

# The desire of apartheid

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## ABSTRACT

This paper has two objectives. It aims, firstly, to provide an overview of the explanatory dilemmas that J.M. Coetzee highlights in his acclaimed essay “The mind of apartheid” in respect of existing theories of apartheid ideology. It then makes recourse, secondly, to a series of concepts in Lacanian psychoanalysis so as to shed light on these dilemmas. Two questions seem to particularly vex Coetzee. Firstly, where should we seek to locate agency in respect of apartheid ideology: predominantly on the side of the subject or predominantly the side of structure? Secondly, if we need to appeal *both* to subject and structure, then how are we to understand the *relation between* these two factors in the workings of apartheid ideology? By means of Lacanian conceptualisation, the paper supplements and extends Coetzee’s argument according to which the notion of desire is central to understanding the spread and hold of apartheid ideology. The paper then moves on to elaborate a Lacanian understanding of ideological agency which accounts for the relation *between* subject and structure (or, in Lacanian terms, subject and the symbolic Other) and does so by thinking apartheid as a transaction of desire and/or lack between the two.

**KEYWORDS:** Agency; desire; ideology; Lacanian psychoanalysis; racism; social structure

At around the same time that J.M. Coetzee was conducting the preliminary research for what is perhaps his most explicitly psychoanalytic essay, “The mind of apartheid: Geoffrey Cronjé” (1991), the Slovene philosopher Žižek (1989, 1991a, 1991b) was developing a series of pathbreaking analyses utilising Lacanian psychoanalysis to further the project of ideology critique. While neither of these two intellectuals cites the associated scholarly work of the other in any significant way, their attempts at theorising ideology share an important common denominator, namely, a creative yet critically astute application of psychoanalysis. Their efforts converge interestingly also inasmuch as they both take aim at orthodoxies pertaining to structuralist notions of ideology, or, to state things somewhat more broadly, at approaches to ideology that treat the facts of psychical life (desire, fantasy, libidinal investment, operations of repression and displacement) as surplus to analytical requirements. What I set out to do here is to explore how various of Coetzee’s insights in “The mind of apartheid” both resonate with, and are profitably extended by, an unexpected ally, namely, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Lacanian ideology critique more particularly.

Part of the originality of Coetzee’s approach was that he enlisted Freudian psychoanalysis – which, given its overtly psychological nature, would have been something of a *persona non grata* for structuralist and/or Marxist approaches to ideology – so as to move beyond the impasses within predominant trends of apartheid historiography. While a scholar like Macrone (1937) had interestingly drawn on psychoanalysis to conceptualise facets of pre-apartheid colonial racism in South Africa, Coetzee attained a new level of complexity in thinking through

conundrums of agency, desire and ideology apparent in the apartheid period. Two of the conceptual dilemmas posed by apartheid for Coetzee were:

1. How to account for the contagion-like spread of apartheid thinking, for the fact that apartheid seemed to operate like a colonising virus, attaining the status and persistence of a veritable *weltanschauung*?
2. How are we to understand the longevity and tenacity of this racist system which, despite its manifest injustices, maintains such a profound grip on the white population of the country? What psychological gains or libidinal rewards sustained the white commitment to such a blatantly oppressive and dehumanising political order?

The key term in the challenge Coetzee issues to existing theories of apartheid ideology is desire. Racism, and apartheid racism in particular, he avers, must be approached through the prism of this psychoanalytic concept. This is a notably counter-intuitive move. Racism, at first sight, seems to have little if anything to do with desire, certainly so if we abide by commonplace assumptions according to which racism is driven by hate, cultural incompatibility or antagonism, or by a radical indifference or lack of empathy for the plight of the other. And yet Coetzee's analysis pays dividends by pointing to what psychical rewards, aside from considerations of material wealth, might play a compelling role in apartheid thinking.

Apartheid ideology, as a formation of desire, was, Coetzee argues, sustained by libidinal gains that went beyond the factor of material rewards. Intriguingly, Coetzee eventually puts forward the notion that apartheid involved a type of ideological and fantasmatic exchange, a "phantasmatic transaction" (1991, 29), in other words, a type of interchange of desire as effected between apartheid as *ideological belief system* and *subjects of that ideology*. This fascinating insight, unfortunately less than fully developed in view of its conceptual and political ramifications, occurs towards the end of Coetzee's essay, and it begs further elaboration and conceptual refinement. Several key notions from within the domain of Lacanian theory – desire, the (big) Other, fantasy and especially the dimensions of alienation and separation in the subject–Other relation – prove helpful in this regard.

This then, is my twofold agenda in what follows: firstly, to provide an overview of the difficulties and impasses that Coetzee highlights in (then) existing theories of apartheid ideology, and secondly, to refer to a series of crucial concepts in Lacanian psychoanalysis so as to offer a response to several of the explanatory dilemmas we find in the study of apartheid ideology. This work of theory conjunction helps us respond to a number of questions which seem to particularly vex Coetzee. Firstly, where should we seek to locate agency in respect of apartheid ideology, predominantly on the side of the subject or predominantly on the side of structure? Secondly, if the answer to this question is less than forthcoming or clear-cut, if, indeed, we need to appeal *both to* subject and structure by way of response, then how are we to understand the *relation between* these two factors in the workings of apartheid ideology? These questions beg a two-tiered response, and as a result this paper is composed of two parts. In the first of these, I foreground and supplement Coetzee's argument according to which the psychoanalytic notion of desire is central to understanding the spread and hold of apartheid ideology. In the second part, I elaborate a Lacanian understanding of ideological agency which accounts for the relation between subject and structure (or, in Lacanian terms, subject and the big Other) and which does so by thinking apartheid – and here a clear debt to Coetzee must be acknowledged – as a transaction of desire between the two.

