

## **“Shooting the White Girl First:” Race in Post-Apartheid South Africa**

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They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time.

Toni Morrison, *Paradise*

In Paul Gilroy’s provocatively entitled work, *Against Race*, the opening chapter is both an acknowledgement of the efficacy of raced struggle and a caution against its uncritical future usage. “The currency of ‘race’ has,” Gilroy argues, “involved elaborate, improvised constructions that have the primary function of absorbing and deflecting abuse. But they have gone far beyond merely affording protection and reversed the polarities of insult, brutality, and contempt, which are unexpectedly turned into important sources of solidarity, joy, and collective strength” (Gilroy 2000:12). It is in the description of exceeding easy conceptualizations of race, in “going far beyond” easy binarizations, that the sharp edge of Gilroy’s critique can be located. In the attempt to transcend polemicized thinking, *Against Race* (or, *Between Camps*, as the book was marketed in Britain) refuses to reduce race to the physiognomic. *Against Race* will not accede to a “raciology” of the body, to the overdetermined enunciations “blackness” or “whiteness.” Gilroy is equally wary of locating race in culture, the socio-political practice that is too often rendered as the racialized metonymic, that expansive cluster of signs that compose and substitute as the discourse of racial difference.

It is precisely because Gilroy goes beyond racial conflict (or, more importantly, race as the telos of conflict), beyond the “polarities of insult, brutality, contempt,” that *Against Race* compels a different engagement with race. In unmooring race from the body, from culture, and, even, from its colloquial and “common sense” history, a new set of interrogations become imperative: What has race become? How does it function? What has the struggle for racial equality become, into what kind of political tool has it been transformed? Cynically phrased, does the “race card” have any contemporary veracity or efficacy? Has the privileging of race, the calling attention to itself as

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an experience (of racialized subjugation, degradation, or grounds for exclusion), become merely a political expediency?

Refusing the location of a racialized identity in the physiognomic, Gilroy designates the body as considerably more than an unreliable marker of racial knowledge: it is also the site of ontological anxiety because it provokes a questioning of the “essentialized” self. *Against Race’s* determination to resituate blackness emerges not so much “externally” – a narrow conceiving of racial antagonism; or, blackness under threat from the usual protagonist, “whiteness,” or, more crudely conceived, “whites” – as from within the discursive changes wrought by the conditions of a “post”-bio-culturalism. The “crisis of raciology” is located firmly within the (black) body, a process that destabilizes race as a secure and reliable political category. If race can no longer be equivalenced as “culture,” if the (racially) agnostic “black” body can no rely simply upon, that hard-won right (secured through the critique of liberalism<sup>1</sup>), the speaking of racialized self to assert its social identity, then the Foucauldian “bio-political” sphere has to be re-examined.

The non-racialized or anti-racialized identity can only be thought beyond the somatic markers. The “appearance,” in Gilroy’s allusive terms, “of a rich visual culture that allows blackness to be beautiful also feeds a fundamental lack of confidence in the power of the body to hold the boundaries of racial difference in place” (Gilroy 2000:22). The racialized body is not a socio-political entity convinced of either its sustainability or its ability to “hold the boundaries of racial difference in place.” This ontological uncertainty injects a precariousness into racial discourse: if “difference” cannot be maintained, what will become of racial identity and the racialized politics founded upon it, in different forms, for centuries?

Both the literal and the fictional black body, as twentieth century authors from James Weldon Johnson (*Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*) and Nella Larsen (the novellas *Quicksand* and *Passing*) to Toni Morrison (*Paradise*) and Philip Roth (*The Human Stain*) make clear, should not be easily trusted. The body can lie: the (black) physical, as in Weldon Johnson (early twentieth) and Roth’s (fin-de-siècle) stoic male protagonists, Larsen’s tragic mulattas (Harlem Renaissance) and Morrison’s (late-twentieth century) racially “indistinct” convent women, is not the site of the ontologically “confident” but the embodiment of “raciological” – Gilroy’s term – uncertainty. The (black) body is often something – or someone – other than what it is racially deemed

to be. The “black” body is frequently revealed, in fiction and in the “scientific” moments in *Against Race*, to be hybrid, if not putatively “white.”

The impulse to think beyond race, to produce a paradigm that enables an alternate, transformative, view of social arrangements is an old, but by no means, unimportant project. With its deep philosophical roots in the ostensibly egalitarian paradigm of Enlightenment subjectivity, the desire for a structure of socio-political sameness has animated and sustained anti-racial struggles from slave rebellions in the antebellum US South to Toussaint’s campaign for Haitian sovereignty; from the mid-century anti-colonial movements in the Asian subcontinent to fin-de-siècle Chiapas (which stands as its own kind of “autonomista” battle against imperialism, racial discrimination, and global capitalism). The struggle against racial(-ized) naming (so constitutive of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, whose many faced protagonist is always slipping the yoke of naming) is, much like *Against Race*, about imagining a world in which the racialized body – the historically denigrated black body – is not always read a priori, and interminably, as a deficit; the “spook” of Ellison’s novel who understands that his lack, his invisibility is not “exactly a matter of bio-chemical accident to my epidermis” (Ellison 1987:7). In resisting racism, the black body wages an epistemological campaign to refute its deficient representation, its enunciation as a lack, an absence, the Other, or an interrupted or suspended humanity.

