From the White Interior to an Exterior Blackness: A Lacanian Discourse Analysis of Apartheid Narratives

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Introduction: The imaginary

In this chapter we examine some fragments of narratives from the Apartheid Archive Project (see www.apartheidarchive.org), and put to work ‘Lacanian Discourse Analysis’ recently propounded in the psychological domain (Parker, 2005; Pavón-Cuéllar, 2010a; Pavón-Cuéllar & Parker, 2012), following upon some quite distant and some immediate antecedents (e.g. Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2003; Georgaca, 2005; Hook, 2003; Pêcheux, 1969; Pêcheux & Fuchs, 1975). We do this with a commitment to the project of critical psychosocial reflection on the symbolic apparatus of racism, and we know that we bring to the material the perspective of outsiders who are introducing a theoretical discourse that has, in different parts of the world, itself been complicit with colonialism. However, this theoretical discourse, while apparently so alien to this context, is uncannily implicated in it, and that is what can give it a sharp deconstructive edge. We will home in on some extracts to exacerbate contradictions and oppositions that are at work there, to make them explicit in order that they may be questioned. We will begin with some methodological reflections on the nature of ‘analysis’, and introduce the concept of the ‘imaginary’.

Lacanian Discourse Analysis does not regard the narratives as analysable discourses to be analysed by us, but as analysing discourses. That is to say that we do not adopt a position outside the material in order to ‘apply’ the analysis to it, which is a danger in some forms of psychoanalytic ‘psychosocial’ research (Parker, 2010), but we attend
to the way the narrative reflects and makes sense of itself. One might liken this to a form of ‘ethnomethodology’ in which the actual methods employed by subjects are tracked in place of the privilege usually given to the methods of the researcher (Garfinkel, 1967).

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, it is the ‘analysand’ who analyses, and here we treat the narratives of the Apartheid Archive Project as reflexive, self-critical discourses that return on themselves, and ‘analyse’ themselves. Actually, the narratives today often have an agonising explicit reflexive character in which there is an attempt to grapple with questions of responsibility by searching for mitigating background reasons, sometimes with reference to past material circumstances and sometimes with reference to personal failures of the speaking subject. Narratives framed in this way may indeed depoliticise our understanding of the past. But our task here, using the particular theoretical resources of Lacanian psychoanalysis, is to disturb those narratives and to politicise them again. With this aim, we treat the narratives not only as discourses that may already analyse themselves through themselves but also as discourses that may also re-analyse themselves through our analysis.

Following our method, we do not ‘apply’ our theory of discourse analysis, but embed our reading in a theoretical framework. There is a risk, of course, that this will privilege psychoanalysis. This is a risk we take, but only because we are also willing to acknowledge the cultural-historical specificity of this theoretical framework. It opens something up, we hope, instead of simply advertising itself as a theoretical solution to the problem we are concerned with (i.e. the implication of individual subjects in racist discourse and their attempt to reflect on that implication). Instead of knowing how to solve this problem by analysing discourse in our theoretical perspective, we aim to learn from the analysing discourse and its implicit problematical theory, taking account of the temptation to merely learn that which is already known somewhere in our perspective. Nonetheless, even from within this perspective, discourse may provide important theoretical lessons. It may even provide us important methodological lessons. We learn, for example, that ‘self-presentation’, as explored by Eagle and Bowman in this volume, is managed through forms of narrative that are not directly under the control of speakers, or those who analyse them.

Let us turn to an extract from one narrative in this archive, Narrative 59, to obtain a methodological lesson from the analysing discourse. This is a white man’s narrative (and in the course of this chapter we will be following the practice of the Apartheid Archive Project in categorising the narratives as produced by a ‘White’, ‘Black’, ‘Indian’ or