## Racism as desire

### *The libidinal economy of apartheid*

In the opening pages of “The mind of apartheid,” Coetzee muses that madness has its place in history. Differently put: there are periods of history which are themselves effectively mad, that operate – as we might rephrase this idea – within a libidinal economy (obsessionality, hysteria, phobia, psychosis, perversion, etc.) that is itself pathological. While intuitively this makes a degree of sense, such a contention ran counter to prevailing (structuralist/Marxist) historiographies of apartheid. Such historiographies avoided any descriptive reference to the domain of psychology – particularly depth psychology – and relying instead upon the presumption of subjects as fundamentally rational agents models of the functioning of ideological systems. A blind spot is thus revealed: such models of ideology cannot fundamentally grasp how ideologies are themselves subject to systematic forms of irrationality. In his reading of a wide cross-section of texts by one of the prime ideologues of apartheid – those of Geoffrey Cronjé – Coetzee wastes little time in identifying what he takes to be the libidinal economy in question, namely that of obsessional neurosis. We see evidence of this economy both in Cronjé’s writings – which Coetzee provides a detailed analysis of – and in the multiple structural features of apartheid as system of governance, in its segregations and divisions, its “mad” preoccupations with categorisation and differentiation, in its displacements, substitutions, and deferrals of desire:

apartheid deserves to have restored to it the chapter that has been all too smoothly glossed over, censored out, removed: a denial and displacement and reprojection of desire re-enacted in further huge displaced projects of displacement: the redrawing of the maps of cities, the division of the countryside, the removal and resettling of populations. (Coetzee 1991, 18)

Coetzee here utilises a Freudian vocabulary of neurotic defences to great effect, applying it to the (ir)rationality of apartheid governmentality, alleging, furthermore, that types of (structuralist/Marxist) analysis that have foreclosed such facets of desire from consideration in conceptualising both the spread and hold of apartheid mentality are themselves guilty of a type of (analytical/intellectual/subjective) repression.

Coetzee is to be commended for opposing the idea that apartheid was at base a distorted form of rationality that, in the final analysis, was motivated most fundamentally by material gain. The analytic strategy he takes up is, by his own admission, riskier, more speculative, and yet it proves instructive. Exploring the apartheid ideology as mode of desire, as entailing all the varying defences of desire (of displacement, substitution, denial, projection, etc.) enables a distinctive vantage-point on the pliability, resourcefulness, and insistence of apartheid thinking. Given then that obsessional neurosis, as subjective structure or as libidinal economy more broadly understood, is essentially a way of managing desire, it helps here to say a little bit more about how we can think of racism and racist ideology *as desire*.

Coetzee’s concern with racism *as desire* is not, of course, unprecedented. In respect of the colonial context, Fanon ([1952] 1986) had famously asked “What does the black man want?,” prior to posing a sobering conclusion, “To be white.” Coetzee’s analysis can be read as a variation on this question, indeed, as posing the query: “What does the white Afrikaner want?” A simple reversal of Fanon’s conclusion will not, however, suffice here, and not only because the white man or woman does not typically countenance the desire to be black but because their

desire takes on the form of an actively affirmed negative: they desire *not* to desire what is black. We are moving too quickly, however; let us pause for a moment to consider what this unorthodox move of thinking racism as desire brings to the fore. It opens up a series of different analytical insights and perspectives to what is typically the case if we follow standard conceptualisations of racism (notions of “othering,” dehumanisation, objectification, lack of recognition/empathy, etc.). It foregrounds the historical adaptability and resilience of racism, and it enables us to better grasp the saturating spread and seemingly unshakeable hold of apartheid mentality that proved so characteristic of apartheid ideology. To prioritise the notion of desire in conceptualising racism is also to highlight that the various primary process phenomena offered by Freud in the analysis of dreams (most notably condensation, displacement, symbolisation) are very much part of the operating system of racism. As Hall (1992) remarked, racism works “rather more like Freud’s dreamwork than anything else ... racism expresses itself through displacement, through denial, through the capacity to say [or represent] two contradictory things at the same time” (15).

We will turn shortly to Coetzee’s more fine-grained analysis of the particularities of racism as desire within Cronjé’s texts, but let me briefly note a number of Lacanian implications of understanding racism in this way. Desire, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, is unending. It is not the name for that which I can attain and secure but for the process of constantly striving for whatever it is that lies beyond what I do secure. Desire, in other words, evades satisfaction or final encapsulation in any one object. Hence, the well-known characterisation of desire as metonymic: it spreads in a series of “infectious” linkages from one object to another without ever being reducible to an object. To risk a short digression: blackness, for the white racist subject, is itself metonymic inasmuch as it is the troubling quality which migrates across a seemingly endless series of features which come to stand in for what, given a particular historical moment or situation, is considered to be most problematic about blackness. Coetzee himself in fact highlights the role of metonymy in racism – without, admittedly, connecting it explicitly to the Lacanian notion of desire – when he discusses “the sanitation syndrome” in apartheid (that is, public health administration concerns that came to link blackness and infectiousness):

In a first sequence of metonymic displacements we see the germ of infection suspected of being harboured by the black carrier being displaced on to his breath, his sputum, his mucus, and then onto the black as black who houses that breath, that spittle, that mucus. From being a carrier who is black, the suspect becomes the black who is a carrier; from being the vehicle of infection blackness itself becomes the infection. (Coetzee 1991, 26)

The idea that desire operates metonymically, along the lines of a generative and never-ending series of extended associations, will prove useful in conceptualising the racism of apartheid. It provides a crucial means of understanding the spread of racist sentiment and thinking, especially given the “contagious” yet never fully secured or domesticated ideological “object” that blackness is in racist ideologies.