The desire to think beyond race is, however, a double-edged sword. It marks the ambivalent process of mobilizing against racism and yet working within – and against – established racial categories. Race, and racism, is, for this very reason, not only dialectical, it is epistemologically foundational. It constitutes the very architecture within which the debate about race takes place: race cannot be transcended. It is impossible to be “against race” without, as it were, “doing” race – as a theory of politics or as a way of accounting for its deleterious ontological effects. It is for this reason that Gilroy, despite being “against race,” acknowledges how ambivalent, contradictory and potentially destructive (to historical subalterns) such an imagining might be: “the dramatic gestures involved in turning against racial observance can be accomplished without violating the precious forms of solidarity and community that have been created by their protracted subordination along racial lines” (Gilroy 2000:13). Race constitutes a critical community; or, because of race/ism, sustainable communities of subjugated peoples are racialized into being;

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political identities emerge out the historical process of racialization; constituencies, be they located in the diaspora or the periphery, are philosophically inconceivable without the experience of race/racism.

“Post”-racialism, however contentious such a condition might be, constitutes the dialogic project of recognizing race as the primary discourse to be at once engaged and disarticulated; post-racialism cannot be achieved “without violating the precious forms of solidarity and community” – practices essential to sustaining a black bio-politics in moments of degradation, disenfranchisement, or repression. Within the discursive project of transcending racial affect and effect, race is centered even in the attempt to oppose it. Hence the paradox: race is constitutive and yet it can only be epistemologically liquidated – which is to say, worked through and beyond as a philosophical terrain – upon the terms of its historically racist making. Race is a politics that in-forms, and de-forms, even in the efforts to disarticulate it, to take it apart, and render it socio-politically null and void.

It is for this reason that the campaign against race is of especial significance in those societies where racial categorization has significant purchase, where race is at the root of societal conflict, where the very history of the locale is (over) determined by race. This essay explores the construction of an anti-racist/racialized politics in a society, South Africa, structured by specific, historicized racial hierarchies. It examines the entanglements of race as it obtains on the terrain of the nation’s “politics,” conceived here in both its electoral, (post-apartheid) constitutional formation, and in its “extra-parliamentary,” anti-apartheid articulation. The struggle against apartheid is located here in the “long” (specifically African) anti-colonial decade, that protracted moment from the mid-1950s (when Ghana gained independence in 1958) to the late-1980s (when Zimbabwe, 1980, and Namibia, 1990, became sovereign), when the “political” consisted of predominantly “black”<sup>2</sup> opposition through non-electoral strategies, some of them more violent than others. South African politics in the “long decade” is not generated by historic turmoil, which we would expect to be most conducive to political change, but by a very different modality, that moment Fredric Jameson names the “suspension of the political” (Jameson 2003). In Jameson’s conception (which is inflected with Carl Schmitt’s notion of the political),<sup>3</sup> politics emerges out of precisely those moments when change, through either constitutional or revolutionary means, appears impossible: when the (apartheid) state, having secured to itself all the

legitimacy it requires to exercise power, has worked diligently to block any efforts to effect social transformation. Historic turmoil, Jameson might argue, is produced precisely out of the subjugated's response to the suspension of the political. The political stasis, the enforcement of a Schmittian "order," sought by the state is, instead of quiescence, met with intense opposition. The modality of "suspension" constitutes that moment when any notion of democracy, which is founded upon the right to political disagreement, even disaggregation, is suspended. "Suspension" is how the political, instantiated as the sovereign white state, was lived in anti-apartheid South Africa by the disenfranchised: the condition of racialized inequity. In South Africa, the moment of "suspension" proved decidedly generative in that it motivated black youth (in particular) to attack the state. It was during the long moment of "suspension" of normative, democratic politics, the apartheid era that lasted from 1948 to 1990, that unarmed or stone-throwing or Molotov-cocktail tossing black subjects take up the struggle against the might of apartheid machinery most committedly. The "suspension of the political" produces a series of protests against disenfranchisement – and its many manifestations – which result, "impossibly," in a democratic post-apartheid society. (The South African experience of the "long decade" finds its contemporary corollary in the Palestinian scenario – a politics crafted out of historic inequity, in response to, the seemingly unending "suspension" of the political.) In South Africa, racism formed the very basis for the "suspension of the political" which, impossibly, produced a (constitutionally) non-racial democracy.

In reading two speeches by post-apartheid South Africa's first two black presidents, the iconic Nelson Mandela and his successor Thabo Mbeki, this essay demonstrates how fundamental race is to political thinking in this newly democratic nation. The ways in which race and racism function discursively for both these figures is instructive because of how they position themselves in relation to South Africa's apartheid past and how race is instrumentalized in the post-apartheid present and for the future; how, to reframe the issue, is race understood and spoken in that moment in which democracy has been achieved? What is the role of race in a non-racial democracy? Can there be a non-racial democracy? How do we think politically about race in a society where race thinking is implicitly verboten?

Mandela and Mbeki, in their different ways, confront the political task of addressing race at a juncture where race is the (over-)determining and most

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visceral factor in South African life. This moment consists of a two-phase paradox: transforming the foundational element of the society, race/racism, from the defining trauma (apartheid) into a publicly speakability (this was the task of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission), and then into a (post-apartheid) discourse outmoded by the transcendent, incorporative commonality of national identity – the non-racially imagined community. Envisaged as the culmination of the post-apartheid project is, conceptually phrased, the replacement of race with racelessness. More specifically, race as the primary signifier of identity is liquidated by its modernist equivalent, the geo-politics of spatiality; racial affinity, imposed or otherwise, is superseded by national identity. The aporetic moment in this project of constructing a post-racial/racist national identity, in the sense that the aporia indicates not simply a gap but a bridging, might be Archbishop Desmond Tutu's poetic vision: South Africans as the "Rainbow Children of God."

