

## PRECARIOUS SILENCE: DECENTRING THE POWER OF WHITENESS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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*Unpacking the habits of “whiteness”, Mo Shabangu responds to Samantha Vice’s 2010 article “How do I live in this Strange Place?”. In so doing, he argues that Vice extends rather than unstettles the parameters of white entitlement.*

Sometime before Samantha Vice published “How Do I Live in This Strange Place”, I had encountered and been moved by the narrator-protagonist of J.M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* – Mrs Curran – an old white woman living in interregnum South Africa. Mrs Curran, true to Vice’s proposition, feels a deep sense of shame as a result of her being a white woman in divided Cape Town. As she suffers from a terminal disease, the novel is in the form of a confessional letter which Mrs Curran writes to her daughter in America. In this letter, she exposes the meretricious role of the apartheid state and the condition of being white in post-apartheid South Africa.

It is important to stress that I proceed by reading Vice as a rationalist, who would sympathise with the Kantian philosophy of the individual.<sup>1</sup> This, it seems, is by and large the liberal predisposition that favours a suspension of judgment upon encountering the Other, that to which one is different. It brings to mind the dichotomy that inevitably emerges when one considers the notion of the good and moral community. This idea has its roots in the Kantian philosophy which, on the one hand, privileges equal recognition on the basis of individuality and a form of autonomy

that is capable of formulating neutral principals which lead to the construction of an enlightened community. On the other hand, the idea that cultural difference has to be recognised and acknowledged since, in our interactions with others, we habitually conceive of difference between communities by making use of stereotypes, thereby constituting our own communities oppositionally or dialectically and in relation or relative to the Other. It makes sense, then, that proponents of such a notion, premised on the need for recognition of cultural difference, would accuse the former Kantian conception (which is founded on equal dignity) of universalising its claims, since the notion of the individual or the celebration of reason is in itself a form of cultural particularity. What must be understood is that an individual is located in community, rather than somehow transcending it and, therefore, supposedly occupying a position that is instinctual and unmediated (326). Vice’s argument is that the white person should seek to redeem herself. Coetzee’s, through Mrs Curran, is different. One can only redeem oneself by forfeiting what one is, what one has been made to be by the social context in which one is located. One has to become other than what one is. In a sense, one has to die. In other words, his argument is not as self-directed as Vice’s, and this is because she adheres to the notion of an internal core of selfhood.

One of the main arguments that continues to permeate South African discourse around race is the notion that the country, having emerged from a debilitating system of institutionalised racism, has become a ‘home for all’, in which a dynamic ethico-political equilibrium has been achieved, twenty years after democracy. This idea of inclusivity – first conceptualised by Archbishop Desmond Tutu as



Wikipedia/Lionsgate, *Dear White People*.

‘the rainbow nation’— has become axiomatic in contemporary South Africa, where both black and white citizens claim a position in a country in which individuals and members of groups identify their similarities and differences as a means to unity. In what follows, I examine the manner in which this rainbowism has limited explanatory power in the face of empirical evidence in the form of the lived experiences of black people who come into contact with a white world, and South African non-whites<sup>2</sup> in particular, who continue to experience their blackness (non-whiteness) relative to a hegemonic whiteness.

In recalling critical conceptual frameworks within which the debates concerning race are conceived, particularly the Hegelian dialectic of ‘master’ and ‘slave’, I argue that black people in South Africa have been made to feel alienated by the white culture that has produced them. I take, as a point of departure, Samantha Vice’s “How Do I Live in This Strange Place?” and explore some of the appropriate reactions white people may have to shame, guilt and regret. I conclude that white South Africans need not feel guilty per se, but should rather convert any feelings of guilt towards an ethics of responsibility to the re-negotiation of the country’s image in an attempt to curtail the unfortunate experience that is the result of whiteness being rendered invisible. The suggestion, then, is that ‘whiteness’ as it stands has been, and continues to be, unmarked and transparent to white people themselves and that its ontology needs to become perceptible and recognised as a state of being that does not exist ex nihilo, but one that has been constructed in order to establish and maintain white supremacy. The two responses of ‘silence’ and ‘humility’ that Vice calls for, consequently, serve only to reinforce the invisibility upon which such white privilege is founded.

