

# Incomplete Histories: Steve Biko, the Politics of Self-Writing and the Apparatus of Reading

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## Abstract

This paper gathers together deliberations surrounding Steve Biko's *I Write What I Like* as it simultaneously registers the critical importance of the text as an incomplete history. Rather than presupposing the text as a form of biography or following a trend of translating Biko into a prophet of reconciliation, I argue that the text leads us towards the postcolonial problematic of self-writing. That problematic, I argue, names the encounter between self-writing and an apparatus of reading. The paper stages the encounter as a way to make explicit the text's postcolonial interests and to mark the onset of an incomplete history. This, I argue incidentally, is where the postcolonial critic may set to work to finish the critique of apartheid. Incomplete histories call attention to how that which is unintelligible in a text makes an authoritative reading difficult.

How else can one write but of those things which one doesn't know, or knows badly? It is precisely there that we imagine having something to say. We write only at the frontiers of our knowledge, at the border that separates our knowledge from our ignorance and transforms the one into the other. Only in this manner are we resolved to write...Perhaps writing has a relation to silence altogether more threatening than that which it is supposed to entertain with death. (Deleuze 1994:xxi)

Steve [Biko] had a sure centre. (Woods 1978:95)

Ever since the brutal murder of Steve Biko at the hands of South African security police in 1977, there has been a concerted effort not to surrender his story to those responsible for his death by letting them have the last word.<sup>1</sup> In a bid to guard against such an eventuality, Biko's spirit is increasingly being enshrined in the collection of his political writings published under the title *I Write What I Like* shortly after his untimely death

while in police custody in Port Elizabeth. The text is taken as a biography in the making that was cut short by a cruel act of violence.<sup>2</sup> Writing in 1978, Aelred Stubbs for example noted the following in the preface to the publication of Biko's writings in terms that remind us how the text might supplement a biography:

The time for a comprehensive biography of Steve Biko is not yet. But it is hoped that the production of a book containing a selection of his writings may be timely, that it may serve to inform those who all over the world know the name of Biko only in the dreadful context of his death, a little more fully what manner of man he was. For this reason nothing is said in depth about his death, crucial as this is in a final assessment of the man. (Biko 1979:v)

What concerns me is the way in which Biko's writing is construed as an element of biography but not, as its title might otherwise suggest, as a statement about political constraint. In this paper, I seek to gather together a history of deliberation about Biko's writing in what I will call an apparatus of reading. By apparatus of reading I mean the disciplinary and political frameworks that authorise and enable the tasks of reading – the machine not too dissimilar to the state that makes us speak and act in a certain way. In staging an encounter between Biko's writing and an apparatus of reading, I seek to identify the point at which a biographical reading falters and is rendered unsustainable. At that point, I wish to suggest, Biko's writing lends itself to a postcolonial argument that makes *I Write What I Like* available to the South African present. My argument, briefly, is that *I Write What I Like* is not so much a biography under construction as it is a text that names the postcolonial problematic of self-writing.

The article consists of four sections. I begin by reflecting on the question of self-writing by considering briefly a recent essay by Achille Mbembe and the furore surrounding JM Coetzee's *Disgrace* so as to specify what I mean by the postcolonial problematic of self-writing. Thereafter, I examine political discourses that encounter the writing of Steve Biko, particularly those positions that set out to fulfil its biographical promise. In the final sections, I address the question of incomplete histories as a specific strategy for thinking about where to begin the narrative of postcolonial difference in the wake of apartheid.

### **Postcolonial Self-Writing**

In an essay on African modes of self-writing, Achille Mbembe argues that the conditions under which the African subject could attain full selfhood

had been thwarted not only by imperialism but also by the combined effects of Afro-radicalism and nativism (2002:240). Central to Afro-radicalism and nativism was a politics of recovery – of self, property and past. I am sympathetic to the politics that drives Mbembe’s critique of Afro-radicalism and nativism, and have also elsewhere tried to highlight its consequences for the discipline of history (although not nearly as eloquently). But what concerns me is the effort to move the story of the subject along, to the point of exploring self-styling, as Mbembe puts it. What in particular I want to recall in this discussion of self-writing is none other than the weight of history – not the long history of subjugation that Mbembe confronts but rather the poetics of history. By this I mean that Mbembe, in his determination to finalise the history of the incomplete subject by substituting it with a self-styling subject, fails – I will argue – to acknowledge that self-writing is an effect staged in an encounter with an apparatus of reading. It is perhaps in this convergence that postcolonial criticism potentially approaches something like the productivity of incomplete histories.

