

The haunting quality of racism

Abstract

Anti-racism has nurtured many visions of post-racism futures. All this talk and political action relies on and reproduces discourses of racism. While much of this discursive force lies in what is said, we argue that a haunting quality of racism may arise from what is unsaid. This includes the multifarious points of connection between the present and the past. We are all implicated, albeit unevenly. This article describes the phenomenon of spectral racism that arises from such implicature. We develop a discursive account of its constitution in acts of dialogical repression, and we consider some of the social psychological and political ramifications of haunting racism. We illustrate our arguments by an analysis of the way the prohibition against the use of the k-word echoes the toxic past and zombies racism via psychological enticement.

Discourse about racism often nurtures dreams of utopia. The liberal utopia is a colour-blind world where race no longer matters and racial categories are consumed in the dust of history (e.g., Mare, 2014). The Africanist utopia is a post-racial society in which the back of White supremacy has been broken by the thoroughgoing material undoing of colonialism (Dladla, 2017).

In the meantime, we have to contend with the messy reality of racism. We live in a world that is racist to its core. The post-colonial condition is woven from a thousand strands of daily exclusions, indignities, antagonisms and violence. As South Africans, we can barely move under the weight of racism's history; slavery, imperialism, apartheid, landlessness and poverty, along with affective currents of shame, outrage and hatred.

Racism enters into discourse in discussions and debates about history, current events and social change. Racism

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discourse has been a powerful mobilizing force that has shaped our world. It has framed the struggle against colonialism and apartheid, and is the motivating force and objective behind present day struggles for racial justice – e.g., the #Fallist and Black Lives Matter movements. It is here, in the discourse of racism and anti-racism and in social mobilization, that dreams of a post-racist and just world are nurtured.

This article will consider one reason why the end of racism remains so elusive. The failures of decolonization and liberation from apartheid are often rightly attributed to the stubborn materialities of capitalism, expanding inequality and segregation, unbridled class interests, meritocratic ideologies, and to identity dynamics and the psychology of prejudice. We hope that removing these conditions will bring us to the destination of a post-racist, just society. The objective of clearing the world of racism is formulated first in the discourse of racism and anti-racism, and it is to a particular quality of such discourse that we turn in this article. We will consider the haunting quality of racism. In discourse – as in its materialities – the past is not so easy to shake because its residues rework themselves into the present and even into the discourse and practices of anti-racism. Utopia eludes us even as we seek to dismantle racism because it returns in haunting form to unsettle us and disrupt the project of change.

The Specter of Racism

The specter of racism is an ever-present reality in the post-colony. It casts its shadow over all we say and do. Racism hardly ever comes boldly out from the shadows, but we can see its effects everywhere and we feel its allusive power and its force in innuendo and suggestion. For example, the whole weight of our history imbues meaning to the suggestion that an African university offering a course in “African Psychology” is a “form of self-imposed othering”. (Ratele, 2019: 73). The observation stings because we know what it means. Whether we view ourselves as psychologists, African psychologists, African- or Afrikan-centered psychologists matters because of the history of racism. The point is that change is contested and it is contested under the shadow of racism. Our language and terms of reference are infused with echoes, tones and “vibrations” from the past (Mkhize, 2021; Henriques, 2010). As we can see here, the specter of racism has a disciplinary force that qualifies speakers and regulates what they can and cannot think, say and do.

This is not to say that racism always remains an unuttered allusion. As we know very well, it is used in naming and shaming. Stevens (2020) reflects on recent instances where pressure had been placed on journals to retract racist articles. In each case, the accusations of racism were greeted with celebration and cheers as well as denials framed in terms of academic freedom and the scientific method. Stevens (2020: 304) suggests that these publications reveal the “specter of scientific racism that lingers

in research today”. These are spectral because the racism has a “slippery texture” in comparison with the overt scientific racism of the past (305).

There are many points of convergence and connection between race science of the past and the sciences practiced today, just as there are between African and Euroamerican psychology: the institutional contexts, the demographics, the methods, the language, the measurements, and labels. They all have allusive powers that signal the specter of racism. Sometimes the use of race-centered words, measurements and distinctions produces “race trouble” (Durrheim, Mtose & Brown, 2011) but mostly they pass by without comment. The whole field is spectral. The production, consumption and interruption of science in its entirety – even when it is trying to be non-racist, transformatory or decolonized – takes shape around these points of convergence and connection. Positioning in the field and the possibility of criticism animates all aspects of the production.

