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Political Death and Neo-racism: Styles in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*

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In his lectures in 1975-1976, Michel Foucault conceptualised the inclination to commit murders in political circumstances, and delineated it as 'political death' (2003).¹ Such killings encompass both corporeal and psychological execution exercised through diverse means, for instance, murder, manslaughter, genocide, social ostracism and exposure to deadly environments. Apparently, today political death is implemented either through implicit biopolitical stratagems or overt violence by those who are already in power or those who attempt to gain power, and is prompted through phenomena such as racism, patriotism and xenophobia.

This paper aims to examine 'political death' prompted by racism, and interrogates the ways and means by which these murders are actualised and rationalised, but ultimately rendered invisible in society, as represented in Athol Fugard's Anglophone play-text, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1972). Set against the backdrop of the apartheid epoch, Fugard's play focuses on the regulation and coercion of black populations by Afrikaner rulers in postcolonial South Africa. By analysing the play through Frantz Fanon's, Foucault's and Achille Mbembe's lenses on biopolitics and racism, I argue that the concept of political death offers perspectives on biopolitical frameworks that foreground non-normative killings; disembodied deaths. The discussion creates a space to reflect meaningfully and critically on 'living-dead' conditions encountered by many populations today.

Key words: biopolitics, racism, political death, Fugard, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*

This article explores the representations of political killings exercised through the weapon of racism, as represented in Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona's play, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1972).² It focuses on a close textual investigation of Styles – one character in the play.

In his lectures (1975-1976), Michel Foucault explained the inclination to commit murders in political circumstances:

When I say 'killing', I obviously do not mean simply murder as such, but also every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to

¹ Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the College De France 1975-76*, trans. David Macey, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana (New York: Picador, 2003).

² The play-text used for this analysis appears in *Township Plays* (Oxford edition, 1999) which mentions Fugard as the playwright of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*.

death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection and so on.³

Implicitly, political killings encompass both corporeal and psychological execution exercised through diverse means such as murder, manslaughter, genocide, social ostracism and exposure to deadly environments. Foucault shows the importance of racism in such killings – ‘a power that has the right of life and death, wishes to work with the instruments, mechanism, and technology of normalization’, and asserts that it is ‘racism’ which is the ‘indispensable pre-condition’ for exercising ‘the right to kill’.⁴ This article examines political killings prompted by racism and interrogates the ways and means by which these murders are actualised and rationalised, but ultimately rendered invisible. It refers to South Africa and engages with the phenomenon of disembodied death.

Racism is perceived in diverse ways in different socio-political contexts. Two noteworthy polarities are, ‘evidence of prejudice’ and the ‘structural, institutional edifice and its practical consequences.’⁵ Racism is materialised, both in expressing contemptuous prejudices and in exercising institutionalised political authority. Foucault argued that at the end of the 19th Century, racism moved beyond prejudices; it ‘removed from the ordinary racism that takes the traditional form of mutual contempt or hatred between races’; instead it is ‘bound up with the workings of a State that is obliged to use race, to exercise its sovereignty power.’⁶

Foucault’s theory can be employed to suggest that in the early 1990s racism was embedded in political power. This parallels Zygmunt Bauman’s definition of racism, as ‘an effective instrument of political practice’ and ‘a thoroughly modern weapon used in the conduct of premodern, or at least not exclusively modern, struggles.’⁷ Premodern here refers to the pre-digital age and alludes to the twentieth century drama. In this respect, it is used for political ends and administrative means in contemporary societies. In political contexts specifically, it is a regular means of controlling subjugated persons: yet, it often appears camouflaged, echoing Fanon’s

³ Foucault, 2003, 256.

⁴ Ibid., 256

⁵ Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 89.

⁶ Foucault, 2003, 258.

⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 61.

analysis of racism. Fanon asserts that even though the Western Bourgeoisie is 'fundamentally racist', they often 'mask this racism by a multiplicity of nuances which allow it to preserve intact its proclamation of mankind's outstanding dignity.'⁸

Although racism became explicit and first 'develop[d] with colonization' as a biopolitical means, it is not a static phenomenon, but functions recurrently in diverse ways depending on the contemporary socio-political needs and prejudices of a society.⁹ A case in point is Boer racism.¹⁰ In 1910, South Africa became an autonomous state within British rule, and the Union of South Africa was established with Afrikaner rulers. However, Afrikaner rulers continued to marginalise native South Africans by imposing apartheid laws based on skin colour. Hence, 'Boer racism was more explicit than that of the British colonies.'¹¹ In this apartheid era, racism functioned in a more powerful manner, with a façade, as the country's rules and regulations masked segregation. With apartheid laws politically implemented, particularly through influx control means, the risk of death for black colonised people increased (this will be further discussed below). Referring specifically to political tensions, Stoler also asserts that racism 'always appears *renewed* and *new* at the same time' [original emphasis].¹² In this sense, racism is a modern biopolitical weapon in disguise: thus it can be identified as neo-racism used for corporeal and psychological murder.

Developing Foucault's view, Stoler also argues that '[r]acism does not merely arise in moments of crisis, in sporadic cleansings. It is internal to the biopolitical state, woven into the weft of the social body, threaded through its fabric.'¹³ Unlike biopower, which intends above all to discipline individuals, biopolitics aims to '[use] overall mechanisms [...], to achieve overall state of equilibration or regularity [...], [by] taking control of life of biological process of man-as-species.'¹⁴ Foucault explains that the objects of biopolitical operations are not individual human beings, but

⁸ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 163.

⁹ Foucault, 2003, 257.

¹⁰ Boers are the members of Dutch population settled in South Africa in the 17th century. The decedents of

Boers in the 19th century are also called Afrikaners. South Africa became a British colony, creating a tension between British and Dutch settlers, which led to the Anglo-Boer War (1898-1902).

¹¹ Daryl Glaser, *Politics and Society in South Africa: A Critical Introduction* (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 27.

¹² Stoler, 1995, 89.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁴ Foucault, 2003, 246-247.

masses, with the aim to exercise power over them. This links to Fanon's clarification of the relationship between racism and existence – '[t]he object of racism is no longer the individual man but a certain form of existing.'¹⁵

Developing his concept of necropolitics, Achille Mbembe also agrees that racism is 'the ever present shadow in Western political thought and practice, especially when it comes to imagining the inhumanity of, or rule over, foreign peoples.'¹⁶ For instance during the period of colonisation, South African plantation workers were subjected to the gaze of the coloniser. Moreover, while referring to the political sovereignty and biopolitical operations in the contemporary world, Mbembe writes that '[t]o exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power.'¹⁷ These death conditions create mass destruction and deadly environments in communities. Although Mbembe's observation focuses on contemporary warfare, his perception is relevant to political death through racism. In view of such perspectives, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* is outstanding; it theatrically testifies to indirect and invisible political death.

Inherent in the historical fact of apartheid regulations is the dimension of biopolitics; this is present in the scholarship on *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. Yet, apparently, a gap exists in literature on the complex nature of political death, particularly of dis-embodied death. This is where my reading departs from the existing debate; I offer a contribution to the long-standing critical vocabulary of one of Fugard's most acclaimed works. The article also examines how these politically-killed people attempt to 'gain life' through humour, thus challenge the agency of political coercion. Drawing on the influx control concerns of the apartheid epoch and paying due acknowledgment to the existing critical literature on the play (e.g. Andre Brink 1993 and 1997 and Brian Crow 2002), this article approaches the subject primarily from Fanon, Foucault and Mbembe's perspectives on direct and indirect murder and neo-racism. The essay argues that the concept of political death offers perspectives on biopolitical frameworks that foreground non-normative killings – and dis-embodied

¹⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 32.

¹⁶ Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, in *Public Culture*, 15.1 (2003): 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

deaths – while attending to ever-pressing economic demands, particularly experienced by postcolonial populations.¹⁸

A note on apartheid politics is necessary as it provides a backdrop against which to read the play. Irrespective of the country's independence from Western colonisation, Afrikaner settler rulers continued to implement segregation regulations, by categorising all South Africans as White, Asian, Coloured or Black.¹⁹ Using the Group Areas Act, the best, most developed areas were reserved for whites, whereas the least developed rural outskirts were allotted to non-whites: more than 80% of land was granted to white people who made up only about 15% of the total number of citizens. Abject poverty and abysmal modes of marginalisation were a matter of policy, particularly for black populations because they outnumbered the other groups. Black people were not only dispossessed of *their* lands and offered menial jobs, either in dangerous environments such as mines and factories; they were exposed to hunger, disrespect and subjugation. This segregation was an intentional socio-political economic strategy to preserve a supremacist monopoly for the Afrikaner rulers. This is an avowal of the rulers' racism and echoes an objective of biopolitics – to seize and control human beings as a 'global mass'.²⁰ An apposite case in point is represented through *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*.