A troubling upshot of this insight is that desire, in its unfulfillable aspect, is effectively unending for Lacanian psychoanalysis. This suggests that if racism is itself a type of desire, then it knows no final satiation or necessary end-point, and is endlessly self-perpetuating, potentially infinite. Jacques Lacan, after all, speaks of “the endless perpetuation of the subject’s desire” (2006, 262), which, by extrapolation, suggests that racism might be endlessly generative, effectively inexhaustible, existing in the register of that which, by definition, knows

no end. This, suffice to say, is a sobering conclusion. Having briefly provided a psychoanalytic perspective on the first of Coetzee's two major conundrums in respect of apartheid racism – the virus-like spread of apartheid thinking – we now have a speculative response to the second conundrum, namely the seemingly endless tenacity, the unrelenting grip, of apartheid as *weltanschauung*.

This theoretical perspective on racism as desire remains, however, all too abstract. We need turn now to the fine-grained empirical analysis that Coetzee offers us by means of his study of Cronjé's texts. Why though, we might ask, the texts of Geoffrey Cronjé? There are surely multiple other textual sources Coetzee could have consulted. Coetzee's choice, it turns out, is a good one. Not only was Cronjé a prominent Afrikaner intellectual, he was also an important apartheid ideologue whose multiple texts on the sociology of segregation (Cronjé 1945, 1946, 1948, 1958) provided a robust defence and justification for apartheid.

### ***Racism in obsessional form***

Coetzee proves himself remarkably adept in the technical concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis. After reviewing Cronjé's major texts, and considering their key concerns and anxieties in light of a Freudian diagnostic system, Coetzee concludes that Cronjé is best understood within the rubric of obsessional neurosis. Obsessional neurosis, for Lacan, is a diagnostic structure that needs to be understood in terms of desire, precisely as a strategy for locating one's self in a structural relation to the desire of the Other. The caveat that follows here is that this desire – like the suppressed wishes underlying the production of dreams – is less than obvious, is, indeed, fundamentally *repressed*, and is as such not immediately evident. The desire of the obsessional, in other words, is not directly manifest, but is rather – again like the wishes propelling the cyphered contents of dreams – only indirectly detected via the distortions, negations, and operations of disguise that cloak its presence. Cronjé's desire, in other words, is enacted in relations of repudiation and avoidance; it is desire in its unconscious form most typically expressed as instances of *counter*-desire. In Cronjé, says Coetzee, “we encounter a continual hide-and-seek with desire” (1991, 11). Cronjé's desire is apparent in his very inability “to face the desire of black for white or white for black”; it “manifests itself in motions of evasion ... revulsion and denial” (11). The very defence against desire, in other words, is the evidence of a repressed desire. This desire shines through in another distorted (negativised) way, in both Cronjé's obsessional concerns with the perils of mixing and in his anxieties concerning inter-racial living conditions (*deurmekaarwonery*) and racial blood-mixing (*rassemengelmoes*). Even a rudimentary understanding of Freud allows us appreciate how phobias and anxieties conceal repressed relations of desire. Coetzee concurs:

What Cronjé does not address in his text, what he repudiates at every turn, is a desire for mixture. Around mixture his mind obsessively turns ... mixture in its endlessly attractive and endlessly repulsive allure ... It is mixture and the desire for mixture that is the secret enemy of Geoffrey Cronjé and the knights of apartheid, the baffling force that must be thwarted, imprisoned, shut away. (Coetzee 1991, 3)

What is exemplified here is not only the obsessional's famous trait of ambivalence but also how this ambivalence is realised in relation to *jouissance*, that is, to the “substance” of intense libidinal enjoyment, i.e., that which is at once obscene, disgusting, taboo and yet also immensely erotically appealing, precisely by virtue of its transgressive qualities. The obsessional's list of prohibitions ultimately functions to keep just such a traumatic – yet nonetheless alluring – *jouissance* at bay.

Cronjé's texts never of course (consciously) raise the issue of the desires that played their part in the formation of apartheid ideology. And yet the topic of desire is raised, albeit in a curiously inverted manner, via the affirmation of a negative. That is: Why do those whites who are willing to coexist in proximity with other races *not* feel a *more* forceful desire to separate themselves from these others? Cronjé thus queries the *absence* of "*apartheidsgevoel*" (the feeling or drive for racial separation), the lack, differently put, of what he takes to be an inherent tendency to segregation within "*die Afrikanervolk*." There is, as Coetzee nicely stresses, something telling about the fact that Cronjé's question takes the form of a double negative, "why *not* the desire *not to*?" A psychoanalytic reading pays witness to how Cronjé's words imply the reverse of their intended meaning, suggesting in fact that there may in fact be no natural impulse towards racial segregation. Another example of Cronjé's writing speaking against his consciously asserted ideological agenda is found in his insistence that as the distance between whites and non-whites diminishes, so "[u]nconsciously a gradual process of feeling equal (*gelykvoeling*) ... begins to take place" which results in "a condition of being exposed to blood-mixing" (Cronjé 1945, 58). Coetzee remarks that such an assertion can be read as an argument that interracial tensions can be in fact *reduced* by social mixing. Cronjé's words speak louder than his presumed message: he seems here, despite himself, to convey the basic underlying principle of what social psychologists refer to as the contact hypothesis, the idea, in short, that prolonged exposure to other groups reduces both inter-group conflict and perceptions of difference.

