

# Of Hauntings, Impasses and Lacunae: The South African Debate on Postcolonial Theory

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## Summary

Which modalities of postcolonial theory gained currency within the literary-cultural discourses of the South African academy? In seeking to answer this, I highlight the key concerns in the debate on postcolonial theory in South Africa: the question of the applicability of the term postcolonial or a notion of postcoloniality as an explanatory discourse for the South African case; the question of critical disablement of the investigating intellectual who deploys postcolonial theory informed by deconstruction; the question of the political implications of postcolonial theory as appropriated in the South African academy; and the question of the focus on racial and cultural difference at the expense of an analysis of class. The mode of articulation of postcolonial theory in South Africa submerges a "liberal-humanist" tendency – one that sought to abrogate some of the most radical insights of postcolonial theory. What results from this will to power is a deadlocked institutional politics that does not yet begin to exhaust the potentialities of postcolonial theory – a correlative reductionism of literary criticism (should we posit one) could then perhaps be traced back to this moment of appropriating a theoretical lexicon.

## Opsomming

Watter modaliteite van postkoloniale teorie het posgevat binne die literêr-kulturele diskoerse van die Suid-Afrikaanse akademie? In die soeke na hierdie antwoord beklemtoon ek die volgende belangrike punte in die debat oor postkoloniale teorie in Suid-Afrika: die kwessie van die toepaslikheid van die term postkoloniale of 'n idee van postkolonialiteitsstudies as 'n verklarende diskoers vir die Suid-Afrikaanse geval; die vraag van kritiese belemmering van die ondersoekende intellektueel wat postkoloniale teorie ingelig deur dekonstruksie ontplooi; die kwessie van die politieke implikasies van postkoloniale teorie soos aangewend in die Suid-Afrikaanse akademie; en die vraag van die fokus op rasse- en kultuurverskille ten koste van 'n ontleding van klas. Die modus van artikulasie van postkoloniale teorie in Suid-Afrika verskuil 'n "liberaal-humanistiese" neiging – een wat sommige van die mees radikale insigte van postkoloniale teorie verwerp. Wat volg uit hierdie wil vir mag is 'n dooie-punt institusionele politiek wat nog nie eers begin om die potensiaal van postkoloniale teorie uit te put nie – 'n korrelatiewe reduktivisme van literêre kritiek (sou ons een aanneem) kan dan moontlik teruggevoer word tot hierdie oomblik van toeëiening van 'n teoretiese leksikon.

Recently, in “The Case of Coetzee: South African Literary Criticism, 1990 to Today”, Michael Chapman surveys the field and is disquieted by the proliferation of a literary-critical register that in the early 1990s turned to “continental philosophers (Derrida, Foucault, Levinas) as theorists of an ethical responsibility to ‘otherness’” (2010: 103). Chapman decries the unfulfilled promise of “a new phase of discussion” within South African literary criticism after the fractious debates of the 1970s and ’80s between “those dubbed as ‘instrumental’ (or political) critics and those of ‘art’ persuasion” (p. 103). Hence the concern to reinvigorate an appreciation for and commitment to the aesthetic value of the “experiential text” (p. 113). For Chapman, there is (has been?) a dominant strand of literary criticism within the academy that has tended not to *prize* (precisely in both senses) the “aesthetic dimension” (p. 113) of literature; this all in favour of abstract philosophical and theoretical insights that (supposedly) flatten the complexity of the literary text.<sup>1</sup>

Given the exponential attention that Coetzee’s texts have garnered, Coetzee scholarship becomes the “leitmotif” (Chapman 2010: 104) of this tendency. Chapman is right to suggest that we revisit both the earlier debates of the 1970s and ’80s as well as to remind us that the metropolitan articulation of theories of difference and otherness should not be merely “imitated” within “the apartheid-scarred divisions of South Africa” (p. 107). Certainly. What I seek to argue here, however, is that perhaps we should go back to the debate (which is in any case the inflected inheritor of the concerns of the earlier debates) that took place in the early 1990s. Within this charged space of transition, which modalities of postcolonial theory gained currency within the literary-cultural discourses of the South African academy? What follows then is an attempt to parse a debate which has largely been passed in contemporary discussion.

