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**INCOMPLETE HISTORIES: READING WRITING IN POSTCOLONIAL
DIFFERENCE**

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Introduction¹

How else can one write but of those things which one doesn't know, or knows badly? It is precisely there that we imagine having something to say. We write only at the frontiers of our knowledge, at the border that separates our knowledge from our ignorance and transforms the one into the other. Only in this manner are we resolved to write...Perhaps writing has a relation to silence altogether more threatening than that which it is supposed to entertain with death.²

Steve [Biko] had a sure centre.³

Perhaps the most fortuitous consequence of the death of Steve Biko at the hands of South African security police in 1977 is the *sociographical* tendency to write *his*-story in terms of identity rather than difference.⁴ Torn between anger at his death in police custody and the importance of his philosophical and political legacy, Biko's life history is presented, to paraphrase Gabriel Garcia Marquez, as "a chronicle of a death foretold." In some measure, and somewhat predictably, this desire to control the story must certainly be attributed to the refusal to allow those responsible for what many have called the murder of Biko, to have the last word. In a bid to guard against such an eventuality, Biko's spirit has been enshrined in the collection of political writings published under the title *I Write What I Like* in which we encounter the promise to reconcile presence and sign. There is, however, a fundamental problem in the attempt to narrate Biko's story in the idiom of presence reconciled to the sign. That problem, I argue in the present paper, has to do with the often forgotten argument that Biko was first and foremost a thinker of difference.

Contrary to histories that emphasise identity and reconciliation, I propose the concept of incomplete histories as a strategy to think about the writing of Steve Biko and the problematic of postcolonial

¹ The idea for this paper derives in part from BCS 379, Centre for African Studies, Manuscripts Section. The file is listed as containing an incomplete history of Biko by Noel Mostert. Unfortunately, the file has been misplaced, leaving the present paper, dare I say, incomplete. The idea also draws on Mosubudi Mangena's suggestion that the effort to arrive at a clearer picture of Biko's death remained incomplete. Mangena *On Your Own* (Florida Hills: Vivlia, 1989) 143. In some respects it is the question of the sense of incompleteness that this paper seeks to develop. Thanks to Leslie Witz and Kopano Ratele, my colleagues at the University of the Western Cape, for close readings of earlier drafts.

² Gilles Deleuze *Difference and Repetition* Translated by Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) xxi.

³ Donald Woods *Biko* (London: Penguin, 1978) 95.

⁴ The term sociographical comes from John Mowitt who deploys it to move us beyond the constraining division between past and present in narrating the sociogenesis of the text. Its use here will have consequences for my interpretation of the apparatus of reading writing which I develop later. See John Mowitt *Percussion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). See also Pal Ahluwalia and Abebe Zegeye "Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko: Towards Liberation," *Social Identities* Vol.7, no.3 September 2001, 455-469. Even though they argue that Biko's philosophical and cultural views challenge the paradigm of the postapartheid state, Zegeye and Ahluwalia hold on to identity politics as the grid through which to filter Biko's writing.

difference. In contrast to the metaphor of the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow that characterises the contemporary resistance biography – or what Derrida might call the resort to the transcendental signifier – the inconclusive narrative of Steve Biko opens into a question rather than an answer. Why, in the discourse of South African nationalism, is reconciliation the most obvious response to the experience of apartheid and not a different concept of difference, one that significantly engages, in the process of articulation, the very problematic that structures postcolonial difference?

My response to this question concentrates on the reception of *I Write What I Like*, especially the effort at reading the text as an ethical and political reconstitution of the self through an adequation of presence and sign. At stake here is not a hidden agenda to appropriate *I Write What I Like* to the discipline of history, but rather to ask why, if it is so central to ethical and political renewal, is it not available for instigating a history in the wake of apartheid.

I proceed by tracking the apparatus of reading writing as it positions Biko ahead of his time and as it is made to serve political and ethical statements of reconciliation. I argue that the apparatus of reading writing is fundamental to the attempt to reconcile presence to sign, or Biko to writing. It is in this effort that Biko is somehow seen to be ahead of his time. In contrast to this reconciliatory gesture, I want to posit the impossible adequation between presence and sign, or what might otherwise be called the scene of writing history, as enabling what I call “incomplete histories” and as a specific strategy to think postcolonial difference in the wake of apartheid. Such a strategy begs some familiarity with Roland Barthes “From Work to Text” which, as alibi, frames the various concerns of my reading of Biko and the problem of postcolonial difference.⁵

The paper consists of four sections. I begin by outlining the ways in which the problem of postcolonial difference relates to the apparatus of reading writing. Thereafter I examine several instances of reading writing that attempt to deal with the dilemma of presence and sign by bringing the latter into direct relation with the former and, in so doing, places Biko, as subject, ahead of his time. In the final section, I address the question of incomplete histories as a specific strategy for thinking about where to begin the narrative of postcolonial difference after apartheid. As such the paper is an extension of the effort undertaken in my dissertation to bring the specificity of the question of apartheid to bear on a postcolonial problematic.⁶ It also answers those who have informally responded to my initial emphasis on the *aporia* between the inability to represent and the necessity to represent, as a case of “the end of history” rather than as a beginning, in this instance, of a critique of the discourse of reconciliation.