'Bloody circus monkey': Styles in Sizwe Bansi is Dead

Sizwe Bansi is Dead is 'constructed in two circles: the story of the photographer Styles and that of his client Sizwe;' the focus of this article rests only with Styles' story, the first part.²¹ The later part of the story also reveals political death as Sizwe is compelled to live as another man's ghost for survival. Set in the township named New Brighton in Port Elizabeth, the play opens in a photography studio with the owner Styles delivering a monologue. It begins with Styles reading newspaper headlines to the audience before Sizwe's (Robert's) arrival. The theatrical importance of Styles' narrative is apparent as his lengthy one-way dialogue with the audience lasts for more than twenty or thirty minutes in performance and comprises

¹⁸ Dis-embodied deaths in this context refer to, not literal death, but psychological, political and civil death manifested through diverse technologies of power,

¹⁹ Glaser, 2001.

²⁰ Foucault, 2003. 242-243.

²¹ Andre Brink, "Challenge and Response: The Changing Face of Theater in South Africa," *Twentieth Century Literature* 43.2 (1997): 168.

fifteen pages in the script.²² The politically-charged theatre as revealed through Styles' representation of exploitation may sensitise the white audience to be critical of apartheid rules. The headline about a car plant expansion without an increase of the employees' 'pay-pocket' triggers the narration of a previous incident: a visit to the Ford Factory by Henry Ford the Second (the owner from America, where Styles worked before setting up as a photography studio).²³ As Brink states, Styles' narrativisation 'contains a strong and explicit political text' and 'signs of more problematic ideological subtext'. Styles' revelation is a 'political satire' and explores the 'economic choice' of black subjects.²⁴

Styles' service in the factory for a year – in 'the dangerous hot test section without an asbestos apron and fire-proof gloves', because authorities did not 'replace the ones [he] had lost' – is a stark testimony to incongruities of exploitation.²⁵ Working at a factory without safety and protective clothing is hazardous: the authorities' ignorance of and lack of concern towards Styles' life intensifies the creation of deadly environments for black workers, recalling Foucault's definition of political murder. Thus, for Styles, survival is uncertain in the factory, epitomising the disavowal of black South Africans' existence. This is a type of political murder.

In addition to the physical danger, Styles' narrative depicts the verbal harassment encountered by the black workers at the factory. Their Afrikaner boss, the General Foreman named Bradley, insists that they must 'impress Mr Henry Ford that they are better than those monkeys in his own country, those niggers in Harlem who know nothing but strike, strike,' a depiction of racial prejudices and pejorative attitudes experienced by black individuals both in America and South Africa.²⁶ It is a powerful recapitulation of colonial history because during the period of British colonisation black South Africans were marginalised and deprived of many human rights simply because of their skin colour. Discriminatory identification in particular implies that black workers are exposed to psychological persecution – a 'system based on the exploitation of a given race by another, on the contempt in which a given branch of humanity is held by a form of civilization that pretends to

²² Dennis Walder, "Introduction," in *Township Plays*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 149-164.

²³ Ibid., 149.

²⁴ Andre Brink, "'No Way Out': *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and the Dilemma of Political Drama in South Africa," *Twentieth Century Literature*, Athol Fugard Issue, 39.4 (1993): 441.

²⁵ Ibid., 152-153.

