Master signifiers, ideological fantasy, unknowability, and enjoyment in the colonial field

Abstract

Chabani Manganyi's long-neglected (2018) essay "Making strange" demonstrates how many of the most influential philosophical and psychological discourses of Western modernity are fundamentally extensions of colonial discourse, a fact evinced in a reoccurring discursive device: the production of otherness. This paper argues that the procedures through which otherness is produced are not only discursive but psychical also. They are discursive in the sense that discourses of racial knowing perpetuate – by their own constant failure to fully know – the need to try yet again to know the unknowable, that is, to produce unknowability. They are psychical in the sense of a fundamental fantasmatic assumption of a counter-identification, that is, via an already made assumption of fundamental difference. So, while the argument is sometimes made – as it is, in exemplary fashion in Manganyi's work – that psychoanalysis cannot rid itself of the conceptual shadow of colonial discourse, it can also be said that the critiques of colonial discourse are themselves are often tied to, if not implicitly contingent upon, extensions and adaptations of psychoanalytic ideas.

Introduction

Chabani Manganyi's "Making strange" (2018) represents a rich convergence of critical theories. The distinctive Marxist orientations of Althusser and Volosinov are called upon early on in the essay; postcolonial theorists Edward Said and Homi Bhabha are cited (Fanon is also briefly referred to); the critical social psychology of Mick Billig is a clear ally; and the influence of post-structural thinkers the likes of Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes is likewise evident. Perhaps the most important of these

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influences, however, is methodological in form, for it is surely Foucault's (1969) attention to discursive production which underlies the thematic thread that Manganyi so boldly traces through the diverse but interconnected realms of Western philosophy, Marxism, psychoanalysis, social psychology, ethnopsychiatry and the various apartheid-era South African psychologies of intelligence testing and African personality measures. Central to Manganyi's wide ranging argument is the assertion that the transcription of racial otherness is to be found not only in many of the most revered texts of Western modernity – Hegel, Marx and Freud are all implicated here – but also in the fascist tendencies of early accounts of group psychology, in multiple instances of scientific racism, psychiatry, and, of course, in the apartheid psychology of 1980s South Africa. What Manganyi demonstrates for us is that many of the most influential philosophical and psychological discourses of western modernity are fundamentally extensions of – or at very least commensurate with – colonial discourse. Vital an argument as this is, it does pose a question. How might it be that even in Manganyi's critique of how such discourses operate to produce otherness, we nonetheless find ourselves drawing on an unexpected ally, that is, on variations or extensions of psychoanalytic concepts?

Freud's colonial imaginary and master signifiers of otherness

There is a critical reflex apparent in many defenders of psychoanalysis (of which I am one), that is typically mobilized in such situations. Yes, of course – so the argument runs – Freud was a man of his times and his work obviously reflects many of the norms and political attitudes of his day, but this in and of itself is not reason enough to abandon the radical potential of psychoanalysis as a means of social and historical critique (McGowan, 2013). True as this might be, Manganyi's sketch of what upon reflection seems to have been something of a preoccupation on Freud's part, that is, his repeated return to the interlocking racialising (and racist) themes of primitive man, the primal horde, the cannibalistic savage, etc, makes any such attempt at salvaging Freud seem at best a very remote possibility. What Manganyi refers to is not one or two minor or isolated inscriptions, but an enduring series of themes, what we might refer to as Freud's colonial imaginary, namely, ideas of the mindless mass, of id-dominated psychologies, of the unruly man-as-child, of sexual transgressions, lawlessness and amorality – which coalesce into a stereotypical racializing image of the non-European other.