⁵ Roland Barthes *The Rustle of Language* translated by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 56-64.

Postcolonial Difference:

In postcolonial theory, by which I mean that corpus of writing that investigates the possibility of *being* after the experience of colonialism, difference operates both to highlight a specific predicament of subjection and to inaugurate a process of the reconstitution of the self. Many have read in the latter argument a claim that is made to establish mere difference. However, as Partha Chatterjee points out in his essay “Talking About Our Modernity in Two Languages,” the difference that is the target of postcolonial theory may be thought of in terms of *being* located in the interstices of two languages.⁷ Chatterjee runs two arguments alongside each other. The first is an example from Rajnarayan Basu in 1873 providing a comparative evaluation of “those days and these days,” that is the periods before and after the introduction of English education in India. The second consists of responses to the question “What is Enlightenment?” by Immanuel Kant and Michel Foucault, written in 1784 and 1984 respectively. What is remarkable about Chatterjee’s essay is his argument that a notion of “our modernity” as articulated by Bengali intellectuals was enabled by an attempt to define a concept of enlightenment that was universally acceptable. In other words, what Foucault calls the attitude embodied in the Enlightenment – that is a critical thinking against one’s age – is precisely the simultaneous condition for a critique of a universal concept of modernity.⁸ However, what encourages the Bengali intellectuals to “think against their age” is that colonialism precludes the refusal to surrender thought to a specialised authority. This, we might recall, is fundamental to Kant’s response to the question of the enlightenment.

Chatterjee is calling attention to an argument in which opposition to colonialism always also entails work on how one feels about the age in which one lives. It is a problem that has bedevilled western modernity, which elevates the problem of subjectivity without raising the question of subjectivation as integral to addressing power. That it has been recognised as a problem may be gleaned from the philosophy of subjectivity produced by Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. In his extended essay, simply titled *Foucault*, Deleuze tells us that after writing the history of sexuality Foucault felt slightly uneasy wondering if he had not trapped himself within the concept of power relations.⁹ According to Deleuze

Foucault put forward the following objection [in response to the question]: ‘That’s just like you, always with the same incapacity to cross the line, to pass over to the other side...it is always the same choice, for the side of power, for what power says or what it causes to be

⁶ See for example the chapter titled “History After Apartheid,” in P.Lalu *In the Event of History*, unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of Minnesota, March 2003.

⁷ Partha Chatterjee *A Possible India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998) 284

⁸ Michel Foucault “What is Enlightenment?” in Paul Rabinow (ed.) *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) 32-50.

⁹ Gilles Deleuze *Foucault* translated by Seán Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 94.

said.’ And no doubt his own reply was that the most intense point of lives, the one where their energy is concentrated, is precisely where they clash with power, struggle with it, endeavour to utilise its forces or to escape its traps.¹⁰

Foucault’s answer to this despair is of course to invoke the concept of subjectivation by which he implies a process of self-being. Unfortunately, in the case of Biko, such an assertion would have to come to terms with the “terrifying void” that confronts the postcolonial subject who opts to speak the truth of the self to power.¹¹ Foucault’s response to the problem however is indeed novel. For Foucault, the question of self-being is not merely a calling upon the consciousness of being, but an effort to fold the outside, the problematical unthought in Deleuze’s phrasing, into the inside.¹² The operative term here is the fold, which is the multiplicity of micrological forces reworked into potentiality.

The micrology of power that Deleuze and Foucault mark as a constitutive force field is, thanks to the critique made available by Spivak, also to be seen as “screen-allegories that foreclose a reading of the broader narratives of imperialism.” Spivak argues that Foucault seems to develop a miniature version of a heterogenous European imperialism equipped with the management of space (but by doctors), development of administrations (but in asylums) and consideration of the periphery (but in terms of the insane, prisoners and children).¹³ But she also leads us to an argument, through a reading of Derrida’s “*Of Grammatology as a Positive Science*,” towards the problem associated with the attempt to “consolidate an inside and draw[ing] from it some domestic benefit.”¹⁴ For Spivak, the crisis of ethnocentrism represented by such a consolidation presents itself in a psychoanalytic withdrawal in the case of the constitution of the European subject. Here she recalls in Derrida the place of the investigating subject “which seeks to produce an Other that would consolidate an inside, its own subject status.”¹⁵ The itinerary of this conflation is tracked in the complicity of writing. Spivak opts to recall the investigating subject squarely within a critique of subjectivity. She is, in so doing, of course marking an alienated exteriority that is necessarily obscured in the work of Foucault and Deleuze, but present in Derrida, namely the scene of writing.