It is not possible to now create the field anew, to produce a decolonized science completely free of all these points of convergence and connection. We can rewrite but not re-run history. This does not mean that we have to throw up our hands in defeat and embrace the inevitability of racism. But it does mean that we will not escape racism’s haunting presence. The question, however, is what’s to be done with it?

Racism discourse

Discursive studies have sought to map the language of racism (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). They have shown how people use language to make racial distinctions, defend racist practices and interests, and resist change. Language can be the medium and instrument of racism as well as its undoing. All this discourse occurs in a context of controversy and in a social climate where it has been necessary to deny racism (Billig, 2012; van Dijk, 1992; Augoustinos & Every, 2010). Discursive investigations have shown the many ways in which participants in these controversies construct what is and is not “racism”; and they help us understand the persuasive and mobilizing powers of racism discourse, which have become so influential in society today (Durrheim, 2020).

The debate about affirmative action in South Africa provides an instructive case in point. Most generally, the controversy takes shape around two contrasting concerns about racism. The first problematizes the apartheid racial categories that underpin the policy (Erasmus, 2010; Mare, 2014); the second deems racial targeting essential to transitional justice and the undoing of racial injustice in practice (e.g. Erasmus, 2010; Joshi, 2020). Affirmative action legislation in South Africa navigates carefully between these two concerns, targeting “‘Black people’...meaning Africans, so-called Coloureds, and Indians” as designated beneficiaries (Madala, 1999: 1547) while aspiring to the “affirmation of every person’s worth, dignity, and equality” (ibid: 1548).

These contending definitions of racism make available multiple fine-grained arguments and positionings about affirmative action and racism. Right from the start, White commentators portrayed themselves as victims of reverse racism (Sikhosana, 1993, in Badat, 2012: 22). Indian and Coloured interviewees also felt they were victims of racism, “not being Black enough” to benefit from affirmative action in practice (Adam, 2000: 52). Some scholars have treated this discourse of reverse racism as a sign of racism, informed by the idea that Black beneficiaries lack competence (Franchi, 2003; Reuben & Bobat, 2014). Others have criticized the way in which the policy has enriched a Black elite and reinforced class inequalities (Alexander, 2007).

Positionings within these debates intersect with inherited power and privilege – race, gender, employment status, and so on – to ground moral framing of thought and action, reaction and self-regulation with many targets and varieties of accusation and denial of racism. Agreement is elusive because all sides in these debates use nuanced theories of ‘racism’ for justification and accusation. They draw on the resources of racism discourse in “identity performances”, taking the moral high ground and pointing fingers at each other with accusations, counteraccusations, and denials of racism (Durrheim, Quayle & Dixon, 2016).

The discourse of affirmative action takes the form of an ideological and affective knot that connects us to the past and to the animating stereotypes of White racism and Black incompetence and corruption. Unravelling such knots in debate can lead to acrimony and injury, so it is often best to keep one’s opinions to oneself. It is often best to tiptoe around the topic to avoid interrupting the flow of our collective conversation. Such avoidance, what Billig (1999) terms “dialogical repression”, occurs when people circumnavigate topics and behaviours that are likely to draw criticism or cause offence. They routinely shift conversations away from troubling themes or topics that could attract accusations of racism (Durrheim, 2012; Durrheim, Jacobs & Dixon, 2014), and they even avoid making accusations of racism when these can threaten the smooth flow of social interaction (Goodman & Burke, 2010). This is an avoidance that can become so routine and collective that we may even forget that we are avoiding something at all (Billig, 1999; Murray & Durrheim, 2021), leaving it to become a topic that is neither fully dead nor fully alive.