The point about the limits of an African mode of self-writing is presciently conveyed in the controversy which raged recently in the South African press concerning J M Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, which was earlier named at a South African Human Rights Commission hearing as an example of racist writing. The Commission, as a specific apparatus of reading, understood the text as autobiography and thereby pronounced on a reality effect in a work of literature. Yet, as with much of Coetzee’s earlier writing, the position of the writer is less obvious than is presumed. The apparatus of reading perhaps too hastily perceived the verb *to write* as an active verb and produced, consequently, the charge of racism. But the charge of racism carries an assumption that the writing is aimed at, as Barthes puts it in a text that Coetzee elsewhere cites, an exterior or antecedent person. It must therefore deny the possibility of self-writing, of self as effect and affect of writing. Consider the following quotation attributed to Coetzee in which he echoes Barthes’ essay “To Write: An Intransitive Verb”:

Though modern Indo-European languages retain morphologically distinct forms for only the active-passive opposition, the phantom presence of a middle voice (a voice still present in Ancient Greek and Sanskrit) can be felt in some senses of the modern verbs if one is alert to the possibility of the threefold opposition active-middle-passive. “To write” is one of these verbs. To write (active) is to carry out the action without reference to the self, perhaps, though not necessarily, on behalf of someone else. To write (middle) is to carry out the action

(or better, to do writing) with reference to the self. Or – to follow Barthes in his metaphorical leap from grammar to meaning – “today to write is to make oneself the centre of the action of *la parole*; it is to effect writing in being affected oneself, it is to leave the writer inside the writing, not as a psychological subject...but as the agent of action”. The field of writing, Barthes goes on to suggest, has today become nothing but writing itself, not as art for art’s sake but as the only space there is for the one who writes. (Coetzee in Dovey 1988:14-15).

The leap from grammar to meaning is of course a leap over the law of the difference between “what can be said and what is actually said”.<sup>3</sup> In this respect it is interesting that Coetzee omits the following comment in Barthes’ formulation that appears in parenthesis marking the difference between a psychological subject and the scriptor as agent of the action: “the Indo-European priest could perfectly well be overflowing with subjectivity while actively sacrificing for his client”. The reference is to an earlier comment by Barthes when he draws a parallel with the example given by Meillet and Benveniste to illustrate and enable his leap. Barthes writes:

According to the classic example given by Meillet and Benveniste, the verb *to sacrifice* (ritually) is active if the priest sacrifices the victim in my place and for me, and it is the middle voice if, taking the knife from the priest’s hands, I make a sacrifice for my own sake; in the case of the active voice, the action is performed outside the subject, for although the priest makes the sacrifice, he is not affected by it; in the case of the middle voice, on the contrary, by acting, the subject affects himself, he always remains inside the action, even if that action involves an object. (1986:18)

The distance between priest and client, between scriptor and writing, is asymptotically diminished here in keeping with the desire expressed by Barthes. But in no way can it account for the difference with the apparatus of reading that circumscribes the realms of what can be said. In skipping over the reference to the discussion of the Indo-European priest, Coetzee symptomatically sacrifices the apparatus of reading. The implication is that self-writing takes place in spite of, rather than as a result of, the presence of “the priest”.

By contrast, in staging the confrontation between self-writing and the apparatus of reading I am not merely calling attention to the demand to read what is necessarily unintelligible in the frameworks of such an apparatus, important though that may be. I am also asking how that which is specifically unintelligible renders an authoritative reading difficult. In other words,

unlike biography, self-writing, as a postcolonial strategy, is an eruption that defines the limits of an apparatus of reading.<sup>4</sup>

### **Biography under Construction**

The political legacy of Steve Biko as one of the founders of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in South Africa is often critiqued for its overt emphasis on subjectivation so that the struggle for the constitution of the self is seen as ultimately inadequate to the tasks of fighting apartheid. As Oliver Tambo, the exiled leader of the African National Congress (ANC), was to suggest in a comment about the 1976 Soweto uprising:

