

# A Haunting Responsibility to James Cone

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## Abstract

The Communist Manifesto begins with the words, 'A spectre is haunting Europe – a spectre of Communism'. Maybe with the death of *the* father of Black Theology one could argue that a spectre of Black Theology is haunting the globe. A Spirit of Black Theology is haunting the globe and particularly South Africa, and this spirit is seeking to become manifest, in other words, seeking to be made manifest by finding an embodiment. Theologies in the South have inherited this spirit, the spirit of James Cone, and with this inheritance comes a responsibility. In this article I will seek to respond to this spirit, but in the light of another of Marx's texts, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, where he argues that the new social revolution, which would maybe be an appropriate response to Cone's spirit, is a revolution that takes its poetics from the future. "The social revolution cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped itself of all its superstitions concerning the past. Earlier revolutions relied on memories out of world history in order to drug themselves against their own content. In order to find their own content, the revolutions of the 19th century have to let the dead bury the dead. Before, the expression exceeded the content; now the content exceeds the expression" (Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*). The content, the cry, exceeds the expression. Between these two texts of Karl Marx (and Engels), I will specifically be reading Cone's *expropriation* of the cry of black pain, and how this cry calls for a response (*expression*) in the contemporary context of mass migration, fundamentalism and a shifting world order from a mono-polar world to perhaps multi-polar globe, whilst heeding Marx's words that the content exceeds the expression.

**Keywords:** Haunting, responsibility, James Cone

## 1. Thrown into a world stratified by the White Face

One is thrown into a world, but what kind of world is it? In this section I will be referring to Deleuze & Guattari's (2011:174-191) interpretation of the White Face (Face of Christ) as the abstract machine of the West, constructing the Modern Western World into which one is thrown.

This is a world of clearly differentiated, stratified bodies, organs, which are cut out and/or etched into the body without organs (Deleuze & Guattari, 2009:11), as each different body – as a differently identified organ, for example the different races, or different sexual orientation, or different genders, or different classifica-

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tions of normality and ability in contrast to disability and abnormal – are all cut out or etched into this body without organs. One could argue that Flesh, Life suffers this cutting, this etching, and these stratifications. However, Life or Flesh would already be its own differentiation cut into the body without organs. For the sake of the argument, I will remain with flesh that suffers this ontology and thus epistemology, which transforms the flesh into clearly differentiated bodies.

This is the suffering of all flesh that is caught in the gaze of the White Face, the abstract machine of the West. There is a certain universalism to this suffering flesh, as no flesh escapes this gaze of the White Face.

Cone (1977:153-154) as well as Biko (2004:27) were often in critical conversations with such universalisation of suffering, most clearly articulated in the Communist and/or Marxist ideas, as such universalisation denied the particularity of black pain. Likewise, I do not want to deny the particularity of different *expressions* of suffering, by including all suffering in the universal suffering of flesh, although I do believe that turning to the suffering flesh, or the naked cry, is different from the “particular” universal suffering of workers under the market conditions of global capitalism. What is important to note is that whatever particularity one focusses on it is and remains an *expression* of suffering, namely a giving voice to suffering and never suffering flesh pure and naked, but always only as it is *expressed* by someone.

Yet, there *is* suffering of flesh at the hands and gaze of the White Face, the abstract machine, with its metaphysics and epistemology and its determining (colonising) ontology. The flesh, the Life that irrespective of the skin colour of the body has and will be colonized by the White Face, which raises the question: how to speak, how to *express* the pain of the cry, the suffering of the flesh without falling into the various traps of identity politics, but neither falling in the traps of universalist reason, typical of the Old Left. Maybe, what I want to argue for is the victim-in-person, rather than the victim-of-race, or victim-of-class or victim-of-gender and/or the victim-of-ability/disability. In this sense, I will be following François Laruelle’s interpretation of the victim-in-person: ‘The victim-in-person, as Laruelle calls her to highlight her real character, her lived or flesh-and-blood character, does not inspire philosophers and intellectuals in the same way that heroes, or brave resisters, or those who turn the tide and heroically vanquish their enemies, do. So, the victim becomes the unthought of philosophy, a stumbling block to its standard practice’ (Laruelle, 2015:xi).