This image takes on the weighting of – and here I follow Manganyi in referring to Edward Said (1981) – a type of *radical realism* which we can understand as a type of discursive loading that equates select social constructions with what is most real, most natural, unquestionable. This is an idea we can expand upon via reference to Ernesto Laclau's (2007) discourse theory, and his notion of empty signifiers (another name for what Lacanian social theory refers to as master signifiers). In the case of a type of radical realism that centralizes, exaggerates and constantly reifies otherness, we would expect

one or more elements within such an organizing frame (be it of the non-European, the African, the Oriental) to take on a disproportionate value. In more technical terms: one or more signifiers come to stand out from others and begins to operate in a higher-order capacity, *arranging* the discursive field, imbuing it with what Stuart Hall (1985) referred to as a set of preferred meanings. Such signifiers – and Manganyi provides us with many in his reference to Freud (the primitive, the savage, the child-like) – are not as susceptible to interrogation as are other surrounding signifiers. They take on the value of "essential" values, which, as Homi Bhabha (1983) has stressed, underwrite the uncanny historical persistence of racial stereotypes. It is in this sense, for Laclau (1990) and Žižek (1989) alike, that such signifiers no longer merely signify, but bind together other signifiers, combining, re-articulating them into a discourse which, in turn, engenders effects of hegemonic meaning. This is one way we can understand the "narrative pressure" that Manganyi (2018: 7) speaks of, and in which he detects the intention "to secure a permanent and irreducible recognition and constitution of otherness". The notion of racial difference, along with a related set of terms (blackness, whiteness and associated signifiers such the bodily, the cultural, inferiority, superiority, etc.) play just such an organizing role within colonial discourse. (For an excellent example of Lacanian social theory as applied to post-apartheid racism [inclusive of the notions of master signifiers, the Lacanian real and the *objet a*], see Hudson, 2013).

One could of course attempt a sleight-of-hand re-contextualization here and attempt thereby to rescue the Freudian endeavour. All the above instantiations of the so-called "primitive", "primal" or "savage" must, we could argue, apply in an all-inclusive way to *all* human subjects. That is to say, the set of activities Freud has in mind are, in fact, *universal* unconscious impulses, id phenomena shared by all speaking subjects who are split by the opposing demands of nature and culture. The problem is these regrettable propensities have – in racist fashion – been accorded a colonial location (or, as we might put it, *a heart*) in the black and most typically the African subject (*of darkness*). The temptation to make such an argument falters when we consider that even if the "primitive", "primal" and "savage" were not to be given an African location, these designations would invariably, with some variations and adaptations, be personified by some other population, and the process of making strange would continue. Moreover, the attempt to locate such attributions as essential also to the white subjects of western modernity would be met with the routine yes-but-no ideological manoeuvre that Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2017) considers characteristic of contemporary formations of whiteness. Psychoanalytically, we might speak of this as an operation of disavowal. So, there can be an acknowledgement of sorts (yes, of course, such primal, violent and sexual attributes are found universally, in white subjects also), but it is immediately followed by a disqualifying move (but it is typically in the children, the criminals, the most uncultured members of western societies). Hence is set up the

threefold racist ideological equation that Fanon (1967) was so attuned to: blackness = childlike, blackness = criminality, blackness = absence of culture.

To be clear then – and faithful to the tenor of Manganyi's argument – the idea is not that Freudian psychoanalysis has inadvertently assimilated a series of colonial tropes. It is rather the case that the momentum of enquiry underlying psychoanalysis as such – premised as it inevitably is on the attempt to know the otherness of the unconscious – is itself predicated on the broader structure of colonial discourse. The fact that this is a very broad and perhaps somewhat less than nuanced argument (are there not important features of psychoanalysis which set it apart from characterization as a colonial discourse?) in no ways detracts from its critical force.

Knowing unknowability

One opportunity that Manganyi's overview presents us with is precisely that of examining further the process of the discursive procedures of making strange. There is a way in which adherence to Foucault's methodological framework of genealogical discourse analysis prevents us from examining the psychical dynamics underlying this phenomenon of making strange, and it is precisely here that I would like to pause. What makes what Manganyi (2018: 7) refers to as "the irreducible recognition and constitutive of otherness" so compulsive, so unending? Let me try and briefly step outside of the epistemological and political domain that Manganyi focuses on – that is, of the colonial episteme, and offer some thoughts on a more prosaic topic drawn from popular culture.

