibility of the postcolonial intellectual is not to say deconstruction merely calls for a politics of reading. Rather, it is to partially keep open the question of the realm of effectivity of intellectual work so as to resist the sort of self-aggrandising praxis that authorises McClintock and Nixon. And yet I still hold that the task of the South African postcolonial intellectual is precisely to think through the difficulties of the post-*apartheid* 'imagined community' of what has been called 'the New South Africa'. I hope to have illustrated that it is precisely a deconstructive postcolonial reading that would be germane to the reading of those difficulties. The slogan of the state's media campaign to foster something like an African-national consciousness, uttered by none other than former state president Thabo Mbeki, assures us that South Africa is 'alive with possibility'. To follow Derrida's apprehension of the complexity of the question of *apartheid* is perhaps to begin to read the heterogeneity of *that* possibility, the striking complexity of the text of contemporary South Africa and the difficulties facing a deconstructive postcolonial analysis to come.

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