In the process, racism can become spectral and zombified. Avoiding racism requires a good knowledge of the thing to be avoided. We need to know what not to say, how not to say it, and what we can say in its place to communicate our opinions, interests and preferences, and to dialogically coordinate our views and behaviours with others (Billig & Marinho, 2019; Bischooping et al., 2001; Irvine, 2011). In all this circumlocution, the specter of racism is conjured and given shape and power (Durrheim & Murray, 2019). Even as racism is

expelled from interaction, it serves as a backcloth to that interaction. Dialogical repression produces a dialogical unconscious, replete with unspoken offensive content and taboos gesturing toward racism (Billig, 1999). In such cases, racism can acquire an uncanny absent presence in discourse. Racism may be the palpable elephant in the room, a censored thought or impulse, a free-floating sense of hurt or anger, or an allusion, implication or innuendo (Durrheim, 2012; Durrheim et al., 2014; Whitehead, 2017). Racism can acquire a haunting presence in polite talk and institutional practice, where stereotypes, thoughts and feelings from the past circulate just beyond the margins of the sayable. In some respects, this kind of race trouble is the worst kind, where racism takes on an elusive zombie form, difficult to pin down and subject to scrutiny and criticism because it is simultaneously dead – discredited and marginalized – yet hauntingly alive.

Racism then acquires the haunting quality described by Avery Gordon (2008), where a “repressed or unresolved social violence” makes itself known by returning as a specter to upset the present. Stephen Frosh’s (2019) description of the discursive unconscious as the “murmuring deep” describes the mechanism of return. It’s not deep as a dead body is deep, buried 6 feet under, below consciousness in the ground of the human mind. It is deep in its *resonance*, its “humming, murmuring, cooing, groaning, tumult, music, restlessness, stirring, panic”, the large register of tones it communicates (Zornberg, 2009 cited in Frosh, 2019). The murmuring accompanies living. It is embodied in human expression and its affects flow from our past into the present and, we would argue, into our haunted future.

In the next section we will demonstrate how the haunting quality of racism allows the past to recirculate into the present and even into anti-racism. We enter the writhing knot via talk and taboos surrounding the use of the k-word. Its indefensibility is its strength, and it can teach us something about how racism can become transmogrified into a haunting presence with an “otherness we are responsible for preserving” (Davis, 2005: 737).

“Never use the k-word”

The k-word is the most potent and hurtful racial slur in South Africa, with its roots in slavery, colonial violence and apartheid. The word still has popular currency, being used 15,415 times in South African public social media in 2016 alone (Citizen Research Centre, 2017). In one high profile case, on 6 September 2016 Vicki Momberg¹ used the word 48 times in an emotional confrontation with a Black police officer after she experienced a robbery. Each utterance was a barbed, venom-filled attack on the officer’s personhood.

¹ <https://mg.co.za/article/2016-07-14-vicki-momberg-appears-in-court-says-shes-sorry-for-her-racist-rant-at-black-police>

Hate speech causes “psychological hurt and harm” (Judge & Nel, 2018) and legislation that holds its users accountable has been a critical element of anti-racism in South Africa. Given its racist history and its power to injure, the k-word has been classified as hate speech. On 8 November 2017² the Randburg Equality Court found Momberg guilty of hate speech, and she will go down in history as the first person to serve prison time for uttering the word.

But eliminating racist habits is not as straightforward as criminalizing hate speech. Crude racist slurs are like zombies in the sense that they are already discredited and dead, but are still very potent weapons in the hands of Vicki Momberg and others. In addition, we will argue that their haunting quality is evident even when we oppose them. The haunting quality of racism will be considered via reflection on the injunction against the use of the k-word, made by the SA Human Right’s Commission, following the Momberg Court ruling: “The Commission is of the view that there can never be any context in which the use of the k-word is acceptable.” (SAHRC, Friday 9 June 2017).

Here is an unambiguous statement of anti-racism: Never use the k-word. So egregious is the word that it cannot be uttered even in an injunction against its use. A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles (DSAE) (Silva, 1998) helps us understand why the word has acquired such power. It defines the actual k-word as an offensive noun and adjective whose reference to native Africans has historical roots in the Arabic word for infidel. The Portuguese racialized the term, which by 1596 had become “quasi-synonymous with Black skin colour” (Arndt, 2018:). The currently understood negative connotations were forged in the late 18th century context of the colonial frontier wars, where European settlers began to compete with the amaXhosa for land and other resources (Arndt, 2018). Native Africans were viewed as savage, subhuman, treacherous, thieving, indolent and merciless (Arndt, 2018), all of which were infused into the term.