Together, David Attwell and Leon de Kock are acknowledged as seeking to install postcolonial theory onto the South African literary-cultural discursive agenda in the early 1990s. The most exemplary instances are Attwell’s and de Kock’s respective interviews with Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. So too are Attwell’s “Introduction” to a 1993 special issue on postcolonial theory in *Current Writing*, and de Kock’s “Postcolonial

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1. De Kock is concerned to make a similar point in his presentation “Squeezing Writers Out: A Deductivist Stranglehold on the Construction of ‘South African Literature’?” (2010) in the English Studies Research Seminar at UKZN (Howard College). De Kock bemoans what he calls a “critic dominant” or “deductive” criticism, which he argues, tends to constitute a closed form of reading that does not open onto the scene of the literary text but rather onto the stage of the critic’s performance of theoretical mastery. Citing Derek Attridge, de Kock of course then favours an inductive criticism that would be less reductive in appreciating the “singularity of the literature”.



Analysis and the Question of Critical Disablement". Also important here will be Annamaria Carusi's contributions to postcolonial analysis in South Africa – in "Post, Post and Post. Or, Where Is South African Literature in All This" (1991a) and "The Postcolonial Other As a Problem for Political Action" (1991b). Nicholas Visser's critique, "Postcoloniality of a Special Type: Theory and Its Appropriations in South Africa" (1997), will be crucial for partially highlighting the stakes of the debate. In this vein, I will also draw on Kelwyn Sole's "South Africa Passes the Posts" (1997), and "Democratising Culture and Literature in a 'New South Africa': Organisation and Theory" (1994a). There are four major concerns in the South African debate. Firstly, there is the question of the purchase of the term postcolonial or a notion of postcoloniality as an explanatory discourse for the South African case. This question derives from the exemplary status South Africa has seemed to enjoy for postcolonial inquiry. Let's remember Laura Chrisman's caution and complaint about the possible danger of "sanctioned ignorance" on historical specificity posed by the metropolitan theorisation about South Africa, due to the country acquiring "the fetishistic status of racial allegory" (1997: 41-42). Secondly, I examine what emerges in the debate as the question of critical disablement of the investigating intellectual who deploys a deconstructive postcolonial theory. In its own manner, the latter concern reiterates both Benita Parry's familiar complaint against what she argues is a political lacuna and what Bart Moore-Gilbert suggests is "political pessimism" in Gayatri Spivak's work. In a different register, the South African debate rehearses concerns that such postcolonial theory merely invokes a "textual" politics that does not enable an activist politics. These preoccupations are related to the last two questions, namely, the question of the political implications of postcolonial theory as appropriated in the South African academy, and the question of the focus on race- and cultural differences at the expense of an analysis of class.

That South Africa has been seen as a paragon of postcoloniality is not to say there has been no debate of that very designation. For Attwell, "South Africans are hardly in a position to decline the term" (1993a: 1) postcolonial. Attwell further argues that "*we cannot avoid asking what relevance international discourses of postcoloniality have for South Africa*" (1993a: 4; my italics). Is there not something other than mere generosity in both Attwell's contention about the impossibility for South Africans to refuse the term postcolonial and his programme of unification, implied by his "we"? From the very first paragraph (the first line even) of his "Introduction" to the issue of the aforementioned publication, Attwell claims discursive authority for his articulations, through the consensus implied by his use of "we". Attwell's assertion that "we have always known we are 'postcolonial' in one sense or another" (1993a: 2) further illustrates this.



At the same time, Attwell recognises the “untheorised” status of such knowledge – hence his appropriation of a postcolonial “critical-theoretical language” (1993a: 2) – and its potential vulnerability “to self-contradiction or to sceptical questioning from *international* quarters” (1993a: 3; my italics). I highlight “international” in order to illustrate the focus of Attwell’s appropriation of postcolonial theory. It also demonstrates the manner in which Attwell construes the relationship between metropolitan discourses and peripheral reception. Thus the claim: “As real or at least aspirant participants in critical theory, we find ourselves already in a relationship with these discourses. South Africa continues to be seen as a crucible wherein many of the questions being addressed elsewhere burn with unusual intensity” (1993a: 2). This latter assertion resonates with my discussion of the claims for South Africa as an exemplary instance of postcoloniality. Attwell’s concern is, in fact, to speculate “about the South African case as instance of the postcolonial” (1993a: 5). Under Attwell’s assumptions South Africa’s postcoloniality “is founded on a dialogic principle ... so that any simple theoretical polarity [between ‘settler’ and ‘native’] becomes unworkable” (1993a: 5). But one would be hard-pressed to find postcolonies where “simple theoretical polarities” have ever been workable.