The early 1990s saw an explosion of interest – at least in American popular culture – in the figure of the serial killer (Seltzer, 1998). This was the era of films such as *Silence of the lambs, Seven* and *American psycho* not to mention countless other TV shows, novels and true-crime adaptations which successfully exploited the audience's lurid fascination with such appalling figures. Interestingly, the huge success of this morbid theme in the entertainment industry soon led to an increase in the popularity of forensic psychology, a situation where fictional themes started to feed the discipline of psychology. (The trend continues: even a psychodynamic clinician as well respected as Nancy McWilliams (2011) refers to *Silence of the lambs* in an illustrative capacity in her textbook on diagnosis and psychopathology).

What is the importance of this reference to popular culture? Well, for a start, it suggests that fictional tropes are never quite as separate from scholarly discourse as we would like to think – a point already well-established within the field of postcolonial studies, particularly by Edward Said (1981) in **Orientalism**. Indeed, it is within **Orientalism** that Said offers the aforementioned notion of radical realism, which stresses how a series of ideological themes, fictional or not, come – once adjoined to a given discourse and

authoritative speaking position – to function as fundamental truths, facts of reality. Let us consider Said's (1981: 72) own description of Orientalism as radical realism:

> "the kind of language, thought and vision that I … [call] Orientalism very generally is a form of radical realism; anyone employing Orientalism, which is the habit for dealing with questions, objects, qualities, and regions deemed Oriental, will designate, name, point to, fix what it is talking … about with a word or phrase, which then is considered … simply to be, reality".

Psychoanalytically, we could understand these organizing truths (relying, for Said [1981], on words, phrases, or, as we might rephrase: *master signifiers*) as necessarily rooted in fantasy. It is precisely fantasy – certainly as it is understood in Lacanian terms – that provides us with the lens through which a minimally-consistent experiential and ideological world becomes stable, viable. After all, to remove the framework of fantasy would not – as Žižek (1996) reminds us – result in a neutral, objective fantasy-free depiction of reality; it would mean that reality as such collapses into unintelligibility. If we take this claim seriously, then Said's – and by extension Manganyi's – use of the notion of radical realism implies and draws on the notion of fantasy, understood here as a type of cultural unconscious commitment or belief. More simply put, if we are to account for the fact that some socially constructed truths take on a disproportionate value, then such truths are presumably underwritten by an order of conviction that is less than fully conscious. This is what Fanon (1967) is driving at in his conceptualization of colonial racism along the lines of the European collective unconsciousness – such ideologies are rooted in something more obdurate than rationality, something more deeply culturally-rooted than conscious individual convictions.

This attempt to link Said's discursive notion of radical realism to psychoanalysis is not as fanciful as it may at first sound. To the above cited description of radical realism, Said (1981: 72) adds: "Psychologically, Orientalism is a form of paranoia, knowledge of another kind, say, from historical knowledge". While one might question whether Said intends the phrase "knowledge of another kind" to resonate with Freud's idea of another scene (which refers, of course, to fantasy), what is, however, certain is that Said's theory of Orientalism itself relies on concepts drawn from Freud's theory of dreams. I have in mind here the famous distinction between manifest and latent, which Said utilizes so as account for how Orientalism is at once in its deeper, more structural elements largely historically consistent (the latent dimension of Orientalism), while nevertheless permitting for considerable variation depending on the varying historical and political circumstances of its realization (the manifest dimension). What this suggests then is not only that Manganyi's account of racism as an epistemic parameter underlying Western philosophy and psychology might be strengthened and extended by reference to

psychoanalytic social theory (notions of the master signifier, of disavowal, fantasy) but that his broader conceptualization, relying on Said, Fanon and others, is itself already reliant on implicitly psychoanalytic themes.

