

# Academic Postcolonial Resistances and South Africa

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As an autonomous system rather than an ideological instrument, the University should no longer be thought of as a tool that the left will be able to use for other purposes than those of the capitalist state (Readings 1996: 41).

This essay attempts to make connections between elements of postcolonial critique post-apartheid debates within my own university. The analysis of neo-colonialism, problems of representation and academic production, should have a bearing on the often fractious attempt to transform a South African university. And, looking the other way, the colonial background of South African debates offers the chance to clarify the stakes of metropolitan exchanges. What links these diverse contexts is the tension between a view of the university as the institutional apparatus through which society ensures its uneventful reproduction, at the least cost to itself, and the vision of the university as a potential, if unlikely, lever of change. As articulated in President Kgalema Motlanthe's *State of the Nation* address, 6<sup>th</sup> February, 2009, the ANC does not have a racial agenda but is committed to making institutions reflect the demography of the nation.

I will argue that the battle over representation can take second place to obscurantist professions of commitment to the managing of relations in line with what is seen as the transformational logic of capitalism. The broader background includes the direction of South Africa's liberation as

Naomi Kline (2007:194-217) has summarized it; the story of the embrace of the business model and the pre-eminence of investor sentiment within the terms of the global financial market. Academic discourse and the institutional politics of the university are not immune to the tricks of authoritarianism, evasions and self-delusion that accompany this complex.

I would like to begin by unearthing a marginal and largely forgotten moment from the South African literary debates. Its emblematic value will, I hope, become clear.

It is now twelve years since Kelwyn Sole attempted to settle accounts with the South African reception of postcolonial theory as part of a wider debate on the political consequences of academic and aesthetic production. The main thrust of his argument was that postcolonial theory favoured a textualism which was the academic counterpart to the supposedly apolitical accommodation to the reality of an emerging neoliberal consensus. It included the self-reflexive and tendentious claim that political participation within institutions of learning can be efficiently managed within the academies' intellectual and social boundaries (see Sole 1997: 145). Whatever one makes of this divining of the political unconscious of academic production, I would suggest that it did amount to staking out a post-apartheid critical position that demanded a response.

If it is unsurprising how little interest metropolitan postcolonial theorists take in the detail of South Africa debates, one might have expected those moving along the corridors of the academic market-place to at least note in passing a significant and well-documented local exchange on the relation between literary theory and the political. One might expect, that is, to see at least a passing reference to it in David Attwell's study of South African literary history, *Rewriting Modernity*, a book that situates itself within the complex debates around South Africa's modernity and postcoloniality. The very subject matter and theoretical resources drawn on by the book call for such an engagement, as does the participation by its author in pivotal moments of this debate. A notable moment in that debate was a call for literary scholars to stick to what they are 'competent to do' (Attwell 1990: 80). Elsewhere the veil of disciplinary propriety drawn over the politically castrating effects of institutional context was to be secured by the assertion that, 'in terms of the political scene, postcolonial studies is

post-nationalist' and 'on the intellectual front it is post-marxist' (Attwell 1993: 4). Ultimately, mirroring the manufacturing of consent through omission that we are quick to condemn in political discourse, the (un)resolved debate is simply dropped in the form of a dictum rather than an argument. Doubtless this censorship responds to the need to differentiate scholarly from political obligations on the grounds that scholarly pursuits are superior because they are 'not self-interested' (Attwell 1995: 95)<sup>1</sup>.

It is significant that this elision in Attwell's book is accompanied by a reading of the exchange between Benita Parry and Gayatri Spivak that wishes it away as part of what is caricatured as 'a rather shallow and hermetic debate between materialists and poststructuralists, thankfully one that is now receding in pertinency' (Attwell 2005: 20). I will argue that this dismissal downplays the stakes of a debate that are far from negligible. You will recall that, in 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse', Parry took Spivak and others to task for substituting an insurgent anti-colonial subject position with their own diasporic preoccupations. This fractious debate has been read variously in terms of an argument over representing the Other—that resistance is always mediated, the role of academics therein, the resistance to theory, etc.—and the nature of political agency. In other words, precisely the issues that Sole sought to draw out in the South African context, and that Attwell consigns to the silence of history. Bearing in mind that criticism is not unjust when it dissects but rather when it parries by not parrying, I will interrogate what is at stake in this debate that provokes repression.

I will argue that the Spivak/Parry debate usefully sets the South African moment within a wider purview than is usual, and gives some perspective on issues that are often blurred by their immediacy. The same applies looking the other way as the South African debates highlight marginalised aspects of the directions and dead ends thrown up by postcolonial critique. While all debates are at the same time specific to their circumstances they also share certain affinities. Ultimately these considerations will lead, by way of what I would term a primary process, to

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<sup>1</sup> Absent too is any reference to Sole's sharpening of his critique in his 'Writing South Africa' that considers Parry's and Attwell's readings of Coetzee. See also Rustom Kozain (2002).

the parochial site of my own university. Let us first return to the traces of the originary metropolitan dispute.

## I

It is impossible (and in my view unnecessary) to choose between these [Spivak's and Parry's] positions (Loomba 1998: 235).

Gayatri Spivak's (1999: 190) unsettling *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* restates the rebuttal of Parry's diagnosis of the problems in theories of colonial discourse:

Benita Parry has criticized Homi Bhabha, Abdul JanMohammed, and Gayatri Spivak for being so enamoured of deconstruction that they will not let the native speak. She has forgotten that we are natives too.

