AFRICAN HERMENEUTICS’ ‘OUTING’ OF WHITENESS[1]

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Abstract

This paper argues that the critique offered by African hermeneutics of what they perceive to be Western hermeneutics, can be interpreted as an interpellation of whiteness. The paper endeavours to explore aspects of this interpellation. Based on Pres. Thabo Mbeki’s letter on the eve of Human Rights Day, it proceeds by illuminating several other interpellations, starting with Butler’s gender interpellation in order to provide some structural resonance between gender performativity and racial performativity. It then looks at two racial performativities, namely the videotape of the Rodney King beating and Fanon’s vignette ‘Look, a Negro!’ in terms of an assertion of blackness as the very antithesis of the social order. Two reactions to blackness as antithesis of the social order are then looked at, namely the 50 year old *Des prêtres noirs s’interrogent* and Kä Mana’s view on the myth of the West. The paper offers Perkinson’s *White theology* as a possible, yet problematic, answer to the interpellation of African Hermeneutics found in these two reactions. The paper is concluded with a few observations about whiteness.

1. Introduction

Pres. Thabo Mbeki’s weekly newsletter (cf. Mbeki 2007) on the eve of the celebrations of Human Rights Day on 21 March presented an example of the racialising effect on identity construction in current South African identity politics.[2] His portrayal of racism by employing a completely anonymous example of stereotypical behaviour and transferring it to whiteness in general, threw a spanner in my own endeavours not only to come to terms with the past (cf. Snyman 2006) and with the influence of racism (cf. Snyman 2007a), but also with the construction of a non-racial identity. Moreover, when one looks at letters written to the newspapers, one realises how this letter upset people who lost loved ones in criminal attacks. There is a general inclination to refuse his “Althusserian” interpellation of the white racist.

Nevertheless, Kelley’s (2002) arguments of racism within Western philosophy and Christian hermeneutics, despite my reservations (cf. Snyman 2005b), continued to impress upon me the problem of race in my performativity of whiteness, a performativity, I think, is being called forth not only by Pres. Mbeki’s racialisation of

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[2] Pres. Mbeki took his cue from allegations made by the leaders of the Freedom Front Plus and the Democratic Alliance respectively, namely that South Africans do not spend enough time to listen to each other. To Pres. Mbeki, one issue we ought to debate honestly is the scourge of racism. Citing an extreme example of racism at the workplace and the link drawn by ‘white fear’ between blackness and crime, he concludes “[t]he resolve to educate ourselves to not be too quick to judge as illegitimate the concerns and expressions of any group must include not being too quick to judge as illegitimate the concerns and expressions of the African people, the historic victims of racism, who remain deeply disturbed that some in positions of power still think it is normal to speak of them as ‘kaffirs’, and others among our white compatriots think that it is natural to ask the question – since they are Black, how do we know they are not criminals!”

the debate, but also by the continuous and forceful instance of African (theological) hermeneutics.

What appears to be an ongoing harping on the same string in a debate drenched in essentialist thinking (cf. Snyman 2002 and 2005), nonetheless, requires to be taken seriously. Essentialist thinking on both sides of the racial spectrum not only stifles the debate on racism, but also makes it difficult to transcend its parameters. It has become a reverse discourse that replicates old racist polarities. What is necessary is to refuse the founding concepts of the problematic. In other words, an essentialist debate on identity should be refused in favour of a debate in which the constructedness of identity receives more prominence.

In lieu of enquiring into the racist dimensions of white existence, it would probably be more profitable to expose whiteness as a power structure. I am not sure whether whiteness as a power structure lies behind Pres. Mbeki's sporadic references to white racist behaviour, but within the current African hermeneutical debate with its continuous critique of Western imperialism and thought structures that appears to be the case. Being educated and cultivated within Western modernity, as a white man I do not really know how to react in this debate, since I am constructed from the very start as a perpetrator. My suggestion, at least for now, is to take the debate seriously, and cautiously accept the challenge to "out" my own whiteness. Furthermore, my deliberation takes place within a framework of mourning in as much as one uncovers whiteness as a practice of terror.

My contention is that the critique offered by African hermeneutics of what they perceive to be Western hermeneutics, boils down to an interpellation of whiteness. By way of reaction, I will explore whiteness and expose its attributes. I start by looking at Althusser's notion of interpellation as the hailing of a subject. I then proceed to illuminate several other interpellations, starting with Judith Butler in order to provide some theoretical layout in the light of her thoughts on gender, trying to create a structural resonance between gender performativity and racial performativity. Subsequently, I take a glimpse at two racial performativities, namely the videotape of the Rodney King beating and Fanon's vignette "Look, a Negro!" in terms of an assertion of blackness as the very antithesis of the social order. Two reactions to blackness as antithesis of the social order are then explored, namely the 50 year old *Des prêtres noirs s'interrogent* and Kä Mana's view on the myth of the West. I offer Perkinson's *White theology* as a possible, yet problematic answer to the interpellation of African Hermeneutics found in these two kinds of reaction. The paper is concluded with a few observations about whiteness.

2. Interpellation

2.1 Mbeki's Human Rights Day interpellation

President Thabo Mbeki (2007) calculatingly created a connection between a particular racist position and a perception of crime in which white concern about the high crime

levels is based on the notion of the black danger, known as the *swart gevaar*. [3] This perception is based on the link between criminality and blackness that found justification in the public discourse of the USA during the Nixon and Reagan administrations. In these two administrations, the not so subtle racial dimension of the anti-crime rhetoric resulted in a crude racial stereotyping.

Within the white community, the reception of this connection was rather cynical. The Leader of the Official Opposition of the time, Tony Leon (2007), responded in condemning, on the one hand, the president for railing against shadowy racist caricatures and ignoring the massive goodwill displayed in all communities who have adapted the new political dispensation, and in acknowledging, on the other hand, that racism still pervades society and that it needs constant exposure and correction. In general, one can surmise that Mbeki's contentions were considered to be one-dimensional in that it portrays racism as an exclusive white phenomenon (cf. Laurence 2007a, 5).[4]

Notwithstanding this strong criticism, answering Mbeki's postulation means that any opposition[5] would inevitably become recruited subjects within his ideology. In an Althusserian sense,[6] Mbeki shouted out "Hey, you there!" Anyone reacting to that hail as if it was addressed to them becomes a subject.