The motif of absent desire becomes evident also when Cronjé turns his attention to the void that he takes to exist at the place where Afrikaner men might desire black women. This is an absence in which Coetzee intuits something else: the presence of a disguised allure and attraction: "the true force here," he remarks, "is desire, and its counterforce, the denial of desire" (1991, 18). Desire may also be said to lie at the heart of the problem that apartheid endeavours to solve, namely the need voiced by Cronjé to avoid the degenerative slide into a "mishmash-race" (*mengelmoesras*) (Cronjé 1948, 27), an imperative which foregrounds the need to consistently separate "the white man from the daily view of the black man," to thus "ensure that an essentially unattainable white culture and lifestyle do not become the object of his envious desire" (Coetzee 1991, 15). Coetzee subversively paraphrases Cronjé's rationale here, interjecting his own suspicions of Cronjé's reasoning: segregation will "remove the black man (the black woman?) from the view of the white man and thus ensure that he (she?) does not become the object of white desire" (15). The challenge of apartheid governance for Coetzee, then, is less the control of dissent than the control of desire. Cronjé's version of apartheid, Coetzee suggests, develops precisely as a *counterattack upon desire*. We can bring this section to a close by citing Coetzee, who, in an inspired turn of phrase, insists: apartheid was overdetermined, "It did indeed flower out of self-interest and greed," but it certainly "also flowered out of desire and out of the hatred of desire" (2).

### **Between subject and structure: fantasy as exchange of desire**

#### ***The absent subject of a 'self-writing' system***

I have stressed above that for Coetzee apartheid ideology cannot be understood merely as the outcome of rational (if iniquitous) processes, and that the goals of economic domination, greed, wealth, etc., while surely pertinent, are likewise, in and of themselves, unable to fully explain the fantasmatic and libidinal gains that apartheid offered its white beneficiaries. I have highlighted the role that desire plays for Coetzee in apartheid ideology – something that existing historiographies of apartheid had, in Coetzee's view, failed to properly register.

Building on foregoing arguments regards the role of desire in apartheid, we now turn our attentions to questions concerning agency in respect of apartheid ideology. Coetzee is clearly frustrated in the accounts he consults (Dubow 1989; Du Toit 1975; Legassick 1974; Moodie 1975; O'Meara 1983; Smith 1981; Thompson 1985). One issue that seems evident to Coetzee is the question of how to think of *the role of the subject* within structuralist accounts which unflinching accord structure itself an agentic role. Prevailing theories of apartheid ideology, for Coetzee constantly “elide ... the question of the subject” (1991, 28).

A related point: while theorists suggest that the analysis of ideology requires a deciphering, an unmasking, a deconstruction, then who was it who might be situated as the author of apartheid, as the agent responsible for the initial ciphering, masking or construction? Was apartheid a self-authoring system which “cipher[s] itself, mask[s] itself, unconsciously” (Coetzee 1991, 28)? Or, by contrast, was apartheid ideology “the creation of a group of people ... who appropriate ... inchoate popular notions, put them together in a pseudo-system ... and use them to further [their] interests?” (28). Neither of these suggestions seems viable, especially given that the latter still begs the question of who or what authored the material that apartheid ideologues reassembled. Questions of the authorship of apartheid, or indeed, of a kind of prime ideological agency for apartheid, seem then to require a different elaboration of agency to what Coetzee finds in prevailing structuralist/Marxist theories of ideology. The question – which seems to haunt Coetzee – is repeated: is apartheid a “free-floating, parasitic idea-system running the minds of its hosts” (30) or is it a *weltanschauung* devised and consciously elaborated by apartheid ideologues? If, presumably, it is exclusively, neither one nor the other, then how to understand the relation between these two? How are we to grasp, in other words, the distinctive mode of the articulation joining apartheid ideology as mode of subjectivity and apartheid ideology as societal/discursive/structural force? If this were not enough, Coetzee also puts forward an additional dilemma, that of accounting for the ostensibly extra-ideological move – indeed, the paradoxical type of agency – that would be required if apartheid ideologues were able to author the ideology that somehow nonetheless exercised a determining influence upon them themselves.

Coetzee settles upon an interesting prospective idea as he works his way through this puzzling terrain: the notion that perhaps apartheid ideologues are themselves caught up in the spell of the ideology that they are conjuring. This idea, that apartheid might be viewed as a type of ideological virus that attaches itself to a society of subjects, certain of whom, for a limited time, act as its privileged points of articulation, cannot simply be dismissed. This is certainly true from a Lacanian standpoint which sees the subject as precisely *the subject of the signifier* and which views the symbolic domain as itself possessed of a formidable (over)determining form of agency – hence the idea of the agency (or instance/*insistence*) of the letter, to cite one of Lacan's most well-known texts (Lacan 2006).

We could say that Lacanian theory has precisely the concept that Coetzee is searching for in respect of his questions concerning the authorship of apartheid and in respect of the apparent “supra-agency” such an authorship would imply. The Lacanian notion of the big symbolic Other is the trans-subjective point of appeal grounding what counts as truth, authority and law in a given society. It provides the “rules of the game” that enable and coordinate everyday ideological interactions and presumptions. It seems as such the best conceptual tool for the task at hand. What better conceptualisation can we find of the supra-agency that Coetzee's critique invokes? And yet, while this concept will prove crucial in what follows, there is clearly something questionable about positing the big Other as primarily responsible for apartheid ideology. While there are many good reasons why we could argue that the big Other – as

delegated locus of law and authority, as the transference-inducing “subject supposed to know,” as collectivity of societal norms and historical values – was necessary for apartheid to function as an ideology, this in itself is not enough. To assert that the big Other of apartheid was racist – a point that seems difficult to refute – is potentially to imply that this is where the lion’s share or responsibility for apartheid should lie, to suggest, in other words, that the subjective accountability of the white beneficiaries of apartheid might be negligible. It helps to remind ourselves here that one of the concerns motivating Coetzee’s critique of structuralist accounts of ideology was precisely their inability to grasp the *subjective investments* of individuals in the ideologies they have become most invested in. Such forms of structural agency seem curiously bloodless; theorisations of ideology as structure seem, accordingly, unable to account for the affective/libidinal intensity of ideological beliefs, for the “crassest absorption” of apartheid’s grand architects in their “passions and appetites” (1991, 2) as Coetzee puts it. In short: irrationality and passionate investment alike are elided in such accounts of ideology.