This is a reworked version of an essay on J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* that was published (twice) in 1990<sup>2</sup>. It was also cited extensively by Spivak (1990:59f) in her 1993 book *Outside in the Teaching Machine* where the criticism is made more tersely:

Ms. Parry is, once again, an ally and she was kind enough to draw my attention to the fact that in a recent issue of *Oxford Literary Review* on colonialism, she had charged Homi Bhabha, Abdul JanMohammed, and Gayatri Spivak basically with not being able to listen to the voice of the native .... It is in response to her that the name 'postcolonial' comes into play ... In a piece on J.M. Coetzee's novel *Foe*, I have approached Parry's question ....

This reference to the 1990 Coetzee essay leads to 'the liberty of quoting myself, with contextual modification' (60). The citation from the 1990 text

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<sup>2</sup> Spivak's 'Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's *Foe* reading Defoe's *Crusoe/Roxana*' was published in *Consequences of Theory*, edited by Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson; and in *English in Africa* 17, 2 (1990).

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in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* includes reference to the venue where Parry proffered her own reference to the published version of her criticism:

When Benita Parry takes us to task for not being able to listen to the natives, or to let the natives speak, she forgets that the three of us, postcolonials, are ‘natives’ too.

....

Those of us present in that room in Birkbeck College, or indeed the writers and readers of this collection, who are from formerly colonized countries, are able to communicate with each other, to exchange, to establish sociality, because we have had access to the culture of imperialism (qtd. 1993: 60).

So *Outside in the Teaching Machine* cites the 1990 version of the essay on Coetzee to mark the intervention as taking place in Birkbeck College, University of London, where Parry drew attention to her *Oxford Literary Review* essay. But by the time of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* the textual referent becomes ‘a recent article in *Oxford Literary Review*’ and the exchange at Birkbeck is erased. This apparently minor variation, suggestive of the textualism of the historical event, effects a deflection by shifting the source of animus from an interpersonal exchange ‘in that room at Birkbeck’ to the propriety of the published critique. This muting could of course also indicate a structure of feeling not unrelated to an intensification of resentment. Of more interest, though, is an accompanying parapraxis.

We have seen that *Outside in the Teaching Machine* gives the reference to the citation that includes “that room in Birkbeck College” as the *Foe* essay from the 1990 collection *Consequences of Theory*. But this is incorrect. The *Foe* essay in either of its published forms contains no such information and is closer to the version that reappears in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, referring merely to the *Oxford Literary Review* essay. So the Birkbeck intervention was already screened out in the earliest recounting, and the disclosure of the 1993 *Outside in the Teaching Machine* is re-erased in the 1999 *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. In fact, textually speaking, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* originates the event supposedly

recorded in the earlier *Foe* essay. It would seem that we are dealing with a nested citational structure and retrospective causality, a primary scene and parergonal composition of interlocking frames. What is it for an event to be framed and enclosed in quotation marks, elliptically coordinated through what Freud terms *Abwehrhandlungen* (a set of parrying actions), and then shuffled off-stage?

At the most immediate level it would also seem that the stakes of this uneasy exchange are quite familiar and centre on representation. This is the sturdy prison-house of academic identity politics with Spivak arguing that the minority academic is not the subaltern, and warning against minority academics fulfilling the role of proxy in the first world academe:

I believe the teacher, *while operating within the institution*, can foster the emergence of a committed collectivity by not making her institutional commitment invisible: outside in the teaching machine (1993: 294, note 2).

Which, of course, is Parry's point in warning against overestimating the impact of academic performance (a warning that paradoxically asserts its importance)<sup>3</sup>. Indeed the last pages of the revised 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* appear, indirectly, to concede Parry's criticism of the original essay<sup>4</sup>. A matter of style rather than of content.

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<sup>3</sup> See the essays by Jenny Sharpe (1989) and Anne Maxwell (1991). Reflecting on the Spivak/Parry exchange in his *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*, Neil Lazarus locates the crux of the dispute in what Parry feels to be the wholesale disparaging of nationalist discourse, although he adjudges her to be overstating the charge against Spivak (1999: 120f; and see Lazarus 1994).

<sup>4</sup> In a recent overview of postcolonial theory, Parry refers to 'Spivak's pioneering work on *Jane Eyre*' and offers a judicious summary of her 'deconstructive position towards the logocentrism and identitarian metaphysics underpinning Western knowledge' (2002: 73). See George Hartley's reading of Spivak's 'impossible injunction' (2004: 254).

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At issue, then, is not the sincerity or the political commitment of academics but rather the pedagogical and academic elisions likely to follow, and also the likely political consequences, of certain theoretical orientations. The task is to open to analysis the pressures of an institutional-disciplinary type that form the corridors of power linking mobile representatives of the post-colonies (see Dirlík 1994). Assuming the viability of representing others at all, in Kantian terms we are also here in the arena of the judgement of a spectator rather than the maxim of an actor<sup>5</sup>. If academics cannot help laying down the law, and if geo-political location at the imperial centre guarantees their judgements amplification (if not necessarily authority), and if they profess commitment to counter-hegemonic possibilities, then they have an obligation on their own terms to register oppositional sites of praxis beyond the metropole and its institutional discourses.