But can one refuse the hailing? Not really, according to Althusser. Recognising the hailing by turning around one becomes the subject, "[b]ecause he [sic] has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him [sic], and that 'it was *really him* [sic] who was hailed (and not someone else).'" (Althusser 1971, 163). Althusser (1971, 163) is of the opinion that experience in practical telecommunication of interpellation shows that a hailing rarely misses its target. Nine out of ten times the subject will turn around believing or suspecting the interpellation is meant for him or her.

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[3] He is cautious in putting his thesis, saying "we still have a significant proportion of people among the white minority, but by no means everybody who is white, that continues to live in fear of the black, and especially African majority."

[4] In another article, Laurence (2007b, 8) comments that Mbeki's ruling party is driven by a "doctrinaire" African nationalism whose objective is to invert the old racial order in which black indigenes occupy all or most of the important positions, placing itself at variance with the accepted definition of non-racialism.

[5] Leon as well as Laurence are not indifferent to racism. They both refer to the necessity of debating racist attitudes in the public sphere. To Leon, the nation "should spend more time listening to each other and not be too quick to judge as illegitimate the concerns and expressions of any particular group." To Laurence, "[f]or there to be a constructive, two-way dialogue, and not a dialogue of the deaf, Mbeki needs to acknowledge that racism is not the monopoly of whites and that his black kinsfolk are not entirely immune to it."

[6] Althusser (1971, 162) argues that ideology interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects. He explains the concept of interpellation in terms of a policeman hailing a suspected citizen in public with the phrase 'Hey, you there!' He (1971, 167) later refers to Moses' interpellation by God: "God thus defines himself as the Subject *par excellence*, he who is through himself and for himself ('I am what I am'), and he who interpellates his subject, the individual subjected to him by this very interpellation, i.e. the individual named Moses. And Moses, interpellated-called by his Name, having recognized that it 'really' was he who was called by God, recognizes that he is a subject, a subject *of* God, a subject subjected to God, *a subject through the Subject and subjected to the Subject.* The proof: he obeys him, and makes his people obey God's commandments."

Thus, when the police hails a subject, as a representative of the law, his or her address seeks to bind the one being hailed (the suspect) to the law. The call, in the form of a reprimand, wants to produce a lawful subject. As a unilateral act the hailing compels fear as well as offers recognition,[7] but Butler (1993b, 121) asks whether this subjectivation takes place as a direct effect of the reprimand or whether the reprimand wields the power to compel fear of punishment, producing compliancy.

Leon and Laurence recognised the "other" whites, but not in terms of Mbeki's caricature of the unrepentant irredeemable white racist. They saw them as people of goodwill, concerned about criminals getting away with crime and with criminality hurting investor confidence. They refused Althusser's (1971, 169) condition of absolute guarantee, namely "that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be alright." In other words, they declined the racist label Mbeki has flagged, yet their reaction indicates that they indeed recognised the nature of Mbeki's reference as that of an interpellation.

However, if Mbeki's letter is interpreted as an interpellation of whiteness and not of racism, or of the white racist, how does one then play the game? No one in the white community really reflects about the relation between race and values. Martin, Krizek, Nakayama and Bradford (1999, 31) observe that when white people racially dominate their privilege and standards become culturally embedded. As the racial norm one need not acknowledge one's whiteness, because whiteness is the racial yardstick with which others are measured. In this regard, it seems to me that the general response to Mbeki's letter, in foregrounding racism, whiteness as the yardstick is never put on the table.

Leon questions what he regards as Mbeki's racial myopia from a position of disempowered whiteness. To him (2007), those issues marked by Mbeki as white racism, have other causes: lawlessness is caused by ineffective policing, people die of AIDS because the government dragged its feet in rolling out antiretroviral medicine and the Zimbabwean crisis is not because of land restitution but because of the undermining of democracy. Laurence's (2007, 5) reason for white people focussing on crime is the ubiquity of criminals (and the lack of policing) as well as the threat crime poses to investor confidence.

With the white-black power relation being reversed in 1994, is it fair to read behind Leon and Laurence's reply a cultural embeddedment of standards that are thought to be universal? Adding to it, is it reasonable to read into their rhetoric an inadvertent construction of whiteness that acts powerfully in the background? In other words, are effective policing, democracy, antiretrovirals and investor confidence merely white liberal values? Whiteness is never discussed.

2.2 Judith Butler's interpellation and the issue of race

A crucial aspect of Butler's gender performativity is interpellation. She (1993b, 7-8) says the following:

[7] Althusser (1971, 168) refers to the mutual recognition of subjects and Subject, the subjects' recognition of each other and the subject's recognition of himself or herself.

> Consider the medical interpellation which (the recent emergence of the sonogram notwithstanding) shifts an infant from an 'it' to a 'she' or a 'he', and in that naming, the girl is 'girled', brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. But that 'girling' of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reenforce or contest this naturalized effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm.

At birth, according to the visible genitals, one is pronounced a boy or a girl. In apartheid South Africa, the birth certificate also indicated the race of that child. Gender and race became continuous interpellations, a custom that did not cease entirely after 1994. In my view, Mbeki's letter before Human Rights Day (21 March) constitutes an interpellation of white people. His use of an anonymous example of stereotypical racist white behaviour he insists is more common than white people would admit, constructs that interpellation.

In Althusser's explanation of interpellation, the interpellation is taken up when the one being interpellated turns one-hundred-and-eighty degrees to take up the position. Although the interpellation is unilateral (1993b, 121), the one being interpellated receives recognition and attains a certain order of social existence. To be effective though, the one being interpellated has to recognise himself or herself as the subject that is being hailed by that specific interpellation. However, the girl being "girled" at birth is unable to take up that subject position. It is only with continuous citations that she eventually takes up the call and constructs her role accordingly. The girling that takes place is an interpellation that initiates a process of girling based on perceived and imposed differences between men and women. For her to remain a viable subject within the heterosexual matrix, she will need to continuously cite the norm (1993b, 232).