¹⁰ Deleuze, 94.

¹¹ Any number of names may be substituted here, Ken Saro Wiwa being the most obvious.

¹² Deleuze, 118

¹³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 291

¹⁴ Spivak, 293. See also Jacques Derrida *Of Grammatology* translated by Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) 80.

The Names of the Transcendental Signifier

The political legacy of Steve Biko is often critiqued for its overt emphasis on subjectivation so that the struggle for the constitution of the self, is seen as inadequate to the tasks of fighting apartheid. As Oliver Tambo was to suggest in a comment about the 1976 Soweto uprising,

the fact that the popular rebellion did not become an insurrection pointed up limitations in Black Consciousness ideology. There had been a lack of political direction to guide the outbreak of collective anger in the townships and, although there was some solidarity between the youth and workers, the gulf had not been bridged. Among the youth there arose an awareness that revolution required organisation and comprehensive policies capable of guiding struggle through different phases. Whatever the strengths of the upsurge of 1976 they lacked a strategy and tactics which could only be found in the leadership of the ANC.¹⁶

In his report to the National Executive Committee in 1985, the sense of limitation of what was referred to as Black Consciousness ideology had given way to a claim that Biko had arrived at the conclusion that the ANC was the leader of the revolution. More importantly it was claimed that Biko had accepted that the Black People's Convention should operate within the broad strategy of the ANC and concentrate its efforts on mass mobilisation.¹⁷ What Tambo seemed to be emphasising was a more general tendency to see Biko and his thought as a variation on the theme of African nationalism, but a specific manifestation of what Gail Gerhart calls the "Fanonesque apocalypse" that accompanied the rise of Black Consciousness in the 1970s.¹⁸ The strains of this form of racially exclusive politics, which is how she sees it, can be traced through the ideological formation of African nationalism in South Africa. Gerhart reduces Black Consciousness to an identity claim in the ideological circumstances of a racial convergence between Afrikaner Nationalist conservatism and a racially particular liberalism. In some respects, writing about Biko has always tended towards filling in the missing exteriority of his politics or what in history one might call filling in the gaps and in semiology and deconstruction, the search for the transcendental signifier. This tendency can be traced in both nationalist and liberal discourses that encounter the thought of Black Consciousness and which are produced at the expense of the intransitive verb "to write" that suggests itself in Biko's collection of political writings published under the title *I Write What I Like*.

¹⁵ Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak," 293.

¹⁶ *Preparing for Power: Oliver Tambo Speaks* compiled by Adelaide Tambo (Nigeria: Heinemann Educational Books, 1987) 114.

¹⁷ Ibid. 126. See also Helena Pholandt-McCormick *I Saw a Nightmare* Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1999, Chapter 4.

¹⁸ I too, elsewhere, have been guilty of such a hasty conclusion. See the final chapter of *In the Event of History*, unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2003. Kopano Ratele pressured me to think through the equivalence that I have drawn and this paper is, in part, an effort at addressing his question and concern.

The tendency can also be tracked for example in the programmatic response of the exiled African National Congress (ANC) to the idea of Black Consciousness popularised by Biko and other members of the BCM. A few months before Steve Biko was killed in detention in 1977, the ANC introduced the concept of internal colonialism into its analysis of the South African political crisis. The timing was not entirely coincidental since the programmatic statement on internal colonialism, a concept that resonates with Biko's unfolding of the logic of Black Consciousness, seemed to absorb the full weight of the political resurgence marked by the advent of mass resistance to apartheid in the late 1970s. At its Lisbon Conference in March 1977, the ANC officially proclaimed its analysis of the South African situation as one of internal colonialism and declared:

The South African National Liberation Movement, the ANC and its allies, characterise the South African social formation as a system of 'internal colonialism' or 'colonialism of a special type'. What is special' or different about the colonial system as it obtains in South Africa is that there is no spatial separation between the colonising power (the white minority state) and the colonised black people. But in every respect, the features of classic colonialism are the hallmark of the relations that obtain between the black majority and a white minority. The special features of South Africa's internal colonialism are also compounded by the fact that the white South African state, parliament and government are juridically independent of any metropolitan country and have a sovereignty legally vested in them by various Acts of the British government and state. These juridical formalities should not be allowed to cloud the colonial content of the white supremacist state.

Internal colonialism was a concept specifically aimed at capturing the attention of a generation of youth who had been captivated by the ideals of Black Consciousness, even as it sought to present the latter concept as inadequate to the tasks facing the political movement in South Africa. The ANC seemed to invoke the term to mark the way in which a colonial legacy persisted as a residual, although effective, strategy of a system of racialised territorial governmentality. In elaborating on the concept and by establishing "what was different about the colonial system as it obtains in South Africa," the ANC seemed to be calling attention to what it saw as a shortcoming in Biko's contemporaneous reflections on the struggle in South Africa. Without referring to it specifically, the 1977 programme effectively reduced the concept of black consciousness to a rather uncomplicated pursuit of the Kantian ideal for a release from self-incurred tutelage. In opposition to Biko's supposedly limited emphasis on the interiorisation of the colonial predicament, the ANC seemed to stress the sovereign state as a specific exteriority that might alter the tactical horizons of political action.