Attwell suggests – although he insists that he is only “playing devil’s advocate” (1993b: 107) – that given the history of the segregationist, exclusionary and discriminatory discourses of apartheid, the deconstructive thought of difference is unsuitable for the South African case. In a country sundered by a palpably violent history, Attwell speculates on the urgency for national solidarity in the transitory uncertain potentialities of the negotiated settlement of the early 1990s, which called for anything but a violent intransigence: “Historical pressures seem to be moving us towards [the] kind of reflection ... where we are able to look beyond the fixed polarities of some metropolitan versions of postcolonial studies” (1993a: 5).

It comes as no surprise then when Attwell, in his interview with Bhabha, notes the particular difficulty felt by South African critics faced with the task of “applying a disjunctive reading of nationalism ... [when] reading the reconstitution of the nation in terms of the national democratic struggle as led by the ANC” (1993a: 108). What is of course missed here is that the seeds for a “disjunctive” reading of nationalism are already within the counter-discourses of the anti-colonialist tradition. Indeed, Bhabha’s response to Attwell acknowledges the political necessity of “nation-building” as “the notion of the nation as the liberatory horizon, which has a national, populist resonance, of a claim to justice ... the claim to a new history” (1993b: 108). For Bhabha, what remains important is to also highlight the necessary ambivalence in that (re)construction of a national culture – to remain aware of the contingency, the fissures and occlusions that occur in any articulation of “unified sovereignty” (1993b: 108).



Attwell's suggestion for the appropriation of postcolonial theory in South Africa homogenises the emergence of a historical consciousness for both "white South Africa" and "black" subjects. Firstly, there are important class differentiations in the racially identified emergent historical consciousness of "white South Africa" occluded in Attwell's discussion. For instance, this would mean attending to how such formations of historical consciousness would have differed between English- and Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans, given the imperially legislated economic privilege enjoyed by the former before the constitution of the first republic of South Africa. Secondly, Attwell's assertion that "the claim to authority by various streams of African, self-affirming consciousness is realised within white discourses" (1993a: 5) is, I would argue, precisely the limited discursive interaction between black elites and their white counterparts.

Attwell's prompting of Bhabha's statement, "class is one agency among others" (1993b: 107), possibly serves to highlight his positionality. It also foregrounds a particular (mis)take in his exchange with Bhabha. For Bhabha, to question the "*sufficiency* and *priority* of class" is not a "refusal of the importance of class as generating a certain structure of the social formation which produces its own agency" (1993b: 107). This does not mean, as Attwell seems to understand it, that the postcolonial intellectual should merely elide class as an analytic category, choosing exclusively (if not primarily, in what is a simple reversal of priority), to focus on racial and cultural difference. This reversal of priority is perhaps indicative of the politico-institutional dynamics operating within the South African academy. Contrary to Attwell, Bhabha's affirmation of the statement "class is one agency among others" emerges out of the search for a "deconstructive reading of class, class against the grain" (1993b: 107). Attwell's hasty appropriation of the "critical-theoretical language" of postcolonial theory clearly (mis)takes the reading of class. A similar tendency is demonstrated in de Kock's more sophisticated articulation on the reading of class within postcolonial analysis.

De Kock's "Sitting for the Civilisation Test" attempts to reorient postcolonial theory to the South African case in an investigation that focuses on thinking forms of native agency and resistance that would be other than Bhabha's theorisation of "mimicry" and his notion of "sly civility". The problem arises in the manner in which de Kock reads the relevance of class. This is illustrated in both his analyses of the unanimous resolution made at the African Authors Conference (AAC) of 1936, by some of the most pre-eminent black South African authors of the time, that a "national" literature – as opposed to an aboriginal "tribal" literature – should and could only be expressed in English (de Kock 2001: 393), and the calls for a "civilisation test" "at the All African Convention (AAC) in 1935" (2001: 397-398). Here, de Kock affirms the discursive authority and authentic representivity of the resolutions of what is clearly a black elite: "On the surface we have



an emergent African nationalist discourse framing its ideals in what post-colonial theory would normally regard as the language of complicity” (2001: 399-400). That postcolonial theory is presented as an orthodoxy is perhaps the consequence of its peculiar articulation on the South African scene.