Making strange as discursive and psychical procedure

Let us return to the central thread of our argument. We have noted Manganyi's insistence of the inscription of racial otherness as a type of meta-trope with western philosophy and psychology. There is thus a discursive imperative to establish and reify difference, to underline and repeatedly stress racial otherness. This imperative has, furthermore, taken on a type of fantasmatic conviction, blending the fictional and stereotypical with the allegedly scientific and factual, so as to produce radical realism, that is, a discursive form which organizes the field of truths rather than itself being fundamentally questioned. Here our earlier reference to serial-killer popular culture again proves instructive. How so? It helps us to consider why a given form of otherness becomes so fascinating and intriguing in the first place, so compelling that it might prove – as in the case of Said's **Orientalism** – the basis of both an efflorescence of fictional portrayals and a surge in scholarly and applied interests. The will to knowledge is never innocent, so Foucault (1969) (via Nietzsche) tells us. What this means then is that it is not enough to establish that a given theme or figure of otherness has become the focus of an epistemic flurry. We need to investigate also why this flurry of discursive activity takes on a momentum of its own, becoming not only self-sustaining but increasingly fascinating and intriguing the more knowledge it generates.

Said (1984) refers to this situation via the tools of discourse theory, noting that a discourse manufactures its own materials continually, producing ever more objects of knowledge and new forms of material practice. This is a useful formulation, although it arguably stops short of explaining what ultimately motivates this vortex of discursive production, what underlies the insistence and scale of the inscription of otherness. One clue seems to lie precisely in the never-ending nature of the process itself. That is to say, the fact that the otherness in question can never be fully known – more studies can always be commissioned, more books written, more psychological hypotheses generated – is crucial. It is as if a prior fundamental epistemological – and fantasmatic – assertion has already been made: this particular object of knowledge (in this case, the racial other) is most fundamentally unknowable. The knowledge-producing apparatus of a given discipline (in Manganyi's article, psychology itself) responds to this challenge, attempting – and in some strange ways even *succeeding* – in producing "knowledge", even if the knowledge in question seems often rather stereotypical and repetitive and rather too close to themes of popular discourse and fictions. We could say then that the failure of the enterprise is what keeps it going. (One is reminded here of the Lacanian idea that we invariably misunderstand one another when we attempt

to communicate, and that it is this very failure that ensures we continue trying to communicate – hence the idea that "there is cause only in something that doesn't work" [Lacan, 1981: 17]). If such an explanation seems viable, then we have to take seriously that what is necessarily produced in each attempt to know the racial other is the fact of their very unknowability. This is the fundamental fact that is repeated, paradoxically, in every attempt to know the other – their irreducible otherness which produces, in turn, their nature as necessarily different.

This is a promising conceptual premise, but it remains largely at the level of discourse; it is a thesis that fits with Foucault's tracing of formations of discourse which need to reproduce their own materials continuously. We can expand on this unknowability in another and more overtly psychoanalytic manner. Let us return again to the idea that the other can never be fully known. This suggests that the epistemic drive lies not simply with the object – which surely should begin to be less interesting over time, being reduced, ultimately, to the merely banal or the insignificant. The epistemic drive then must be most fundamentally located in the subject attempting to know, in the agent of knowledge production itself. This sounds, if we are once again to draw on the technical terminology of psychoanalysis, like the situation of transference, in which the figure of one's analyst – boring, mundane and uninteresting as he or she may be to others – proves, at least for the analysand, to be endlessly fascinating. In such a situation, a little or even a lot of information (ferreted details, online searches, glimpses of the analyst's family, etc) does not dampen one's curiosity – it merely fuels it.

There is a psychoanalytic concept which might help us conceptualize the incessant attempt to know (and yet also not know) the other. I have in mind the idea of the *objet a*, Lacan's object-cause of desire. The idea here requires us to reverse two standard assumptions. Firstly, part of what is most definitive of us as subjects is not a given positive property, but a lack, a seemingly evacuated space, a missing piece. Secondly, this missing piece – which we never in fact possessed, this lack is, as we might put it, an inbuilt element of our design – only becomes apparent and seemingly accessible in an *external* location, that is, in others. The more I lack, the more some feature of the other will be magnified. This quality of the other will be exaggerated in direct proportion to my lack, and this intriguing quality – which can pique my desire or incur my hatred – always tells us more about *the subject* than the object of attempted knowledge. We arrive thus at a paradoxical state of affairs. Indeed, we can say that the very insistence not to know – which functions as a fantasmatic commitment prior to practical procedures of knowledge production – drives the will to know the other. More clearly put, a fundamental principle is at work in colonial discourse: the very fact that the other cannot be understood, cannot be the same, cannot be identified with – is what makes them fascinating. Or differently put, it is the very fact of a forceful