The reconfiguration of the tactical dimensions of Biko's political position resulted in a rather limited range of possible interpretations of Black Consciousness, the concept advanced by Biko and his cohort. It tended to reduce its politics to a game of self-interpretation, or to paraphrase Samuel Weber, to a

soliloquy of the soul. It also then inadvertently stabilised the concept of blackness by designating the sovereign law as transcendental signifier. With this apparent narrowing of the interpretive field, by way of the expansion of the empirical field, the work on the self, through a politics of writing – a subjectivity in writing - that is suggested in the title of Biko's *I Write What I Like* was altogether obliterated. More particularly, the ambiguity between self-consciousness and unconscious desire that is conveyed by the iteration of the “I” in the title was not made available to political discourse.

Several histories of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa reenact this supposed demarcation of the interiority of the self and the exteriority of the state. Foremost among these is Gail Gerhart's study of Black Consciousness, in which she argues that “like the ideologues of orthodox African nationalism from Lembede onward, Biko and the architects of SASO began from the premise that oppression was most immediately a psychological problem.”¹⁹ But such an analysis is by no means unusual. John Saul writing about the period after the so called vacuum left by the repression of the 1970s writes of Biko's generation in ways that suggests the lack generally attributed to Black Consciousness:

In the first instance [the vacuum of the 1960s was filled] by the emergence of the Black Consciousness movement. An ideological project that paralleled other cultural nationalist expressions of the time (like ‘Black Power’ in North America), it was largely the creation of petty bourgeois intellectuals (albeit many of them of impressive stature, like Steve Biko) with separatist overtones, limited strategic sense and a minimal grasp of the possible role of popular classes in effecting social change. However, as a reaffirmation of racial pride and of the sentiment of resistance to the apartheid dispensation, Black Consciousness was significant. Perhaps, as its themes began to permeate the ambience within which new generations were growing up, its immediate importance was more psychological than political.²⁰

Taken on the plane of ideology, Biko's interventions are thereby rendered little more than a continuation of a longstanding Africanist strand in the argument of nationalism. What it amounts to is a critique of what Fanon once called lactification, by which he meant the psychological aspiration to accede to the condition of whiteness.²¹ At another level, it displaces, as Saul would have it, the political by elevating the psychological and in this regard is to be found wanting.

¹⁹ Gail Gerhart *Black Power in South Africa: The Evolution of an Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) 271.

²⁰ John Saul *Recolonisation and Resistance in Southern Africa in the 1990s* (Canada: Between the Lines, 1993) 7.

²¹ See Mowitt *Percussion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) 38. Mowitt suggests that by “lactification,” Fanon meant the self-abnegating desire to accede to the condition of whiteness.

In the narration of his tragic death at the hands of the apartheid state one cannot but notice how such psychologism enables a rather heroic construction of mind versus might, so that the physical torture of the body meets its match in the strength of the mind. Unfortunately, this very conception was also used by Drs. Lang and Tucker who were accused of complicity, because of their failure to intervene, upon examining the flailing Biko, in the cause of his death. Under cross-examination at the inquest called to rule on the death of Biko, Ivor Lang claimed that he had been summoned to the offices of the security police on September 7, 1977 because Biko “would not speak.” In his testimony, Lang attributed the staggering gait to shamming on the part of Biko (although later he claimed that the thick speech was a consequence of a lip injury and the ataxic gait was because Biko had been manacled and his ankles swollen) and claimed that he found no abnormality or pathology on the patient. Similarly, the security branch officers claimed that on 7 September, “Biko had gone berserk, assaulted people and had to be restrained by force.”²² As a measure of the truth, history rearranges these words uttered by those complicit with an act of violence to insist that Biko did not die without putting up a fight.

To run these two narratives together, the story of the interiority of the self versus the sovereignty of power and the story of mind versus might, is to encounter the schism that operates the philosophical field of will and power, the same dilemma that renders Biko’s history inconclusive. But the ANC’s resolution to the crisis, judging from its 1977 programme, is to merely call attention to a transcendental outside without recognising how such a move is little more than the return of the same.²³ In other words, by adopting the programme of internal colonialism, the ANC was also marking the argument that was advanced by proponents of Black Consciousness as inadequate for the purposes of determining the character of subjection under apartheid. What was in question was the potential for Black Consciousness to “stage an insurrection,” as Tambo put it, and not merely a rebellion against apartheid domination.