All the different victims of the past, victims-of-race, victims-of-slavery, victims-of-gender, victims-of-gender-and-race, etcetera have played a vitally important part and role in the history of rights and specifically human rights. Their fight for self-determination as well as their battle for the right to speak *in their own voice* in the various public spaces has firstly broadened the public space, and secondly brought

greater democracy to these public spaces, and for these victories the world owes these brave fighters a tremendous debt. The fight for a self-determining voice in the public space remains a fight for a voice in a world, which is carried out by the White Face. In other words, these nearly heard voices do not change the space, but maybe only democratises the space slightly more. What about dreaming or inventing a completely new world and even a new humanity? Is that not what Fanon<sup>2</sup> was writing about: a different world, not a world of the past, but a world that is invented rather than discovered (colonised)? Not to seek to democratise the world as it is believed to be, but to invent a new world, both a new Africa as well as a new Europe.

I do not want to separate the invention of a new world from the important roles all the different historical victims have played in their different battles, but I also believe that these roles need to be unpacked, as the battle for the space will never be over, and there might be an inherent reason why it can never be over, unless one moves away from an antagonistic battle for space towards invention. To unpack these roles, and specifically the inherent reason why the battle is never over, is not a denial or criticism, but it is an awareness of the incompleteness of the struggle, as long as it is struggle about who colonises the space.

I have just mentioned the importance of self-determination, but self-determination is only possible when a subject (individual) identifies him or herself as a subject in relation to a group, which, as Mouffe<sup>3</sup> argues, is possible only on the basis of differentiation into clear camps of us and them, and the necessary hegemony that goes with such clear differentiations.

## 2. The particular vs the universal

Hubert Sauper's 2014 documentary film, which he wrote, filmed and directed, *We come as friends*, is a film about the war, neo-colonialism and finally the division of Sudan into two countries. The film begins with a little boy walking completely naked down a dusty African road looking and smiling into the camera. It is as if this little boy, a symbol of life, a symbol of naked innocent life, is looking into the camera, into the lens, into the gaze of colonialism. Life, naked innocent life is smiling, looking into the gaze of global modernity and calling this "modernity" into responsibility. Calling this camera, symbol of all that modernity (with its epistemology and

<sup>2</sup> For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavour to create a new man (Fanon, 2004:239)

<sup>3</sup> I argue that once we understand that every identity is relational and that the affirmation of a difference is a precondition for the existence of any identity – i.e. the perception of something 'other' which constitutes its 'exterior' – we can understand why politics, which always deals with collective identities, is about the constitution of a 'we' which requires as its very condition of possibility the demarcation of a 'they' (Mouffe, 2013:5).

technology) stands for, into responsibility, and thereby to respond to this naked life, naked black experience as Cone<sup>4</sup> and Vellum (2015:5) might say.

This is the first scene of the film; in the second scene the film turns to the small plane in which the narrator, director and film maker is travelling with this co-pilot. The local co-pilot sees a small music box fixed to the dashboard of the plane; he winds up the music box to play its tune, whilst asking the narrator why he has a child's plaything on the dashboard? The pilot responds by saying that the tune that the music box is playing is *The Internationale*<sup>5</sup>. These two images introduce the film, even before the title of the film appears. The little naked black boy looking into the camera, calling the camera and all it stands for and all that stands behind the camera into responsibility, and behind the camera is a man who has a child's plaything fixed to the dashboard of his plane, which plays *The Internationale*. It is as if a *Spectre of Communism is haunting this world* and maybe more so now than ever before.

Yet, in this film, it is the *particular* Sudanese naked boy calling the gaze of the camera into responsibility. Is this naked Sudanese boy the antithesis of the camera? Is he the other of the camera?

Black Consciousness in the tradition of Biko which calls for an antithesis to the thesis of white colonialism and/or white racism (Biko, 2004:55). To use Biko's interpretation of the dialectic: there is a thesis (white racism) and therefore the

<sup>4</sup> We must create a global vision of human liberation and include in it the distinctive contribution of the black experience (Cone, 1977:156).

<sup>5</sup> Stand up, damned of the Earth/ Stand up, prisoners of starvation / Reason thunders in its volcano / This is the eruption of the end. / Of the past let us make a clean slate / Enslaved masses, stand up, stand up. / The world is about to change its foundation / We are nothing, let us be all.