²⁶ Ibid., 154.

superiority.²⁷ This recalls the postcolonial notion of the 'primitive other' which degrades colonised subjects in Western discourses: for instance, in colonial discourses the postcolonial subjects were described through animal imagery by constructing derogatory identities.²⁸ Foucault's observation (made in the 1970s), of the removal of the 'ordinary racism' of 'contempt' is unsupported here, as evidenced through Styles' description.²⁹ Yet, Fanon's suggestion that the 'major artery [of such stereotyping] is fed from the heart of those various theories that have tried to prove that the Negro is a stage in the slow evolution of monkey into man' is, thus, reinforced in the play.³⁰

Colonial legacies exist through apartheid politics in postcolonial South Africa as the oppressed are still under disparagement, as evidenced in Bradley's reference to the factory workers. Stoler posits that racism is not simply a biological science but is materialised frequently on a daily basis, and the play supports this.³¹ Black workers' involvement in strikes in Harlem show their relatively more empowered status compared to their counterparts in South Africa, as when employers institute unfair practices by abusing workers and intimidating them, a strike may empower the workers.³² Explicit here is South African black workers' disempowerment at the hands of white employers.

Ironically, Bradley advises Styles and his co-workers to display their contentment by singing and dancing whilst working – by hiding their 'true feelings'.³³ Bradley's intention is to influence Ford, who is part of the process of oppression. This recalls Fanon's assumption that white colonisers 'mask' racism.³⁴ Styles is given a new safety apron and fire-proof gloves in preparation for Ford's visit, further confirmation of Bradley's hypocrisy and racism. Styles recalls with bitter humour how he was an 'Armstrong on the moon' in his new clothing, satirising his phony elevation from a monkey to an astronaut.³⁵ This again alludes to Fanon's observation about

²⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann. (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 174.

²⁸ Ashcroft et.al, *POST-COLONIAL STUDIES: The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 79.

²⁹ Foucault, 2003, 258.

³⁰ Fanon, 2008, 8.

³¹ Stoler, 1995.

³² This is complicated by the role of trade unions in the anti-apartheid struggle.

³³ Athol Fugard, 1999, 153-154.

³⁴ Fanon, 1963, 163.

³⁵ Ibid., 153.

white colonisers, and functions as 'objective evidence that expresses repressed and camouflaged racism.'³⁶

Nonetheless, referring to animal images used for discrimination, Fanon writes that the black subject:

laughs to himself every time he spots an allusion to the animal world in the other's words. For he knows that he is not an animal; and it is precisely at the moment he realizes his humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure its victory.³⁷

Securing a victory on these terms, Styles subverts Bradley's humiliation by being his translator. Styles translates Bradley's request to '[t]ell the boys in your language, that this is a very big day in their lives', as '[g]entlemen, this old fool says this is a hell of a big day in our lives.'³⁸ Styles' ploy – the transformation of 'boys' into 'gentlemen' and Bradley into an 'old fool' – is an indication of black workers' animosity towards their boss and fantasy of shedding their subjugation. For instance, Styles creates humour when he mimics their boss: it resonates with Styles' idea that the photograph, both taking it and being the subject of it, is '[a] dream'.³⁹

This is an 'important weapon of survival and resistance' in the factory, because it relieves them from their hard work, labour exploitation and social ostracism, while adding humour to their lives.⁴⁰ Moreover, in his dramatisation of the factory event, Styles acts all four roles himself, Bradley, factory workers and Henry Ford, using their languages: Xhosa, Afrikaans and English. In doing so, he not only enhances victory, but also subverts the white oppressors' prejudices. The play's political intervention against racism implies that there is no difference between native South Africans and white rulers. The difference is a phenomenon constructed by the oppressors for the control of black citizens.

Unlike normal days (on which the black workers were always under strict surveillance), Styles narrativises the role-reversal on the day of Ford's visit: '[w]e

³⁶ Fanon, 2008, 8.

³⁷ Fanon, 1963, 43.

³⁸ Fugard, 1999, 153.

³⁹ Ibid., 164.

⁴⁰ Brian Crow, 'African metatheater: Criticizing Society, Celebrating the Stage,' *Research in African Literatures*, 33.1 (2002): 139.

were watching them, nobody was watching us.⁴¹ This alludes to the Homi K. Bhabha's contention that '[t]he fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master's place while keeping his place in the slave's *avenging* anger [original emphasis].⁴² Styles dramatises Ford's visit:

Let me tell you what happened. The big doors opened; next thing the General Superintendent, Line Supervisor, [...] like a pack of puppies! [...] In came a tall man, six foot six hefty, full of respect and dignity [...] I marveled at him. Let me tell you what he did.