I would suggest that Spivak's own recounting of the exchange at Birkbeck not only testifies to the potentially wounding nature of academic debate - the personal investment in professional intellectual discourse, the flickering between foe and ally - but also the capacity of questions of representation and legitimacy to both animate and derail analysis. When one of the signs of the times is read as 'the collapse of the futures (specifically the socialist and nationalist futures)' (Scott 2004: 18) that animated revolutionary anti-colonial struggles, and when capitalism seems to be triumphing through its own weaknesses, there is surely a need to look beyond the implications of the social identity of the subject of enunciation and its states of injury. With this in mind I propose to quickly look at the dynamics of a reversion to academic identity politics by disputants concerned to clarify the stakes of the Spivak/Parry exchange.

## II

Post-colonial theory, fixated on the writings of Fanon, remains preoccupied with the glamour of liberation and nationalist discourses of resistance rather than with the more mundane difficulties of

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<sup>5</sup> See Alain Badiou's 'Against 'Political Philosophy''. The essay 'What is a Thermidorean?' in the same collection is also relevant to my argument.

power in a decolonized state which owes its very form to the terms of the transfer from colonial power, as a result of which it remains enmeshed within inherited political discourses. It will be interesting to see how émigré South African critics, hitherto fully committed to nationalist discourses of resistance, cope with this change. (Young 1998: 24).

In a 1996 review of *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Robert Young (1996: 230) comments:

Spivak's rejoinder points to the political irony of three Black writers being attacked by an émigré South African critic during the era of apartheid. Her comment prompts the reader to ask what political agenda, what political priorities, drive such offensives.

In a rejoinder Laura Chrisman (1997: 40-41), objecting to Young's serenely dogmatic insinuations, points out that Parry's original critique targeted Spivak herself—and not Homi Bhabha and Abdul JanMohammed—with silencing the voice of the natives. She notes the shift from ethnicity to nationality in Young's characterisation of Spivak and Parry respectively, and sees in this a feature of neo-colonialist knowledge production in which South African intellectuals are considered unworthy of critical engagement: 'Young chooses to privilege the experiential rather than the political' (41)<sup>6</sup>. Still, she concedes in a recuperative gesture, quite possibly both Spivak and Parry have misread one another (40).

In response Young accuses Chrisman of misreading his enquiry into Parry's politics; her 'confus[ion] [of] the personal with the positional': 'But a person's origins, familial or national, are not the same as the subject position that he or she adopts in academic critical discourse' (1997: 49). Young (1997: 48) was not concerned with national origins as such, but

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<sup>6</sup> Chrisman notes that she herself suffered a similar fate to that of Parry for criticising Spivak's work (1997: 43); see her essay, 'The imperial unconscious? Representations of imperial discourse', and its critic Paulus Pimomo (1991).



rather with positioning and political context:

[one could ask] what position she was speaking from in statements made in response to a paper I gave at Warwick in 1986 concerned with the contemporary South African political situation, in which she was, at the very least, critical of the African National Congress. Chrisman, who has the benefit of knowing Parry personally, speaks of her 'political activism in a revolutionary socialist movement' in England. This implies Trotskyism—which would explain Parry's reservations about the ANC—but if so, why not say so? It would give Parry's readers a far better understanding of the political location of her criticism.

Of course, Parry hardly needs to say anything about her own (or Spivak's) politics since the point at issue concerns the political effect of certain kinds of academic production whatever the political intention might be<sup>7</sup>. Once more there is an event behind the apparently textual dispute, and Young's aggressivity begins to look like political supervision and the ritual demand for professions of loyalty. Notably the accusation of 'Trotskyism' of course has a history associated with Stalinism and, more interestingly, has been successfully used within South Africa by the ANC to silence critics from the left.

What is at issue in this mutually reinforcing, mirrored dissent is, among other things, the issue of professional self-legitimation and struggle for authority. As Young notes of Spivak's use of the imperative mode in her writing, this is the language of laying down the law, of the pedagogic

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<sup>7</sup> Commenting on Parry and others' criticisms of the work of 'the Holy Trinity of colonial-discourse analysis [Said, Bhabha and Spivak]', Young has argued that 'they also involve a category mistake since the investigation of the discursive construction of colonialism does not seek to replace or exclude more materialist analysis' (1995: 163). Once again intentionalism takes precedence when in fact intention is not the issue so much as the effect of metropolitan intellectual production.

imperative that brooks no refusal (1996: 238)<sup>8</sup>. In his subsequent *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* Young cites Spivak's 'When Benita Parry takes us to task ...' (2001: 415) riposte<sup>9</sup> with no mention of his subsequent exchange with Chrisman; indeed with no mention of her anywhere in the book. But he does illuminate his own political position when he endorses the view that the idea of a vanguardist takeover of the state and the economy, associated with the politics of Lenin, has long since given way to the resistance to hegemony associated with Gramsci. For in the postcolonial state decolonization corresponds to the shift between what Gramsci calls political and civil societies where overt violence is replaced by economic coercion ultimately wielded by international capital to the advantage of the old colonial centres. The implication of this situation, therefore, is that national sovereignty is effectively a fiction, and the system of apparently autonomous nation-states is in fact the means through which international capital exercises imperialist control (2001: 46). We'll return to these substantive claims shortly.

Chrisman's (2003: 12) response to Young's criticism of Parry forms chapter 8 of her 2003 book *Postcolonial contraventions* entitled 'Robert Young and the ironic authority of postcolonial criticism'. While omitting consideration of Young's own rejoinder, it does reflect on the Spivak/Parry contretemps, albeit indirectly:

I welcome the debates about location, authority and the representational politics of speaking for, as and on the behalf of others, that postcolonial studies has generated, and the intellectual and political insights that have emerged from them. Equally I am concerned by the authoritarianism that has also, on occasion,

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<sup>8</sup> However, Spivak reads Young as a 'metropolitan postcolonialist' who has 'objected to my call for vigilance' (1999: 362, note 68)—a curious take on the accusation of authoritarianism.