Chorus: This is the final struggle / Let us group together, and tomorrow / The Internationale / Will be the human race.

There are no supreme saviours / Neither God, nor Caesar, nor tribune. / Producers, let us save ourselves, Decree the common salvation. / So that the thief expires, / So that the spirit be pulled from its prison, Let us fan our forge ourselves / Strike the iron while it is hot.

The State oppresses and the law cheats. / Tax bleeds the unfortunate. / No duty is imposed on the rich; The rights of the poor is an empty phrase. / Enough languishing in custody! / Equality wants other laws: No rights without duties, she says, / Equally, no duties without rights.

Hideous in their apotheosis/ The kings of the mine and of the rail. / Have they ever done anything other Than steal work? / Inside the safeboxes of the gang, / What work had created melted. / By ordering that they give it back, / The people want only their due.

The kings made us drunk with fumes, / Peace among us, war to the tyrants! / Let the armies go on strike, Stocks in the air, and break ranks. / If they insist, these cannibals / On making heroes of us, They will know soon that our bullets / Are for our own generals.

Workers, peasants, we are / The great party of labourers. / The earth belongs only to men; / The idle will go to reside elsewhere. / How much of our flesh have they consumed? / But if these ravens, these vultures Disappear one of these days, / The sun will still shine forever.

need for an antithesis (Black Consciousness), and only then is there a possibility of a synthesis, interpreted as non-racialism (Biko, 2004:55).

In light of such a dialectic, one could argue that what is necessary is truly a strong and powerful antithesis, but an antithesis to what? Maybe an antithesis to what Fanon<sup>6</sup> calls internalisation of inferiority, namely epidermalization, or what Mignolo calls *coloniality of being* (see Maldonado-Torres, 2007:242). An antithesis, as an exclusive black consciousness in Biko's sense, it is necessary, where white voices are excluded<sup>7</sup>. Such an antithesis would be the positive image, as the opposite (antithesis) of the internalized inferiority. For such a positive image, positive identity to develop, clear differentiation and hegemony is necessary. As Cone argues, a black theology for the black community against the dominant theology of Europe and North America, which would then need to be interpreted as being heretical (Cone, 1985:768). As Mouffe argues: a clear us against them is necessary for any positive identity to be developed. It is also for this reason that Cone argues that instead of turning to 'Reinhold Niebuhr and John Bennet for ethical guidance in those troubled times, we searched our past for insight, strength and the courage to speak and do the truth in an extreme situation of oppression (Cone, 1977:147). This was Cone's struggle to reconcile Black Power (for example the statement written in July 1966) with Christian love (which is mostly interpreted as an inclusive love) and thus the separation between Martin Luther King, Jr (inclusive love) and Black Power (see Cone 1977:148). Christian love was interpreted as an inclusive love, specifically when interpreted within the context of white theology, which is taught in most Western seminaries. This dominant Western theology of inclusive love is internalized.

While the rise and growth of independent black churches suggest that black people had a different perception of the gospel than whites, yet there was no formal theological tradition to which we could turn in order to justify our definition of Black Power as an expression of the Christian Gospel. Our intellectual ideas of God, Jesus, and the Church were derived from white European theologians and their textbooks (Cone, 1977:148).

<sup>6</sup> Fanon calls this internalisation of inferiority epidermalization (Fanon, 2008:xiii) as it is indeed an epidemic.

<sup>7</sup> Let me hasten to say that I am not claiming that segregation is necessarily the natural order; however, given the facts of the situation where a group experiences privilege at the expense of others, then it becomes obvious that a hastily arranged integration cannot be the solution to the problem. It is rather like expecting the slave to work together with the slave-master's son to remove all the conditions leading to the former's enslavement (Biko 2004:22).

The power of definition had to be challenged<sup>8</sup>, as this power still rested with the white theologians and the Western theological establishment.

It is in this social and religious context that the term “Black Theology” was created and was initially understood as the theological arm of Black Power (Cone 1977:149). “Black Theology” was a response to the desire to search within faith for a response to the political, economic, social and religious challenges without religion becoming once again the opiate of the masses (see Cone 1977:149). The question is whether religion and/or ideology is not always the opiate of the masses?