But it is also possible to refuse the interpellation or to respond in such a way that it is undermined. Butler (1993b, 122) calls it an enabling violation when one draws from that construction in order to articulate an opposition. She (1993b, 123) says:

> [P]recisely because such terms [sex, race, racism] have been produced and constrained within such regimes, they ought to be repeated in directions that reverse and displace their originating aims. One does not stand at an instrumental distance from the terms by which one experiences violation. Occupied by such terms and yet occupying them oneself risks a complicity, a relapse into injury, but it is also the occasion to work the mobilizing power of injury, of an interpellation one never chooses.

In this paper, I thus pick up Mbeki's hailing of the white man, but not to concede to his racial stereotype. However, it is possible to be constituted by a name one does not recognise, i.e. hear it or acknowledge it. The name will continue to force itself upon the person (cf. Salih 2002, 106).

The reason I am inquiring into the thinking of Judith Butler is to glean from what she argues about gender identity useful pointers for thinking about race. However, Salih (2002, 93) says that Butler has not convincingly integrated the issue of race in her book *Bodies that matter*. She shows how sex, sexuality and gender are interpellated, but there are no parallel discussions of performative race or how race is interpellated by racializing norms. Salih also refers to the possibility that race is more than a socio-political category, making theorizing about the visibly raced body different from the sexualized or gendered body. Butler does not argue that racism, homophobia and

misogyny is of parallel or analogical relations.[8] Each has its specific history of construction and deploys its power for the purpose of its own articulation. However, race, like sex, gender or sexuality, is *constructed* rather than being natural. It is the notion of construction that may be valuable.

In arguing that the category of the subject is a performative construct, it would be possible to move away from racial identity in terms of essences. Her idea of gender as performative, something one does rather than is, similar to Simone de Beauvoir's famous claim that one is not born a woman but becomes a woman (Butler 1990, 33), displaces the category of man and woman or male and female. According to her approach, male and female are discursive constructions within a matrix of power.

Gender as performativity does not imply it is something one chooses in the same way one chooses an outfit in a wardrobe. The choice is not entirely free, since the choice is influenced by what Butler calls the normative conditions under which the materiality of the body is framed and formed (1993b, 17). One's choice is conditioned by various factors, such as culture, job, income, education, and social location (cf. Salih 2002, 50). As Butler (1990, 33) puts it, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within *a highly rigid regulatory frame* that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being." The freedom of choice is constrained and the script is determined within this regulatory frame. The repeated stylisation of the body implies that gender is a sequence of repeated acts that harden into appearance of something that has been there all along (Salih 2002, 66).

In Butler's framework, gender identity does not pre-exist performativity. She (1990, 25) says that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results. It works as follows: Gender as an act brings into being what it names. A gender identity is constructed and constituted by language. There is no gender identity that precedes language, says Salih (2002, 64). Identity as a signifying practice means that a cultural intelligible subject is the effect of discourse and not the cause of discourse (ibid). Gender acts performatively constitute a subject that is the effect of discourse and not its cause. Says Butler (1990, 136): "That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitutes its reality."

Salih (2002, 65) remarks that since there is no doer behind the deed, it means there is no volitional agent that *knowingly* does its gender. But this is perceived to be exactly the problem with whiteness: it functions unknowingly.

3. Racial production(s)

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[8] Butler (1993b, 180) disputes sexual difference's priority over other differences: "It is this assertion of the priority of sexual difference over racial difference that has marked so much psychoanalytic feminism as white, for the assumption here is not only that sexual difference is more fundamental, but that there is a relationship called 'sexual difference' that is itself unmarked by race. That whiteness is not understood by such a perspective as a racial category is clear; it is yet another power that need not speak its name. Hence, to claim that sexual difference is more fundamental than racial difference is effectively to assume that sexual difference is white sexual difference, and that whiteness is not a form of racial difference."

Whiteness operates from a position of invisible power whereby it remains an unreflected norm. After all, those with power get to label others first (cf. Martin, Krizek, Nakayama and Bradford 1999, 32), since they occupy a "naturalised" position, and hence, they have no need to define themselves. In countries with a majority white composition, racial identities of whites are rarely mentioned. Those of minorities are often noted (1999, 31).[9] With white being the norm, the construction of whiteness occurs largely unrecognised and unknowingly, so much so that when a racial beating in a predominant white society such as the USA was captured on amateur video, the racial minorities, those who cannot speak from a naturalised position, hailed it as a revelation of racism for everyone to see.

I refer to the Rodney King [10] beating in Los Angeles and the subsequent court case against the four white policemen that beat him. Many African-Americans, claiming it revealed brute facts that were speaking for themselves, regarded the videotape as objective proof. [11] However, in that court case, the four police officers were acquitted, because the videotape became interpreted as that Rodney King posed a threat to them.

Crenshaw and Peller (1993, 65) see a deep ideological connection between objective proof and the general way race is understood in American culture. The special status attributed to the King tape as objective proof is according to them a social construct in which a hierarchy of objectivity and subjectivity worked as a discourse of power that marginalised victims of racist police practices (1993, 66). The hierarchy of objective proof and subjective assertion assumes a vantage point of objectivity outside any interpretation and transcending time and space. Gooding-Williams (1993, 165) referred to it as a positivist fantasy.

What happened with the videotape in the court case was that the entire video was frame-frozen, broken into stills, played individually, "like medieval tableaux, transcendently isolated moments, rather than as part of a motion called history, having a tempo or chronology that meant anything; the deflection by minutiae." (Williams 1993, 53). Each micromoment of the beating was broken into a series of frozen images mounted on white illustration board and posed to experts on prisoner restraint (Crenshaw and Peller 1993, 58). It was a process very similar to a literal interpretation of the biblical text!

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[9] With the reversal of roles in 1994, Mbeki can afford to note the racial identity of whiteness. Occupying the naturalised position, it is possible that blackness will no longer see any need to define itself. But in invoking whiteness, it demonstrates its need for the binary in order to affirm its own identity. No one can be black without white and vice versa.

[10] Rodney King was caught speeding on the highways of Los Angeles. When stopped, he jumped out of the car "in the kinaesthetic disguise of black minstrelsy" (Baker 1993, 47). Four policemen then beat him. An amateur videotaped the beating. The video footage showed a man brutally beaten repeatedly without offering any resistance, except for a hand that tried to cover his head. The four policemen were initially acquitted on assault charges.