If we agree, as Coetzee urges us to, that the psychological subject (of desire, fantasy, libidinal investment, etc.) must be factored into the analysis of ideology, and if we likewise concede that structure (or, in Lacanian terms, the domain of the big Other) is likewise necessary, then the question we are confronted with is how to understand *the relation* between these two crucial analytical components. How, then, should we approach this interchange, this transaction between subjective and structural levels of ideology? We need to conceptualise how subjects – inclusive of apartheid ideologues such as Cronjé himself – are active as agents in an authorial process which nonetheless at times effectively over-writes them. This process of exchange, whereby the subject is both the result of, or spoken by, the Other of ideology whilst proving, nonetheless, still able to voice their own fantasmatic articulations of that ideology – Cronjé’s varying accounts and ideals of apartheid ideology being a case in point – was not something that Coetzee believed had received a satisfactory explanation.

We have now a better sense of the complexity required in addressing questions of ideological agency and authorship, especially so in situations where subject and Other are not clearly divisible. This challenge, of understanding the subject-structure (or subject-Other) relation, especially in cases where agency appears to flow in both such directions, indicates the need to consider the role of the unconscious and fantasy. This is what a Lacanian perspective brings to these dilemmas of ideology: an attention to how the agency of the Other exerts a force on the subject even as the fantasizing subject plays its part in the making of this Other. This is a relation, furthermore, which, necessarily entails the transactions of fantasy, that is, the subject’s (transferential) *questioning: What is it that the Other wants?*

### ***Racist fantasy as transaction***

Desire, for Lacan, is always mediated by the desire of others, and, more significantly yet, by the big Other of the symbolic order. This theme of mediated desire – Lacan here having repurposed the Hegelian idea that “desire is always the desire of the Other” – proves crucial in what follows. It will shed light both on the role of desire within ideology and upon the complex relation between the subject and the big Other as it pertains to questions of agency within apartheid. How then to begin? Simply by noting that this formula is relational in form and by stressing, accordingly, that desire is never static and is never the exclusive property of either subject or Other. Desire, by contrast, must rather be seen as always in flux, in a state of constant movement and negotiation, and, as importantly, as the outcome of a type of co-ownership.

We can relate this theme of mediated desire – which is always, for Lacan, sustained and developed by means of fantasy – to an elementary question: “What do you, the Other, want of me?” From an explanatory standpoint, it proves helpful to make illustrative reference to the context of early childhood. The infant’s variation on the above question, “What does my mOther want?,” provides an important means of negotiating the uncertainties of their world. While the child’s responses to what (*they imagine*) the mother desires may take on an endless variety of forms – from subjective enactments or seductive behaviours to identifying with objects of the mother’s desire – what is important is that this very process *sets the child’s own desire in motion*. If the Other’s desire is akin to a lack, a space without content, then it is, at the same time, an unoccupied area in which the young subject can begin to move about it, a place to explore and investigate. The quandary of the mOther’s desire, we can say, is hystericising for the child, in the particular Lacanian sense of subjectivising the child, igniting their own desire.

We have a continuous to-and-fro movement then between the unconscious guess-work of presumption (what the Other is imagined to want) and the attempt to be or embody what is wanted (what I should be in order to fulfil mOther). We have here the rudiments of the psychical process of fantasy, namely: the ever-repeated cyclical procedure of generating hypotheses about the Other’s desire, which are followed by wishful assertions of subjectivity which eventually fade and need be followed by a new hypothesis regards the Other’s desire.

It helps here to underscore a series of aligned Lacanian ideas. Firstly, the question of the Other’s desire can never be settled with a sense of finality for the simple reason that this desire is less than clear to the Other themselves. This opacity, furthermore, does not result in the fantasmatic hypothesis-generating process grinding to a halt. Quite the opposite: being confronted with an enigma is, in terms of the unconscious, hugely generative. This is itself a principle of how the transference is induced and maintained in the clinic. The more difficult it is for a subject to come up with a working hypothesis regards how they should situate themselves as regard an enigmatic Other, the more fantasy will be mobilised.

While the child invariably runs through a variety of existential hypotheses as regards the desire of the mother (particularly apropos what type of object they might be for her), their eventual realisation is that they will never be able to encapsulate within themselves all of what this Other is imagined to desire. This is unsurprising, because it is, ultimately, an impossible goal. To realise this is also to experience one’s self as in some way insufficient, as, indeed, lacking. Two distinctive areas of lack are now apparent in the relational field constituted between subject and the Other. The subject’s desire is not, thus, alone: the mother/Other is also perceived as incomplete, as wanting something, as lacking. What we are presented with then is a relay joining these two lacks, two locations of desire (desire being coterminous with lack). These two sites of lack are connected, and a momentum of sorts is generated between them. What is essential to the subject, namely, their subjectivising desire, is set in motion by the questions posed to the Other (“What do you, the Other, want of me?,” “What must I be for you?”), a situation which results in two barred (lacking) positions being joined in a dialogue of lacks. The fact that no final, consummate answer is ever supplied by the Other means that this exchange is ongoing and unending. This is the circuit of questioning and imagined response that underlies the production of unconscious fantasy. The argument I am advancing here is that it is precisely this exchange between levels (those of the subject and of the Other) that enables us to conceptualise the relation between subjective and structural agency in apartheid ideology.