In the first instance, the "rainbow" symbolizes the disjoining of the "old" South Africa from the new; the rainbow of the present represents a "racially" complementary harmony as opposed to the apartheid past where the dis-union of the various peoples was the predominant racist logic; then, secondly, it metaphorizes the splendid, "colorful" conjoining of all South Africa's racially distinct peoples. In the African National Congress' (ANC) vision of the post-apartheid future, the rainbow functions only as a temporary (national) emblem en route, ideologically, to non-racial South African sameness. The rainbow has to be superseded by that modality in which race has no purchase and the different colors of the (racial) spectrum have merged, through concerted political education, into a "colorless" singularity.

A Nobel Peace Prize laureate (like his countrymen Tutu and FW de Klerk, the last white president, the National Party figure instrumental in undoing apartheid), Mandela, positioned himself as the Gandhi-like liberator of the black South African masses and the Toussaintian figurehead, the black leader who would protect white life and property under the terms of the Enlightenment constitution, committed to a harmonious, racially heterogeneous present (im)perfect. It was always a project, racial reconciliation, for Mandela, but he traded heavily on his own symbolism – the ex-guerilla, ex-political prisoner reincarnated as the post-apartheid "man of peace" – to advocate the possibility of overcoming historic racial enmity. Mandela's constituted, for this complex of reasons, a symbolically critical presidency: the first black leader of a

democratic South Africa who offered, in a single rhetorical gesture, a racially loaded and racially transcendent vision of post-apartheid society.

It is in Mbeki's presidency, however, an infinitely less charismatic tenure (where the racial cleavages cannot be so easily disguised or "canonized" away by presidential aura), that the workings of race become more obvious; and, more obviously discursively demanding. A dour figure possessed of no Mandela-like resonance with the South African populace, except the business community, Mbeki has used his notion of an "African Renaissance" (Farred:2003) to lay claim to "continental" leadership, both within Africa and as a representative to global capital and its major institutions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. However, what is evident in the tenure of both the nations' first democratic black presidents, is that their rhetoric reveals how they are capable of thinking racially, of mobilizing racial identities, even as they disavow race as a strategy for achieving electoral gains. Mandela and Mbeki demonstrate how race, when it is either affirmed or transcended, is always available as a first or last recourse in the post-apartheid democracy. Race is always, politically and philosophically speaking, in play in South Africa. In South Africa, to think politically is to think racially and, possibly, "racistly" (to coin an awkward term), so precarious is the epistemological slippage between the two concepts.

### **Beware of Shooting the White Girl**

The novel *Paradise* constitutes Toni Morrison's most ambitious engagement with the dialogic of race in America. Morrison's work is more often preoccupied with, in significant measure, the internality of black life in America, even though she is always aware of the white presence at its fringes that can impinge at any time – as is so patently obvious in *Beloved* (as Sethe flees from Southern slavery) and, as a haunting pathology (the desire for a white physiognomy) in the *Bluest Eye*. Whereas race is undoubtedly the dominant trope of the Nobel laureate's oeuvre, novels such as *Beloved*, *Song of Solomon*, and *The Bluest Eye* makes this patently clear, it is in the dystopia named Paradise that racial identities are most concertedly unsettled. In *Paradise* Morrison crafts a narrative – which turns on the difficult, erotically entangled but unspeakable relations between the (re-)constituted black town and racially mixed, even indistinct, socio-economic space that is the convent – where black and white is harder pin down, sometimes even to name. Who, after all, is the "white" girl? Can we ever really be sure, given the complications of Morrison's postmodern tableau that is

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built around an oven that has to be disassembled, moved from the town of Ruby to the town of Paradise, and then reconstructed with every deracination?

Both the implicit invocation of “paradise” and its more racially resistant articulation, *Paradise*, resonate with the South African condition. In its “peaceful” transition from white minority rule to post-apartheid democracy, South Africa was heralded as a (putatively) postcolonial “miracle:” the African state that achieved black majority rule with a “minimum” of violence. South Africa became, in and through this enunciation, an African “paradise,” an ideologically and economically idyllic space because of its ability to accommodate all of its citizens in the postlapsarian colonial moment – the beacon of Third World hope after the postcolonial world’s ignominious fall into corruption, disease, famine, war and civil strife. In South Africa, unlike in 1970s Uganda and Kenya, the racially enfranchised and the historically disenfranchised can coexist within the borders of the new postcolonial state. South Africa represents the exceptional, in the benign, American (“new Eden”) not Agamben’s (where the state of exception produces the notorious “camp”) more violently traumatic sense, African state. Post-apartheid South Africa is configured as the postcolonial democracy sans specters of fleeing white or Asian settlers (their capital in tow, their businesses abandoned). However, South Africa is also the incarnation of *Paradise* in that its new leaders, the various constituencies, and its old, newly articulated memories and new technologies of governance, have to grapple with the project of assembling the “oven” of post-apartheid democracy – how will it work? How do its constituent parts fit together? Can the old and new modalities of race and ideology and different generations collaborate successfully in this venture to produce a new, fractured, fissured, but functioning national identity? Can white and black citizens, for so long balkanized into their own separate and racially distinct mechanisms of social operation, work together on the new national undertaking? Can a usable sameness be fashioned out of historic difference, out of a rainbow of colorful component parts?