#### THE NEED FOR RECOGNITION

The thesis of the ‘need for recognition’ finds its relevance particularly where the construction of whiteness is concerned. Whiteness emerged, as Melissa Steyn correctly intuits, as a ‘master narrative’ long before European colonial expansion, when encounters with the ‘non-white’ world were cast merely in terms of difference, and not inferiority (4). However, the self-interest of European colonialists meant that they were “fiercely competing for the

world’s economic spoils [and] recognised an identity in this competition which they baptised ‘white’ ” (5). Steyn suggests that the more European expansion and conquest prevailed, the more whitened Europeans became, developing “a common identity by using Africans as the main foil against which they defined themselves” (5). To risk stating the obvious, it is not only that race is a construct, but that it is one that has been established relationally. Steyn mentions how blackness and whiteness “can only be understood as a pair [...] European colonists became white only in parallel with their identification of those they colonised as blacks” (5). This notion finds its roots in the Hegelian dialectic that aims to describe a specific form of human relation in which domination, and the power to define, have a central role to play. The dialectic takes the form of an analysis of the machinations of self-consciousness and delineates the manner in which the self can only become conscious of itself “by the presence of, and recognition of itself by *an-other*” (Villet 40). This process, however, must necessarily take place at the expense of the Other, thus Steyn comments: “whiteness brought the power to define both self and other, a power that whites could wield” (8). As Hegel pointed out, the dialectic must be understood as that moment in which the self becomes conscious of itself, “declaring itself as an ‘I’” and thereby negating and destroying the Other as an-other (Villet 40). Both the self and the other, then, engage in a process of self-consciousness which results in a relationship of strict opposition. The irony, of course, is that both the master and the slave are in need of each other’s recognition in order to exist and, subsequently, survive. This implies that, since the master:

[achieves] his recognition through another consciousness (the slave), and in so doing becomes dependent on the thing for his own self-consciousness [...] the chains of the slave become that of the master as well. As a consequence, there exists no manner of freedom, only mutual enslavement to the *thing*. The slave is dependent on his thinghood and thus on his definition as the thing by the master. (41)

This irony, as Steyn mentions, can also be analysed in terms of the Lacanian split subject, or Derridian deconstruction, but the end result will be the same – the (psychological) dependence of “the oppressor on the oppressed for a sense of identity” (Steyn 16). Hence the difficulty of conceiving of whiteness in isolation:

It is the black condition, and only that, which informs the consciousness of white people. It is a terrible paradox, but those who believed that they could control and define black people divested themselves of the power to control and define themselves [...] The purer white the identity, the more dependent it is on its black other. (16)

The paradox, of course, is that ‘homogenous white identity’ is constantly seeking to disavow that on which it is dependent. For this reason, the construction of an ‘Other’ more degenerate and less virtuous emerges out of the self-hatred and guilt that lies inherent in the construction of whiteness. However, as Fanon seems to suggest, while the need to recognise difference is important, it serves us best only when the white ‘master’ is willing to see

difference as simply dissimilarity and not inferiority. To acknowledge difference, to know one's whiteness or blackness, is an affirmation of difference that is significant in a sense that knowledge of the ontology of whiteness or blackness is invested with epistemological certainty about one's identity, an identity which is thus constructed oppositionally. The difference between the two, however, should not lead to an idea that there is *only* difference, but that, between the two racial groups, the need to recognise the different enterprises means that we do not allow for a forgetfulness of the atrocities of both colonialism and racism because we simply desire to elide the specificities in our heterogeneous and conflictual history. The starting-point in recognising our differences is accepting that it has become the centre of dominance where one group is advantaged and privileged at the expense of another.