[T]he fact that the popular rebellion did not become an insurrection pointed up limitations in Black Consciousness ideology. There had been a lack of political direction to guide the outbreak of collective anger in the townships and, although there was some solidarity between the youth and workers, the gulf had not been bridged. Among the youth there arose an awareness that revolution required organisation and comprehensive policies capable of guiding struggle through different phases. Whatever the strengths of the upsurge of 1976 they lacked a strategy and tactics which could only be found in the leadership of the ANC. (Tambo 1987:114)

In his report to the National Executive Committee in 1985, the sense of limitation of what was referred to as Black Consciousness ideology had given way to a claim that Biko had arrived at the conclusion that the ANC was the leader of the revolution. More importantly it was claimed that Biko had accepted that the Black People's Convention should operate within the broad strategy of the ANC and concentrate its efforts on mass mobilisation (Tambo 1987:126).<sup>5</sup> What Tambo seemed to be emphasising was a more general tendency to see Biko and his thought as a variation on the theme of African nationalism, but a specific manifestation of what Gail Gerhart calls the "Fanonesque apocalypse" that accompanied the rise of Black Consciousness in the 1970s (Gerhart 1978:14).<sup>6</sup> The strains of this form of racially exclusive politics, which is how she sees it, can be traced through the ideological formation of African nationalism in South Africa. Gerhart reduces Black Consciousness to an identity claim in the ideological circumstances of a racial convergence between Afrikaner Nationalist conservatism and a racially particular liberalism. In some respects, narrating Biko has always tended towards filling in the missing exteriority of his politics or what in history one might call filling in the gaps, and in semiology and deconstruction the search for the transcendental signifier.

This tendency can be traced in both nationalist and liberal discourses that encounter the thought of Black Consciousness and which are produced at the expense of the intransitive verb “to write” that suggests itself in Biko’s collection of political writings published under the title *I Write What I Like*.

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

The South African National Liberation Movement, the ANC and its allies, characterise the South African social formation as a system of ‘internal colonialism’ or ‘colonialism of a special type’. What is special or different about the colonial system as it obtains in South Africa is that there is no spatial separation between the colonising power (the white minority state) and the colonised black people. But in every respect, the features of classic colonialism are the hallmark of the relations that obtain between the black majority and a white minority. The special features of South Africa’s internal colonialism are also compounded by the fact that the white South African state, parliament and government are juridically independent of any metropolitan country and have a sovereignty legally vested in them by various Acts of the British government and state. These juridical formalities should not be allowed to cloud the colonial content of the white supremacist state. (Statement of Lisbon Conference 1977:1)

Internal colonialism was a concept specifically aimed at capturing the attention of a generation of youth who had been captivated by the ideals of Black Consciousness, even as it sought to present the latter concept as inadequate to the tasks facing the political movement in South Africa. The ANC seemed to invoke the idea to mark the way in which a colonial legacy persisted as a residual, although effective, strategy of a system of racialised territorial governmentality. In elaborating the concept and by establishing “what was different about the colonial system as it obtains in South Africa”, the ANC seemed to be calling attention to what it saw as a shortcoming in

Biko's contemporaneous reflections on the struggle in South Africa. Without referring to it specifically, the 1977 programme effectively reduced the concept of Black Consciousness to a rather uncomplicated pursuit of the Kantian ideal of a release from self-incurred tutelage.<sup>7</sup> In opposition to Biko's supposedly limited emphasis on the interiorisation of the colonial predicament, the ANC seemed to stress the sovereign state as a specific exteriority that might alter the tactical horizons of political action.

The reconfiguration of the tactical dimensions of Biko's political position resulted in a rather limited range of possible interpretations of Black Consciousness, the concept advanced by Biko and his cohort. It tended to reduce its politics to a game of self-interpretation, or to paraphrase Samuel Weber, to a soliloquy of the soul. It also then inadvertently stabilised the concept of blackness by designating the sovereign law as transcendental signifier. With this apparent narrowing of the interpretive field, by way of the expansion of the empirical field, the work on the self, through a politics of writing – a subjectivity in writing – that is suggested in the title of Biko's *I Write What I Like*, was altogether obliterated. More particularly, the ambiguity between self-consciousness and unconscious desire that is conveyed by the iteration of the "I" in the title was not made available to political discourse.