In his earlier assertions, at the time of his interview with Spivak, de Kock is concerned to assuage the hostility towards postcolonial theory and colonial discourse analysis within the South African academy given their efficacy for “a country as deeply postcolonial and as discursively-stratified as South Africa” (1992: 32). De Kock argues that the machinations of reforming apartheid unsettled the grounds of oppositional discourses: “The governing party ... had begun freely to appropriate liberal language ... so that even the discourse of liberal humanism, which for so long was the front line of cultural resistance and the preserve of the arts, looked to be in danger of being swallowed up by the former apartheid demons” (1992: 30).

Given de Kock’s place within the South African literary-cultural establishment, perhaps his positionality is highlighted by both his endorsement of “liberal humanist” discourse and oppositional practice, and his claim that at the New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa “[a]ll of South Africa was symbolically reconstituted under the single nationhood formerly denied” (1992: 31).<sup>2</sup> He seems to be aware that class identifications have a bearing on the enunciation of discursive authority when he notes that the conference was a “fairly middle-class affair, while black South Africans continued to die in large numbers in the political violence all around us” (1992: 29). And, although he criticises the conference for being “like a post-revolution conference before the [material political] revolution that would now never really occur” (p. 29), de Kock approves of the stated preoccupations of the conference – the latter being framed as an attempt to discuss “alternatives to race talk”.<sup>3</sup> However, if the session titles of the first day of the conference are taken at their word, then the concerns are not so much

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2. The New Nation Writers Conference took place in 1991, as a result of reforms undertaken by the Pretoria regime in the early 1990s. As both de Kock and Attwell also note, the return to South Africa by some of the previously banned political exiles and political parties who opposed *apartheid*, and the end of the academic boycott of the country by international writers, critics, theorists and commentators, opened up the space for revisioning “the cultural identity of South African people” (de Kock 1992: 30).
  3. So, many of the conference themes were perforce conceived in opposition to the perceived dominant tropes of the old apartheid .... The first day was devoted to discussing alternatives to race talk. The sessions were entitled “Race & Ethnicity: Towards Cultural Diversity & Unity”; “Race & Ethnicity: Images & Stereotypes in Literature”; “Race & Ethnicity: The Problems & Challenges of Racism in Writing”; and “Race & Ethnicity: Beyond the Legacy of Victims”; “South African Writers Speak” (1992: 30-31).



“an alternative to race talk” but the reinsertion of race talk at precisely the moment when it is supposedly transcended.

How revealing is de Kock’s conception of the task of reconstituting a representative South African national culture as merely achieved through a release of “the stranglehold of ... pompous, Wasp, middle-class control of scholarly discourse” (1992: 31)? Laudable indeed. It is, however, a particular type of opening up – with its own constraints, exclusions and marginalisations. With eleven official languages, one such constraint would be the linguistic hegemony of the English (and Afrikaans) language within the South African literary-cultural establishment, and the insufficiency of translation work being done in the country. The difficulty of reading the place of class analysis in de Kock’s work is that he shows an awareness of, and even uses, class as an analytic category. Nevertheless, the manner of de Kock’s attention to class does not complicate the promise of what Derrida has called “South Africa in memory of apartheid” (1985: 293).

De Kock approaches the problematic of critical disablement that is said to cohere to postcolonial theory – the supposed retention of binary oppositionality or “strong othering” – by arguing it is only the result of misrepresenting the postcolonial theoretical thought on otherness. Thus his argument attempts to keep open a space for “what a critic of colonialism in South Africa is enabled to say” (1993: 48). Instead of a “hard version” of “post-structuralist-based” theory, de Kock argues for a version that would allow “for an ethical subject who can recognise the tyrannies of identity, but who nevertheless must work from a basis of identity which is politically defined” (1993: 60). He clearly expresses his interest as follows:

[If] poststructuralist logic were to teach that, regardless of relative agency or historical, political and ethical considerations, any assertion of subjectivity in identitarian terms was “logocentric”, “essentialist” and unacceptable because it merely reversed Western binary procedure, then black political mobilisation, or any group mobilisation for that matter, would have to be regarded as inadmissible.