The word acquired a commonplace usage over the course of the nineteenth century, where it transformed into an adjective to name indigeneity (Baderoon, 2004). Despite this migration into common language, the word still bore nagging echoes of earlier meanings. As Bakhtin (1981: 290) notes, curse words are created by usage – “for a long period of time, and for a wide circle of persons” – which infects the expression with its own intention and impulses, imposing on the words “specific semantic nuances and specific axiological overtones”. From our perspective today, there is something thoroughly naïve and unsettling about how the use of such a racist word was

² <https://mg.co.za/article/2018-03-31-jail-time-vicki-momberg-sets-new-precedent>

³ <https://www.dsae.co.za/entry/kaffir/e03579>

normalized in the past (see “combinations” listed in DSAE³). This gives us a sense of the depth and breadth of racism and of the timescale in which the morality, intentions, and impulses of racially-loaded words can develop and transform.

In stating the taboo, the SAHRC statement also articulates acceptable ways of speaking. The actual k-word is never acceptable but “the k-word” can be used in its place, even to oppose racism. By refusing to utter the toxic word, the speaker shows their attitude toward the racism of the past. On the surface, then, “the k-word” is a tool for social action and positioning ourselves in a society populated by racism of various degrees, including the likes of Vicki Momberg. By using “the k-word” as opposed to the slur it replaces, we lay down a clear demarcation line between us and them, the anti-racists and the inveterate racists. It allows us to speak *about* racism without fear of being accused *of* racism.

It was for this reason that the SAHRC came into existence. It was constitutionally mandated as a “state institution supporting constitutional democracy” for the post-apartheid state, and its function was “to promote the protection, development and attainment of human rights” (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996: Section 184.1b) including the eradication of racism, hate speech and xenophobia, and the preservation of justice and dignity for all.

Despite its ostensible prohibition of racism in favour of anti-racism, the SAHRC injunction against using the k-word also faintly echoes the racism it seeks to dispel. The act of silencing can have an ironic effect in making the silenced content hauntingly present and hearable (Frosh, 2019). The shift is accomplished linguistically by the use of euphemism as a figure of speech (see Warren, 1992). When the euphemism becomes conventionalized, the displaced content becomes camouflaged but the underlying association remains intact (McGlone et al., 2006).

There is thus a mundane sense in which the euphemism invokes the pernicious content by gesturing towards it and providing less toxic means for talking about it. But the presencing of excluded content involves more than semantic association. There are also psychological enticements. In his important work on dialogical repression, Michael Billig (1999) reiterates Freud’s belief that repressed content “returns” in the sense that “what has been forbidden becomes an object of desire and pleasure” (96). Dialogical repression creates dialogical temptation.

There are at least four ways in which the substitution of the original slur with its euphemism conjures racism’s specter as a background against which talk and action take place. First, the expression, “the k-word”, draws our interest. It provides only

the thinnest veil for covering the obscene, giving its audience a voyeuristic pleasure of knowing. The SAHRC statement *presumes* that readers know what “the k-word” actually means. The toxic fullness of the word can sound loudly in the silence of the reader’s mind, in a violation of the statement’s overt morality.

Second, “the k-word” stirs curiosity in the face of ignorance. The definite article marks particularity and exceptionalism. This is not just any k-word; it is *the* k-word. “What is the k-word, daddy?” invites urgent hushed explanation or silencing by shutting down the question. In this way, the children of perpetrators and victims both get to learn secrets and to be “haunted by what is buried in this tomb” (Schwab, 2010, cited in Frosh, 2019: 265). The intergenerational transmission of trauma is thus laid down in the moral education of silencing to avoid hurt. “The k-word” is just the tip of the iceberg of all the unspeakable that lies buried there.

Third, like all prohibitions, “the k-word” incites desire. The desire to speak the unspeakable finds expression at the extremities of social life; in profanity, jokes and anger. How better to demonstrate exasperation beyond the restraints of politeness than by using racist expletives, as did Vicki Momberg on that fateful day. How better to strike where you know it will hurt than to use an unutterable racial slur? The taboo makes it powerful. And there is also an ironic, celebratory, identity-qualified self-application of the word studied by Sonia Mbowe (2019: 45): the salutation, “Morning kaffirs”, elicits not anger, pain or demands for accountability, but warm affiliation in the social network: “Morning, my competent brother that believes in himself!”