[11] Belief in the evidence of the video was enormous within the African-American population. Watts (1993, 239) is astounded at the resilient and naïve faith in even the most radical and informed black Americans regarding that video, namely believing that what prevents white America from intervening on behalf of the poor black community is the correct information. The video was viewed as moral capital in a racial struggle and they thought things would be different if whites knew the truth (1993, 240).

Once broken up, each still picture was then rewoven into a different narrative about the restraint of King where each blow was an approved technique to restrain (ibid 1993, 59):

> The videotape images were *physically* mediated by the illustration board upon which the still pictures were mounted, and in the same moment of *disaggregation*, they were *symbolically* mediated by the new narrative backdrops of the technical discourse of institutional security and the reframing of King as a threat rather than a victim.

The video as a whole said something quite different from the individual stills that could not constitute excessive force or police brutality.

Crenshaw and Peller (1993, 61) calls this process "disaggregation" where each factor becomes divorced from its context in the full picture and meaning divorced from context, enabling the interpreter to put together the disaggregated images with new alternative narratives. To Crenshaw and Peller (1993, 63), this kind of disaggregation is similar to neutrality and objectivity in the sense that narrative does not depend on point of view and could mean anything.

The question is how this video with its footage of a body being beaten, became interpreted in terms of a body that posed a danger and a threat to injure these four police officials. Judith Butler (1993a, 17) says that the "visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful." She argues (1993a, 15) that this interpretation was achieved as a consequence of reproducing the video within a saturated field of visibility. What she perceived to have been a body brutally beaten appeared to the jury as a body that threatened policemen whose blows, in turn, were judged to be reasonable actions of the police in self-defence. Says Butler (1993a, 16):

> From these two interpretations emerges then, a contest within the visual field, a crisis in the certainty of what is visible, one that is produced through the saturation and schematization of that field with the inverted projections of white paranoia.

Such a racist interpretive framework saw the black male body beaten on the street as an agent of violence, receiving his just desert. King's hand above his head was not self-protection but an indication of a physical threat. [12]

The racial production of the visible can be illustrated by Fanon's well-known anecdote about the Negro (1967, 111-112):

> 'Look, a Negro!' It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile.
> 'Look, a Negro!' It was true. It amused me.
> 'Look, a Negro!' The circle was drawing a bit tighter.
> I made no secret of my amusement.
> 'Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!' 'Frightened!'
> Frightened!. Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears but laughter had become impossible.

Here the black male body is constituted through fear with a naming and a seeing, in other words, an interpellation. The words "Look, a Negro!" suggest that "Look" is a

[12] To Butler (1993a, 16), what the jury saw was not an act of direct perception, but the racial production of the visible, the workings of racial constraints on what it means to see. She says (1993a, 17): "to the extent that there is a racist organization and disposition of the visible, it will work to circumscribe what qualifies as visual evidence, such that it is in some cases impossible to establish the "truth" of racist brutality through recourse to visual evidence."

pointing and a seeing. It points out what there is to see, in the process circumscribing a dangerous body. Butler (1993a, 15) says the pointing is a foreshadowing of an accusation.

Fanon describes in his anecdote the lived experience of being black in a ubiquitous racist society (cf. Gooding-Williams 1993, 164). The corporeal schema, the image one has of oneself as a body located in a physical space, is being destroyed and a racial epidermal schema is being imposed. The constituent elements of the latter are not the sensations and perceptions one has of one's own body, but an image woven out of a multitude of stories and anecdotes other people have of this particular kind of body that are foisted upon it and forced to claim it as its own (ibid). It is as if a second skin has been superimposed on one's body and haunting it like a shadow. [13]

In Fanon's story as well as in the police's interpretation of the video the black body is circumscribed as dangerous before any gesture. The white reader/child is portrayed as helpless in relation to the black body and in need of protection; a protection police gives against violence, especially where the violence is the imminent action of a black male body.

If the police protect whiteness, argues Butler (1993a, 18), their violence on a black body is not violence, because the black body is the site and source of danger. King then received blows to his body in return for those he was suspected to deliver: "According to this racist episteme, he is hit in exchange for the blows he never delivered, but which he is, by virtue of his blackness, always about to deliver." (1993a, 19). The police was seen as always protecting white communities against the threat King's body represented, regardless any action he performed or was about to perform.

In the end, King has been constructed not only with a particular racial epidermal schema that the four policemen imposed upon him, but also in terms of a wild animal, the nemesis to civilisation in the Middle Ages. The police depicted King's behaviour as a bear, hulk-like, a wounded animal whose very gesture threatened civilisation (Gooding-Williams 1993, 166). The police became the defenders of civilisation against the wilful attack of a chaos-bearing wild animal. It was a narrative retake of an interpreted image of black bodies that appeared in European representations of Africans in the 17th century (1993, 166)! This image of King allegorically asserted blackness as the very antithesis of the social order (1993, 167).

It is this archetypal construction of blackness as the racial other or the chaos-bearing wild-animal that proves to be Western hermeneutics' nemesis in the post-colonial condition. Here, the affirmation of blackness interpellates whiteness.

4. Post-colonial reaction from blackness as antithesis

50 years ago, a book was published in France under the title *Des prêtres noirs s'interrogent* (1957) reflecting the socio-political context marked by European

[13] I think Mbeki superimposes a racial epidermal schema on whiteness in general on the basis of an experience someone had of this kind of body. He claims that racial schema as belonging to whiteness, and given our racial history, that second skin will haunt us like a shadow!

colonisation. The book wanted to express African priests' thoughts on the Catholic Church in their respective countries, because, somehow in the mayhem their voices are drowned (Ablle *et aliter* 1957, 16):[14]

> People have for a rather long time thought about our problems for us, without us and even despite us. The African priest should say what he thinks about his church in his country in order to advance the kingdom of God. We do not pretend that the African priest never was listened to, but in the confusion of the voices descanting from the Missions, his words were rather discreet or easily obscured, whereas, all the same, he seems to have a right to an opinion. Without making a racket (the noise would not have been good, we know it), it seems to us a good thing to join the debate on Africa that has been open for so long. (My translation – G S)

The book is an affirmation of Africanicity as blackness in the face of the French/Belgian European masters. Taking their cue from the essentialist discourse that framed them as black, they intended to assert a distinct blackness that would noticeably mark them from Western Christianity's unspoken whiteness.