<sup>9</sup> In 'Deconstruction and the Postcolonial,' Young cites Spivak's (*Outside in the Teaching Machine*) rebuttal of Parry as part of his argument against the assumption (here the culprit is Helen Tiffin) that the Other cannot be the author of theory (2000: 191f).

emerged from these debates, as I discuss in my chapter here on Robert Young.

The Parry/Spivak exchange is touched upon only to uncover the affirmative inclination of the former's work (164) as far as Chrisman is concerned. Spivak receives a ritual genuflection<sup>10</sup>, and Young's *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* is rightly taken to task for its condescending reading of the South African Trotskyite Unity Movement<sup>11</sup>, and reductive portrait of the ANC. More interestingly, evaluating Spivak's contention that Kant's categorical imperative can be travestied in the service of the state, Chrisman also invokes the value of Gramsci's analysis of the relations between state, civil society and ideology. Turning to South Africa, the left and labour movements (in comparison with Western Europe) are seen as having the potential for active representation in government power and economic policy (2003: 154)<sup>12</sup>. This seems to me to mark, however inadvertently, a return to the critical issues buried beneath the uninspiring displays of self-justification. As a bridge to South Africa let us return to *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.

### III

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<sup>10</sup> 'Pessimism may deter us from the urgent tasks and responsibilities that our locations create: the task of, as Gayatri Spivak puts it, "learning to learn from below"' (Chrisman 2003: 13).

<sup>11</sup> For Parry's view of the Unity Movement, and its failure to develop a mass movement, see her *Postcolonial Studies. A Materialist Critique* (2004: 229, note 1), and 'The New South Africa. The revolution postponed, internationalism deferred' (2005: 182). See also Allison Drew (2000) on the left tradition in South Africa; and Baruch Hirson (1993). The driving force behind the Unity Movement consisted in part of teachers.

<sup>12</sup> Chrisman locates 'both the promise and the insufficiency of contemporary Gramscian thought' (2003: 154) in the argument of Grant Farred (1992) which, whatever its faults, and with the benefit of hindsight, does anticipate the centralized, top-down statism adopted by the ANC for the sake of delivery.

And a single teachers' students, flung out into the world, is surely a better real-world example than one named the New 'International', which immediately brings Marxist organization to mind (Spivak 2000: 34).

Spivak explains the problem of achieved victory in national liberation struggles when the barriers between fragile national economies and international capital are being removed, the possibility of social redistribution in the so-called developing states, uncertain at best, are disappearing even further (1999: 380). There is complicity between local developers and the global forces of capital. The interest of the migrant, however remote, is in dominant global capital Eurocentric economic migration (and eventually even political exile), and persists in the hope of justice under capitalism. Meanwhile the anti-systemic movements aspiring to global reach no longer view the developing state as the main theatre of action:

... these globe-girdling movements have to stand behind the state, plagued as it is from the inside by the forces of internal colonization and the local bourgeoisie and plagued from the outside by these increasingly orthodox economic constraints under global economic restructuring. Therefore, there is no interest in grabbing state power as a main program in the non-Eurocentric global movement for ecological justice. Indeed, the electoral left parties often see them as insufficiently political. This instrumentality of what can only be called nationalism or even nationalist localism in the interior of a strategy-driven rather than crisis-driven globalization is certainly beyond the benevolent study of 'other cultures' in the North. Upon this ground it is easy to cultivate 'postnationalism' in the interest of global financialization by way of the 'international civil society' of private business, bypassing the individual states, where powerful non-governmental organizations (NGOs) collaborate with the

Bretton Woods organizations with the mediation of the new UN (Spivak 1999: 381)<sup>13</sup>.

The shift from the insurgent project of grabbing state power is compromised by the power of international finance capital, and Lenin's critique of imperialism is invoked to underline the point (310f). Indeed the question of the vanishing present can be reformulated in the terms of Gramsci's interpretation—within the context of war of position rather than war of movement—of the Leninist concept of the present moment and of politics as grasping the weakest link of a chain. Despite the proclivities of 'many Euro-U.S. thinkers of the global [who are] caught in the national' (27 note 32), the possibility of persistently redirecting accumulation into social redistribution can be within this group of gendered outsiders' reach 'if they [postcolonial subjects] join the globe-girdling Social Movements in the South through the entry point of their own countries of origin' (402).

In another echo of the earlier Coetzee essay Spivak's concern with the complacencies of post-nationalism and the reactionary utopia of evangelical neoliberalism involves the sidelining of the internal struggles within a nation in favour of the focus on imperialist domination:

David Atwell [*sic*] of the University of Pietermaritzburg has pointed out to me the existence of the notion of a 'colonialism of a special type' in South Africa, a colonialism that did not, by and large, export surplus value. He makes the interesting suggestion that this, too, might explain Coetzee's Crusoe's noncommittal attitude toward classic metropolitan interests. I keep to my much less finetuned point of territorial presence ... (1999: 190f, note 113).