These are the metaphoric challenges that Morrison’s work poses for the post-apartheid dispensation. It compels a thinking of race through the treacherous network of black and white epistemologies, self-conceptions, and pasts; it demands a racialized dialogic where the space between the fictional towns of Ruby and Paradise, the post-apartheid “paradise,” and the border locale that is the convent, the apartheid past that lies at the forefront of the new



nation's consciousness, has to be traversed, from a racially dangerous terrain. The conceptual framework offered by *Paradise*, its complex figuring of the "raciological," anticipates and gives literary animation to the theoretical girding of Gilroy's *Against Race* in that both authors resist an easy recourse to uncomplicated racial binaries. "Race" has to be produced, or not, out of the text; it is not a concept, or an experience, or even epistemology, that can be imposed upon a historical (or fictional) moment. The politics of race can only be discerned by reading the fragments or corpses of racial texts that constitute "paradise," or dystopia; or, the dystopic elements integral to, and indeed constitutive of, the "paradisaical" construct, be that Ruby or post-apartheid South Africa.

Cast in the terms of *Paradise*, the state (or the party) is always willing to metaphorically "shoot the white girl first" if it believes that the "black girl" (the "ideally" constructed political subject, the metonymic subject being hailed through the white girl's abjection) understands herself to be (affirmatively) addressed through this act of semiotic violence. There can, as in *Paradise's* convent, be no "white girl" to "shoot" if there is no racialized alerity: the black girl who is not yet shot. The "black girl" is saved, or whose fate is suspended, precisely because the critical event of the "white girl" is framed as constitutive of the misogynistic social violence; the violence is also exemplary (in the Foucaultian sense) in that it prefigures what will happen to the "black girl." However, what the metonymic "black girl" has to grasp is that the symbolic death of her (white) sister/enemy, since the two positionalities lie so close to each other within the logic of the older black men from the town of Ruby, has little to do with her own repositioning, reinscription, or advance; she is not able to, literally, move to another place that is not the circumscribed space that is the convent or house of domestic violence; she cannot relocate herself on the political landscape; neither is she able to reconfigure a different, non- or anti-, racial/ized identity. On the contrary, who and what the black girl is has everything to do with the consequences that obtain from the white girl's figurative death.

The dead, reviled, racialized subject, the figuratively white body of *Paradise*, represents the un/conscious force of race as a disciplinary mechanism. Similarly, the white apartheid past functions as an ideological tool with which to police the post-apartheid nation's political thinking. Violence demonstrates how race can be expropriated from the implicitly referenced black body, the black

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woman who is “hailed” without “language” through the death of her white contemporary in the convent, summoned unceremoniously into the service of racialized hegemony. Race is the discourse deployed only when the political shock of its violence can be heard; and, not simply heard, but acknowledged as an incendiary speaking to whiteness. Whiteness is addressed only in the form of the threat: when its vulnerability is made public, when the apartheid past can be used to regulate the post-apartheid present.

Girding the political struggle against apartheid, by organizations such as the ANC and the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), as it was then known,<sup>4</sup> was the vision of a non-racial society. A concept first coined and most carefully theorized by NEUM intellectuals, non-racialism proposed a social arrangement in which race was not (supposed to be) constitutive of citizenship or the determinant of human worth. First articulated in the 1940s, the principle of non-racialism was founded upon the Enlightenment epistemology that race was an “unscientific” discourse, NEUM’s concept of non-racialism can be understood as a precursor to Gilroy’s notion of “against race.” Non-racialism was, and continues to be, in some quarters, a means of arguing against race in order to refute the apartheid categories of statutory racial difference – strictly hierarchized, from the white minority at the apex to the black majority at the base of the racial pyramid. Based upon a profoundly modernist European principle, non-racialism was an ideologically strategic means of agitating for legal equality for all South Africans.

Because the logic of non-racialism refused the philosophical grounds of racial difference, it revealed the fundamental flaw at the core of apartheid reason. The apartheid ideology of the ruling Afrikaner National Party (NP) premised itself upon the “Europeanness” of white South Africans; they were the bearers of white, Western modernity with the Calvinist mission of civilizing the “natives” but never recognizing their equality. The NEUM’s non-racialism revealed how incommensurate NP logic was with the terms of progressive European modernity. Within a non-racial society, race could not be the very telos that decided whether or not people should be enfranchised, where they should live, work, attend school, whom they could marry. While the ANC was never as sophisticated in its thinking about race as the NEUM, it adhered to a concept of “nations” (each of the four apartheid communities, white, black, coloured, and “Indian” were represented at the historic Congress of the People in 1955), the principle of non-racialism gradually emerged as the guiding

principle in the anti-apartheid struggle (Lodge 1983). The boycotts, strikes, “rolling mass actions,” innumerable protests and the high-intensity “civil war” of the 1980s was motivated and sustained by an oppositionality to racial categorization. Non-racialism envisioned a nation in which race would be negated, where it would have no role or value. It was this guiding principle that the world celebrated in both 1990 and 1994: the first moment marked the unbanning of the black liberation movement and the release of political prisoners, the second stands as the historic, inaugural, democratic elections.