Availing himself of essentialist discourse, Bajeux, for example, distinguishes between a black mentality, a biblical mentality and a Western mentality. In his mind (1957, 59), the black mentality is much nearer to the Bible than Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologia* and Aristotle's works. Moreover, he detected a greater correspondence with the life world of the Bible. The Western mentality poses a problem to him (1957, 60), because it is profane, scientific, reflexive and deductive. In contrast, Biblical culture's proximity to nature makes it religious, empiric, spontaneous and intuitive (1957, 69). These features help him as *un Noir* to find in the Bible a civilisation very similar to his own (1957, 72).[15]

Verdieu and Ondia (1957, 88) lament the universalising of Europeanness as the norm. The position is prevailing in missionary oriented communities that only recognise their own culture as legitimately Christian, imposing it on everyone. Verdieu and Ondia want the African priest to give an African face to God, but they found too many congregations with missionary origins that ended up renouncing their own culture in imitating the European missionary churches (1957, 90). Even in seminaries with Africans and Westerners where the focus is on equality, that equality is achieved not by Africanising the Westerners, but by Europeanising the Africans. Not only did the curriculum fail to introduce these would-be missionaries to the countries in which they will work (1957, 102), but also these missionary communities in Europe received their knowledge about Africa via the news reports of missionaries who did not portray their subjects always in favourable terms! [16]

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[14] "On a assez longtemps pensé nos problèmes pour nous, sans nous, et même malgré nous. Le prêtre africain doit ausi dire ce qu'il pense de son Eglise en son pays pour faire avancer le royaume de Dieu. Nous ne prétendons pas que jamais le prêtre noir ne s'est fait entendre, mais dans le tumulte des voix discourant sur les Missions, sa parole a été plutôt discrete ou facilement couverte, alors que, tout de meme, il semble avoir, le premier, voix au chapitre. Sans vouloir faire du tapage (car le bruit ne fait pas de bien, nous le savons), il nous a donc semblé bon de jeter notre mot dans le débat ouvert depuis si longtemps sur l'Afrique."

[15] Bajeux (1957, 72) refers to the ancestral cult, patriarchy, tribal structures, all making the Bible much easier for a black to understand than for a Western. Biblical names reflect the context of a person whereas Western names are simply a label attached to someone. Even the language is said to reflect black or Western mentalities. Hebrew is thought to be very concrete but able to transmit vital emotions (1957, 79) whereas Greek or French are literary languages that can analyse and dissect.

[16] Dosseh and Sastre (1957, 140) point out that it happened that the stories were thickened in order to drive a point home, such as the need for money.

In reaction to a massive assimilation to the West, the latter became regarded as a destructive force that wiped out what is African (black) under the pretext of possessing no human value and retarding the evolution of Africa (Bisainthe 1957, 119). Christianity was aligned with Western civilisation and African civilisations with paganism.[17] In order to counter assimilation, argues Bisainthe (1957, 120, 157), Africa has embarked (in the 1950's) on a process of interiorisation, a process of validating certain indigenous practices within Christianity, leading to *une vraie connaissance de l'Afrique,* a real knowledge of Africa*:* an in depth study of the black mentality and the customs of Africa, the black worldview, its philosophy and theodicy.

Bisainthe too distinguishes between an African and a Western mentality. He aims his remarks against what he calls "intellectual knowledge". Judging the latter as baneful (*néfaste*, a word used several times in the book), he puts forward an African way of knowing. Intellectual knowledge implies domination whereas, in his mind, African knowledge implies knowing with love, knowing by sympathy. Intellectual knowledge in Africa meant that the African became an object that can be put on a table and dissected without any thought about his or her human dignity, imposing on the black a Cartesian judgment (1957, 130).

34 years later, Kä Mana ascribed the objectification of Africa as part of the disillusionment in the enchantment of the West. The enticing Western world is simultaneously a world that dominates and subjugates politically, economically and culturally (1991, 61). The mastery of the West goes hand in hand with its beastly nature in its contempt of humanity and betrayal of humanist principles. The mastering of the laws of nature resulted in the treatment of the human being as an object. This objectification is particularly strongly felt by Africa in the past four centuries of annihilation through slavery, colonisation and neo-colonisation of globalism (1991, 62-63).

The ambiguous image of the West is a motivating myth[18] that constitutes within the African psyche an interpellation to rethink, to re-do and to redefine the African psyche. But this is a very difficult task, according to Kä Mana (1991, 64-65), since the myth of the West has become a phantasmagoria with no tie to reality.

The construction of the West within the African psyche is dialectic of enchantment and disenchantment. Africa is enchanted by the power of the West to which they subjugate themselves. She is taken up by Western technology as ultimate proof of human capacity for creativity. Africa is at the mercy of the fascination the material success of the West. Her technological, military, and financial power weighs heavily on Africa's spirit (Kä Mana 1991, 60). Subsequently, Africa imitates the West in her

[17] Hebga (1957, 189) thinks that an arrogant nationalism of Christian nations and the absence of an African infrastructure within revealed religion caused Christianity to become an export product and an agent of imperialism.

[18] Kä Mana (1991, 55) refers to the myth of the West, but not in the sense of irreality. The presence of the West is too real for Africa, because the west is a world than conquered, dominated, enslaved and reduced Africa to nothingness in the concert of human civilisation (1991, 55). The West represents a strange presence that suffocated Africa. To speak of the West as myth or in terms of mythological presentation could result in detaching the imaginary from the real lived life (1991, 56).

rational organisation of things, mastering of technology, scientific rigour, and philosophy, in order to obtain power over reality.

To Kä Mana (1991, 65), the presence of the West within the black psyche is pathological, the sole cause of her misery. As symbol of misery the West needs to be crucified. This happens each time Africa affirms her identity and freedom. To Kä Mana (1991, 67), this is *une comédie pénible*, which very few people are prepared to recognise: in crucifying the West, Africa does not feel culpable, yet secretly, she wishes that the crucified would resurrect itself to rebuild Africa!