#### WHITE PRIVILEGE IN ACTION

In his semi-autobiographical study of racism, *The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism and White Privilege*, Robert Jensen describes white privilege as a facet of white supremacy, by which he means "a society whose founding is based in an ideology of the inherent superiority of white Europeans over nonwhites, an ideology that was used to justify the crimes against indigenous people and Africans that created the [American] nation" (Jensen 4). While, at a juridical level, white supremacy has been destabilised, the concept of 'white power' and privilege is still very much alive in South Africa today. If to many white people this seems preposterous, it is perhaps because of the lack of absolutism that many people (both black and white) desire from the mere existence of the new

constitutional imperatives which have allowed for all South Africans to be viewed with as 'human'. 'White power' continues to be contested, since it is generally accepted that vestiges of racial inequality do indeed exist, and that, additionally, racial tensions can be felt, and that many white people still take recourse in on a sense of apartheid nostalgia. If we analyse the national statistics since, at the level of collective experience, they are generally taken to be a regular barometer of the social condition, we begin to take the first step towards making whiteness visible. This is because whiteness is tied up with a privilege that necessarily is impossible to overlook. Consider, for instance, that "one of the key ways of theorising whiteness is as a global norm that is invisible, working in the background as a standard, not of one particular being in the world, but as normalcy, as universalizability, of just being 'the way things are'" (Vice 324). Through such a system, whites are positioned advantageously since this way in which 'things are' is simply invisible to them and so is not seen as an advantage.

The latest census results released in October 2012, for instance, revealed that the average income of a white household is seven times the average income of the black household (Statistics South Africa: Census Results ). This points to the reality of the disparities between these races, which, if continually denied, compromises the very notion of the 'rainbow nation'. What does it mean, then, to say that whiteness needs to be made visible? Commensurate with Steve Garner, I proceed from the notion that the invisibility of whiteness stems from never having to consider itself as 'raced' and, therefore, of never having to define itself explicitly in comparison to 'non-whiteness' (39). As a result, whiteness

is *represented* as normality, the universality of humanness: whites are not simply a certain type of race, they *are* the human race. Anything that is not white is, accordingly, deviant from the normative<sup>3</sup> code (35).

The argument, in fact, would be better encapsulated if we were to use the term 'unmarked' rather than 'invisible', since whites are indeed visible but, in their eyes, whiteness has become unmarked for the majority of whites under the weight of privileges bestowed upon them (35). This project of marking whiteness means that white people need to 'see their particularity' and to 'make whiteness strange' by recognising that the state of whiteness occupies a privilege bearing position, notwithstanding the different contingent privileges attached to it and the contextual differences that exist (39). Hence, to acknowledge whiteness is to admit that "one is inherently tied to structures of domination and oppression, that one is irrevocably on the wrong side" (Vice 326). It means, as Vice would argue, that whites have to see and conceive of themselves as "a problem" that is constituted by "moral offenses" (326). The project of visibility begins, apparently, by disabusing oneself of the notion that things simply happen to individuals and that whites cannot bear a collective burden of responsibility on the grounds of those who are only implicitly involved, or are involved by association with a group, that is, by virtue of the fact that they are born white. This is why, for instance, the much-cited essay by Peggy McIntosh, "The Invisible Knapsack of Privilege", deals with the common responses of white people to their privilege, which responses, according to her, stifle the project of particularising whiteness. On the face

of it, one may term these responses “denialism” but I want to suggest that it is far more complex in the South African context, and that, this ‘denial’ or passive reluctance to acknowledge and particularise the white race is seen by well-meaning liberal whites as a polite and constructive means to negotiating identity.

When Robin DiAngelo develops the neologism “white fragility”, she seeks to account for the systematic processes through which the black experience is delegitimised by an irrational sensitivity of whiteness. Quite often, this sensitivity is concealed within silence as well as within the universal platitude that whites use in response to the assertion that black lives matter. Such a universalism insists that ‘all lives matter’ and that, as result, the question as to whether or not black lives in particular matter, is not significant since the matter can be set aside by invoking the abstract equality of all lives, regardless of the socio-political specificities of our moment. Could it be that the silence whiteness presumes in such an instance, evades the very question; do black lives matter? Is it not the case that attempting to answer that question opens whiteness up to be revealed as the moral and political scandal that it is, since of course, when such a question is asked, the asker is simultaneously invoking the Hegelian Other by implying another question: *for whom* do black lives have value? Of course, to ask the question, or to pronounce the aphorism “black lives matter” is already to lodge an appeal to whiteness. So, to ask the question is simply to show that, in the spaces where the value of lives is adjudicated, there is no consensus on the matter, and that in these valuing communities, the question can be asked in the first