### **Residual Race/ism? Mandela and the New Racial Logic**

It is against the backdrop of these two historic events that the last full-length ideological statement by then-president Nelson Mandela achieves such salience. Speaking to the ANC national convention in his final major address as party leader in December 1997 (some sixteen months before the second democratic elections), Mandela focused his political sights on a single constituency: white South Africa. And he did so in a historically overdetermined guise. Whites were addressed not as post-apartheid, rainbow-nation fellow-citizens, but as a residual constituency: as inveterately, ahistorically apartheid subjects, those who represented nothing so much as an ideological time-lag (people who clung desperately, defiantly, to an earlier mode of being, which we might understand as racism), whites as reluctant citizens, as political recidivists, guilty of nothing so much as the crime of historic privilege – of implicitly remembering (and thereby tacitly regretting) the loss of inequity, of hierarchy. Speaking at one moment during his speech in defense of affirmative action, Mandela warned his colleagues: “even a cursory study of the positions adopted by the mainly white parties in the national legislature during the last three years . . . will show that they, and the media which represents the same social base, have been most vigorous in their opposition, whenever legislative and executive measures have been introduced, seeking the end of racial disparities which continue to characterize our society” (Mandela 1997:3).

In the ANC’s terms, South Africa was democratic but not yet egalitarian. According to Mandela, post-apartheid society remained steeped in racial inequity, an imbalance that the historically enfranchised were eager to maintain: “Thus, whenever we have sought real progress through affirmative action, the spokesperson of the advantaged have not hesitated to cry foul, citing all manner of evil – such as racism, violation of the constitution, nepotism, dictatorship,

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inducing a brain drain and frightening the foreign investor” (Mandela 1997:5). Departing from the same philosophical standpoint of being opposed to race, Mandela’s pronouncements seem to throw Gilroy’s project into sharp relief: even in a post-apartheid society committed to a non-racial future, every rhetorical attempt to transcend race confronts – either as an imagined, expedient opposition or a substantive socio-economic force – itself, most frequently, as racism. This suggests that the ideology of *Against Race* is at once a complicated amalgam of the ideal, the politically naïve, and the structurally impossible. Even those opposed to race as a mode of social arrangement and thinking find themselves mired in several, all-too manifest physiognomic and cultural-political realities. Being against race does not necessarily mean that it is possible to refuse its ontological purchase. Mandela’s speech demonstrates how it is impossible to argue, in a putatively non-racial society, against race without being ensnared, subverted, and even possibly undone by it.

The process of transformation, the President held, “had not yet tested the strength of the counter-offensive which would seek to maintain the privileges of the white minority” (Mandela 1997:1). Mandela’s sudden re-turn to a Marxist discourse is salient because it makes a sudden reappearance on the most public of party platforms – the annual, fiftieth, in this case, party conference in 1997. It is possible to argue here that Mandela, as socialist fellow-traveler, was simply remembering the Trotskyist dictum that the revolution is never quite so vulnerable as in that period immediately following its completion. Beware the counter-revolutionaries; fear the white Russians, as Trotsky warned, was the message that came echoing fraudulently across the Russian Steppes to the South African hinterland town of Mafikeng, which hosted the ANC conference. The racial commensurability between the white Russians and the white South Africans was convenient and especially apt for Mandela’s purposes. But why, against the backdrop of a superficial Marxism, invoke the specter of race, the history of racism, when the political threat does not exist? Why recall a “politics of suspension” when a political democracy obtains? Why the temporal anachronism, the recalling of apartheid’s racial logic, the strategic political disjuncture? What is Mandela’s but an ideologically hollow call to “shoot the white girl first?” All of these questions provoke the more insidious inquiry, premised upon the “exceptional” Agambenian trajectory from the exception to the “camp:” who is next in line after the “white girl” has been dispatched with?

First in line, clearly, is the “media,” an institution of civil society – which “represents the same social base” – overly identified with white South Africans. But what other constituencies were also being indicted? Is there in Mandela’s address also, more ominously, a warning to black opposition? To black journalists who do not agree with the ANC’s policies? Does it also contain a caution against any recalcitrance by the trade unions? Are all “counter-offensives” equally intolerable to the ANC government? These constituencies and institutions of liberal civil society, whatever critiques one may offer of that political construct, represent the real opposition, those forces who have been most willing to express their dissatisfaction with the new regime, prepared to articulate the shortcomings of the post-apartheid society and to aim their critiques at first the Mandela and then the Mbeki government as well as at the apartheid past.

### **Race and Capital: Critiquing Mbeki**

The press, the trade unions, and the new black lumpen-proletariat have, since his coming to power, established themselves most vocally as the anti-Mbeki constituency. The political constituencies are all, in own particular way, suspicious of the new president, his relationship to capital, and his big business, global capital, World Bank and International Monetary Fund agenda. Unlike Morrison’s vengeful black men in *Paradise*, who can “take their time” because the convent where they will kill the “white girl” and all the racially “indistinct” girls, is isolated and vulnerable to no one so much as the men of the all-black town of Ruby, there is not quite the same temporal luxury for the ANC leadership. The ANC may have the “time” to expediently invoke race because there is no viable opposition to the government. But there are other factors mitigating against Mbeki. As an American journalist reported from Soweto in 2002:

Disappointment is clearly surging among the poor, the working class and the undereducated. Western officials have praised the black government for its conservative fiscal policies, but the nation has lost thousands of jobs in recent years as the previously sheltered economy has been liberalized (Swarns 2002:4).