(de Kock 1993: 53)

What remains interesting in de Kock’s above assertion is his attempt to refuse precisely the deconstructive demonstration of the textuality of “agency or the historical, political and ethical considerations”. The misreading involved here is incapable of interrogating the historicity of the text of apartheid. De Kock seems to suggest that the deconstructive thought on alterity finally closes off access to materiality, quotidian politics and ethics.

Carusi is also anxious that the conceptual problematic of heterogeneity within postcolonial theory “results in a dilemma for the theorising of constitutive political action” (1991b: 228). What Carusi (and others) take umbrage at is precisely the advent of deconstruction within postcolonial theory. Hence, “[o]therness is a ... problem for theories of postcolonialism; it is



also one of the major obstacles to their fulfilling their claim to contributing to emancipatory political intervention” (1991b: 229). Carusi acknowledges the contribution made by Spivak and Bhabha’s examination of the power/knowledge dynamics of colonial authority and identification, and the ways in which it constructs the colonised as the colonising Self’s shadow. However, in a manner not unlike Benita Parry’s attack on Spivak’s and Bhabha’s work in “Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse” (1987), Carusi argues that their interrogations of the elisions of imperialist subject constitution foreclose the colonised’s ability to fashion counter-hegemonic practices. For Carusi, Spivak’s notion of subalternity implies that the

other is in a structurally identical position as the beyond of transgression, that is, it has only a negative status .... [The] idea of an other to the West reinforces the position of nonfunctionality and powerlessness of the other with respect to the West. Working within such a framework ... it is no wonder that “the subaltern cannot speak”.

(Carusi 1991b: 230-231)

This fails to contextualise Spivak’s interrogation of subalternity. Spivak reiterates this much in her interview with de Kock when she notes how criticism of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” has tended to ignore its occasionality. That is, the incident and situation informing her contention that “the subaltern cannot speak” is the message Bhuvaneshwari attempts to speak through her suicide.

Carusi is precisely correct when she notes that the deconstructive thought of heterogeneous difference does not prescribe or found a political programme that is recognisable under the terms of conventional political philosophies: “Purposeful action requires a basis in a positive foundation in that it requires a basis on which decisions and predictions are made” (1991b: 236). Purposeful action requires purposeful action seems to be the neat tautology Carusi here asserts – a misapprehension of the undecidability that cuts through all moments of decision. Carusi’s assertion seems to hold an unexamined assumption about the radicality of merely invoking political practice. That is, as Bhabha argues,

[p]olitical positions are not simply identifiable as progressive or reactionary, bourgeois or radical, prior to the act of *critique engagee*, or outside the terms and conditions of their discursive address. It is in this sense that the historical moment of political action must be thought of as part of the history of its writing .... [This] is to suggest that the dynamics of writing and textuality require us to rethink the logics of causality and determinacy through which we recognize the “political” as a form of calculation and strategic action dedicated to social transformation.

(Bhabha [1989]1994: 22-23)



Is it still necessary to remind that subalternity is not a moment of negativity in some conception of a dialectical progression? For Spivak, subalternity is the catachrestic occasion for the subversive interruption/irruption of the other that refuses subsumption – so as to refuse a valorisation of the “oppressed as subject”. As Spivak argues, this does not mean that representation or political action becomes an impossibility or mere contradiction. On the contrary, to highlight the conditions of undecidability of the moment of decision is precisely to demonstrate the necessary urgency of the political decision that would remain ethical.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, Carusi’s reading is recuperable inasmuch as it initiates a South African critique of the appropriation of metropolitan theory.