instance and that this should not be the case. A white fragility, in the first place, cannot respond to such a question since it is ever in a defensive mode, a mode which vacillates between audible assertions of individualism (we are *not* all the same) or universalism (we are all the same, humanity – no colour), or simply in the form of a precarious silence (we ought to be silent, this is a black issue a la Vice).

### SILENCE AS REIFICATION

While Vice’s thesis of ‘habitual white privilege’ acknowledges that the white subject is born into a world that is not directly controlled by her, she finds it easy to “disentangle guilt from any direct relation to actions one has performed” (328). She argues that it is difficult to avoid feeling guilty, since one is “a continuing product of white privilege and benefiting from it, implicated in and enacting injustice in many subtle ways” (328). Vice concludes, therefore, that “feelings of guilt are appropriate” when one considers the unfortunate positionality of white South Africans who do not choose to be in the privileged situation in which they find themselves. However, the problem associated with the use of the term ‘guilt’ is that it does not take into account the extent to which white people are involved in white privilege, since it suggests that the one from whom the guilt emanates is implicated and stained by the privilege as if she was directly involved in the act of oppression (328). Under these circumstances, Vice suggests that we instead turn our attention to ‘shame’, since it is the one feeling that is often met with a defensive approach on the part of those who are said to bear it. Shame, a suitably fungible term,

is therefore marked by its difference from guilt to the extent that it is “directed towards the self, rather than outwards toward a harm one brought about” (328).

“[W]hite silence will only serve to sustain white privilege, whereby those perceived as occupying towering positions over the rest will continue to do so, without taking opportunities to engage meaningfully and learn from the ‘diverse’ cultures within the ‘rainbow nation’”.

The feeling of shame, then, is the causal result of failing to meet the self-imposed standards that we accord ourselves, as opposed to the result of an unpleasant feeling that is associated with what one has done (328). Shame, as Vice correctly observes, is concerned, first and foremost, with whom one *is*. This is a radical thesis insofar as the responses to white privilege are concerned, because it acknowledges that while not all white people were directly involved in the oppression, they still benefit from a system that relied on their whiteness in order to survive and, consequently, they must undergo a deep emotional and cognitive dissonance between their inherent whiteness and the oppression of those who were used to sustain it.

This is akin to Albert Memmi’s notion of “the coloniser who refuses”, a proposition that presents a white person who is not complicit in the environment in which she finds herself, since it is understood in light of the ‘white master’ who comes to dwell among the ‘black natives’ but is “astonished by the number of beggars, the children wandering about half-naked” (63) and the scandal that is racial domination. On sight of this, the ‘white master’ then refuses to indulge



in the systems of oppression, naive to the fact that his complicity in the oppression means that “what he is actually renouncing is a part of himself” (63) since the individual is located *within* the community and does not occupy a type of acosmic position, transcending her surroundings and freed from the burden of skin colour. For Memmi, the ‘white master’ who refuses the conditions under which blacks are subjugated is in fact complicit insofar as her skin enables her to “participate in and benefit from those privileges” in which the master revels:

Does he receive less favourable treatment than his fellow citizens? Doesn't he enjoy the same facilities for travel? How could he help figuring, unconsciously, that he can afford a car, a refrigerator, perhaps a house? How can he go about freeing himself of this halo of prestige which crowns him and at which he would like to take offense? Should he happen to rationalise this contradiction so as to come to terms with this discomfort... (64)