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With the worsening economic conditions, the fissures within the black community have become more publicly obvious since Mbeki's ascent to power: "‘Things were better before,’ said Kala Kgamedi, 33, who lost his job as a salesman two years ago. ‘In the years of apartheid, things were running smoothly,’ said Mr. Kgamedi” (Swarns 2002:4).

In this instance, those against, critical of or unsure about the post-apartheid dispensation demonstrate how the contestation is not reductively about race but, more complexly, about class, ideological differences within the black community, even a wistful remembering of the efficiencies of the apartheid dispensation, all of which produce a compacted political discontent. Under- and unemployed and leftist blacks alike are opposed to a black president who does not represent their interests, a president's whose rhetoric on race is discredited by his alliance with global capital (which is identified as institutionally and figuratively white). Economic restructuring, approved of by "Western officials," has produced such dissatisfaction within the black ranks that the unthinkable, nostalgia for apartheid, is now a resonant trope in the black political imaginary:

‘We wanted to contribute to our country,’ said Mr. Sibanda . . . ‘We fought so long for equal rights, to be respected, to be treated as people. I wonder now, the struggle, was it worth it? Here I am, young and qualified, and I cannot get a job. Why should I vote when I don't benefit from this government? They say they're trying to alleviate poverty, but I don't see it' (Swarns 2002:4).

While Mbeki may not agree entirely with his critic from the streets of Soweto, even as the most ardent proponent of attracting international capital for investment, the president recognizes how post-apartheid society has created new intra-racial divisions. According to Mbeki, "the disparity in wealth and income between the black rich and the black poor has, in fact, become the distinguishing feature of the new South Africa" (Mbeki 2000:4). It is not, however, a situation that Mbeki is considering rethinking. The impact of globalization and Mbeki's close relationship with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund has produced a post-apartheid category of impoverished blacks dubbed, by one critic, the "poors." Entering the global economy as a democratic society has, for the historically disenfranchised, meant the destruction of the racially stratified apartheid welfare state and the loss of

its, not inconsiderable, benefits. Apartheid provided decent healthcare, minimal housing, basic education, and, most crucially, a safer society than its successor. The “poors” (Desai 2003) is produced out of that unexpected conjuncture between globalization and post-apartheid democracy, between the failures of anti- and post-apartheid apartheid race politics, and between race politics and international capital.

The South African situation represents a complex intertwining of historical racism, the desired (but perpetually deferred, elusive) non-racial future, and intra-black ideological and a looming class conflict (uneven and varied as it is), all of which are eminently capable of working in multiple alliances with and against each other. In South Africa, for this reason, race can only – in its Gilroyian instantiation – be effectively contested by operating within a raced paradigm that is always alert to the functioning of global capital. In order to oppose the “shooting” of the symbolic white girl, to oppose and counteract an uncritical race politics, it is necessary to understand that while being cogniscent of how economic inequity and exploitation can be subverted by recourse to racialized logic. It is imperative to recognize the expedience of the racialized logic of the post-apartheid black government:

If you are a black South African, you are most likely to have welcomed the end of apartheid in our country in 1994 with great enthusiasm. You would have seen this as an historic fact of liberation, indeed opening up the prospect of a better life. If you are a white South African, you are most likely to have welcomed this change with a certain degree of unease. Some would have wondered whether they, their families and properties were safe from black hordes that might go on the rampage (Mbeki 2000:2).

Black unemployment, poverty and structural lack can always be explained (rationalized away) by the authority of presidential, racially-inflected dictat. Mbeki’s discourse is premised upon the political fallacy, what he projects as the new “racial common sense,” that to speak of the racialized past is to implicitly invalidate other critical discourses. When Mbeki invokes racial difference and transubstantiates it into a historical absolute, his intention is to deploy race as a blunt but affectively potent ideological tool. Race is transformed by the black president into the political weapon of elite black censorship: to recall the

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apartheid past is to immunize, by affective contrast, the black ANC government from opposition by either other blacks or whites. Paradoxically, and insidiously, through Mbeki's representation of it race once again becomes an oppressive discourse for black South Africans. The black "poors" are punished, not once but twice. First, by the white apartheid regime and then the black post-apartheid government. In both cases because they represent a socio-political constituency opposed to the (white and black) ruling blocs. The memory of black orchestrated liberation is used against the possibility of other, future, race-based struggles that are equally rooted in and routed through class politics. The discourse of race, both Mandela and Mbeki's speeches make clear, is always in the service of power.

Ironically, in post-apartheid South Africa, much as during the apartheid era, racial identities have hardened discursively. Post-apartheid racial identities function as signs of an unchanging same, concretized into articulations that permit only temporal – the apartheid as opposed to post-apartheid era – but never conceptual notions of difference – ideological disparities are not permitted. South African identity, the intensely racialized self of the past and the present has, as in Gilroy's terms, "degenerated readily into emblems of supposedly essential or immutable difference" (Gilroy 2000:101).

Essentialism inscribes within itself a history of a specific, and crucial, aspect: the lack or circumscription of agency. Essentialism is often not so much a strategic ideological choice as the only possible response to a variety of repressions, violences, and disenfranchisements. It is about the absence of real political alternative. Essentialism enunciates, in instances such as South African apartheid, a politics of deprivations because it precludes, because of the conditions of racialized struggle, the material and psychic possibility of a different, more politically efficacious response. Essentialism is not always about the insistent, unreflexive, and intransigent maintenance of identity or ideological position. It is frequently, as in this case in South Africa, about race – about the denigrated historicity of the black body – as the final resort: as a genealogical marker of community, an immutability out of which an enforced solidarity – a sameness of the body that translates and widens into the sameness of lived experience – which binds disenfranchised constituencies together. It is, not to put too fine a point on it, essential that these communities cohere in the face of hegemony – or, worse, state-sponsored repression. If they do not



practice political essentialism, they render themselves even more politically, psychically, and physically vulnerable.