It should be clear then, that the appropriation of postcolonial theory by the critics under discussion – primarily Attwell and de Kock – seeks to install a “particularist version of postcolonial theory” (Sole 1994a: 23) that seeks to foreclose the deconstructive interrogation of alterity. For Sole, Attwell and de Kock’s formulations of postcoloniality largely bypass an examination of “how to periodise South Africa within a ‘colonial/post-colonial’ framework” (1997: 119). Visser’s exposition in “Postcoloniality of a Special Type: Theory and Its Appropriations in South Africa” condenses a rigorous and incisive critique of the critiques I have discussed. Besides rehearsing the orientation of many of Visser’s arguments, Sole’s critique in “South Africa Passes the Posts” is too expansive for my purposes. At the same time, it is not so much a rehearsal. Visser acknowledges the trace of Sole’s non-present signature to the essay when he states, “Kelwyn Sole was originally to have co-authored this essay but had to withdraw owing to illness. I have benefited greatly from discussions with him” (1997: 79). However, Sole’s case will be explored inasmuch as it illuminates the reasons for what I will argue is a deadlock in the South African debate. Visser’s critique hopes to identify in the assertion of South Africa’s postcolonial status by South African critics an uncritical endorsement of the assumptions of a theory popularised by the South African Communist Party in the early 1960s – the theory of South Africa as an instance of “Colonialism of a Special Type” or CST, as it later became known: “Assumptions about shared experience, about the supposed convergence of interests among all who are not white, and about shared racial subjectivity ... have been central features of CST. They are also key features of postcolonial theory in South Africa, and within that theory they carry the same questionable entailments” (1997: 81).<sup>5</sup> Attwell and de Kock’s appropriation of postcolonial theory, together

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4. See Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’” (1992: 9-10, 15-16). See also Geoffrey Bennington (2000: 33).

5. That Attwell endorses and prescribes to CST’s model of “internal colonialism” becomes clear in Spivak’s following acknowledgement:



with their endorsement of CST's model of "internal colonialism", certainly privileges an analysis of race over an analysis of class.

Like Carusi, Visser notes the overshadowing of the term "post-apartheid" by "postcolonial". Visser argues that there is a self-congratulatory tendency in the appropriation of postcoloniality in the South African academy. For him, this results from the misapprehension of "[t]he transition that occurred in South Africa between 1990 and 1994 ... [as] the most convincing occasion for dating the end of colonial rule over South Africa" (1997: 83). Such a critique of the temporalising tendencies within the term "post-colonial" of course repeats the metropolitan debate.

In conceding the problematic question of the term "postcolonial" in South Africa, Visser might also have noted the equivocality of the term "post-apartheid". To follow Jacques Derrida's insistence on interrogating the "totality of the text of *apartheid*" would then perhaps mean to attend to both its continuities and discontinuities within contemporary South Africa – not always necessarily of practice, but also of affect, within the many discursive spaces of the country. These sites of enunciation are not limited to academic discourse but would include, among other things, all manner of political speeches, state policy and particularities of social relations – whether cultural, economic, racial or sexual difference. There is, of course, the danger that such attention could be seen as counterproductive to attempts to foster a national culture after the violently Manichean and discriminatory practices of the apartheid state. Minimally, one of the responsibilities of the (post-colonial) intellectual in South Africa should be an attempt to demystify the difficulties of the country by thinking through them in the most consistent fashion possible.

Some of Visser's specific critiques about the status of postcolonial theory in South Africa are indeed insightful. Yet, I do not always agree with the manner in which they are derived. To be sure, de Kock does acknowledge the debt of his understanding of colonial relations and the South African debate on CST, in an expansive footnote (see de Kock 1997: 65). He, de Kock, shows a critical awareness of the historicity of the idea of colonialism in South Africa, prior to Visser's criticism. To bury the discussion of the applicability of the term "postcolonial" to the South African case within a footnote, however, could also be seen as a strategic critical hiatus.

Visser and Sole are right to suggest that the appropriation of postcolonial theory in the South African literary-cultural establishment seems to be "liberal-pluralist" (Visser 1997: 90) or falls back onto the terms of "liberal

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David Attwell ... 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 ... I keep to my much less finetuned point of territorial presence – though even there, the difference between settler colonies ... and territorial imperialisms ... must be kept in mind.