There are moments within Cronjé's texts where this apparent lack in the big Other seems abundantly present, and where he, as an active agent of apartheid ideology, seems called upon to act. Perhaps the most striking example of this is when he laments that

There are whites, born in this country, who have degenerated to such an extent ... that they feel no objection against blood-mixing ... The nation-community (*volksgemeenskap*) is entitled to call to dock everyone who acts in conflict with its highest interest ... the interest of the nation (*volksbelang*) always outweighs personal interest (*eiebelang*). (Cronjé's emphasis, cited in Coetzee 1991, 10)

The *volksgemeenskap* (nation-community) as both a crucial point of appeal and collection of cultural (and racial) ideals is Cronjé's (and apartheid's) big Other. The fact that there is something lacking within this Other is most certainly a call to action, or, in more psychoanalytic terms, a call to be subjectivised through one's *lack*. This process, the fantasy cycle of guessing what the Other lacks and thereby needs and wants, is what ignites a certain desire, in Cronjé's case, the desire for apartheid. What Coetzee's essay shows is that Cronjé, as apartheid ideologue, intuitively lacks within the *volksgemeenskap*, and attempts to provide what this Other is imagined to desire. Cronjé's many responses to the crisis of a lacking *apartheidsgevoel* and the related problems of miscegenation remain inexhaustible. An unceasing momentum is produced in this interaction between subject and Other, a recursive movement which permits no stasis or finalisation.

### ***The object a of apartheid***

There is, however, a further facet of Lacan's account of fantasy as a type of exchange between lacks that we need to introduce. We can do this by way of a qualification. There are two different types – or sites – of lack involved in this interchange between subject and Other. This, perhaps, is not unexpected, given that the former is a site of subjectivity, whereas the latter is the condensed symbolic order: the social substance as personified. Nonetheless, this factor of disparity, of disproportionality, is important to emphasise because this subject-Other exchange cannot be equated with a form of intersubjectivity, to an inter-subjective dialogue. This is not an interchange between equal partners, it is a relation of marked nonequivalence (it is “circular, but ... dissymmetrical” Lacan (1979, 207), says, noting also that it lacks any balanced sense of reciprocity). A different dialectic of exchange is involved.

In the first decade of his teaching, Lacan constantly reiterates how the subject is unavoidably alienated in the Other, how this Other (as “treasury of signifiers”) overdetermines the subject. This is not a view he retracts: “The Other is the locus in which is situated the chain of signifiers that governs what might be made ... of the subject” (1979, 203). Yet, by the eleventh year of his seminar, he needs to supplement this account of the subject's symbolic alienation in and by the Other with an additional process, that of separation. Incidentally, it is for this reason that Lacan can never be categorically characterised as a structuralist, and for this reason also that his conceptualisations of the subject and fantasy in relation to the Other prove such an essential resource for Coetzee's attempts to think beyond the remit of structuralist theories of ideology.

What, then, is the psychic process of separation as understood by Lacan? Verhaeghe (1998, 180) is of assistance here, noting that “[a]lienation takes the subject away from being, in the direction of the Other.” “Separation, he continues, “is the opposite process,” one which “redirects the subject towards its being,” thereby “opening a possibility of escape from the all-determining alienation, and even a possibility of choice” (180). Not only does Verhaeghe

emphasise how closely intertwined the processes of alienation and separation are, he also foregrounds the particular psychical by-product – Lacan’s *object a* – that is produced by means of separation. He also goes on to offer a few metatheoretical comments on the conceptual breakthrough represented by the notion of separation in Lacan’s teaching:

Alienation and separation are linked to the twofold lack [lack as it occurs in both subject and Other] and they install the subject in a never ending pulsating process of appearing and disappearing ... The process of alienation conducts the subject towards the signifying chain of the Other ... With separation, the effect is the installation of a void between subject and Other, in which the object *a* makes its appearance. This void permits the subject and Other to fall apart momentarily ... [it] implies an escape from the all-embracing determinism of the Other and ... a limited possibility of choice. (Verhaeghe 1998, 181–182)

This order of separation is made possible precisely because of the interaction between the perceived lack of the Other and the lack of the subject. This, Verhaeghe continues, brings us to questions of ontology and ethics because

[f]rom the point of view of alienation, the subject has no substance whatsoever; it is ... an ever fading effect of the symbolic order, the Other. At this point, Lacanian theory belongs to constructionism and determinism. Ideas of individuation, self-realization, and subjective autonomy do not belong to this line of thought ... Through separation [however] the subject receives an element of choice. (Verhaeghe 1998, 181–182, emphasis added)

Without getting overly bogged down in Lacanian theory, let us note that in Lacan’s attempt to move beyond the remit of what Verhaeghe refers to as a constructionist, determinist (and, for that matter, structuralist) paradigm of explanation, he, Lacan, focusses precisely on the agentic impetus of *lack*, lack as it is radicalised in both subject and Other. It is precisely a *coincidence of such lacks* which permits for something new, *object a*, the object-cause of desire, to emerge. Now, while this fantasmatic object emerges from a juxtaposition of lacks, which means of course that the Other is necessarily involved, this *object a* is never simply owned or overdetermined by the Other. We can stress this point by noting that whereas the alienation is governed by the posited *desire* of the Other, in separation the Other has failed, and is perceived not merely as contingently but as *ontologically* lacking. The accent in Lacan’s explanation of separation has thus shifted from a sense of agency impelled by imagined desire to a form of agency induced via lack. (This is why Verhaeghe adds: “Separation does not take place through the intervention of the Other and the symbolic; on the contrary, it takes place through ... the real” (1998, 182)).

This precious *object a* – which Žižek (1989) will go on to dub the sublime object of ideology – is often thought of as a reminder, or more aptly yet, as a *remainder*, of the subject’s imagined unity with the Other. The importance of this conceptualisation of separation is hopefully by now apparent. Doesn’t Verhaeghe’s description of the “pulsating processes of appearing and disappearing” (1998, 180), of the subject’s vacillation between “the all-embracing determinism of the Other and ... a limited possibility of choice” (181) lend itself to thinking of apartheid ideology? I have in mind particularly the complexities of and ambiguities of agency eluded to above whereby the subject of apartheid (like Cronjé himself) is both spoken by the Other of ideology whilst nonetheless proving able to voice their own fantasmatic articulations of that

ideology. We have thus one response to Coetzee's paradox of ideologues who both self-consciously write ideology and yet are nevertheless over-written by it.