While Mandela and Mbeki may, with their different nuances and emphases, insist that in South Africa race is not the terrain of contestation, the transmutation of race into ideology – for a second time – signals a crucial postlapsarian conjuncture. Too soon after the fall of institutionalized racism, for the historically disenfranchised race has all too evidently become the modus operandi of post-apartheid politics. A critical race politics has to be conceived of as an ideology that recognizes how various constituencies, black and otherwise, align themselves in relation to the functioning of global capital and its workings in post-industrial South Africa. At the level of the “second” struggle, the black “poors” struggle against the black ANC government, the political project is to unyoke the uncritical ANC discourse that implicitly, and cynically, links post-apartheid race to the legacy of post-apartheid capital – this strategy amounts to little more than explaining continuing black poverty through the lens of historic white privilege in an era when the black elite has, courtesy of the ANC, embourgeoisied itself beyond the recognition of both the “poors” and the new elite’s more modest apartheid status. The ANC has failed the black “poors” as much as it has advantaged the new black elite. In the “second” black struggle, apartheid’s racial categories are fundamental but contextually and textually inadequate. The apartheid categories cannot simply be transposed into the post-apartheid context; race has to be contextualized into contemporaneity, it has to be made into a political text incorporative of the conjunctures the new, conceptually unprecedented moment in South African history. The critique of post-apartheid economics has to be redefined on the occasion of South Africa’s entrée into global capital as much as race has to be reanimated and retooled as a political discourse.

In South Africa race and class has historically been mutually constitutive. Thinking them discretely has never really, except for the interregnum that was 1990 to 1994, been a viable political option. Mbeki returned to this theme a couple of times in his short “Speech at the Youth Conference on Nation-Building” in 2000, “The racism . . . defined black people as sub-human, barbaric, incapable of sharing the same moral norms as the white minority, incapable of being civilized – and therefore menacing, requiring to be watched, contained and tamed at all costs” (Mbeki 2000:2). At the very moment of non-racial inauguration, the new nation reveals itself to be racially discontinuous;

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the racial cleavages, “civilized” whites and their Conradian black counterparts, too “savage” to be trusted to their own political devices, not only survive the end of apartheid but emerge at the beginning of the new century in sharper ideological outline. Post-apartheid society in 1994, where black “enthusiasm” contrasts sharply with a “certain degree” of white “unease,” announces the revitalization of racialized discourse, affect, and identity. Race lives even as it is being constitutionally buried. In South Africa race, and racism constitute an impermanent conundrum, a conceptual incorrigibility in and for a society trying to imagine itself as non-racial.

### **Race and Nation**

It is not surprising that race should emerge so regularly in the South African national discourse, or in the discourse of the insufficiently tentative project, or too balkanized girding, of nation-building. As Mbeki phrased it in his address, “in our social psychology, our instincts and our perception of ourselves, we see ourselves as distinct elements of an agglomeration of different racial and ethnic groups whose interests we believe might very well be mutually exclusive” (Mbeki 2000:2). What is significant, however, is the return to race in what should be the apogetic moment of non-racial triumph. Instead of celebration there is, when confronted with the nation disarticulated by race, public admonishment of those who wished to “maintain racial disparities” by the iconic Mandela, post-apartheid statesman. Instead, Mandela offers a relenting, not a giving up on, the raced morality of the apartheid past. It is in this moment of racialized indefatigability, that moment when race and racism reveals its public sustainability, that the nation reveals itself to be in racial disarray. It is on these occasions that race and racism demonstrate how the post-apartheid nation is lived as a disjunctive if not yet dystopic construct. How is race reconstructed as an oppositional politics at a juncture when the establishment of the post-apartheid state publicly embodies its death? Is race and racism the perpetual South African political unconscious? Is race the historical condition, the historic experience, that is always invocable, inexorably subject to recall at strategic moments?

Problematic as Mandela and Mbeki’s expedient deployment of race is, it would seem that in South Africa – for now and the foreseeable future – the only way to think a non-racial society, if not a post-racial future, is to engage the social construct through race bi-furcatedly: through the dual and occasionally

split lens of anti- and post-apartheid history. Such a modality requires an acute awareness and grasp of strategic moment, a critical consciousness about how and why race is invoked, the understanding and acknowledgement of Gilroy's critique; and yet, such an approach is also predicated upon knowing that the project of non-racialism is premised upon thorny, uneven, entangled engagements with the history and consequences of race and racism. The black South African body, in other words, continues to possess both an ideological presence and an ontological saliency, a racialized memory, an apartheid sense of itself that makes it simultaneously wary of anti-white rhetoric and strangely susceptible to that discourse – an ideological proclivity that Mbeki was clearly trying to invoke, if not explicitly exploit, in his “Youth Day” speech. This ontologized racial memory retains, furthermore, an ideological purchase precisely because of the conditions under which the newly enfranchised black citizenry labor: they are the “poors,” still the economic subalterns, they have greater numbers of the unemployed in their ranks, they and their children are less well educated. In post-apartheid society, guaranteed equality by the constitution, they still live the socio-economic experience of the black subject under apartheid. Their past is only constitutionally distinguishable from their future.