The white master is clearly cast into an inherited world and must therefore choose to accept or refute the machinations of such a world. In feeling shameful, the white master rejects the oppressive – and indeed constructed – superiority of whiteness. It would seem, then, that the feeling of shame is correctly identified, by both Memmi and Vice, as an appropriate response to the question of white privilege, since it shows some inclination towards a responsibility not *for* the past systemic oppression, but for being the by-product of a system which aimed only to benefit white people and distance them from the sufferings of others. It is common to hear whites in South Africa declare that

they do not feel ashamed of the past, because they are not to blame. The presumption of innocence and worthiness are part and parcel of the privilege that is bestowed on white people – the knowledge that they were not involved directly or even collectively in creating a system of oppression and marginalisation absolves them from responsibility. However, to say this is to miss an opportunity to take on a responsibility not *for* the past, but rather, a responsibility *to* the future. This is primarily because white people have inherited a legacy and, as such, cannot merely deflect the shame that comes with the horrific past as if to suggest that their innocence means that, even accidentally, they played absolutely no role at all in maintaining subjugation. For this reason, Vice argues that the “sense of historical innocence is often self-serving and not merely ignorant” and must therefore result in further shame (331). I would argue, though, that once white people begin to see the evidence of the past as ever more prevalent, in other words once the pathology of whiteness begins to be marked and made visible, the indifference to the historical implications will at that point be enough to generate another kind of shame, resulting in an instance in which shame stems from their shamelessness! Ultimately, white people may have to confront feelings of shame once whiteness is made visible, and will therefore have no recourse in the silence that Vice suggests is necessary in order to take seriously the ethical primacy of the individual moral self. Thus, white silence will only serve to sustain white privilege, whereby those perceived as occupying towering positions over the rest will continue to do so, without taking opportunities to engage meaningfully and learn from the ‘diverse’ cultures within the ‘rainbow nation’. To retreat,

therefore, is not to take a feeling of shame and use it to direct an ethical impetus: it appears to me that silence is to be so guilt-ridden that one is reluctant to speak out, fearing that a disagreement with non-whites may be conceived as a demonstration of white supremacy. For Vice, the prescription is to

Live as quietly as possible, refraining from airing one's views on the political situation in the public realm, realising that it is not one's place to offer diagnoses and analyses, that blacks must be left to remake the country in their own way [because] whites have too long had influence and a public voice; now they should in humility, step back from expressing their thoughts or managing others. (335)

While Vice notes the limitations of silence on a personal and professional level, citing the Platonic relationship between self-knowledge and dialogue with those different from you – the idea that one finds oneself only through earnest interaction and engagement with other people divergent from oneself – her ‘silence’ prescription has limitations beyond those which she so readily acknowledges. Vice's resolution that “the relevant kind of silence is therefore a *political* silence” (335) has inadequate explanatory power in a country that vowed never to silence the voices, political or professional, of any one group. Hence, the suggestion that whites should exercise “silence in the political realm, rather than a professional silence or the stifling of all conversation with others in which race or privilege, for instance, is the topic” falls nothing short of a pipe-dream. How, in a country in which everything is so highly and overtly politicised, can it be suggested that whites retreat and

withdraw from the political realm? At once, the notion of politics which Vice invokes seem reductive at best and derisive at worst since the professional realm is political as Vincent so carefully demonstrates in her analyses of the institutional at Rhodes University. The personal, what is termed the 'private sphere' is also political, mediated primarily by that in which the individual is located.

One of the first public respondents to Vice's prescription was political commentator and associate at the Wits Centre for Ethics, Eusebuis McKaiser, who argued that it is deeply problematic for a country to argue that the idea of silence, political or otherwise, would be the morally correct course of action for white people, even if shame and regret are appropriate feelings for those who have benefited unjustly. He mentions, therefore, that the project of making whiteness visible does not necessarily mean that blackness replaces it. Thus McKaiser:

It is not black South Africans' turn to be political. It is all South Africans' duty to engage each other as equals both within the public and private spheres. Whites need to engage their whiteness publicly [...] I do not want to be shielded from whiteness I want to be given the space to rehearse my own full personhood as a black South African by engaging [...] publicly; it is the only way healthy relationships between blacks and whites can develop. (para. 18)

It would seem that the political is personal and the personal is political; whiteness is not merely the pigmentation of the skin, but also involves the systems of power and privilege that are sustained in the professional realm. Remaining silent simply

means that these systems are reinforced in ways that would otherwise not be possible had there been earnest ongoing dialogue between whites and non-whites. The problems with whiteness in the political realm need to be approached in the same way that the problems with whiteness are approached in the personal and professional realm, specifically, by making whiteness visible and, by virtue of this visibility and the resultant shame with which it is coupled, changing the ways in which white people interact with the structures that exist from a white supremacist discourse of the past, to a self-reflexive discourse of humility.