This aside touches on a debate that is at once historically interesting and relevant. Launched by the South African Communist Party as part of the 1962 Programme 'The Road to South African Freedom', the colonialism of a

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<sup>13</sup> See Jameson's (2000) claim that the nation-state today remains the only concrete terrain and framework for political struggle; and Aijaz Ahmad's (1995) criticism of Spivak.

special type (CST) thesis refers to internal colonialism and has two parts: firstly, the contradictions of capitalism explain the shift from racist attitudes to a racist ideology; and secondly, the institutions of racial domination were first created and have since been reshaped over the years in order to meet the needs of the different fractions of South African capital. It shares a lineage with the Native Republic thesis, formulated by Jimmy LaGuma and Nikolai Bukharin and adapted by the Communist Party of South Africa in 1928, that implied a two stage theory as a national (bourgeois) democratic revolution was seen as a prelude to the move to socialism<sup>14</sup>. In 1969 the African National Congress endorsed the CST analysis as part of a national liberation struggle aiming at national citizenship<sup>15</sup>. Others have seen internal colonialism as both literal, in the case of homelands, and metaphorical in the case of extremes of categorization and discrimination within a national polity (see Cooper 2005: 249). The criticism of CST was that the subject position remains racialised in the call for a national democratic revolution to overturn colonialism and replace the white ruling class with a black bourgeoisie and ruling political class. In other words CST is amenable to liberal reformists committed to the continuation of an economic system in which the formerly advantaged might retain—under the banner of postcoloniality and with the participation of a new comprador elite—privileges nurtured by property and capital inherited from the apartheid era<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Allison Drew (1996: 21) gives the following description of the Native Republic thesis: ‘Presupposing national self-determination for a predominantly agrarian black colony conquered by white foreigners, its implicit concept of the South African nation was a racial or colour-based one, derived from a colonial model and superimposed on a post-colonial, racial capitalist society’. Trotsky also endorsed mobilising workers and peasants around the national question.

<sup>15</sup> See Peter Hudson (1986). During the eighties the saliency of the CST model was a source of contention between the nationalist COSATU and its rival, workerist inclined, union grouping FOSATU. See Martin Legassick and Gary Minkley (1998).

<sup>16</sup> See also essays by Colin Bundy (1989), Jeremy Cronin (1990), and for a literary perspective Jabulani Mkhize (1998).

Clearly the two stage theory, the rationale for the SACP's alliance with ANC, is based on knowing the difference between managing the reality of capitalism and making it an end itself<sup>17</sup>. CST has been linked to South African importations of postcolonial theory. Nicholas Visser took issue with the punting of a moderate postcolonial theory that foregrounds race and the experiential at the expense of other analytic categories such as class, and drew a comparison with the pitfalls of CST. These consist not only of the privileging of the experiential franchise and the racial homogenisation of identities, and the monolithic understanding of colonialism, but also a tendency to secure existing socio-economic structures. In disciplinary terms this means the amenability of postcolonial theory to 'an immensely powerful and self-regulating mechanism' (Visser 1997: 89).

My point in following this thread is that attending to the South African context not only throws light on the importation of postcolonial theory and its amenability to an untroubled institutionalization. While the CST debate fulfils Spivak's worries concerning the homogenizing dynamic of anti-colonial nationalism, it foregrounds the ability of race to over-determine that of class. It also falls short of Parry's optimistic scenario of inscribing cultural identity before it can be transcended, of working through attachments in order to emerge beyond them; of committing, at least strategically, to insurgent identities mobilised to the end of grabbing the state as part of a national and international struggle (Parry 1993: 30). However, so far the South African example has been distinguished by the emergence of what an economic historian has termed a typical African 'party state' (Bill Freund, 'South Africa: a new nation-state in a globalising era', 44). The spectacle of the social emancipation of the new bourgeoisie within the framework of political patronage characteristic of the ANC in power would appear to justify the scepticism directed at the radical potential of democratic nationalist movements<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> For more on the national democratic revolution see <http://www.sacp.org.za/> which seems to suggest, given current conditions, a stagist, incremental, gradualist approach.

<sup>18</sup> However, it is possible to read this symptom the other way, seeing in nationalism a bulwark against globalisation (see Guy 2004). Contrast this with the arguments of those concerned with the tendencies of the ANC's

#### IV

In other words, the key Leninist lesson today is that politics without the organizational *form* of the party is politics without politics ... (Žižek 2002: 558).

Most striking in both Spivak's and Parry's critique of postcolonial reason is the timely warning against the complacencies of post-nationalism and the appeal for continuing resistance to comprador regimes and new oligarchies. If the palliative of liberal-democratic-capitalist-reformism is preferable to delusory revolutionary false starts and the identity politics of class, it is no less utopian. With this in mind I would suggest that the 'vanishing present' referred to in Spivak's subtitle is not so much, as David Huddart (2001: 44) claims, the author's own vanishing—absent not only to her readers, but also to herself—nor is it merely the displaced presence of her readers. There is an equally substantive and contextualisable issue at stake that is registered when, in response to Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, Spivak reads the question of the political into 'the invocation of that absent class' (200: 34). The lesson to be taken is that

the presuppositions of the text of Marx should be internalized (learnt) by as large a group as possible—so that the practice is changed upstream from the party line—rather than be the means of metonymically collectivizing people whose other differences will inevitably bring the 'collectivity' down (ibid.).

We are confronted here with what has been termed the finitude of a certain concept of the party<sup>19</sup>. After all, the seizure of State power merely represents

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continentalism and the erection of a monolithic liberation history (see Mngadi and Monson 2001); and Gqola 2004). According to Michael MacDonald one of the effects of the 'collusive liberal capitalism in South Africa' is 'to reproduce and reward racialism' (2006: 152).