Black subjectivity remains anteriorized: located in and enfranchised by post-apartheid South African society, ideologically it is an anachronistic socio-economic experience. Blacks continue to live, materially, in the time before – in the conditions of the original struggle except that the state is now governed by “their,” physiognomically speaking, representatives. For the expanding class of black subalterns, race is not only the dominant language of their social existence, it is the lingua franca of their lives: non-racial citizens in a world still stratified by the inequities of the racist past; philosophically non-racial, economically racialized, negotiating not so much between the present and the past as between the past and its double-edged, shadowy, as-yet unformed future.

Non-racialism is always lived imaginatively, at a historical distance, removed from and unavailable to the conditions of the present even while epistemologically girding – ideologically holding up – the present. In this scenario, non-racialism assumes a conceptual urgency and again offers itself as a struggle – as the condition to be achieved, again. Non-racialism cannot, because of the establishment of the post-apartheid state, be rhetorically postponed into

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the future: it has to have an envisioning in the present. Unlike the Morrisonian “white girl,” non-racialism cannot be summarily “killed,” unlike the “rest” of *Paradise’s* convent women, its fulfillment cannot be postponed indefinitely. It has to have a presence, however ghostly, unhomed, or unachievable, in a society in which race functions as the founding myth. Even as the “white girl” is held metonymically accountable for the delayed non-racial condition, so the body of the historically privileged victim draws attention to its subreptive absence. Subreption not only conceals strategic information, its speaking – the indictment of white South Africans – enunciates its foundational lacks: apportioning blame to whites as an explication for non-racialism, inadvertently articulates the non-fulfillment of the historical pact.

As Mbeki, without any sense of historical irony, or, worse, historical foreboding, himself acknowledges: “if we do not address these disparities, which, like the land question in Zimbabwe, were central to the struggle for liberation in this country, at some point in the future we will experience and enormous and angry explosion by those remain disadvantaged” (Mbeki 2000:5). Invoking the specter of Robert Mugabe’s expedient and economically devastating deployment of race politics in Zimbabwe (where 5000 white farmers have had land expropriated almost two decades after independence when ZANU PF was, not coincidentally, in electoral trouble), Mbeki uses the Zimbabwe crisis to warn against race-based economic exploitation without any awareness of ANC accountability. Again, the specter of black violence of the anti-colonial variety is used not to achieve equality but to hint at the potential fate of the “white girl.” Zimbabwe allows for the metaphorization of a semiotic violence: it recodes the threat of violence for South Africa by geographical displacement. The “dispossessed” Zimbabwean peasants stand in for, and momentarily as, post-apartheid South Africa’s historically disenfranchised underclass. Displacing accountability, playing the race card, in this case doubles back upon its speaker: non-racialism’s non-existence becomes, despite the efforts to deflect, becomes – perhaps even demands – its own interrogation. If the language of race is always historically racialized, overburdened by inequity and injustice, then the discourse of non-racialism is similarly, constitutively, overwritten by race.

It is, as Gilroy suggest, an injunction to take seriously the “idea” that a “fundamentally shared identity becomes a platform for the reverie and of absolute and eternal division” (2000:101). Within the South African context, the

memory of race and racism has a powerful retention. It remains deeply present within the collective and “divided” consciousness of the new nation. Race is unarguably resilient in its capacity to shape thinking about the past, the current conjuncture, and the future, and, it has obtained a haunting poignancy: that set of recollections of what the society once was, that memory of how the nation was once “absolutely” separate, divided into distinguishable entities. The apartheid past is, paradoxically, a source of ideological poignancy because the lines of division were not only sharper, but more unambiguously etched.

In the apartheid past South African identities were experienced differently, because they were firmly racialized – the “fundamental divisions” were different, ensuring that the new process of constructing a post-apartheid shared identity will be equally arduous, working against and along racial fault lines that the new nation is only beginning to map. It requires a process of suturing which it is finding incredibly difficult to do – necessarily so, one might add. It is in this way that arguing against race, working for its institutional death, means nothing so much as hand-to-hand combat with the workings, language, and consequences of race – of what it did, of how it imprinted a society, of how it coded civic functionings. It is about arguing not simply against race, but against the powerful authority of racialized “reverie” – of how things used to be, of how much that impacts how the new nation no longer both wants and does not want those codes – that fragmented conception of race – to work. It is about recognizing that non-racialism is not a “paradise,” that it is in the convent that most instructive lessons about racialized identity are located, and that semiotic (or physical) violence against the white girl, shot first or last, is always only a political ruse. If the white girl’s story is silenced through rhetorical death, then the black “poors” oppositional narrative will surely follow. Under no circumstances must the white girl, or the black girls, be shot.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> In the Foreword to Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*, Tracy B. Strong critiques liberalism as that series of social processes that "wishes to substitute procedure for struggle" (Strong 1996:xv).

<sup>2</sup> The term "black" is used in this essay in its incorporative anti-apartheid instantiation: it includes the three historically disenfranchised groups, "blacks," "coloureds," and "Indians" – those of south Asian descent.

<sup>3</sup> According to Schmitt, the political is constituted out of sovereignty, the state as the "sole subject of politics," and the distinction between friend and enemy. See Schmitt (1996, 1985) for a fuller discussion of the political.

<sup>4</sup> It was reconstituted in the mid-1980s as the "New Unity Movement."