(Spivak 1999: 190-191)



humanism” (Sole 1997: 124). This is minimally illustrated by the tendency I have argued is submerged in de Kock’s and Attwell’s respective claims for the task of postcolonial criticism in South Africa. For Sole, Attwell tends to slip “back into notions of authenticity when dealing with issues of black agency” (1997: 116), a move that Sole offers is typical of postcolonial criticism in South Africa. For Visser, the workings of this “entrenched liberal-pluralist orientation” (1997: 90) are revealed “in the relation between current theory and syllabus construction”, given the problematic retention of literary works within syllabi that have been critiqued as complicit with the task of “forming students into good liberal pluralists” (1997: 90). This distinguishing characteristic of the South African appropriation of postcolonial theory then seeks to domesticate “the theory, stripping it of its more interesting and provocative assertions in order to reinstate it as the latest expression of liberal pluralism” (p. 92).

Thus de Kock seeks, as Visser argues,

a deconstruction without most of Derrida or de Man, a poststructuralism without most of Foucault or Lacan, a postmodernism without most of Lyotard or Baudrillard; just as he appears to seek a postcolonial theory without most of Spivak or Bhabha. What is unclear is just what remains after such abstractions, and why anyone would want to advocate the remainder.

(Visser 1997: 85)

In this case, what remains is a postcolonial theory without any class. Attwell’s striking elision of class analysis and his assertion that postcolonial theory is “post-Marxist” (1993a: 4) can be understood as deference to the politico-institutional dynamics of the South African literary-cultural establishment. For Visser, Attwell’s uncritical pronouncement is not post-Marxism but the far more familiar anti-Marxism (1997: 94).<sup>6</sup>

The analysis of class identification, alienation or whatever, is not (how could it be?) the exclusive purview or sole proprietary of Marxist analysis. One could remember Derrida’s (belated?) enunciations, in *Specters of Marx*, on the importance of an awareness of the efficacious spectrality of Marxist critique within his thought, especially regarding the contemporary international division of labour, the juridico-economic discourses and consequences of state policies, decisions and actions, and the corporate governance of the modern transnational conglomerate – nothing other than an (for him, now deconstructive) analysis of the contemporary scene of Global Capitalism (Derrida 2006: 111-112).

On the one hand, perhaps this should temper anything like the view that Derrida’s work or deconstruction in general should be inherently either *anti-*

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6. See also David Johnson’s complaint that “anti-Marxist arguments ... have become too-easy critical orthodoxies” (1994: 80).



Marxist or anti-humanist.<sup>7</sup> It also renders questionable any unexamined assumptions of those who would claim to be post-Marxist. Thus Parry correctly notes that what necessarily haunts Derrida's grammar, in *Specters of Marx*, is an understanding that the questions of the politics and ethics are animated by a call for a differential future, for an ethical relation with the other that would be something other than mere subsumption to some prior rule or mere calculation. Such a reading of racial and cultural difference together with an analysis of class in the South African case is incisively demonstrated by John Comaroff's comments in his conversation with Bhabha. The stark reality in contemporary South Africa is that class distinctions have become intensified across race lines.<sup>8</sup>

Sole's critique is valuable for its analysis of the problematics that were largely not thought through in the arrival of postcolonial theory in South Africa. However, Sole's own call for a Marxist analysis of South Africa is not without its problems. Problematically, Sole still argues for an irreducible distinction between the social and the discursive. Here Sole seems to hold too rigid a distinction between the theoretical and the political or between theory and practice. Also, although Sole argues that an analysis of class identification should not mean that all social relations are constructed as economically determined, the singular weight of the prescriptions and descriptions in his argument finally results in this. This is particularly highlighted in Sole's essay, "Democratising Culture", where he argues that postcolonial theorists – Spivak being particularly censured – remain "wilfully blind" to the social domain when they "lose sight of, render obsolete, the powerful socialising and differentiating force of class struggle and formation" (1994a: 21). However, Sole here not only (mis)takes the place of class and the social within Spivak's thought; I would argue that his reiterated insistence on class as a pre-eminent category for analysing social relations finally essentialises the social within what Spivak calls "capitalist sociality".<sup>9</sup> Also, Spivak's insistence that the postcolonial intellectual should mark her positionality, and assertions that the intellectual must attempt to "unlearn privilege", are already a critique of the intellectual as class-privileged.

