

(Post)Apartheid Conditions: Psychoanalysis and Social Formation

Derek Hook

242 pages, 2013, \$90.00 USD (paperback)

Palgrave Macmillan

Reviewed by Clint Burnham, Simon Fraser University

Formerly with the Apartheid Archive Project in South Africa, Derek Hook brings, in this volume, a formidable knowledge of psychoanalytic *and* affect theory to bear on social questions of reconciliation, racialization and memory. Hook is especially interested in what he calls the “temporality of the psychosocial,” especially insofar as the spatial imaginary of apartheid no longer suffices. This is to challenge the geographic hegemony with which the social is often theorized: instead, Hook argues, we would do better to refer to the particularities of “condensed temporality; to transposed vectors of historical transformation and retrogression, to the overlapping of progressive and arrested memories” (7). Such a notion of time is evidently one very much in the Freudian tradition, but, crucially, does not jettison spatiality as such; thus, early in this study, Hook identifies the following “key psychosocial problematics—the psychic resonance of space; fantasies of the body; racialized identification; melancholic attachment; the momentum of symbolic structures and the possibility of their being worked-through” (8). Thus we must also consider, he argues, confronting the specifics of whiteness, the retrieval of traumatic histories, mediations of inter-racial intimacies, and the role of nostalgia. Hook brings this theoretical apparatus to bear on a wide range of texts or case-studies, including public spaces, visual fantasies, such historical anti-colonial writers as Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko, and a specific body of texts: the Apartheid Archive Project, a corpus of narrative reminiscences about the everyday life under South African apartheid. (It should be noted that *(Post)Apartheid Conditions* is a companion volume to *Race, Memory and the Apartheid Archive: Towards a Transformative Psychosocial Praxis*, co-edited by Hook with Garth Stevens and Norman Duncan. That study, with contributions by sixteen researchers, offers a broader complement to Hook’s sustained engagement with these questions in *(Post)Apartheid Conditions*.) Hook’s method both is and is not eclectic: it is in the sense, as he himself notes, that it favors “episodic interventions, unorthodox combinations of theory and problematic, varied points of focus and lines of approach” (9). But this methodological eclecticism is met, if not by a theoretical orthodoxy (although few post-Žižekians will find anything to object to here), at least by consistency: reconciliation here refers as much to reconciliation between psychoanalysis and affect theory as to between the black and white survivors of apartheid.

This book is comprised of seven chapters. In the first, “The Monumental Uncanny,” Hook discusses Strijdom Square in Pretoria, a

public space devoted to apartheid grotesqueries (including a supersized bust, but it is also the site of a killing spree in the late 1980s). The chapter is a model of patient scholarship, as Hook considers first postmodern (Edward Soja) and Marxist (Henri Lefebvre) accounts of space, before drawing on psychoanalytic (Paul Kingsbury) and specifically Freudian accounts of the uncanny. The very monumentality of such spaces, their overwhelming size, he argues, interpellate the subject with fantasies of presence but also embodied absence. What does apartheid want from me?, the structures compel us to ask. The happy coincidence that much of Strijdom Square collapsed on the anniversary of South Africa's Republic Day in 2001 only serves to illustrate that even the most fantastic (or fantasmatic) accounts are grounded in the Real.

Other chapters urge the reader to think about images of "Apartheid's *Corps Morcelé*" (or the dismembered black body: chapter 2), blockage and memory as a form of social progress ("'Impossibility' and Apartheid History": chapter 4), how theories of repression and lack can account for what is implied, but not uttered, in apartheid reminiscences ("Apartheid's Lost Attachments": chapter 5), the "mimed melancholia" around the sort of cross-racial identification engendered and then foreclosed under apartheid labor conditions (black nannies for white children: chapter 6), and the ways in which apartheid nostalgia, a feature of South African culture in the early 2000s (from white trash *zef* hip-hop to the resurgence of anti-apartheid protest songs), constitutes a form of *Nachträglichkeit*, or a retroactive compression of past and present ("Screened history," Chapter 7).

But I want to turn to chapter 3, on "Retrieving Biko," in order to help us think about how Hook brings affect theory and psychoanalysis into dialogue with each other. Hook begins by arguing that Steve Biko's name has become a "master signifier" in post-apartheid South Africa, by which he means a floating or polysemic signifier. Biko's name appears from pop music (songs by System of a Down, Bloc Party, Simple Minds, but also an "Afro Space" radio station), to fashion (t-shirts and handbags), NGOs, and especially events around the thirtieth anniversary, in 2007-2008, of Biko's murder by South African police. But Hook's analysis goes beyond such anodyne cultural studies trend-spotting, and interrogates Biko's legacy via Sara Ahmed's critiques of whiteness studies and nonperformativity. First, Biko's 1970 essay "Black Souls in White Skins?" holds the white liberal up to scrutiny, finding a classic form of disavowal, a fantasy of "people who claim they feel the oppression just as acutely as the blacks and therefore should be jointly involved in the black man's struggle" (Biko, qtd Hook, 93). This, Hook adds, is how white liberals can create a pseudo-difference between themselves and other (racist) whites. Such a particular mechanism of apartheid-era South Africa, we find via Ahmed's work, is alive and well today in the various forms of anti-racist declarations, from those made by police forces after a racist incident (all too relevant today given the Black Lives Matter movement), or Australia's national "Sorry Day" and other apologies for colonial heritage, or academic institutions' acknowledgements (in

Canadian and other contexts) of aboriginal sovereignty. Ahmed's characterization of these moments as "the nonperformativity of antiracism" points to an important aspect of what we might also call, with Žižek, an "empty gesture."¹ The utterances are often made with the trappings of contemporary ceremonial situations—a university convocation, the opening of an academic conference, a police force press conference (or press release). That is, they are inherently *monologic*, not part of a genuinely democratic dialogue. Thus, as Hook acerbically notes, the institution or speaker "acknowledges the social asymmetries that one has benefited from ... thus alleviating a portion of guilt, while continuing to enjoy those privileges, indeed consolidating them at a higher level by virtue of one's awareness, one's self-reflexive stance" (93). Biko meets psychoanalysis in a truly finessed critique. If the trauma of apartheid and South Africa's continuing attempts to deal with that history have provided the ground for Hook's thoroughly engaging study, it is only proper that his analysis should respond with a rigorous solidarity. *(Post)Apartheid Conditions* is essential reading for any scholar or activist interested in those intersections of psychoanalysis, reconciliation studies, settler colonialism and post-colonialism.

Notes

1. For Žižek (*The Parallax View*, 130-131; but also *How to Read Lacan*) and Lacan (*Seminar XI: The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis*), the "empty gesture" is linked to the "forced choice." When a postcolonial authority apologizes or acknowledges racism, apartheid, or other colonial trauma, such an acknowledgement is an "empty gesture," or mere words, which, however, paradoxically is nonetheless crucial, even as it is connected to the "forced choice" of that very colonial history. This paradox is detected in a similar fashion in Ahmed's argument that nonperformatives "work by not bringing about the effects that they name" ("Nonperformativity," 105).

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. "The Nonperformativity of Antiracism." *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 7.1 (2006), pp. 104-126.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. W.W. Norton, 1998.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *How to Read Lacan*. Granta, 2006.
- . *The Parallax View*. MIT Press, 2006.