The potential of the idea of Black Consciousness, incidentally, was more readily appreciated in the argument of Donald Woods, whose *Biko* replays the central narrative of reconciliation and implicates the subject in the unfolding logic of its politics. In Woods’s narrative, Biko the subject, is the point of the return of the same through the politics of difference, the very condition that might make the enlightenment possible to contemplate within the condition of apartheid.

One particular excerpt from Woods’s narrative may help to elaborate this point more clearly. It is drawn from the section of the narrative that deals with personal memories and opens the scene for a recollection of the way in which Biko’s politics were intrinsically bound to his personality. Woods writes:

²² Rand Daily Mail, Sat. Nov. 26, 1977.

²³ Since Biko reads Fanon, and Fanon reads Nietzsche, Biko might be articulating a problem at the very root of a philosophical tradition which calls into question the basis of Cartesian philosophy.

Steve Biko was the greatest man I ever met. What determines greatness? How does one measure it? Each of us has his (sic) own criteria? When I say that Steve Biko was the greatest man I ever had the privilege to know, I mean quite literally that he, more than any other person I have encountered, had the most impressive array of qualities and abilities in that sphere of life which determines the fates of most people – politics. This doesn't mean that he was merely a superb politician. He was much more than that. He was a statesman, in that sense of the word in which it is applied to Abraham Lincoln, having that breadth of vision and that wider comprehension of the affairs of men and nations that is conveyed to the listener through more than mere words. He could impart understanding. He could enable one to share his vision and he could do so with an economy of words because he seemed to communicate ideas through extra-verbal media – almost physically.²⁴

This is a remarkable description for the purposes of this discussion in part because of the way it falters on the domain of the distribution of the pronoun as it seeks out associations by which to enunciate a biography of someone who operated, as we are told, with an “economy of words.” We must read in this excerpt a forewarning that an incomplete history awaits completion. Proceeding with the anticipated tasks of completion, Woods sets out to establish a presence over and above the division that often bedevils the biography of Biko between interiority and exteriority. But such a strategy that seeks the establishment of presence is haunted, I wish to argue, by the constraints that determine the act of writing.

Early in his narrative, Woods describes the difficult circumstances in which his manuscript of Biko was prepared. Woods himself had been banned and ordered not to write for five years. Writing therefore, he tells us, had to proceed in secret and that he had “been warned that the security police would come at any time of day or night to ensure that [he] was not breaking the ban on writing.”²⁵

A little later, almost paradoxically, he directs us to the cultural chauvinism that is harnessed by writing. If its tone is to be trusted, this is also where a claim is made for that which will need to be forfeited if presence is to be realised. Reflecting on his early years in the Transkei, Woods speaks of two worlds, one black and one white, separated by writing.

A white child brought up in these circumstances, being taught to read and write while noting that even adult tribesmen could not form a single letter of the alphabet, understandably

²⁴ Donald Woods *Biko* (Great Britain: Penguin, 1978) 85.

²⁵ Woods, 15.

regarded blacks as inferior and easily accepted the general white attitude that colour and race were determinants of the chasm in cultures.²⁶

The relation between writing and reading and colour and race as well as its consequence for something like culture is not altogether clear here. But it does lead me to assume that to bridge the chasm in what is called “cultures,” rather than between, it may be necessary to return to the scene of writing. I read Woods testimony, which is how he describes his text, as an attempt to enter the scene of writing in order to establish presence. Whilst presence is the authorising trope of this narration, we are also in the space of what de Certeau marks as an impossible adequation between presence and sign, a presence, in other words, taken away from the sign. At the beginning of writing, De Certeau reminds us, there is a loss.²⁷ In the narrative of Donald Woods, it is writing itself which is elided.

The story of Biko interlaced with the philosophy of Black Consciousness is presented compositely as an idea that can be reconciled with the best tenets of liberalism. But liberalism thus conceived is necessarily to be rethought in the predicament of apartheid. The association with Abraham Lincoln, we will recall, is not merely coincidental. In this respect, the narrative of Biko is to be read as an argument both against a specific liberal response to apartheid even as it argues for a different conception thereof. Writing, for example, about black responses to what he calls the liberalism of the Progressive Federal Party (PFP), Woods notes:

The PFP has some excellent individuals, and blacks obviously prefer them to the nationalists, but blacks are increasingly becoming cynical about the PFP’s rejection of sanctions as a weapon against apartheid. They see the PFP as a party-political apostle of capitalism which puts capital interest rates above black interests. In this way, the gray areas in South African political life are being washed away and the scene is increasingly being deep-etched in black and white.²⁸

By brief recourse to the metaphor of writing, a scene deep-etched in black and white, the text leads us through a critique of liberalism, but one directed at the logic of a nineteenth century missionary discourse. In the space of the argument in which Biko’s objections to liberalism are lodged, Woods seeks to rewrite the terms of liberalism adequate to the tasks of a critique of apartheid. Its characteristic is one of disagreement, persuasion, and most of all, recognition of the diversity necessary in the politics that seeks to achieve a particular postcolonial public sphere. This line of argument is in keeping with the central thesis of Kant’s which, as Alisdair MacIntyre points out, holds that thinking for oneself always does

²⁶ Woods, 54.