Ultimately, the imperial West, the dominating West, the exploiting West and the ethnocidal West become the total and permanent cause for Africa's woes, says Kä Mana (1991, 66). To him, the West constitutes a permanent alibi, a scapegoat that carries all the sins of the past four centuries and will carry it as long as Africa remains dependent and subjugated.

How does someone within the cultural context of whiteness answer an interpellation such as that made by *Des prêtres noirs s'interrogent* and Kä Mana's *comédie pénible*? In the past 50 years blackness was continuously marked from Western Christianity's assumed whiteness. The Europeanness of Western Christianity constituted the norm, so that in missionary situations Western culture was closely associated with legitimate Christianity. Perhaps James Perkinson's book (2004), *White Theology. Outing supremacy in Modernity,* may provide a clue to a proposed decentering of whiteness.

5. A White response: James W. Perkinson's *White Theology. Outing supremacy in Modernity*

Perkinson, a white American male, proposes a programme that would articulate American white identity in a context of white power's *inarticulation* of the basis of its operation (2004, 1). The book responds to James Cone's gauntlet thrown at white supremacist theology, a critical and constructive articulation of what Perkinson (2004, 2) calls "the theological meaning of white racial supremacy" within an American context. The latter context, I would add, is one in which whiteness will not relinquish power. How would an outing of whiteness fare within a context of a minoritised shamed whiteness as is the case in South Africa?

Perkinson (2004, 154) sees race not so much a problem of the skin as a problem of the body, a matter of social constraint and cultural conditioning. He regards whiteness as the hidden offspring of white supremacy[19], an upshot of Christian supremacy. According to him (2004, 156), White identity took shape as an explicit theological position, "born of European encounter with people, places, and things that fit no clear category on the map of Christian cognition". Soon bodily surfaces were invested with spiritual significance. European light skin colour became a marker for being Christian over against the native's paganism (2004, 157). In his view Jesus became more and more white in the growing contact between Europe and the rest of the world, laying the foundation for the association of goodness and purity with whiteness and evil and

[19] Perkinson (2004, 154) states with acumen that the genealogy of white supremacy is clandestine and the quiet effect of a noisy practice! His idea of white supremacy is generic and needs to be differentiated from white supremacist theology whose aim is to ensure racial purity within Christianity, i.e. Christian identity. Cf. Beal 2003.

sin with darkness, impurity with a mixture of off-colours, divinity with transparency and Christology with European physiognomy and soteriology with progressive enlightenment. Says Perkinson (2004, 157): "By the eighteenth century, the theological coagulation of 'white' and 'right', 'light' and 'might', began to gain ontological voice." He (2004, 158) argues further that this coagulation linked up with a Reformed sensibility that divined eternal dispositions by way of temporal indications. Black skin became a sign for a dark heart toward God, a curse that could be traced back to Ham. Although current missiological endeavours would disclaim the latter proposition, Perkinson's (2004, 224) argument of the Christian presumption of access to a superior truth in comparison with other religions and cultural traditions, is valid, since that presumption encodes itself in modes of meaning making and reality testing.[20]

According to Perkinson (2004, 69), white supremacy is constitutive of the episteme[21] of modernity:

> It finds its epistemological home in a set of mutually ramifying discourses that are entirely incapable of even 'fielding' the idea of black equality. Scientific revolution, Cartesian philosophical innovation, and Renaissance revitalization of Greek ocular metaphors and classical aesthetical ideas together articulate an understanding of the world that has modern racism as one of its irresistible effects. … Supremacy is so deeply embedded in this discursive formation as to be (seemingly) inseparable from it.

Supremacy roots race in ontology and biology, imagining itself as the embodiment of that condition black people should desire after having been uplifted and integrated into civilised society (2004, 70). Racialised ranking is thought to be an integral part of capitalism's ability to take hold of labour resources and raw materials.

The moment whiteness became common sense, it started to operate in a covert way as the underpinning of racism, says Perkinson (2004, 161). It developed into a taken-for-granted, silent presupposition, masking the working of power and privilege. Whiteness turned into a cultural practice and an inheritance of privilege, a form of embodiment that shaped experience (2004, 163): "a way of being in the world that establishes itself in a silent contrast to others and yet does so in forms of practice that regularly borrow from those who are seen as 'different'".

Since Christianity is regarded as the origin of white supremacy, theology is thought to be an accurate designation of the kind of power that needs to be exposed. Because the oppressed knows more about the power position of the oppressor than the oppressor himself or herself, Perkinson argues (2004, 3) that part of coming to consciousness of whiteness is to look into black eyes and not deny the reflection – a humble exercise.

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[20] Just bring ancestor worship into the picture and see what happens! The missionary subjects often did not see other religious belief systems as exclusive to theirs. They simply added them to the existing ones. But the missionary came with the idea that he has the truth and the only path to the One God, the Christian deity. Ancestor worship has been regarded as a relapse into sin.

[21] Perkinson traces what he calls the crisis of race in the history of modernity, starting with premodern Europe's ancient notion of wildness into which one might regress and loose the chance of salvation (cf. White 1985, 165; Snyman 2007b). In Medieval Spain Christian spiritual anxiety joined forces with political powers to combat the Muslim other. With the new world ventures, black skin would pose the question of salvation in its starkest form (2004, 58), in some instances causing the epidermal schema to conflate with Calvinist notions of predestination. Says Perkinson (2004, 62): "Colonialism's 'drive to civilise' at least refracted, if not reflected, the earlier Christian obsession with likeness, while capitalism's 'drive to globalize' formalized the Calvinist soteriology of success."

He says one needs to hear and internalise black critique and deal with the embarrassment of being found out! Part of the embarrassment is to realise the inarticulation of whiteness. Its public illustration leaves white people vulnerable and racialised in a society whose constitution proclaims non-raciality.

However, whiteness and blackness are tied up with each other, a point Perkinson makes regarding white theology and black theology. Whiteness and blackness is a constant reproduction in relationship to each other as the absolutes of an opposition, making the meaning of the one parasitic upon the other (2004, 41): “Black Theology does not constitute another context, but rather the self-same context out of which any self-consciously white theology would have to speak if it were to take itself seriously as white.” The radical otherness of Black Theology is constitutive of whiteness.