<sup>19</sup> In the words of Jacques Derrida: 'What tends perhaps to disappear in the political world that is shaping up, and perhaps in a new age of democracy, is

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a reform of the system, reinforcing the interstate system which serves the ends of accumulation and the interests of those in the traditional centres of the world system<sup>20</sup>. However, while the path of egalitarian politics does not necessarily pass through the State, or via the agency of a party, it does apparently intersect with the classroom.

We have returned to the theme of academic responsibility—the academic’s ‘one obligation of not writing on something carelessly read’ (Spivak 1994: 35)—within its institutional and disciplinary context, and the question of the location of criticism foregrounds the institution of the university. Since theory (like teaching) is undoubtedly a form of praxis, and in so far as the political is the public exercise of judgement, academics are involved in advancing the interests of others. The confusion of pedagogics with questions of politics circumscribes the arena of intervention in the tradition of politics as *paideia*: ‘Let us teach a resistance to mere theoreticism in the classroom’ (35). If teaching is ideally the non-coercive education of desire, the desire does not all flow one way. It seems to me that what links the metropolitan and the South African debates here is the question of effective activism that summons up a missing party, as mundane as it is fantastic: an (inter)national organization or coalition able to move beyond expressions of solidarity to actualise critique, often at the irreconcilable cost of putting partisanship before intellectual freedom. Parry’s choice of Pablo Neruda’s *A mi partido* (‘To My Party’) as epigram to her essay on ‘The New South Africa’ signals a strategic and organizational challenge obscured by both postcolonial identity disputes and, to a lesser

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the domination of this form of organization called the party, the party-State relation, which finally will have lasted, strictly speaking, only two centuries, barely longer than that, a period to which belong as well certain determined types of parliamentary and liberal democracy, constitutional monarchies, Nazi, fascist, or Soviet totalitarianisms. *Not one* of these regimes was possible without what could be called the axiomatics of the party’ (1998: 146). But what next?

<sup>20</sup> See also the claim that the State has not been thought through in Marx, and needs to be reinvented (Spivak 2006: 115). And Immanuel Wallerstein’s claim that the loss of hope in Leninism has really been the loss of hope in centrist liberalism (1995: 158).

degree, the fates of nationalism and university politics. It also evokes for me the failure of organisations, such as the Unity Movement, to move from educational enlightenment to determining State policy. Today who can doubt the need for organization and unity; for something like a party to transcend factionalism (minus the *ersatz* of the seizure of the university standing in for the seizure of State power)?

Slogans aside, caught between morality as individual critical autonomy and morality as necessarily compromised means of effective intervention, the academic as producer faces a well-documented dilemma<sup>21</sup>. We can still, in the words of Ania Loomba, ‘as students and academics’, follow the recommendation to engage in the ‘empirical specificity’ of ‘institutional critiques’ (1998: 258). As Ato Quayson romantically puts it, beyond teaching the intra-institutional hope is that as we ‘constantly defamiliarize our teaching methods’ ‘activists and workers “in the field” (NGOs, women’s agencies etc.) will find some illumination in these pages’ (2000: 184, 20). The propaganda of professional rectitude promises to displace outdated factionalism or partisanship.

This interlocking of pedagogy, institutional representation and theoretical production is also to be found in what has been characterised as South Africa’s ‘paranoid political climate’ (Jensen 2001: 119). We have seen metropolitan postcolonial debates marked by forms of misreading, the silencing or erasing of opponents, the imputation of ulterior motives, intemperance, strategic solidarity and wishful thinking. Nothing in that follows will challenge the essentials of this portrait of academic identity politics, but it will, I hope, foreground the stakes a little more emphatically.

## V

To fend off that danger [the potentially explosive identification of capitalism with white supremacy] business is joining with the ANC government in encouraging the growth of black middle classes and

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<sup>21</sup> Recall Antonio Gramsci’s observation that the problem of functionaries partly coincides with that of intellectuals (1971: 186). Gramsci, of course, does not understand the comparison in negative terms.

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enlisting racialism, as embodied by the new African bourgeoisie, to support the new political order (MacDonald 2006: 4).

At the level of the South African university, the legacy of colonialism lives on in a particularly noticeable form: the racial profile of academic staff. For example, at my own institution, the University of KwaZulu-Natal, whereas black Africans constitute 84% of the provincial population they only make up 17% of academic staff<sup>22</sup>. In a post-apartheid present marked by an increasing gap between rich and poor, anti-democratic forms persisting under the guise of culture and tradition, empowerment of a comprador and parasitic bourgeoisie carried by established capital, the perceived antidote to this situation is linked to the efficiency of the international, US-forged business model<sup>23</sup>. The imperative of rationalisation has given the impetus to a bitter and self-sustaining recriminatory identity politics in which academics face disciplinary action for publicly criticising university management. Sapere aude! But obey! An incessant crisis is exacerbated by the difficulty of retaining or attracting black staff because of uncompetitive salaries in an economy suffering an acute skills shortage.

There are a few more intertwined moments of this complex—wherein the break between the past and the present is also a moment of halting transition that I would like to highlight.

Our Black African Academic Forum has argued that retention of ‘fully black African academics’ will be helped by the making of ‘a counter

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<sup>22</sup> During the time of writing this figure has now risen to 20%. Of the permanent staff who are academics ‘49.7% are white ie [sic] 50.3% of academics are Black (20% African, 28.3% Indian and 2.4% Coloureds). For the first time, the majority of academics at UKZN are Black’ (Vice-Chancellor’s Communiqué 2008).