The South African media is plagued with examples of whiteness, be it print media, radio or television. Whether it is the unproductive and racist comments that can be found daily in every response to an online news article, or the disgruntled white people who mobilise whiteness as a signifier of "clean governance, reliability, and competence" (Steyn 128) on talk radio, incessant illustrations of what Steyn calls "White Talk" need to be replaced with talks that seek to negotiate an identity of South Africa that is not insensitive to the damage caused by the audibility of white talk. This is something which can only occur once whiteness is made visible, a visibility that cannot be obtained through silence. To repress oneself into a state of self-flagellation seems to me an exercise that reaffirms the ontology of white domination in that the characteristics of "White Talk" are not elided, but merely suppressed even though they exist in the minds of white people. Bearing in mind the overarching nature of white supremacy, a forced white silence seems tantamount to arguing that racism is fine so long as it is lodged in the hearts and minds of those from

whom it emanates. Genuine non-racist encounters with people of different backgrounds may never occur, since the sentiments held by white people would be silently repressed under a pretentious humility! McKaiser, then, rightly recommends to Vice that the way to confront whiteness is not to adopt a strategy of silence, but to engage black people while being mindful of not presenting whiteness as a normative standard to which they should aspire (para.18).

Steyn contends that ideas around European superiority "are strong enough to ensure a certain amount of 'buy-in' from some African people" (127) who would then be made to beg for white people to break their silence by participating in the political realm. Writing against this inevitable legitimisation by reverse, the black *Mail and Guardian* journalist, Mvuselelo Ngcoya, captures the cognitive dissonance engendered in him by this proposition quite neatly when he says:

Reading Vice, I was caught between two reactions. The first and most flagrant and visceral was: I don't flipping care. I wanted to meet this white threat of silence with a black silence of my own.

The second reaction was more measured, but I hated it more, because it requires that I say: "Please speak, *baas!*" (para. 17)

Ngcoya's aversion to his second reaction to the 'threat' of silence must be read as a disavowal of the meretricious role that silence plays, disguising itself as the manifestation of an ethical impulse, but in reality, inconspicuously requiring the black subject to beg for validation from the white

master by asking her to break her silence, if only for the black subject's need for recognition. In conjunction with such a meretricious role, there are a number of white supremacists who are hell-bent on maintaining the *status quo*, and therefore leaving whiteness the invisible entity that it is. Such individuals are outspoken in public forums on a daily basis, and persistently enlist to their supremacist agenda like-minded white people who have no qualms about living in a white supremacist society. Let us take, for instance, the likes of Andre Visagie, the former secretary general of the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB), who became infamous for violently storming off a live television interview with a black woman political analyst who challenged him about the ideology of white supremacy shortly after the murder of his leader Eugene Terre'Blanche. Here, Visagie, too, was exercising a certain kind of silence when he refused to engage the black woman, whose argument was that black South Africans continue to be subjected to macro-structural antagonism: "whites versus us [blacks]" (Maroleng 2010, Interview). For the most part, the limitations of this silence imply that well-meaning white people, like Vice herself, would not be able to influence morally depraved whites, and would thus pave the way for racists such as Visagie and his sympathisers to continue to dominate the discourse by obstinately claiming a position of victimhood and subsiding into silence when that position is challenged.

["The problems with whiteness in the political realm need to be approached in the same way that the problems with whiteness are approached in the personal and professional realm, specifically, by making whiteness visible"](#).