To develop a “Black Theology” it was necessary to turn to the past, but not the past of Luther, Aquinas or Calvin, but rather the past of David Walker, Daniel Payne and W.E.B. Du Bois (Cone 1977:149).

The Black Theology for Cone<sup>9</sup> was a combination of “African” and “Christian”, which is similar, but also very different from what Fanon called for, as he argued that he will not search in the past, but rather in the future. ‘I am not a prisoner of History. I must not look for the meaning of my destiny in that direction. I must constantly remind myself that the real *leap* consists of introducing invention into life’ (Fanon 2008:204).

Cone’s Black Theology developed from what might be termed identity theology as in identity politics, and later moved towards a more inclusive universalism, which included all the different struggles for life against the power of death. This can also be seen in his conversations with the universalism of the Marxist (Cone, 1977:153-154). In his article written in 2000 this struggle between identity politics and universalism is most clearly spelled out.

Cone argues that five main themes defined the character of black religious thought: justice, liberation, hope, love and suffering (Cone, 1985:756). These five themes are unpacked, interpreted and understood from within the context of the lived experience of blacks. There is a fine line of differentiation between the lived experience and identity politics. Cone justifies his “identity theology” as he argues, just as whites used their ‘cultural perspective to dominate others, blacks used theirs to affirm their dignity and to empower themselves to struggle for justice’ (Cone, 1985:756).

The challenge for identity theology or identity politics is that the moment one *names* (identifies and differentiates) or *expresses* the cry, the Life, the experience of suffering and/or oppression, or the moment one identifies the wretched

<sup>8</sup> For the power of definition is a prerogative that oppressors never want to give up (Cone, 1977:149).

<sup>9</sup> I shall call them “African” and “Christian.” Black religious thought is not identical with the Christian theology of white Americans. Nor is it identical with traditional African beliefs past or present. It is both – but reinterpreted for and adapted to the life-situation of black people’s struggle for justice in a nation whose social, political, and economic structures are dominated by a white racist ideology (Cone, 1985:755).

of the earth, one has done that on the basis of a positive identification. The moment one gives those wretched a particular identity, for example: a racial, sexual, economic, social identity, I believe one has a problem of identity theology and identity politics, and I would include Marcella Althaus-Reid's (2000) book *Indecent Theology*, as she identifies, names what is indecent. The moment one names it, the moment one calls it, one has an identity, namely something identifiable as differentiated. Although going back to where I started, there is a historical and political necessity of such positive identities to counter the self-hatred (see Cone 1985:763) inflicted over centuries of exploitation – conscious of the necessity of such positive identification, but likewise aware that such positive identification, as Mouffe argues, always happens via clear differentiation into us and them. These differentiations are not just into clear groups, but together with the us vs them is also the good vs wrong, evil vs godly, etcetera and thus the good, God and Christ are included in this differentiation by identifying God as black, Christ as black or Christ as the wretched of the earth, which is in response to the previous identification of God as white, and Christ as a blond-blue-eyed messiah. Such identification is based on differentiation – to carve the body without organs into identifiable organs and clearly differentiated strata is such a White Face thing to do. It is the gaze of the White Face (Deleuze & Guattari, 2011:174-191) that differentiates and stratifies. The strata are identified either via white dominance or *repeated* via the need for black dignity, and so the world or Rhizome of the White Face grows and expands its dominance.

Mouffe's (2013) response to this identity through differentiation is not necessarily antagonism, but she suggests agonism. Mouffe's agonism might be a way to move beyond the dialectic of a clearly identified thesis with a likewise clearly identified antithesis which stand antagonistically against each other in clearly demarcated us and them camps.

Agonism for me is maybe born from the agony that there is nothing positively identifiable about flesh, Life or the cry, but that all identification, all differentiation is something that happens to flesh, Life, the cry once the white face has turned its gaze towards it. Biko wants to turn something that has historically been reduced to nothing into something positive<sup>10</sup> and thereby create the antithesis, but with it also antagonism. This positive identity is created by using the very same tools that created the thesis.