<sup>23</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that rather than being based solely on the US paradigm, South African affirmative action policies as documented by the Employment Equity Bill (1998) are inspired by the Malaysian model. See Kanya Adam (2005) on negotiating the contradiction between rejuvenating the racial group classifications associated with apartheid and breaking with that past.

offer when one of the black African academics seeks to resign' (BAAF 2005: 15). The challenge is to change not only the 'cultural norms, values and ideologies that underpin the operations and interactions of the university' (6) but also 'the fact that processes which lead to research productivity have non-African frames of reference'; established journals 'focus on specific issue types or on issues that reflect a non-African world view' (8). 'This is particularly dangerous for a part of the world whose identity and preference structure are being defined by others external to its locus'. (17) A key proposal to solve the problem of under-prepared academics being fast-tracked to management positions—where their 'expected failure' is taken 'as proof-positive of the baseness of the policies that assume that black Africans have the intellectual capacity to compete at this level' (8)—is to 'lower the preferred appointment level' (12) rather than employ non-black African candidates.

All of this within the context of the university's 'Strategic Plan 2007-2016' guided by the goal of 'the restructuring of South African industry (with the shift towards manufacturing)' (2008: 5) via programmes designed to meet the needs of the labour market 'and make a meaningful contribution to the provision of high-level human capital' (11). Academics, educated in 'organisational citizenship' (13), are reminded that they work at 'an institution that cares for its clients' (15) and is guided by an 'ethic of customer service to all stakeholders' (ibid.). And this in turn within the context of South African universities receiving a declining proportion of their revenue from the state. According to Habib *et al.* (2008: 149), this proportion is lower than both the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average and the contribution in most African countries.

Inevitably the complaints of those who feel themselves employed under sufferance (using the language of rights as a fig leaf over privilege) test the patience of a management unable to source replacements. Rightly suspicious of the unconscious prevalence of a creeping nostalgia for the principled university under apartheid as covert, normative ideal, the white academic appears as the litigious paranoid who refuses to recognise his own guilt or unearned privilege; clouding the issue of transformation with the self-righteous posturing in defence of academic freedom. The suspicion of co-ordinated subversion finds itself confronting an unmistakable pattern of organised negation and insistent second-guessing. Concerns regarding the

final destination of calls to Africanise (via intellectual endogamy) not only the personnel but also the Eurocentric disciplines of the university that were built on the exploitation of Africa are drowned out by the accusation of intransigent place-holding. The case for a restorative Africanism touts the benefits of repristination as the litmus test of non-racialism, and concerns regarding authoritarianism are heard as challenges to the legitimacy of authority. Meanwhile the recoding of academic freedom in terms of bureaucratic responsibility coincides with the rhythm of perpetual punitive auditing expeditions, and the seepage from the university's racial politics militates against pedagogical enlightenment<sup>24</sup>. Students remain the register of disgust and alienation as those advocating the sacredness of freedom of speech object to being put to the question; the expense of spirit in a waste of shame.

In this embattled diorama appeals for moderation and reason are heard as implying a lack of these on the part of interlocutors who in turn see the continuation of colonialism in the assumed superiority of the appeal, and in its very language (here, English). The sympathetic are struck dumb when confronted by the experiential franchise of the oppressed enforced by an irresistible logic that insistently demands what it implacably refuses: you must understand what you by definition cannot understand (because of your race)<sup>25</sup>. The formation of cliques displaces the formation of parties and each stake-holder sees its Other as impervious to shame, contradicting reality, and inaccessible to logical critique. Beyond the fray, the remnants of the academic luxury of wielding moral superiority without having to face consequences melds into impartiality that acts as a cover for opportunism.

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<sup>24</sup> This involves interpreting the comparison of white academics and baboons. See the commentary by Thabisi Hoeane, [http://www.weekendpost.co.za/main/2005/04/16/Opinion/ot01\\_160420htm](http://www.weekendpost.co.za/main/2005/04/16/Opinion/ot01_160420htm). Also [http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?articleid=290465&area=/insight/insight\\_national](http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?articleid=290465&area=/insight/insight_national). 'The strain of man's bred out/ Into baboon and monkey' (Shakespeare, *The Life of Timon of Athens*, 1.1: 251f)

<sup>25</sup> Those interested in doing so can track these manoeuvres, the belligerent reprisals, special pleading, condescension, and malice at <http://www.changes@UKZN> and <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?11,61,3,1671>

The first stone has always already been thrown in retaliation, and the passion of attack, counter-attack and self-exoneration ensure that that misunderstandings flow seamlessly into disagreements. The stampede for the moral high fails to level the playing field.

As a fragment of the South African postcolonial *agon*, and at the cost of suggesting identities where differences are important, I would like to offer the following schematic thick description.

First, the seductive fantasy associated with white liberals: that they have guided the liberation movement towards modern, democratic, individualistic values. The alternative would have been crude Marxism or a totalising nationalism. In this conceit European culture, as the bastion of civilised values, is a core that must not be obscured by the atavistic aberration of racism. In this paternalistic phantasmagoria the future development of South Africa, in terms of civil society and economy, depends on the tutelage of those guarding the legacy of these values. The crisis in Zimbabwe forms a convenient backdrop illustrating what happens when Africans are given back their own indignity. In defending the gains of a post-totalitarian society, I (the beneficiary of totalitarianism) am free to detect in you (the representative of its victims) a return of the repressed.