Several histories of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa re-enact this supposed demarcation of the interiority of the self and the exteriority of the state. Foremost among these is Gail Gerhart's study of Black Consciousness, in which she argues that "like the ideologues of orthodox African nationalism from Lembede onward, Biko and the architects of SASO began from the premise that oppression was most immediately a psychological problem" (1978:271). But such an analysis is by no means unusual. John Saul writes about the period after the so-called vacuum left by the repression of the 1970s writers of Biko's generation in ways that suggest the lack generally attributed to Black Consciousness:

In the first instance [the vacuum of the 1960s was filled] by the emergence of the Black Consciousness movement. An ideological project that paralleled other cultural nationalist expressions of the time (like 'Black Power' in North America), it was largely the creation of petty bourgeois intellectuals (albeit many of them of impressive stature, like Steve Biko) with separatist overtones, limited strategic sense and a minimal grasp of the possible role of popular classes in effecting social change. However, as a reaffirmation of racial pride and of the sentiment of resistance to the apartheid dispensation, Black

Consciousness was significant. Perhaps, as its themes began to permeate the ambience within which new generations were growing up, its immediate importance was more psychological than political. (1993:7)

Taken on the plane of ideology, Biko's interventions are thereby rendered little more than a continuation of a longstanding Africanist strand in the argument of nationalism. What it amounts to is a critique of what Fanon once called lactification, by which he meant the psychological aspiration to accede to the condition of whiteness.<sup>8</sup> At another level, it displaces, as Saul would have it, the political by elevating the psychological, and in this regard is to be found wanting.

In the narration of his tragic death at the hands of the apartheid state one cannot but notice how such psychologism enables a rather heroic construction of mind versus might, so that the physical torture of the body meets its match in the strength of the mind. Unfortunately, this very conception was also used by Drs. Lang and Tucker who were accused of complicity, because of their failure to intervene upon examining the ailing Biko, in the cause of his death. Under cross-examination at the inquest called to rule on the death of Biko, Ivor Lang claimed that he had been summoned to the offices of the security police on September 7, 1977 because Biko "would not speak". In his testimony, Lang attributed the staggering gait to shamming on the part of Biko (although later he claimed that the thick speech was a consequence of a lip injury and the ataxic gait was because Biko had been manacled and his ankles swollen), and claimed that he found no abnormality or pathology in the patient. Similarly, the security branch officers claimed that on 7 September, "Biko had gone berserk, assaulted people and had to be restrained by force" (Yap and Steyn 1977:2). As a measure of the truth, history rearranges these words uttered by those complicit with an act of violence to insist that Biko did not die without putting up a fight.

To run these two narratives together, the story of the interiority of the self versus the sovereignty of power and the story of mind versus might, is to encounter the schism that operates in the philosophical field of will and power, the same dilemma that renders Biko's history inconclusive. But the ANC's resolution to the crisis, judging from its 1977 programme, is to merely call attention to a transcendental outside without recognising how such a move is little more than the return of the same.<sup>9</sup> In other words, by adopting the programme of internal colonialism, the ANC was also restating the argument about the character of subjection under apartheid. What was in question was the potential for Black Consciousness to "stage an



insurrection” as Tambo put it, and not merely a rebellion against apartheid domination. Working on the self was clearly, in the ANC’s view, no match for sovereign power.

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

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

Steve Biko was the greatest man I ever met. What determines greatness? How does one measure it? Each of us has his [sic] own criteria? When I say that Steve Biko was the greatest man I ever had the privilege to know, I mean quite literally that he, more than any other person I have encountered, had the most impressive array of qualities and abilities in that sphere of life which determines the fates of most people – politics. This doesn’t mean that he was merely a superb politician. He was much more than that. He was a statesman, in that sense of the word in which it is applied to Abraham Lincoln, having that breadth of vision and that wider comprehension of the affairs of men and nations that is conveyed to the listener through more than mere words. He could impart understanding. He could enable one to share his vision and he could do so with an economy of words because he seemed to communicate ideas through extra-verbal media – almost physically. (1978:85)

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

Early in his narrative, Woods describes the difficult circumstances in which his manuscript of *Biko* was prepared. Woods himself had been banned and ordered not to write for five years. Writing therefore, he tells us, had to proceed in secret and he had “been warned that the security police would come at any time of day or night to ensure that [he] was not breaking the ban on writing” (1978:15).