Finally, an imperative to avoid racism also fulfills ideological functions. Reminders of the horrors of past racism – both hidden and exposed in the k-word – allow present routine racialized relationships, privilege and interactions to go unnoticed as racism (cf. Durrheim, 2017): racialized gated communities, second rate education and health care, ubiquitous Black cleaners, unemployment, job insecurity, landlessness, forced removal, police violence and so on all fade to prosaic grey against the flashing red.

The taboos, euphemisms and the hushed tones can help us believe that we live in a transformed world where racism is a thing of the past. It does this in spite of – or perhaps because of – the fact that racism persists. Just as prohibitions against interracial relationships marked out the socially deviant by the apartheid government, so social injunctions and taboos – like that of the SAHRC – mark out what is immoral, deviant and undesirable in post-apartheid South Africa. If we can somehow avoid the racism of the likes of Vicki Momberg, we can believe that we have moved beyond her time. Yet, as we have shown, the specter of racism can haunt us from the margins that define the good and acceptable anti-racism.

Conclusion

We do have something to hide. It is exposed for all to see. The post-apartheid state – like the post-colonial world – continues to be defined by deepening inequality, racial exclusions and Whiteness. As Mamdani (2017: 9) observed, transformation in South Africa “involves too much of an embrace of inherited inequalities”. Anti-racism is often oriented around a utopian dream of a world without racism. Racial inequalities, privileges and hurt will be gone in the just world to come.

Dreams provide hope for something better and inspire social change. However, they can also mislead. We hope to get beyond racism, but perhaps we will never fully be able to shake our past. It’s not only a matter of social reform, radical economic transformation, or revolution. As we have argued, racism has the power to make a haunting return. It does so, firstly, because anti-racism is contested. As decolonizing science and debates about African psychology show, our institutions and our lives have become so completely and complexly structured by imperialism and colonialism that it is difficult to agree on what’s to be done. Racism arises as a specter in these debates and in the practice of psychological and scientific research.

Racism can also make a haunting return by stating and enforcing taboos. Both in hate-speech legislation and in politeness norms, anti-racism involves the dialogical repression of racism. But as racist thoughts and expressions from the past are repressed, they are given shape in the acts of avoidance and become entombed as collective silences, which are forms of social action (Durrheim & Murray, 2019).

Racism is a haunting specter that is transmuted in practices through time, generations and bodies. As the history of the k-word teaches, archaic and less distant meanings resonate as we talk about racism and even as we oppose it. We seem unable to leave it alone. Racism bewitches us. It has become a way for recognizing oneself and others (identification), it is a clarion call to action (mobilization), and its murmuring gives voice to reason (explanation) (Durrheim, Quayle & Dixon, 2016; Durrheim, 2020).

Zombified racism is a powerful political force today. This article has shown how these specters are transmitted through the politics of anti-racism. The zombifications lend legitimacy and recognition to individuals who adopt these stances. The haunting quality of racism that is infused in anti-racism has considerable mobilizing powers as, for example, was evident around the Bell Pottinger affair (see Cave, 2017). Focusing attention on racism in criticism and prohibition can serve “palliative functions of ideology” (Jost & Hunyady, 2002), assuring us that we are doing okay even while the whispers of haunting racism speak in and through us (Durrheim, 2017).

Zombified racism underpins reactionary politics also. Racist stereotypes can be communicated by implication to shore up and defend privileges and injustices. This is nowhere more evident than in the rash of debates over what has become known as right-wing populism. Populist leaders like Trump, Modi, Orban and Farage have mobilized followers in anti-anti-racism by making provocatively “racist” statements. They thus attract predictable accusations of racism which they deny, portraying themselves as the real victims of racism (Durrheim et al., 2018).

In this we learn that legislation and anti-racism cannot defuse the psychic contraption of racism or its politics. The utopian dream remains elusive. We have inherited from colonialism and apartheid not only the material legacy of racism but also a discursive vibrating entombed racism, a zombie that will continue to haunt us as we struggle to manufacture its end.

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