²⁷ Michel de Certeau *The Practice of Everyday Life* translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 195.

²⁸ Woods, 395.

require thinking in cooperation with others, even as some episodes of thought consist of solitary monologues.²⁹

Woods sets out to draw out the enlightenment theme in Biko's elaboration of the concept of Black Consciousness, even as he suggests that subjectivation is an inadequate response to apartheid's difference. By rearticulating the basic tenets of liberalism as expressed in the ideals of the enlightenment, and shifting the focus from its missionary or paternalistic obligations, Woods rewrites the story of Biko as fundamentally reconcilable to the rules of a properly constituted public sphere set against the repressive apparatus of the apartheid state.

Both the concepts of internal colonialism and enlightened liberalism are situated in a particular relationship to Black Consciousness represented by the thought of Steve Biko. That relationship is especially pronounced in the attempt to complete the story of Steve Biko by filling in the gap of the missing exterior. But both concepts of internal colonialism and enlightened liberalism accentuate, it seems, the very dilemma that founds the history of Biko. Let me be more forthright and stake a claim: the desire to reconcile thought to being, or presence to sign, is the same strategy by which history is conflated with the modernist resistance biography.”

Rather than reconciling thought to *being*, postcolonial histories should work towards establishing the productivity of incomplete histories as a strategy for thinking ahead. The history of Biko cannot possibly come to rest with the politics of identity but must begin to reassess the realm of the problematic unthought as a way to establishing a different concept of difference, one that may contribute to thinking after apartheid.

Reading Writing

Hilda Bernstein reminds us that between 18 August to 6 September, shortly after his arrest at a police roadblock, Biko was held incommunicado at the Walmer Police Station, “without books, papers, materials of any kind.”³⁰ He was accused variously of not having written permission for leaving the area to which his banning order restricted him and for having drawn up inflammatory pamphlets which he intended distributing. At the trial of seven accused members of the South African Students Organisation (SASO) in May 1976, the prosecution subjected Biko to lengthy cross-examination about his writing and its implications. Yet, the various encounters with Biko have been little more than attempts at

²⁹ Alisdair MacIntyre “Some Enlightenment Projects Reconsidered,” in Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (eds.) *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1999) 249.

³⁰ Hilda Bernstein *No 46 ~ Steve Biko* (London: IDAF, 1978) 35. At the trial of the SASO 7, Biko noted that his restrictions prohibited him from compiling, editing, disseminating any publication in which government policy is either defended or attacked. Arnold Millard (ed.) *Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 278.

manipulating an exteriority by bringing it into some relation of reconciliation to the interiority of his thought – what in other words is the staple of Cartesian philosophy. Biko, we might conclude from this corpus, cannot conceivably write what he likes. Black Consciousness has in turn been represented as an interplay of the process of epidermisation and consciousness and as such, the story of Biko is the history of the unity of presence and sign. One consequence of this narrativisation of Biko is that it achieves the re-centering of the subject even as it explicitly elides the potentiality of writing.

The uncertainty that founds the story of Biko, I wish to argue instead, is inscribed in the very folds of writing, which activates a specific if not strategic differentiation of subjectivity and subjectivation. We might think in terms of a difference in writing that seeks to transform apartheid's difference into potentiality. But rather than resolving the crisis represented by apartheid, writing perhaps is the point of intensification of that crisis. The task of unfolding aspects of the past is no longer available to history because every reading enters, we might say, the fold of writing. This of course is the point generally missed by oral historians who offer up life histories as written narratives while simultaneously obscuring the work of the investigating subject in discourse. Stated otherwise, we could say that writing intervenes in the process whereby history, as a specific mode of disciplinary inquiry, seeks to place the referent in direct relation to the signifier, thereby expunging the signified.³¹

On May 6, 1976, at the trial of the SASO 7, as it has become known, Steve Biko was questioned about an article he had written under the pseudonym Frank Talk and titled "Fear – an Important Determinant in South African Politics." Attwell, the state prosecutor, read out aloud several paragraphs of the text to Biko who was then cross-examined about their meaning and social implications – a kind of semio-historical interpretive exercise. More precisely, Attwell's reading seeks to draw out the strategy in Biko's writing by which the terms liberal and white are produced as substitutable so as to implicate the author in an act of political treason. Quoting from *I Write What I Like* Attwell directed the court's attention firstly to the paragraph, written by Biko we are told, in which he claims:

To look for instances of cruelty at those who fall into disfavour with the security police is perhaps to look too far. One need not try to establish the truth of a claim that Black people in South Africa have to struggle for survival. It presents itself in ever so many facets of our lives. Township life alone makes it a miracle for anyone to live up to adulthood. There we see a situation of absolute want in which Black will kill Black to be able to survive. That is the