The reaction-formation that answers this self-serving rationalisation holds that the demise of apartheid and the elections of 1994 represent an unequivocal victory over the forces of reaction identified as white. Subsequent resistance to racial transformation represents a rear-guard process of intellectual and bureaucratic wrecking, an intransigent that aims to discredit by delay the process of democratisation and representivity via obstructive provocations. This perspective has its own coherence and justification. Nevertheless its moralising form elicits the suspicion that as a scenario it rests on elision of the fact that the nature of the political compromise arose because of the estimation on the part of those in the liberation struggle was that the alternative to accommodation with former oppressors was the Balkanization of South Africa, a blood-bath that would leave little left to govern, and economic regression.

If the negotiated settlement was a step back from an abyss that involved unavoidable, and often unpalatable, compromise, it follows that to view the continued existence of whites in South Africa as an act of pure generosity on the part of the oppressed, demonstrative of a superior morality,

is a distortion. Whatever the remarkable acts of forgiveness experienced by individuals, the retention of the perceived clients of the former oppressors rests as much on economic self-interest and political realism as on a sense of justice and transcendence of the desire for revenge. The deflection of the charge of self-interest is achieved by returning that charge, assuring stasis. More importantly, if the ethos of the 1994 settlement has now evaporated, or if interlocutors no longer, or never did, identify with such principles, then a reassessment is called for.

On both sides, in the no-man's land between fantasy and memory, the satisfaction of betrayal fuels wounded resentment before gross ingratitude. While this circulation of crude stereotypes represents but one strata of a specific national complex, it does echo the highly personalised nature of polemical exchanges in the metropolitan postcolonial debates that take aim at the legitimacy of opponents. In addition, white academics in the post-colony concerned with social justice face the added responsibility of overseeing the ultimate replacement of themselves with black colleagues in a situation of financial constriction and frozen posts; a situation that resonates beyond the university and therefore gives academic politics a particular charge. Where the stakes are, if not higher, then more immediate, the South African example can illuminate what is often obscured in the metropolitan exchanges.

In the proverbial shadow of invocations of the anti-colonial utopia turning into postcolonial nightmare (but nightmare for whom?), one can sense the attraction of the argument that in the postcolonial era we are making the mistake of still asking anti-colonial questions. Wielding censorial anti-colonial rhetoric in the context of neo-colonialism risks distorting a context that has been described (borrowing from Gramsci) as a 'state of reciprocal siege' (SACP 2006: 19) produced by South Africa's negotiated transition to democracy. The entire system seems to be lurching forward and backward at the same time in a context where the *who* all too often determines the meaning and value of the *what*. A chain of buried interpretation encircles the likelihood of normalising the university in an abnormal society. Is a normal society equivalent to one based on deracialised capitalism, and how can the faith in the possibility of de-racialising

competitive society be turned into reality?<sup>26</sup>

If today it is no longer excusable to confuse the anti-colonial struggle with opposition to capitalism, then it would seem that the challenge confronting those who would do more than tend the flame of hope includes interrogating the limitations of academic production within the context of global and national political alliances and positions. Identifying attempts to silence and de-legitimate both in university politics and the wider academic marketplace often uncovers a common defence of policies and decisions passing off history as ineluctable nature. It appears that the real problem to be addressed—the ability of the current economic system to deliver on the promise of social justice, and the role of the university and its personnel in working for or against meaningful change—is too often lost under the trauma of bitter hope and blossoming anxiety.

Whether in the panorama of metropolitan debates, where the question of political alignment vies with social identity as the index of legitimacy, or in the microcosm of South African institutional politics where the issue of representivity overdetermines the field of non-communication, the question of correct analysis of the historical context recedes before the defence of integrity. At different ends of the academic marketplace the various answers to the challenge of what is to be done are often lost in the wake of defensiveness and charged misreadings that indicate the presence of trauma that is not only personal. We have seen that it involves various interpretations of the nature of society and of the role of the university, of teaching, of nationalism and the usefulness of political parties, etc. While the fragment of the South African case presented here can be read as testifying to the pitfalls of national consciousness, the festering legacy of colonialism, and resistances to the frank analysis of its nature and after-image, it also poses the problem of what is to be done. At the very least, as we say, academics ought to be in a position to offer a rigorous critical analysis of their function and, exceptionally, point to possible ways forward out of the impasse of mutual recrimination. What is your critique of the existing world?

Critical self-reflection is not simply one aspect of academic

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<sup>26</sup> See *Africanus. Journal of Development Studies* 37, 2 (2007), for discussion of South African post-apartheid economic policy.



responsibility among others; and the deadlock in discourses within the university may in fact be mirroring a wider ideological crisis that is having definite material effects, retarding the ability of South Africa to exorcise the spectre of colonialism. What linkage might the post-apartheid wrangling over the stewardship of the means of academic knowledge production have with the struggle over other means of production, for example around the question of land? Colleagues working at metropolitan universities can seem, from outside at least, to dispute within a socio-economic and ideological system whose overall stability (for better or for worse) is considerably more secure than that of post-totalitarian democracies such as South Africa. If this can render metropolitan debates, however intense and significant, peripheral in their own immediate political sphere of influence it also suggests that the stakes for disputants in the post-colonies may well be more urgent. As Mahmood Mamdani (2008) has concluded from an analysis of the crisis in Zimbabwe, the clock is ticking for South Africa.

The most debilitating manifestation of the present academic situation calls to mind the folktale of the exhausted mother who invited a passing man to care for her children, only for him to realise how much easier it was to cook the children one by one and feed them to the unsuspecting mother. He escapes by turning into a stone that the mother throws across the river in anger at his perceived escape.

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