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

A white child brought up in these circumstances, being taught to read and write while noting that even adult tribesmen could not form a single letter of the alphabet, understandably regarded blacks as inferior and easily accepted the general white attitude that colour and race were determinants of the chasm in cultures. (1978:54)

The relation between writing and reading and colour and race as well as its consequence for something like culture is not altogether clear here. But it does lead me to assume that in order to understand the desire to bridge the chasm in what is called “cultures”, it may be necessary to return to the scene of writing. I read Woods’ testimony, which is how he describes his text, as an attempt to enter the scene of writing in order to establish presence. Whilst presence is the authorising trope of this narration, we are also in the space of what De Certeau marks as an impossible adequation between presence and sign, a presence, in other words, taken away from the sign. At the beginning of writing, De Certeau reminds us, there is a loss (1984:195). In the narrative of Donald Woods, it is writing itself which is elided.

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

The PFP has some excellent individuals, and blacks obviously prefer them to the Nationalists, but blacks are increasingly becoming cynical

about the PFP's rejection of sanctions as a weapon against apartheid. They see the PFP as a party-political apostle of capitalism which puts capital interest rates above black interests. In this way, the gray areas in South African political life are being washed away and the scene is increasingly being deep-etched in black and white. (1978:395)

By brief recourse to the metaphor of writing, "a scene deep-etched in black and white", the text leads us through a critique of liberalism, but one directed at the logic of a nineteenth-century missionary discourse. In the space of the argument in which Biko's objections to liberalism are lodged, Woods seeks to rewrite the terms of liberalism adequate to the tasks of a critique of apartheid. Its characteristic is one of disagreement, persuasion and, most of all, recognition of the diversity necessary in the politics that seeks to achieve a particular postcolonial public sphere. This line of argument is in keeping with the central thesis of Kant's which, as Alisdair MacIntyre points out, holds that thinking for oneself always does require thinking in co-operation with others, even as some episodes of thought consist of solitary monologues (1999).

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

Both the concepts of internal colonialism and enlightened liberalism are situated in a particular relationship to Black Consciousness represented by the thought of Steve Biko. That relationship is especially pronounced in the attempt to complete the story of Steve Biko by filling in the gap of the missing exterior. Confounded by the supposed absence of an end point, the production of concepts of internal colonialism and enlightened liberalism are ways of calling attention to a lack in the formulation of the argument of Black Consciousness. Historians recognise this as the necessary condition of biography – a subject in context.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than reconciling presence to sign, postcolonial histories should work towards establishing the productivity of incomplete histories as a strategy for engaging the apparatus of reading. The history of Biko cannot possibly come to rest with the politics of identity but must begin to reassess

the realm of biography. Such a reassessment is enabled by considering the point at which the reading of Biko's *I Write What I Like* falters and makes possible another reading.

### Writing History

Hilda Bernstein reminds us that between 18 August and 6 September, shortly after his arrest at a police roadblock, Biko was held incommunicado at the Walmer Police Station, "without books, papers, materials of any kind" (Bernstein 1978:35).<sup>11</sup> He was accused variously of not having written permission for leaving the area to which his banning order restricted him, and for having drawn up inflammatory pamphlets which he intended distributing. At the trial of seven accused members of the South African Students Organisation (SASO) in May 1976, the prosecution subjected Biko to lengthy cross-examination about his writing and its implications. Yet, the various encounters with Biko have been little more than attempts at manipulating an exteriority by bringing it into some relation of reconciliation to the interiority of his thought – what in other words is the staple of Cartesian philosophy. Biko, we might conclude from this corpus, cannot conceivably write what he likes. Black Consciousness has in turn been represented as an interplay of the process of epidermalisation and consciousness and, as such, the story of Biko is the history of the unity of presence and sign. One consequence of this narrativisation of Biko is that it achieves the re-centering of the subject even as it explicitly elides the potentiality of writing.

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

To look for instances of cruelty at those who fall into disfavour with the security police is perhaps to look too far. One need not try to establish the truth of a claim that Black people in South Africa have to struggle for survival. It presents itself in ever so many facets of our lives.