One implication of this theorisation in respect of Cronjé's writings is that his various rationalisations for apartheid, like the many signifiers he deploys to such ends (such as the *Afrikaner volksgemeenskap* (nation-community) as it is threatened by *deurmekaarwonery* (senseless racially undivided living conditions) and *rasse-mengelmoes* (mishmashes of race)) are not simply determined in a top-down fashion but are, in a significant sense, *his own* articulations, productions of desire stemming from his own lack.

### ***The role of the subject***

We need to clear up a few outstanding issues. The first of these concerns the degree to which we can consider the Other as the overriding agent responsible for the production of apartheid ideology. With the above conceptualisations in place, we can now assert that this symbolic Other – Cronjé's name for which is the *Afrikanervolk* or *volksgemeenskap* – is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the maintenance and spread of apartheid. It helps to bear in mind here that the symbolic Other in Lacanian theory is not simply an aggregated set of social facts or sedimented historical values; the Other is a focus of transference, it embodies the role of the "subject supposed to know" (Lacan 1979, 267) and is always thus populated with, and supported by, the stuff of fantasy. The apartheid Other cannot be separated from the subjects who passionately invested in and replicated the values it was thought to embody, subjects who remain thoroughly implicated in the ideological worldview thus consolidated.

In much the same way, the virus-like spread of an ideology that seems, at first glance, to reproduce itself as a self-writing system that bypasses the authorial role of subjects, now appears, in retrospect, less "extra-subjective" than we may have initially presumed. Inasmuch as subjectivity entails a process akin to Lacan's notion of separation, where the subject's lack overlaps with, and offers an original response to the Other's lack, in the form of the fantasised *object a* – then (discursive, material, economic) ideological structures are always receiving the supplementation of subjective fantasy. We can agree then that there was a type of "supra-agency" underlying apartheid ideology; we can agree; moreover, that this ideological system did in a sense overdetermine those subjects alienated by the chain of signifiers that it set in motion; and yet we can concede these facts without accepting that this Other wholly exhausted the subjectivity or fantasmatic productions of these subjects. To put this in Coetzee's own terms: apartheid *was* a parasitic idea-system that, in some capacity, ran the minds of its hosts (as occurred via the Other in the process of alienation), yet apartheid was also an idea-system constructed by ideologues insofar as it was a *fantasmatic response to this Other's perceived lack* (in the process of separation).

In respect of Cronjé's writings, it seems evident that he was a faithful mouthpiece of apartheid ideology, providing, as he did, revitalised expressions to commitments and principles of the Afrikaner Nationalism that preceded him. He was, in this way, a conduit for the desire of the Other. And yet his obsessional concerns and formulations, his anxieties, particularly regards the perceived dangers of miscegenation, informed the big Other, supplied apartheid ideology with a series of master-signifiers (*volksgemeenskap*, *apartheidsgevoel*, and of course, *Afrikanereie*, etc.) which would come to inform its legislative programme of segregation. The exchange of lacks facilitated in the process of separation does not thus proceed in a one-way or top-down direction. It may lack balance, it may indeed be "dissymmetrical" in Lacan's eyes, but it is also circular: the subject's fantasising plays its part in the making of the Other.

This gives us the opportunity to clarify a point about fantasy in Lacanian theory. Fantasy is both that which forms the intimate core of the subject – that which is genuinely irreducible about them – despite that it never exists apart from, beyond the remit of, the Other. We understand this better by recalling that fantasy is always an answer that is posed – and posed in the form of the subject’s own lack – in response to the Other (or more accurately, to the Other’s *lack*). In this sense, the subject’s fantasy remains always within the field of the Other, even though it is, nevertheless, absolutely the invention of the subject, *their own* contribution in response to the lack of the Other. As Renata Salecl (1998) insists, fantasy is of the subject; it cannot be located solely within the ambit of the Other; the Other is incapable of producing fantasies. At the risk of repetition then, we can insist once more: fantasy is to be understood as the invention of the subject, a fact which reiterates again that this subject does possess agency even given the overdetermining alienating force of ideology.

A similar point can be made apropos *jouissance*, which, like fantasy itself, cannot be reduced to the domain of the Other. For psychoanalysis, a given subject remains always responsible for their *jouissance*. So, while the idea of alienation as discussed above stresses how the subject is in many respects the result of the Other (the product of a chain of signifiers, the effect of the symbolic order, etc.), their *jouissance* is something that they themselves remain fully accountable for. Apartheid’s white subjects need answer, in other words, for their *enjoyment* of the symbolic systems of racism that they found themselves located within and that they played their part in perpetuating. Whether this means the *jouissance* of overt forms of racist passions (the pleasures of hating, of aggressive/sadistic dominance, etc.), the more subtle narcissistic enjoyments of the constant reiteration of white cultural superiority or a host of other instantiations of racist *jouissance* facilitated by the system, white beneficiaries cannot blame the Other for their libidinal investments in, and enjoyments of, apartheid.

### ***Phantasmatic rewards***

With the above set of Lacanian conceptualisations in place, let us now add an additional articulation to Coetzee’s (1991) above-cited insight that the persistence of apartheid may have been in part due to the “phantasmatic rewards” (29) that the ideology of apartheid offered the white electorate. Coetzee, to recall, advanced that the possibility of various intangible psychical rewards – or, we might add, *modes of enjoyment* – exceeded the terms of rational material or financial gain. His idea then – not, sadly, fully developed or theorised – was that the ideological rewards of apartheid were of a very different nature, indeed, that they might take the form of a phantasmatic possession. Coetzee himself seems less than convinced with the types of “phantasmatic reward” (29) that he posits, such as the idea of racial purity and the prohibition against inter-racial sex.

