

Biko and the Problematic of Presenceⁱ

Frank B. Wilderson, III

Let us assume that black people receive the value of Absence. This mode of being becomes existence manqué—existence gone wrong. Their mode of being becomes the being of the NO.

--Lewis Gordonⁱⁱ

The biggest mistake the black world ever made was to assume that whoever opposed apartheid was an ally.

--Steven Biko.ⁱⁱⁱ

I. *Black Recognition?*

When I first arrived in South Africa in 1989, I was a Marxist. Toward the end of 1996, two and one half years after Nelson Mandela came to power, I left not knowing what I was. This is not to say that I, like so many repentant Marxists had come around to what policy wonks and highly placed notables within the ANC National Executive Committee called for then, a so-called “mixed economy;” a phrase that explained less than nothing but was catchy and saturated with common sense, thus making it unassailable. No, I had not been converted to the “ethics” of the “free” market, but I was convinced the rubric of exploitation and alienation (or a grammar of suffering predicated on the intensification of work and the extraction of surplus value) was not up to the task of (a) describing the structure of the antagonism, (b) delineating a proper revolutionary subject, or (c) elaborating a trajectory of institutional iconoclasm comprehensive enough to start, “the only thing in the world that’s worth the effort of starting: the end of the world, by God!”^{iv}

In June 1992, not long after the massacre at Biopatong, Ronnie Kasrils co-chaired a Tripartite Alliance Rolling Mass Action meeting with a COSATU central committee member and an ANC NEC member. They sat together at a long table on the stage in the basement auditorium of the Allied Bank Building in Jo’burg. One hundred delegates of the Tripartite Alliance had been sent there to plan a series of civil actions designed to paralyze the urban nerve centers of South African cities (“the Leipzig Option” as some called it). I was one of the delegates. Out of 100 people it seemed as though no more than 5 to 10 were White or Indian. There were a few Coloureds. One Black American—me; and eighty to ninety Black South Africans.

We began with songs that lasted so long and were so loud and so pointed in their message (Chris Hani is our shield! Socialism is our shield! Kill the Farmer Kill the Boer!), that by the time the meeting finally got underway one sensed a quiet tension in the faces of Kasrils and his co-chairs. An expression I’d seen time and again since 1991 on the faces of Charterist notables; faces contorted by smiling teeth and knitted brow, solidarity and anxiety; faces pulled by opposing needs—the need to bring the state to heel and the need to manage the Blacks, and it was this need which was looking unmanageable.

Planning for a mass excursion was on the table: an armada of busses filled with demonstrators was to ride to the border of the “homeland” of the Ciskei, which was ruled by the notorious General Joshua Oupa Gqozo. We would disembark, hold a rally, then a march, then, at one moment in the march, we would crash through the fence, thus liberating the people of the “homeland” by the sheer volume of our presence. Kasrils and his co-chairs looked one to the other. Yes, things were indeed getting out of hand. As a round of singing and chanting ensued, they leaned their heads together and whispered.

Comrade Kasrils rises. He exits, stage right. He returns with a small piece of paper. An important intelligence report, comrades, news that should give us pause. Reading from the slip of paper, he says he has just received word that, were we to actually *pass* the motion on the floor to cross the Ciskei border en masse, to flood the “homeland” with out belligerent mass, General Joshua Oupa Gqozo would open fire on us with live ammunition. To Comrade Kasrils’ horror the room erupts in cheers and applause. This, I am thinking, as I join the cheering and the singing, is not the response his “intelligence” was meant to elicit.

Had Comrade Kasrils been hoisted by his own petard or was there dissonance between the assumptive logic through which he and the Tripartite Alliance posed the question, What does it mean to suffer? and the way that question was posed by—or imposed upon—the mass of Black delegates? The divergence of our joy and what appeared to be his anxiety was expressed as divergent structures of feeling which I believe to be symptomatic of a contrast in conceptions of suffering and to be symptomatic of irreconcilable differences in how and where Blacks are positioned, ontologically, in relation to non-Blacks. In the last days of apartheid, we failed to imagine the fundamental difference between the worker and the Black. How we understand suffering and whether we locate its essence in economic exploitation or in anti-Blackness has a direct impact on how we imagine freedom; and on how we foment revolution.^v

Perhaps the bullets which were promised us did not manifest within our psyches as lethal deterrents because they manifested as gifts; rare gifts of recognition; gifts unbequeathed to Blackness; acknowledgement that we *did* form an ensemble of Human capacity instead of a collection of kaffirs, or a bunch of niggers. We experienced a transcendent impossibility: a moment of Blackness-as-Presence in a world overdetermined by Blackness-as-Absence.

I am not saying that we welcomed the prophesy of our collective death. I am arguing that the threat of our collective death, a threat *in response to the gesture of our collective—our “living”—will*, made us *feel* as though we were alive, as though we possessed what in fact we could not possess, Human life, as opposed to Black life (which is always already “substitutively dead,” “a fatal way of being alive”^{vi})—we could die because we lived...

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Notes

ⁱ Special thanks to Janet Neary and Anita Wilkins for their research assistance.

ⁱⁱ Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995), 98.

ⁱⁱⁱ *I Write What I Like* (London: The Bowerdean Press, 1978), 63.

^{iv} Aime Cesaire quoted in Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1952, 1967), 96.

^v To my knowledge the term anti-Blackness was first named, as a structural imperative, by Lewis Gordon in *Bad Faith*.

^{vi} David Marriott, *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia UP, 2000), 15, 19.