Township life alone makes it a miracle for anyone to live up to adulthood. There we see a situation of absolute want in which Black will kill Black to be able to survive. That is the basis of vandalism, murders, rapes and plunder that goes on while the real source of evil, White society, are sunbathing on exclusive beaches or relaxing in bourgeois homes. (Millard 1979:288)

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

Clearly, Black people cannot respect White people, at least not in this country. There is such an obvious aura of immorality and naked cruelty in all that is done in the name of White people that no Black man, no matter how intimidated, can ever be made to respect White society. However, in spite of the obvious contempt for the values cherished by the Whites and the price at which White comfort and security is purchased, Blacks seem to me to have been successfully cowed down by the type of brutality that emanates from this section of the community. (Millard 1979:288)

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

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

despised, hated, destroyed and replaced by an aspiration with more human content in it. At worst, Blacks envy White society for the comfort it has usurped, and at the centre of this envy is the wish, nay, the secret determination in the innermost minds of most Blacks who think like this to kick Whites off those comfortable garden chairs that one sees as he rides in a bus out of town, and to claim them for himself. Day by day one gets more convinced that Aimé Césaire could not have been right when he said: “No race possesses the monopoly on truth, intelligence, force, and there is room for all of us at the rendezvous of victory.” (Millard 1979:289)

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

The pursuit for monopoly over reading is foregrounded in the concerted effort to find a filiative connection between author and text at the trial of the SASO 7. Here again the logic deployed by the state prosecutor is to reconcile Biko to writing and by extension to treason. But as is clear from the court proceedings turned reading lesson, it proved far more inconvenient to simply connect writing to author. At one stage during the proceedings Attwell inquired how widespread was the knowledge that Frank Talk was the pseudonym used by Biko. Biko admitted that Barney Pitso and Strini Moodley knew and that others may have guessed from the style of writing. He insisted further that anybody who wrote regularly developed a style (Millard 1979:295). He also noted that the use of a pseudonym was directed at focusing attention on the content rather than, as he put it, the man.

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

explain his question to Attwell, rather annoyed at his cross-examiner's inadequacy, "Can't you read?"

Attwell, we might say, was clearly not up to the task of reading. The reading lesson ended in chaos since the writer could not, it appears, be made to take responsibility for the reading of the state. In some respects the writer could not be held complicitous with the reading since he had relinquished responsibility, vacated the scene of writing, so to speak. Or we might say that the writer and writing have become indistinguishable, and that a reading aimed at discerning the subject is rendered impossible. Writing as such involves transcending the predicament of internal colonialism, the enabling possibility of writing one's way out of a predicament of complicity, into a yet to be determined space. For the ANC and Donald Woods that space is designated respectively by a transcendental signifier. The task, in each case, is instructed to the desiring subject and a writing that is anterior to the subject.

### **Self-Writing and Postcolonial Difference**

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

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

*I Write What I Like* has been read as ethical and political statement that aspires to a reconciliation of presence and sign. But I will argue that it more readily contributes to elaborating a concept of postcolonial difference at the point at which it eludes this fabricated history. This is the point of the text's unintelligibility to an apparatus of reading that seeks to appropriate it to the

genre of biography. In particular, I want to argue that these elusive principles can be tracked through the disintegration of subjectivity that the text entertains. At issue here is not the disappearance of subjectivity, but rather the argument that agitation towards reconstituting subjectivity cannot logically proceed without a certain measure of disintegration and insecurity. In the trial turned reading lesson Biko points out “that *at best*, Blacks see *whiteness as a concept* that warrants being despised, hated, destroyed and replaced by an *aspiration* with more human content in it” (my emphasis) Yet in the essay titled “We Blacks” that Mark Sanders cites as an example of the embodiment of complicity and its negotiation in Black Consciousness, we encounter the following formulation:

The type of black man we have today has lost his manhood. Reduced to an obliging shell, he looks with awe at the white power structure and accepts what he regards as the ‘inevitable position’...All in all the black man has become a shell, a shadow of a man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity. (2002:176)<sup>12</sup>

There is a sense in which the problem of subjection is resolved through nostalgia of the specifically masculine subject, a process of seeking to restore its agency within the argument of Black Consciousness.<sup>13</sup> The desire to constitute the subject, to think beyond the confines of subjection that is materialised, however, encounters the historical limit posed by the *concept* of whiteness. In the fabricated history of reading, Biko is presented as being invested in the project of biography, precisely because he is read into the history of reconciliation between subjection and subjectivation. This is after all the condition prescribed for the post-apartheid national subject, a subject that is also expected to live in a utopian empty homogeneous time that is not its own, in an imagined nation that has as yet not come into its own.