³¹ For an elaboration of this point see Roland Barthes *The Rustle of Language* translated by Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

basis of vandalism, murders, rapes and plunder that goes on while the real source of evil, White society, are suntanning on exclusive beaches or relaxing in bourgeois homes.³²

Reading in the paradigmatic frameworks of a state, Attwell proceeded to articulate a “deeper” meaning to the interpretation of Black Consciousness than simply one that emphasised the contours of a cultural argument about being Black. Affirming that these quotations indeed reflected Biko’s sentiments, Attwell hastily followed with a second quote which he, once again, read out aloud to Biko and the court:

Clearly, Black people cannot respect White people, at least not in this country. There is such an obvious aura of immorality and naked cruelty in all that is done in the name of White people that no Black man, no matter how intimidated, can ever be made to respect White society. However, in spite of the obvious contempt for the values cherished by the Whites and the price at which White comfort and security is purchased, Blacks seem to me to have been successfully cowed down by the type of brutality that emanates from this section of the community.³³

Finally, Attwell cited a lengthy quote which demanded, it would seem, a practice of reading that would penetrate the depths of Black Consciousness thinking and jettison the cultural veneer in which it was expressed. Referring to the second paragraph on the right hand column of page 11, Atwell again quoted the article allegedly written by Biko:

This is a dangerous type of fear, for it only goes skin deep. It hides underneath it an immeasurable rage that often threatens to erupt. Beneath it lies naked hatred for a group that deserves absolutely no respect. Unlike in the rest of the French or Spanish former colonies, where chances of assimilation made it not impossible for Blacks to aspire towards being White, in South Africa whiteness has always been associated with police brutality and intimidation, early morning pass raids, general harassment in and out of the townships and hence no Black really aspires to be White. The claim by Whites of monopoly on comfort and security has always been so exclusive that Blacks see Whites as the major obstacles in their progress towards peace, prosperity and a sane society. Through its associations with all these negative aspects whiteness has thus become soiled beyond recognition. At best therefore Blacks, see Whiteness as a concept that warrants being despised, hated, destroyed and replaced by an aspiration with more human content in it. At worst, Blacks envy White society for the comfort it has usurped, and at the centre of this envy is the wish, nay, the secret determination in the innermost minds of most Blacks who think like this to kick Whites off

³² Arnold Millard (ed.) *Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 295.

³³ *Ibid.*

those comfortable garden chairs that one sees as he rides in a bus out of town, and to claim them for himself. Day by day one gets more convinced that Aime Cesaire could not have been right when he said: “No race possesses the monopoly on truth, intelligence, force, and there is room for all of us at the rendezvous of victory.”³⁴

Unlike the tasks of reading undertaken by literary criticism, the law, like history, approaches the enunciative statement in terms of exegesis. In some respects, the use of the metaphor of a fear that is skin deep and a thinking that is profoundly deeper encourages an exegetical programme of reading. But more interestingly are the ways in which “reading like a state” elides the difficulty of self-writing that permeates the text. The state, we might say, sought to establish a monopoly over what I am calling the project of “reading writing.”

The pursuit for monopoly over reading writing is foregrounded in the concerted effort to find a filiative connection between author and text at the trial of the SASO 7. Here again the logic deployed by the state prosecutor is to reconcile Biko to writing and by extension to treason. But as is clear from the court proceedings turned reading lesson it proved far more inconvenient to simply connect writing to author. At one stage during the proceedings Attwell inquired how widespread was the knowledge that Frank Talk was the pseudonym used by Biko. Biko admitted that Barney Pityana and Strini Moodley knew and that others may have guessed from the style of writing. Biko insisted that anybody who wrote regularly developed a style.³⁵ He also noted that the use of a pseudonym was directed at focussing attention on the content rather than, as he put it, the man.

The surrender of the responsibility attached to authorial agency is crucial here and should not, I would suggest, simply be approached as a position adopted in relation to a repressive state apparatus represented by the court of law. Rather, we have here a specific clearing of space in which Biko might chide the shortcomings of the reader who seeks to hold him responsible for what he has written. How else might we understand Biko’s constant demands that the entire article be read or when he pointed out that meaning of a particular excerpt of his writing was self-explanatory. How might we explain his question to Attwell, in which he asked, rather annoyed at his cross-examiner’s inadequacy, “Can’t you read?”

Attwell, we might say, was clearly not up to the task of reading. The reading lesson ended in chaos since the writer could not, it appears, be made to take responsibility for the reading of the state. In some respects the writer could not be held complicitous with the reading since he had relinquished responsibility, vacated the scene of writing, so to speak. Or we might say that the writer and writing have become indistinguishable and that a reading aimed at discerning the subject is rendered impossible.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, 295.

Writing as such involves transcending the predicament of internal colonialism, the enabling possibility of writing one's way out of a predicament of complicity, into a yet to be decided space. For the ANC and Donald Woods that space is designated respectively by a transcendental signifier. The task, in each case, is instructed to the desiring subject and a writing that is anterior to the time of subjectivity.