<sup>10</sup> As Fanon puts it: 'Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the Native's brain of all form and content, by a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it'. At the end of it all the blacks have nothing to lean on, nothing to cheer them up at the present moment and very much to be afraid of in the future (Biko, 2004:75-76).

Agonism for me is born from the idea that there is nothing positive, but nothing understood in a social constructionist sense, namely that any identity that there is, is a constructed identity, any identity is an *expressed* identity. It is an awareness of this agony of the nothing, that makes agonism possible as an alternative to antagonism. This is how I would interpret Fanon, when he says that we have to invent, maybe even invent *ex-nibilo*, rather than colonise.

This move towards agonism might be a way to move beyond the dialectic of thesis and antithesis, which never seems to come to a synthesis, but rather ends up in a vicious cycle, which might explain the rise of the ultra-right in Europe and the USA, after years of the antithesis of Political Correctness. A strong Political Correctness including Black Consciousness, will not develop into a synthesis as expected, but it becomes the new thesis in the eyes of some, and in response, in reaction, they develop a new antithesis. This apparent need for a new antithesis is what the ultra-right populists are exploiting currently throughout the world.

The cry, the suffering flesh, Life is thus exploited for political gain. In most post-colonial histories of Africa, and currently in Europe and the USA one can clearly see how the wretched have been used by the different political ideologies, which ended with the replacement of one president with another, each time in the name of the wretched, but sadly very often with the only consequence being that the wretched became even more wretched.

### **3. The Cry (Black Experience), the Naked Body of a child**

In one of Cone's later articles (2000:39), he argues for a move towards a united struggle of all struggles for life<sup>11</sup>. The struggle of the cry, the struggle of the naked body and more importantly the realisation that the active or political subject is born in a political-ideological world and therefore the cry is always *heard* and/or *cried* as a political cry. The *expressed* cry is always political, as there is no pre-political cry that is expressed and therefore heard.

Yet, what unites most of these struggles, (womanist, feminist, black, African, ecological, LGBTT+) is their common enemy, namely Patriarchal Heteronormative Western Modernity one could say, or in the light of the above, the White Face. Cone argues that one cannot look to the culture responsible for the ecological crisis to provide 'the moral and intellectual resources for the earth's liberation' (Cone, 2000:43). Further down on the same page he argues: "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Cone, 2000:43). The house needs to be dismantled, and preferably with tools that are not the

<sup>11</sup> Racism is profoundly interrelated with other evils, including the degradation of the earth. It is important for black people, therefore, to make the connection between the struggle against racism and other struggles for life (Cone, 2000:39).



master's tools, in other words, what is necessary is a different kind of thinking, a different epistemology that is not a colonial epistemology. Žižek refers to a colonial epistemology as the symbolic order<sup>12</sup>. What Žižek seems to be saying is that there is an inherent colonization in the dominant epistemology and the question is: can this be escaped? Can one liberate oneself or others by using the master's tools? One cannot escape the Rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 2011), as any possible attempt at escape, any lines of flight, will only be recaptured by the war machines (Deleuze & Guattari, 2011:351ff) and the apparatus of capture (Deleuze & Guattari, 2011:424ff).

The abstract machine is created out of the two sign regimes: priestly and prophetic (Deleuze & Guattari, 2011:111ff). This means that a prophetic voice of the so-called Other does not escape the abstract machine, but is inherent to the functioning of the machine, so much so that one can say with Nancy (2008:10) that both the enclosure and the dis-enclosure remain in the same Face. The clear distinctions between Priestly (State-theology) and Prophetic theology and arguing that these two are in a dialectical relationship with each other, only feeds the Rhizome, offers it new territory to colonise. For example, the clear distinction made by the Kairos Document (1985) between state and prophetic theology is a false distinction as it feeds the Rhizome, as it makes of liberation a commodity to be consumed. A commodity to be consumed in the sense that one believes oneself to be free, as one can consume liberation, consume rights, but in the process the Rhizome has colonised new territory. One can consume the self-determination and the right to have a voice in the public space, and thereby public space has been enlarged. One is free to consume Cone's writings and through this consumption identify oneself as . . . , but in that very moment the Rhizome has ensnared one, the possible line of flight has become one's individuation, my symbolisation, my historicity and thus ensnared me within the dominant symbolisation.