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

Well, it helps to build up the sense of insecurity which is part of the feeling of incompleteness. You are not a complete human being. You cannot walkout when you like, you know, that sort of feeling. It is an imprisoning concept itself. (Millard 1979:30).



Set against the active voice of biography, this statement enables a postcolonial aesthetic, politics and epistemology. In particular, it marks the weight of the constraint of an apparatus of reading even as it overflows with subjectivity. This, I will argue, is precisely because as it undoes the rules of biography prescribed by the apparatus of reading, it simultaneously draws attention to what must remain unintelligible to the apparatus of reading. The statement is symptomatic of potential not in spite of constraint but in direct relation to constraint. As such it is the point at which a postcolonial possibility is instituted in the writing of Steve Biko.

## Conclusion

*I Write What I Like* is less a text that supplements biography than one that offers up strategies for thinking about the constraint posited by an apparatus of reading. Rather than representing a passing phase in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, the text seeps into the postcolonial present by making explicit the extent to which the critique of apartheid is, as yet, not finished. In the process, it brings the techniques of confronting apartheid to bear on the postcolonial problematic of self-writing.

The shift from biography to self-writing that I have narrativised in this article leads us to think about the problem of the imprisoning concept that defines the place of inaugurating postcolonial difference as we reread Biko's writing in the wake of apartheid.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, the 'disintegration' of the subject is precisely the point at which an apparatus of reading is called into question, if not undermined. It is after all the imprisoning concept that presents us with the opportunity of "thinking, feeling and writing in a certain way", but preferably not in that order.<sup>15</sup> Self-writing may thereby answer the demand for finishing the critique of apartheid because as it makes available the unintelligible in certain frameworks, it surprisingly overflows with subjectivity.

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## Notes

1. That resistance was adequately displayed at the recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings into the death of Biko at which the family rejected the amnesty provisions of the commission.

2. See Mangena's suggestion that the effort to arrive at a clearer picture of Biko's death remained incomplete (1989:143).
3. The formulation may be found in Foucault (1972:238). Thanks to John Mowitt for alerting me to the article.
4. For examples of similar encounters see Chatterjee (1998:284); Foucault (1984:32-50); Deleuze (1988:94); and Spivak (1988:291).
5. See also Pholandt-McCormick (1999: Chapter Four).
6. I too have, elsewhere, been guilty of such a hasty conclusion. See the final chapter of my doctoral dissertation (Lalu 2003). Kopano Ratele pressured me to think through the equivalence that I have drawn and this article is, in part, an effort at addressing his question and concern.
7. In claiming that notions of self-help derived from earlier Africanist strands in political mobilisation, scholars such as Gerhart clearly track the emergence of the tendency to the founding of the ANC under the leadership of John Langalibalele Dube. See for example Marks (1986:54).
8. See Mowitt (2002:38).
9. Since Biko reads Fanon, and Fanon reads Nietzsche, Biko might be articulating a problem at the very root of a philosophical tradition that calls into question the basis of Cartesian philosophy.
10. An exception is Ciraj Rassool's PhD dissertation which sets to work on the cultural production of biography.
11. At the trial of the SASO 7, Biko noted that his restrictions prohibited him from compiling, editing or disseminating any publication in which government policy is either defended or attacked (Millard 1979:278).
12. It is important to remember that Sanders' attempt to track the itinerary of the intellectual through the concept of complicity must simultaneously obscure all those moments of irresponsibility that activate the demand for a replacement of the other – and sometimes violently so. It is precisely in renouncing the history of responsibility, which is also to say the narration of irresponsibility, that the concept of the foldedness of human being that Sanders develops is perhaps at the limit, precisely because it sets out to affirm, rather than critique, the apparatus of reading. For it is in this slippage that we might call into question the purported transcendence indicated in the thematic of intersubjectivity. Beatrice Hanssen, in a not unrelated example, has argued that Fanon's later troubling embrace of violence as a way of taking-the-other's-place is a far cry from the plea for transcendence in intersubjective love that framed the earlier work (2000:153).
13. See Ratele (2003).
14. Here I am especially grateful to Qadri Ismail for his reading of Fanon's

*Wretched of the Earth* in a public talk entitled “Let us Leave the West,” given at the University of Minnesota in March 2003.

15. See for example Williams on commitment in writing in *What I Came to Say* (1989:259).

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