In response to the commotion that Vice's paper created, the F.W. de Klerk Foundation released a press statement asking her to withdraw her "witless" comments on whiteness and refrain from aiding the 'reverse apartheid' to which white people are subjected in a democratic South Africa:

We must challenge Ms Vice's views because they are dangerous. They will be eagerly grasped by a new generation of black racists who will use them to justify their increasingly aggressive campaign of anti-white stigmatisation and exclusion. (para.12)

What we have is a discursive strategy that attempts to reconfigure whiteness as disadvantageous and not beneficial. Whites such as F.W. de Klerk would argue, as he is known to have argued on international platforms, that whiteness in South Africa has become a liability. The suggestion conveyed by the press release on Vice's paper was, in the first instance, a flagging of the possibility that whites were increasingly becoming an unprotected minority in the country. This idea stems from the view that whites consider the slate as having been wiped clean by the new dispensation and political reforms that have come into place in a post-apartheid context – Affirmative Action (AA) and Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) to name a couple. The proposition, it seems, is that even talking about race is itself racist, since we ought to see people for their individuality rather than as members of a collective group. I return to the conceptual framework which earlier adumbrated Hegelian the need for mutual recognition. Since Vice's silence would ensure that, yet again, the political discourse

swings into a fixation with whiteness: it perpetuates and endorses its invisibility and continues to deny black people an opportunity to negotiate their own identity. It therefore lends itself quite neatly to the master narrative that suggests that the relationship between the master and the bondsman is dialectically established. The silence, then, functions merely as a self-indulgent, narcissistic tool that serves to keep white people in a state of heedlessness about the unearned privileges that they simply take as entitlement, privileges which are in fact built on the dependence on blacks. It is safe to conclude, then, that the critical theorising of white privilege has become a cornerstone of whiteness studies in South Africa. So, while white privilege manifests itself in many different contextual ways, it is accrued to white people by virtue of their being born into a white supremacist society. Since hegemony is relationally established, there is not only an epistemological frame within which to understand the Other, but also a power structure that locks both the master and the slave so that they can only exist at one another's behest. The importance of this dialectic is pivotal to our conception of race in the first place, not least the ideas around superiority and servitude. Only once we recognise the irony of this relationship, that the chains of the slave are those of the master as well, will we be able to understand the arbitrary nature of race, while at the same time realising the need to make the racial distinctions known. White privilege operates in a deceitful way because part of the privilege is the freedom from the burden of knowing one's whiteness, or thinking of oneself in terms of colour. The danger, then, is the normative nature whiteness assumes, making it invisible and therefore difficult for its group members to recognise.

Upon recognition of this whiteness, however, action rather than inaction is indispensable, and Vice's prescription of silence seems to me, although unintentionally so, insidious. While the type of silence recommended is intended to de-centre and disempower white privilege, the inadvertent result is that it ultimately re-centres and re-inscribes the very whiteness it wishes to silence. The notion of silence is not silent; it is as loud and boisterous as any overt attempt at maintaining white supremacy.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 See Michel Monahan's response to her argument.
- 2 Throughout this essay, I use the term non-white deliberately to emphasise a point. I want to put whiteness at the centre, but not in the sense of valorising or claiming it as the norm. Contrarily, by using 'non-white', the concept of 'white power' is highlighted and shown only to be vested in one category – whiteness. One may argue, indeed following Steve Biko's decentring of the term, that the focus is then placed on white people. But in an essay about making whiteness visible and 'marketing' it, the term can be useful only as a rhetorical strategy since I wish to accentuate the political nature of the struggle and indeed point towards the dependency of whiteness on 'non-whiteness'.
- 3 In the context of ordinary South African discourse, this brings to mind a poignant point raised by Louise Vincent in her paper "The Limitations of Interracial Contact", in which she argues that Rhodes University, attempting to be all-inclusive and liberal, has provided a variety of dietary options in its residence menus. However, "the options are labelled 'African' and 'normal'" (1433). She concludes, there can be "no more explicit exemplification of Richard Dyer's point (1997) that to be white is to occupy the position of privileged normalcy" (1433).

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