There are no other tools, at least not tools that can engage on a global scale. The moment there is symbolisation, the moment there is historicisation, the moment there is a positive identity there is differentiation, and therefore I have used the tools of the master for my freedom. The tools of the master are the tools of colonisation, I have used the tools to colonise myself and therefore death.

<sup>12</sup> Life is the horrible palpitation of the 'lamella', of the non-subjective... 'undead' drive which persists beyond ordinary death; death is the symbolic order itself, the structure which, as a parasite, colonizes the living entity. What defines the death drive in Lacan is this double gap: not the simple opposition between life and death, but the split of life itself into 'normal' life and horrifying 'undead' life, and the split of the dead into 'ordinary' dead and the 'undead' Machine (Žižek, 2008:112)

For a human being to be 'dead while alive' is to be colonized by the 'dead' symbolic order; to be 'alive while dead' is to give body to the remainder of Life-Substance which has escaped the symbolic colonization ('lamella')... [W]e are dealing... [here with] the split between... the 'dead' symbolic order which mortifies the body and the non-symbolic Life-Substance of jouissance (Žižek 2008:112).

If one cannot escape the symbolic order in the global world, the only option that is left is to be *alive while dead*, that is to give *body to the remainder of Life-Substance*. The only option left is "to be" by not being: an apparition. To haunt the symbolic order by being the *alive while dead* of the symbolic. This leads one maybe back to Marx's comment on "true" revolution of the future, where the content exceeds the expression, which is cited both in Derrida (1994:106) as well as Fanon (2008:198). Marx argued that in the past the expression exceeded the content, one could say that the expression colonised the content, but now, in the future, the content exceeds, haunts, disturbs the expression. The universalism of the Marxism is the belief that the content exceeds expression, disrupts expression, exposes expression, haunts expression. This exceeding could be seen to unite all those who believe themselves to stand on the side of that which exceeds current expressions yet seeking to be included in the global expressions. Yet, following a Žižekian (2006) reading of Lacan's interpretation of the death drive, that which seeks the symbolic death, is not that which exceeds expression, but rather it is a lack, a crack in expression itself. If the focus remains on that which exceeds expression, and to give voice to that, to give voice to that which is excluded in expression, for example to give voice to what Althaus-Reid (2000) argues is indecent, only has one result, and that is repetition of the colonialism of expression. As Deleuze (1994:95) interprets Nietzsche: that the truth of such faith, the faith that believes that it can speak (express) in the name of the excluded, is repetition. This repetition is death in the symbolic, or to be colonised by the symbolic.

The focus should not be the excluded, that which exceeds expression, but the focus needs to be on the symbolic, and the lack, the crack in the symbolic, the focus is on the death in the symbolic, which opens the door to a hauntology (see Derrida 1994). One remains responsible to Cone by responding to Cone, but not for what he *did not say*, but for what he *could not say*. If Marx's argument that the future revolution will be because the content exceeds the expression is interpreted as there always being something excluded and therefore the revolutionary has the responsibility to speak (express) in the name of the excluded, such revolutionaries are in a sense state-agents who are colonising new lands, that is, previously unexpressed lands. That kind of revolutionary faith, to speak *for* or *with* or *in the name of* the voiceless will only have repetition of colonialism as its consequence. Maybe

it is time to realise that there is something rotten *in* the state of Denmark, and it is the ghost of a murdered king. Not the faith to speak *on behalf of* or *with* or *in the name of* the voiceless, but to be haunted by the dead inside the house or state of expression. Haunted by the ghosts of all those who died through being expressed, such haunting might liberate one from the faith, of which the truth is repetition. The truth of repetition that becomes currently visible in the rise of racism, migration control, and general rise in sexism. To be haunted not by what is excluded, but by what is included, to be haunted by oneself and the agony of being unto death. Such agonism does not open expression to the unexpressed content, does not open expression to the cry or to Life, but such agonism loosens the grip of expression, so that no one will need to offer a muffled scream: "I can't breathe" like Eric Garner. The loosened grip of expression, the loosened faith of symbolization does not open it for the Other, but shifts from antagonism toward agonism: breathing spaces and maybe life spaces between the clearly differentiated us and them camps.

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