counter-identification (they are other; I am not the same as them) that engenders both the unknowability of the other and the need to forever reiterate their categorical difference. The operation in question is thus both discursive and psychical. It is discursive in the sense that discourses of racial knowing perpetuate – by their own constant failure to fully know – the need to try again to know the unknowable, that is to produce unknowability. They are psychical in the sense of a fundamental fantasmatic assumption of a counter-identification, that is, via an already made assumption that I am fundamentally different from the other.

Colonial enjoyment

How then does one break the spell of transference? How does one make the signifier of racial difference banal, unimportant, rather than fuelling its discursive reification and thereby maintaining its role as a fundamental fantasmatic and ideological commitment?

We have seen that the failure of a given discourse can – at least in theory – fuel its own expansion. We have also seen that a prior insistence on fundamental difference will ensure that one's attempted object of knowledge forever recedes from knowability. These two approaches to ensuring unknowability neglect an important factor: the fact that it is *arousing* to produce otherness. I mentioned above the lurid fascination underlying the figure of the murderer in serial killer culture. I think a similar mechanism applies in colonial racism, indeed, in the procedures of making strange that Manganyi so adeptly analyses. One of the chief contributions that Lacanian social theory (Glynos, Stavrakakis) has made to thinking the operation of political ideologies has been to stress the role of affective excitation or libidinal arousal in the maintenance of discourses such as racism that many individuals would reject at the individual, conscious or rational level. Summarily put: the procedures of making strange, while crucially discursive and psychically operative (as discussed above) also rely on the production of certain intensities of affect, on surreptitious instances of libidinal reward, on – as Žižek (1991) would put it – enjoyment as a political factor. Why do I introduce this concept so late in this essay where there is little opportunity to further articulate its meaning and value, or indeed – as I have done elsewhere (Hook, 2017, 2018) – its analytical role in the analysis of racism? Simply to note that this is one indispensable aspect to consider in furthering Manganyi's account of making strange, one which is, arguably, best facilitated by a type of psychoanalytic theorizing.

Conclusion

The argument has been made – as it indeed was, in exemplary fashion, by Manganyi (2018) – that psychoanalysis cannot rid itself of the conceptual shadow of colonial discourse (Khanna, 2003). While recognizing the importance of this argument, I have tried to how it might also be true that critiques of colonial discourse are themselves often tied to, if not

implicitly contingent upon, extensions and adaptations of psychoanalytic ideas. By virtue of the above reading of Manganyi we can draw two general conclusions. Firstly, psychoanalytic theory, like many more overtly ideological forms of psychological thinking, a less than viable instrument for decolonizing theory and practice. And yet, secondly, there are many resources in adapted versions of psychoanalytic theory, stretching from notions within Lacanian social theory (the master signifier, ideological fantasy, the discursive operation of disavowal, Lacan's *objet a*), to Said's idea of radical realism and Fanon's collective European unconscious, that can be of valuable critical use as part of the critique of colonial discourse. How might this apparent contradiction be resolved? Perhaps it need not be. Maybe it is – adapting and inverting Aude Lorde's (2018) famous assertion – *only* via the master's tools that the master's house might eventually be dismantled, with the crucial proviso that these tools themselves – as in the work of Fanon, Said, Laclau and Žižek – be subject to conceptual revision. Maybe it is via a considered process of extraction and reformulation that some of the vocabulary of Western modernity (inclusive of psychological and psychoanalytic discourse) can be harvested and put to critical work. Let us hope that this is possible. The hopes of a decolonizing critical psychology would seem to depend upon it.

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