Incomplete Histories

Whether in the logic of internal colonialism or enlightened liberalism, Steve Biko and his writing are frequently seen as giving rise to the thought of reconciliation. As such his writing assumes something of a prophetic structure as it programmatically seeks to reconstitute the subject of a new humanism. In the process of scripting death and prescribing life, the apparatus of reading writing ensures a subject that is fully formed, reconciled, as I have argued.

How then might *I Write What I Like* serve as the very condition for a different concept of difference - a concept of postcolonial difference after the experience of apartheid that refuses to transform Biko into a prophet of reconciliation? Perhaps, I will suggest, by taking seriously Biko's injunction: *Can't you read?* This is, in every conceivable sense, a rather unsettling question that addresses not so much the correctness of interpretation but rather the very disciplinary techniques by which reading is authorised.

If reading *I Write What I Like* as ethical and political statement establishes the grounds for a resolution to apartheid enabled by a reconciliation of presence and sign, then I want to argue that the text's contribution to elaborating a concept of postcolonial difference is the point at which it eludes this fabricated history. In particular, I want to argue that these elusive principles can be tracked through the disintegration of subjectivity that the text entertains. At issue here is not the disappearance of subjectivity, but rather the argument that agitation towards reconstituting subjectivity cannot logically proceed without a certain measure of disintegration. Such a measure must be seen to be opening the work – that construct that seeks to make, via the apparatus of reading writing, Biko responsible for his writing – to the impossible adequation between the signifier and the thing signified, or more precisely, those parts of the work that do not signify.³⁶

In the trial turned reading lesson Biko points out “that *at best*, Blacks see *Whiteness as a concept* that warrants being despised, hated, destroyed and replaced by an *aspiration* with more human content in it.” Yet in the essay titled “We Blacks” that Mark Sanders cites as an example of the embodiment of complicity and its negotiation in *Black Consciousness*, we encounter the following formulation:

³⁶ See Roland Barthes *On Racine* translated by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) 164.

The type of black man we have today has lost his manhood. Reduced to an obliging shell, he looks with awe at the white power structure and accepts what he regards as the “inevitable position”...All in all the black man has become a shell, a shadow of a man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity.³⁷

There is a sense in which the problem of subjection is resolved through nostalgia of the specifically masculine subject, a process of seeking to restore its agency within the argument of Black Consciousness. The desire to constitute the subject, to think beyond the confines of subjection that is materialised, however, encounters the historical limit posed by the *concept* of whiteness. In the fabricated history of reading writing, Biko is presented as being ahead of his time, precisely because he is read into the history of reconciliation between subjection and subjectivation. This is after all the condition prescribed for the postapartheid national subject, a subject that is also expected to live in a utopian empty homogenous time that is not its own, that is beyond itself.

In the fold of the impossible adequation between presence and sign, a history of the imprisoning concept demands to be read. At the trial of the SASO 7 for example, Biko pointed out why the disintegration of the subject was so crucial:

Well, it helps to build up the sense of insecurity which is part of the feeling of incompleteness. You are not a complete human being. You cannot walkout when you like, you know, that sort of feeling. It is an imprisoning concept itself.³⁸

Rather than placing Biko ahead of his time, the shift from work to text that I have narrativised in this paper leads us to think about incomplete histories as a problem of the signified, the imprisoning concept that defines the place of inauguration of postcolonial difference. It is in this respect that the disintegration of the subject is precisely the point at which incomplete histories call into question the apparatus of reading writing by designating the crisis of history as the problem of the imprisoning concept. It is after

³⁷ Mark Sanders *Complicities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) 176. It is important to remember that Sanders’ attempt to track the itinerary of the intellectual through the concept of complicity must simultaneously obscure all those moments of irresponsibility that activate the demand for a replacement of the other – and sometimes violently so. It is precisely in renouncing the history of responsibility, which is also to say the narration of irresponsibility, that the concept of the foldedness of human being that Sanders develops is perhaps at the limit, precisely because it sets out to affirm, rather than critique, the apparatus of reading writing. For it is in this slippage, that we might call into question the purported transcendence indicated in the thematic of intersubjectivity.

Beatrice Hanssen, in a not unrelated example, has argued that Fanon’s later troubling embrace of violence as a way of taking-the-other’s-place is a far cry from the plea for transcendence in intersubjective love that framed the earlier work. Hanssen “Ethics of the Other” in Marjorie Garber (eds. et al) *The Turn to Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 153.

³⁸ Millard (ed.) *Steve Biko*, 30.

all, the imprisoning concept that presents us with the opportunity of “thinking, feeling and writing in a certain way,” but preferably not in that order.³⁹

³⁹ See for example Raymond Williams on commitment in writing in *What I Came To Say* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989) 259.