What is hopefully by now clear is that what Coetzee refers to as a “phantasmatic reward” is none other than what Lacanian psychoanalysis would identify as the libidinal treasure of *object a*. We have observed how, for Lacanian social theory, the result of separation – the overlapping of the lacks of the subject and the Other – is the *object a* of ideology (Žižek’s “sublime object”). In Cronjé’s work, this libidinal treasure has a number of names (*Afrikanervolk*, *Boereras*, *Afrikanereie*). Each such incarnation of *object a* stimulates the passions, indeed, the *jouissance*, of Cronjé’s own particularised phantasmatic investments in apartheid ideology, and, as history shows us, that of other Afrikaners and whites as well.

The insidious spread and tenacious hold of apartheid ideology had much to do, psychoanalytically speaking, with the exchange of desire between apartheid’s white subjects

and the apartheid Other, an exchange which of course produced a series of such fantasmatic objects. It is in this way – Coetzee does not offer a conceptual account of how this might occur – that the image of the pure *Boereras* is burnished, the political ideals of the *Afrikanervolk* are affirmed, and the unchallenged value of the *object a* of *Afrikanereie* is elevated to the status of the sublime.

The attempted safeguarding of such fantasmatic possessions is the unstated agenda of Cronjé's writing, virtually all of which is concerned with securing the mythical identity of the *Afrikanervolk*. For Cronjé, this precious libidinal object is worth more than any material expense incurred in its protection. What becomes evident in light of this reading is the degree to which such fantasmatic properties – such modes of enjoyment – are typically posed alongside equally fantasmatic threats. Cronjé's *object a* of the *Afrikanereie* always coincides with threats to its purity, such as those of *uitbastering* (bastardisation) and *mengelmoes-samelewing* (the degenerative effects of races living amongst one another). Intriguingly, Cronjé seems just as innovative in conceptualising threats to the *Afrikanervolk* as in developing signifiers for the *object a* of the apartheid Other. This is less than surprising when we bear in mind the Lacanian notion that fantasy both conceals and yet also pictures castration. Castration, in short, needs both to be veiled, shielded, obscured and yet also staged, reiterated, so its threat remains salient. We have then a continual to-and-fro, a call-and-response routine whereby the consoling images of fantasy respond to the picturing of a nightmarish vision, and a nightmarish vision needs to be constantly reiterated so as to necessitate and highlight the assurances of the consolatory fantasy. This idea has received a very effective reformulation in the terms of Lacanian social theory, as Žižek (1997) puts it, in respect of political ideology: fantasy is always divided between its stabilising aspect (Fantasy 1), and its vexing, undermining, threatening aspect, which forms the basis of exaggerated threats (Fantasy 2).

How might this idea be applied to Cronjé's work, and apartheid ideology more generally? Well, in Cronjé's writings, these two interlocking components seem quite clear. We have both the uniqueness and treasured racial superiority of the Afrikaner race, firstly (Fantasy 1) and also the frightening threat of racial degeneration, as pictured in a catastrophic future where the descendants of Afrikaners will no longer be white (Fantasy 2). The internal dynamism of these two components is worth reiterating. The consolatory dimension of fantasy, fantasy in its utopian guise, as we might put it, is there to entrench the reassuring – even if ultimately unrealistic, unrealistic – idealised image of a racially pure, homogenous *Afrikanervolk* existing in a pristine unmixed state within Southern Africa. The castrating dimension of the fantasy supplies the emotionally fraught, aggrieving scenario, one which threatens the cherished image of white racial purity, announcing as it does the nightmarish inevitability of a degenerative slide into a “mishmash-race” (*mengelmoesras*) of racial blood-mixing.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried both to trace and expand upon several of the most vital and original critical conceptualisations advanced by Coetzee (1991) in his landmark essay, “The mind of apartheid.” Doing this by means of Lacanian psychoanalysis – and the conjoined notions of alienation and separation, more precisely – has opened up a number of distinctive vantage-points on the hold of “mad” ideological systems and on the fantasmatic ties that bind subjects to such ideologies. It also provides a way of thinking about the complicated patterns of authorship, agency, and causality involved.

Utilising Coetzee's account in tandem with Lacanian psychoanalysis has enabled us to foreground the role of desire in the ongoing production of racist ideology. It has helped to stress the need to trace desire – and varying subject–Other transactions of desire – in the analysis of racist belief systems. In addition, it has highlighted the role of fantasy in ideological processes. It has pointed to how fantasmatic exchanges between subject and Other play their part in engendering a variety of sublime ideological objects. While there are significant parallels and resonances between Coetzee's musings on ideology and those advanced by Lacanian social theory (Žižek 1989, 1997), there is one area of Lacanian conceptualisation that takes us beyond Coetzee's speculations. I have in mind here Lacan's *object a*, the sublime object of ideology, that libidinal treasure which functions as the *jouissance*-infused cause of desire. I would argue that we cannot, ultimately, comprehend the tenacity of racist ideology without grasping this idea, and the idea that there remains something irreducibly singular about the individualised contents of racist fantasies despite that they take shape within the remit of the Other of this ideological system. Within the terms of the interlinked Lacanian notions of desire, symbolic Other and fantasy as described above, we have an account that arguably includes both a non-reductive conceptualisation of agentic ideological subjectivity and a viable understanding of the ostensibly overdetermining structural influence of the symbolic Other of a given ideology. Both aspects of this account will prove essential if we are to understand how exchanges of desire – fantasmatic transactions – operate within racist ideologies, and within the mind of apartheid more particularly.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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