What Perkinson (2004, 41) argues is the following:

> [A] contextualized white theology would thus have to comprehend itself as not only ‘object’ in the mirror of a Black Theology that objects *to* it. It would also have to comprehend itself as ‘speaking subject’ in the very discourse it jointly produces with Black Theology. It would have to address both blackness *and* whiteness, simultaneously.

It is no easy task. An honest and adequate response to Black Theology will have to be incisive, laying bare the deepest levels of personal identity (2004, 46): “Such a theology is faced with the task of learning to relocate its tragic guilt, in perception and performance, back inside the white body.”

To Perkinson (2004, 46), the full force of the confrontation can only become fully conscious in a reversal of roles, such as a prolonged experience of reverse minoritization in which whites occupy the place of the racial other without relief for an extended period of time. In this way they register the “feeling-effects” (2004, 47) of racialised terror and black joy. The break-up of white fear and guilt requires a selfconfrontation before the memory of terror “encoded in expressive black practices” (2004, 47).

In the light of what Perkinson (2004, 217) calls the illogic of racialised reasonableness and racism in the Rodney King case, he asks (2004, 221) what a white person can do to be true to history and enter into solidarity with the sufferers of racial oppression. In terms of affluence and wealth, whiteness in general and white maleness in particular is to Perkinson (2004, 221) living forms of social indebtedness. But the indebtedness is so incalculable that one cannot even imagine what redress may look like. The moment one questions the source of what one enjoys, one is gripped by guilt and quick to absolve oneself (2004, 221). He thinks race is a problem for which there is no quick fix. No use in fleeing. The condition is baffling, since for whiteness, the idol is under the skin and the demon is in the mirror (2004, 223): “There is no salvation for whites as white and there is no solidarity with others except as white.” The passage in to a multicultural democracy passes through racial conscientization (2004, 224). [22]

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[22] Perkinson’s programme has serious consequences for teaching. A university or theological seminary gives structural articulation to the particular way of accessing truth (2004, 225) in privileging academic argumentation and disciplinary compartmentalization that is socially specific and culturally limited. But these places of education need to become multiculturally competent in the traditions of those they teach, because if not, their teaching ends up being a version of cultural superiority in that the structure in the classroom cannot but communicate white supremacy. In fact, the demand is to become socially,

6. Whiteness and racial conscientization

Racial conscientization requires an acknowledgement of race – an admittance felt to be quite strange in a society proclaiming non-racialism in its constitution. However, the minoritization of whiteness means exactly that: as a minority within an African context, one becomes more aware of what it is to be white. It has been so all the time! For example, people tend not to identify themselves with whiteness when white is predominant and the norm. They would rather refer to themselves as Caucasian, Anglo or European, but never as white. In the USA, for example, whiteness is a distant-other whiteness in which the white centre achieved stability through occupation and subjugation and extinction, so that the "other" could be rendered psychologically far (cf. Steyn 1999, 267).

In the apartheid context, we were very much aware of whiteness' enforcement through "Whites Only" public indications. Whiteness retained a colonial grain, drawing the other psychologically closer in an active presence (Steyn 1999, 267). Here one is very much aware of whiteness and its overpowering importance for our existence. In the past, whiteness determined very aspect of her life. To some it seems to be even more the case now, calling it a racial myopia that is gripping the public debate.

But having been in power, despite our awareness, whiteness never was exposed. It was always the point of departure, yet never analysed. A critical study of whiteness or the particularisation of whiteness might help one to understand the inner workings of racialisation and dismantle its power, says Steyn (1999, 266): "By becoming conscious of the narratives that inform our identities, we empower ourselves not to continue acting them out." For whiteness the challenge is to find a new relationship to Africa, to its people and to their cultures (1999, 275). The relationship of self/other in the white psyche is undergoing an alignment (1999, 276).

I have been raised to experience a racially divided society as fair and normal. So, I have no instruction regarding the predicament I now face. I was never told about white responsibility in maintaining white privilege and domination. Tony Leon's antiracist response to Mbeki's letter called forth white goodwill. Says Marty (1999, 52): "Despite our antiracist commitments, many white people often opt to protect our moral reputations and our versions of progressive politics rather than recognize and change our unfair and unearned racially based advantages. In doing so, we decisively invoke the power to choose when and how much to 'help' end racism." In affirming an antiracist ethos, the question of white privilege is rendered moot.

The centrality of whiteness in the world assumes it is the default in popular culture. Projanski and Ono (1999, 149) refer to it as strategic whiteness, and defines it as the ability to recenter itself even in the face of explicit attention to blackness (1999, 151). As the default position, whiteness is self-protective and invalidates any challenge to its authority (1999, 152).

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culturally, habitually what one is already economically, subconsciously and insidiously: an inhabitant of more than one culture (2004, 226).

Neither Leon, Laurence nor any other "white" reaction to Mbeki's letter employed the concept of whiteness to address their concerns about Mbeki's racist caricature. Maybe it is because whiteness is still uncharted territory, invisible yet exerting enormous influence over those within and without its border (Nakayama and Krizek 1999, 88). To particularise whiteness is to displace it from its universal stance as normal and natural "to a more specific social location in which [it] face[s] the kinds of questions and challenges facing any particular social location" (Nakayama and Krizek 1999, 91). In this way whiteness can be exposed as a cultural construction in which certain strategies are followed to embed its centrality (1999, 95). [23] However, what I miss in the debate is an element of mourning. To Perkinson (2004, 234) whiteness emerges theologically as a task of mourning, detecting in one's own context where whiteness as a practice of terror intersects with one's own struggle with fear, and refuse to contribute that fear toward practices of exclusion that already structures the social field of one's own life-world.

Moon (1999, 179) argues that the trick is "racially to produce and reproduce white people through the creation of the illusion of a 'white' world, while simultaneously draining that 'whiteness' of any elements that would mark it as a specific structural and cultural location." In other words, whiteness is regarded as normative, pervasive and general and not contextual. In the evasion of whiteness, there is a disconnection with issues of race (1999, 178).