That the debate has stalled is illustrated by some of the belligerent responses to Sole's essay "Democratising Culture". It is arrested when most

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7. For Derrida on the danger involved in summary dismissals (or even unsparing interrogations) of the discourses of humanism, see "Force of Law" (1992: 28).

8. See Michael MacDonald's similar – although in a different register – argument in *Why Race Matters in South Africa* (2006: 126).

9. See Spivak's remarks in conversation with Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean in *The Spivak Reader* (1996: 294).



of the responses engage in *ad hominem* attacks. Sole's critique of post-colonial theory in South Africa has been largely ignored. The texture of such debate does not open onto any further discussion and rather signals the adherence to rigid disciplinary and institutional politics. Sole asserts this much in his rejoinder when he argues that the belligerence of the responses signals the will to power "of official or academic 'consensus'" (1994b: 62) that admonishes the views of marginal and discordant critique. Thus, the major critiques of this appropriation emerge from a self-acknowledged (though not homogenous) Marxist tradition. Attwell himself highlights the displacement of a previously ascendant Marxist criticism within the South African academy when he states that "progressive scholarship in South Africa *has been* predominantly Marxist" (1993b: 105; my italics). What displaced the latter scholarship is an apparently "liberal-pluralist" literary-cultural criticism that was amenable to the atmosphere of negotiated settlement.

That the critique of postcolonial theory in South Africa has been ignored also becomes clear in Attwell's *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History* (2005). Attwell nowhere (not once) explicitly registers Visser's and Sole's critiques. Without any particular citation, Attwell remarks, in the "Preface" to *Rewriting Modernity*, that "[b]y the early 1990s the debate over the place of postcolonial studies in South Africa was firmly under way: should we reject this foreign, homogenising, ahistoricising, 'poststructuralist' import, or should we reinvent it on our own terms?" (2005: ix). Is it not precisely Attwell's occlusion of what is an important debate within South African intellectual discussion that is rather "homogenising" and "ahistoricising"? But of course Attwell has registered the terms of the debate. This is traced in the preoccupations and changed order of priorities in his following assertion:

I could speak of the ways in which the country's celebrated pluralism masks the racist legacies of the past; of a deepening or a "normalisation" of class division as the middle class becomes more black than white .... The question for South Africa, then, is how to translate the terms of [a dominant "liberal capitalism"] in ways that are appropriate to our history and *the country's political, social and cultural priorities*.

(Attwell 2005: 6; my italics)

Attwell can now be seen to acknowledge Visser and Sole's critiques of a submerged "liberal-pluralist" tendency, as well as their assertion of the need for more attention to class analysis within South African postcolonial criticism. Attwell's comments here seem to imply a changed order of priorities for engaging the problematic of contemporary South Africa. Despite this, the debate cannot be acknowledged. In a footnote in his recent "Judging New 'South African' Fiction in the Transnational Moment" (2009), de Kock reports on the advice the editors give potential South



African contributors to the forthcoming *Cambridge History of South African Literature*. This advice is revealing of the extent to which a crucial and unresolved debate is being erased from the literary-historical archives (if only for “those with little prior knowledge of the field”):

[The] editors (Attwell particularly) urged writers to imagine they were writing for an audience conceived of transnationally, with little prior knowledge of the field. Writers were urged to let go of the “internal” or older, national disagreements and controversies in SA criticism. These are market-driven considerations, which are revealing of the imperative to recast histories of literature in a transnational rather than a national mould.

(de Kock 2009: 42)

In a gesture that is not yet as forthcoming as Marx and Engels, one could ask whether there is a spectre haunting the South African literary-cultural establishment. It is for these reasons that I hope to have shown that it is necessary to reread the South African debate. As Shane Moran has recently reminded, to revisit the debate would then require something other than the deadlocked institutional politics that have informed the South African appropriation of (and response to) postcolonial theory:

Critical self-reflection is not simply one aspect of academic 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.

(Moran 2008: 151)

Finally, there is no temporality in which we could evacuate theoretical insight from literary criticism. No. No return to an (a)theoretical “experiential text”. Rather, we need to sharpen the intersubjective interrogation between the text and theory. That would entail an ethics of reading which refuses subsumption; one that does not engage in mere appropriation. This is the task that continues to face us as postcolonial critics in South Africa.

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