(*Three enormous strides*) One...two...three... (*Cursory look around as he turns and takes the same three strides back*).

One...two...three...OUT! Into the Galaxy and gone! That's all. Didn't talk to me, [...] or anybody [...] And what did I see when those three Galaxies disappeared! [...] 'Double speed on the line! Make up for production lost!'⁴³

Ford's visit provides no benefit to the workers as evidenced through his '*cursory look*' and the brief stay at the factory where black workers' survival was jeopardised. Instead, the owner's supremacy is visible, shown in his physical stature and his desire for respect. The allusion to the 'galaxy' implies his massive, unreachable power. The metaphor 'puppies', whilst recalling the domestication of dogs as loyal to men, also represents the non-reciprocal relationship between Ford and the workers. Ford's visit increases the risk of death for the workers, as they have to 'double' their labour to cover the lost production.

However, everything at the factory – including the working conditions and the physical and psychological conditions of workers – was not openly revealed to Ford, exhibiting Bradley's hypocrisy and dishonesty. Ford's visit itself was a deception, as displayed through his lack of genuine interest in any matters concerning the workers. Similar to Bradley's tactics of exploitation, Ford's ignorance as the owner of the factory recalls the state's marginalisation of the natives. Styles' anecdote, which he

⁴¹ Fugard, 1999, 154.

⁴² Homi K Bhabha, 'Foreword to the 1986 edition: Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition', Fanon, 2008, xxviii.

⁴³ Fugard, 1999, 155. This extract also resonates with Michel Foucault's conceptualisation of power, put forth in *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Allen Lane (London: Penguin: 1977).

likens to the newspaper headline where underpaid workers are misused. Expanding the products of the car plant, is useful in emblematising the oppressor's tragic livelihood. This recalls Fanon's assertion that '[a]ll forms of exploitation are identical because all of them are applied against the same "object": in this context the object is the black person.⁴⁴

Referring to European colonisers' exploitative apparatus, Fanon writes that:

[t]he oppressor, in his own sphere, starts the process, a process of domination, of exploitation and of pillage, and in the other sphere the coiled, plundered creature which is the native provides fodder for the process as best he can.⁴⁵

This colonial stratagem reappears in Styles' narration of his bonded servility to the factory owner. Ford considers Styles a consumable inferior resource for his act of plundering: he exploits Styles' labour ruthlessly. Styles symbolises 'fodder' for Ford's 'pillage'. Bradley's statement that Ford 'owns the plant and everything in it' is a verification of Ford's masked violence.⁴⁶ This articulation induces Styles to identify himself as a puppet which is moved and controlled by strings from above his position, in his words, like a 'bloody circus monkey! [s]elling [...] to another man.'⁴⁷ Styles' perception that his life was possessed – and that he was at the mercy of his employer – culminated in his departure from the factory: he begins a small business of his own – the photoshop in New Brighton. Brink notes that Styles' story 'beats' the brutal apartheid system.⁴⁸ He intends to become an independent person, '[t]o stand straight in a place of [his] own;' in Fanon's terms he wants to stop being 'the coiled, plundered creature'.⁴⁹ Read as a fictional reconfiguration of Fanon, Styles' story in the play generates its own theatrical intervention into postcolonial cultural politics.

To conclude, although this analysis refers to the apartheid segregation in postcolonial South Africa, it creates a space to reflect on the biopolitical operations in the contemporary world where human existence is subject to diverse aspects of segregations - racial, linguistic, religious - and to 'political killings'. This condition is

⁴⁴ Fanon, 2008, 65.

⁴⁵ Fanon, 1963, 51.

⁴⁶ Fugard, 1999, 153.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴⁸ Brink, 1997, 168.

⁴⁹ Fugard, 1999, 157; Fanon, 2008, 51.

'necropolitics' where 'the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations' is the central phenomenon of power.⁵⁰ Mbembe perceives this as the power of the continuum of death in the contemporary society, which explains the 'maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*' in which many populations have to suffer life-long processes of death, not just *once-only death*.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Mbembe, 2003, 14.

⁵¹ Ibid., 40. There are highly diverse populations in terms of class, race and gender. What is highlighted here even by Mbembe is the racially-downtrodden, economically poor populations.

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