It means that race is only applied to non-white people as the deviant. White people are not racially seen or named since they function as the human norm. Other people are raced. White people are, simply, people (cf. Johnson 1999, 4). They take their identity

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[23] Nakayama and Krizek (1999, 96 ff) identified six such strategies:

i) Whiteness is closely tied with power in a crude naked manner. White is associated with the majority or simply with power (1999, 96).

ii) Whiteness is defined in terms of negative definitions. White is not being black. In this instance, whiteness appear only after subtraction and is marked in reverse. Says Nakayama and Krizek (1999, 98): 'Within a discursive system of naming oppression, but never the oppressive class, white can never be other than a negative, invisible entity'.

iii) Whiteness is defined along scientific lines. A scientific classification of people privileges reason and objectivity. These two concepts are regarded as stable and trustworthy poles in a dialectic of reason/emotion and objectivity /subjectivity (1999, 99): "Conflating the discourse of whiteness with the label of science serves to mask irrationality and contradictions with a rational image possessing cultural currency."

iv) Whiteness confused with nationality is another strategy. Here whiteness is bounded by national borders, i.e. whiteness means one is of European descent. Nationality and race are conflated within a power relation where those groups who do not fit are relegated to the margins (1999, 100). The same happens in official forms where one is requested to label one's race. The choice of African (and not black), white, Indian, or Coloured equates Africanness with blackness and relegating the rest to non-Africanness.

v) To not label oneself, a refusal of labels is another strategy, especially when whiteness dominates every other racial configuration. To occupy a position of dominance means one need not to label oneself (1999, 101).

vi) A last strategy is to relate whiteness to European ancestry, an identification that serves as a historical foundation for ethnic identity. But referring to European ancestry does not necessarily mean to recognise the power relations embedded in that history. It is more likely used in the same way as one accessorize a wardrobe (1999, 102). However, warns Nakayama and Krizek (1999, 102), stated or unstated, whiteness invokes the historically constituted and systematically exercised power relations.

as the norm and standard by which other groups are measured. Their identity is rendered invisible, says Martin, Krizek, Nakayama and Bradford [24] (1999, 28), "even to the extent that many whites do not consciously think about the profound effect being white has on their everyday lives." It is only within a situation of minority status with issues of affirmative action, reverse discrimination or reduced opportunities in business or education that the meaning of whiteness is highlighted,[25] and in South Africa's case, the issue of crime!

7. Conclusion

The consequence of European normativity was that a Western interpretation of Christ was imposed on the missionary subjects inhabiting a world outside of Europe. Siker (2007, 27) asserts that the history of Western Christian theology "has seen the ascendancy of Jesus as a white Christ with a resultant de facto white God endorsing white power claims over other racial/ethnic groups". Within the reformed South African Calvinist tradition his ethnic identity as a Jew played no role in theology. In fact, his "Christianity" is asserted over against the Jewish tradition that rejected him. The consequence of the recent research done regarding the historical Jesus was that he has become anchored within a particular historical, social, geographical and theological context (Siker 2007, 29). His Jewishness that received renewed emphasis, is no less an effort to overcome the latent anti-Semitism in the orthodox reformed tradition.

With the demise of apartheid there is a deliberate drive to have Africa coming into her own, claiming her own way of doing, knowing and thinking. In the process, several aspects of European, American or Western culture in general are branded as destructive. The question arises as to what those who stand in the firing line (i.e. those who are constructed as members of the perpetrator cultures in this rhetorical exigence) can do.

Whiteness is a power-laden discursive formation that has shaped other identities beyond the geographical borders of the West (Shome 1999, 108):

> Whiteness, thus, is not merely a discourse that is contained in societies inhabited by white people; it is not a phenomenon that is enacted only where white bodies exist. Whiteness is not just about bodies and skin color, but rather more about the *discursive practices* that, because of colonialism and neocolonialism, privilege and sustain global dominance of white imperial subjects and Eurocentric worldviews.'

It privileges, secures and normalises the cultural space of the white Western subject (1999, 108).

[24] Martin, Krizek, Nakayama and Bradford (1999) made a study into which labels white Americans would prefer to be called. They gave a range of seven labels, from the least defined to the most defined. The most preferred label was white, but its meaning was the least defined. They concluded (1999, 44) that it reflects the historical invisibility of white identity and a lack of awareness of being white. The label 'white' is seen as an ideological term and its lack of proper definition indicates the ideological mask that hides the powerful functioning of whiteness. Among the powerful then, there is a resistance to historical, geographical or cultural specificity to whiteness. From the point of view of a minority, self-labelling is regarded as an expression of choice that connotes empowerment, whereas self-labelling from the perspective of a dominant group is viewed as an intrusion of choice (1999, 45).

[25] Wander, Martin and Nakayama (1999, 21) argues that the discursive practice not to mark whiteness works with the racial ideology of racial blindness of which affirmative action is an example. However, a race-blind society does not mean ignoring white privilege, say Wander, Martin and Nakayama (1999, 20).

Why do I need to have an “outed” whiteness? An analysis of the construction of whiteness allows one to denote the intricacies and contradictions that set up the stamping ground of white identity over time and across space (cf. Supriya 1999, 136). Moreover, in marking the moments of discursive transformation and identifying spaces for the formation of imaginary and material multicultural coalitions, one can offer resistance to the “reification of white identity as a transtemporal and transhistorical essence of oppression” (1999, 135). Whiteness then becomes a historically and geographically specific construction. This would pull the rug under the feet of the reification of the West as “white” and a symbol of misery, as well as uncover the privilege of whiteness and its communication embedded in our social fabric (cf. Johnson 1999, 5).

It will be more helpful to me when someone indicates to me where he or she thinks whiteness influences my thinking and behaviour. Mbeki’s racial stereotypes do not work, as everyone will disavow them. The influence of race is much more subtle than we think and perhaps the time has arrived to inquire into the link between whiteness and dogmatic constructions such as predestination, different kinds of hierarchies, in other words, our interpretation of exclusions testified to within the biblical texts.

And the responses to Mbeki’s Human Rights Day letter? It looks as if they were driven by whiteness. Leon acknowledges the problem of racism. Laurence’s reference to other possibilities for white people rallying against crime, suggests the endangerment of privilege, no doubt an issue within whiteness studies. In terms of Butler’s regime, I would argue that I did not chose to be white, but a highly regulatory frame that congealed for four centuries now, constructs me as white and provide citations on a continuous basis that reinforce my whiteness despite a refusal to accede to its interpellation. So, even when eventually embracing whiteness, I would hope to subvert its power matrix in some way or the other.

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