Spook versus Spook

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Interrogating the Rhodes Must Fall Student Protests Through Fanonian Sociogeny: A Psychosocial Analysis of Historical Trauma and Political Violence in Postapartheid South Africa, by Veeran Naicker, Applied Psychoanalytic Studies 23 no. 1, 2026.

This article uses the ideas of psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon to analyse the Rhodes Must Fall student protest movement, which began in South Africa in 2015. It's typical of the kind of psychoanalysis-of-culture which is all too common today in identity-political fields of study. In other words, it treats society or social abstractions as if they were individuals with psychodynamic complexes, and analyses social events as effects of these complexes. The author is a sociologist who has only recently obtained his PhD, and appears to be from the South Asian minority who had social rights under apartheid. He endorses decolonial claims but is critical of Rhodes Must Fall for fighting back against the police. The article is rather a mess and my response is mostly critical.

The author argues that Fanon's concept of "sociogeny," the idea that individual psychology and political structures are deeply intertwined, provides a powerful lens for understanding how the trauma of colonialism continues to shape life in post-apartheid South Africa. The movement, which started with the throwing of human waste at a statue of the imperialist Cecil John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town, is interpreted not merely as a political protest, but as a symptom of unresolved historical wounds and the failure of the country's democratic transition to truly transform society. Clashes between protesters and police are taken to be a form of acting-out of the colonial unconscious (and Naicker is consequently sceptical of the usefulness of fighting). It is symptomatic of failure to resolve historical traumas. Clashes compulsively re-enact traumatic scenes. Naicker's Fanon is also the Fanon of poststructuralists such as Homi Bhabha, not the militant Fanon. His view of decolonisation is not a 'closure' (something which can be won) but an 'unfinished labor of mourning, repetition, and the affirmative invention of new human values'.

The article explains Fanon's engagement with psychoanalysis to develop his sociogenic method. Naicker places the emphasis on social determinism and not psychodynamics. He argues that the primitive/civilised binary arises in psychoanalysis in relation to archaic sins for which modern people are still punished (i.e. the murder of the primal father). 'Western civilization' identifies 'the black subject' with its own 'Freudian id' and its 'anti-social and primitive mateiral within the unconscious.' Fanon argued that racism functions as a psychopolitical process,

where the white collective unconscious projects its own antisocial and destructive qualities onto black bodies through a mechanism of scapegoating. This process, which Fanon called "epidermalisation," results in the internalisation of an inferiority complex by the colonised. He never explains why he takes these claims to still be true today, in South Africa. He simply cites other scholars who think it's true.

Naicker then argues that 'the ego itself' or at least 'white identity' is grounded on 'racial melancholia.' Losses have not been properly recognised or understood. On the other hand, continued white supremacist symbols and systems in a 'melancholic settler society' render the university unhomely and uncanny for students, triggering 'memories of historical trauma.' The author extends this analysis to understand contemporary phenomena like the myth of "white genocide" in South Africa, interpreting such claims as a form of white racial melancholia. This melancholia represents a refusal by white South Africans to mourn the loss of their historical privilege and narcissistic self-image, leading instead to a defensive scapegoating of the black majority and a victimhood nationalism that inverts the actual history of violence.

Applying Fanon's reworking of Freud's concept of "deferred action," the article argues that the MustFall movement represents the belated return of colonial trauma for the "born-free" generation. These students, who entered historically white universities expecting equality, instead encountered persistent institutional racism and exclusion. This failure of assimilation acted as a secondary event that retroactively made the original violence of colonialism traumatic. The protests and the subsequent violent clashes with police are read as a psychic reenactment of colonial domination—an "acting out" of unresolved historical trauma. The movement's articulation of "black pain" served as a public narrative of cultural trauma, giving voice to experiences that the ideology of the "Rainbow Nation" had sought to erase through a discourse of reconciliation that often ignored ongoing white supremacy and economic inequality.

Based on the work of Gqola and others, Naiker argues that black students have been forced to assimilate into white colonial values to succeed in schooling. This leads them to 'psychically suspend' their 'lived experience of assimilation' and to 'repress the shame of being othered as an inferior.' RhodesMustFall was a response to this erasure. However, it was also limited in supposedly having a 'patriarchal leadership' and in not treating violence as traumatic. The movement is criticized for trauma caused by the police, and for supposedly excluding people too traumatised to take part.

Finally, the article examines the internal divisions within MustFall, particularly around gender and sexuality, as a form of "generative failure." While the movement drew heavily on Fanon and Black Consciousness traditions, black feminist activists challenged the patriarchal leadership and the tendency to position the "Black man" as the universal subject of liberation. They argued that the movement's valorisation of violence and its failure to address intersecting forms of oppression, including sexism and homophobia, reproduced the very exclusions it sought to dismantle. The author contends that this critique represents a crucial "working through" of inherited political discourse, transforming repetition into invention. By exposing the limits of post-apartheid reconciliation and the failures of both colonial assimilation and patriarchal nationalism, MustFall gestures toward the need for a new, more inclusive revolutionary humanism grounded in the ethical work of mourning and repair.

What it means for radicals: I usually have more to say about the papers I don't like than the ones I like, or the ones which simply provide new information. We're deep in idpol territory with this article, which I'd hoped would actually engage with the dynamics and affects of protest.

Instead, this is a moralistic article dressed-up in social and psychological terms. The author applies a moral purity test in which a movement has to conform to a particular ideal to be fully valid (healing, transformative, etc.). Anything falling short is automatically wrong and "symptomatic." Thus for instance, something too combative is automatically deviationist, as is a movement which does not explicitly reference feminism. This way of thinking about symptoms is out-of-sorts with psychoanalytic methods. A symptom is never a *moral* flaw, and a *moral* denunciation of it does nothing to change it.

Like many others, the article misuses psychoanalytic jargon (narcissism, melancholy, failure to mourn, etc.) as social/moral slurring. It also exhibits a strong positive orientation to negative emotions such as guilt and grief, and opposition to pride and innocence, *regardless of the agent.* On the whole, this kind of moral name-calling and tickbox judgement is itself a kind of projected hostility – moral sadism sublimated through the voice and pen. It involves positioning oneself as the voice of the big Other, as the subject supposed to know, as "University discourse" grounded in a disavowed authority. It is not truly psychoanalytic.

People today attach far too much importance to symbols. There's other African countries which have prominent statues to liberation fighters, radical former leaders, or pre-colonial heroes, but which are just as neo-colonial as South Africa is. A symbol of past oppression is targeted instead of present rulers, such as capitalists and the present black-led state elite. On the other hand, it's obviously dubious that there are still statues of colonisers in countries claiming to be postcolonial. Defacing symbols of oppression has a particular significance as desecration of sacred power. And statues might be treated as ritual sites associated with a particular egregore. When RhodesMustFall evolved into FeesMustFall, state repression was more severe – and this shows where the current system's interests lie.

Naicker draws the opposite conclusion: nothing much has changed since the abolition of apartheid, and racism is still the main oppression structuring South African society. The basis for this claim, beyond the failure to remove statues of imperialists, seems to be Fanon's general theory of colonialism, which was also articulated in an earlier, explicitly racialized society. The author *speaks for* black students, mainly using the opinions of other academics and a few published statements made on behalf of the movement. I was expecting that he would engage with protesters' motives in subjective terms, based perhaps on interviews or more in-depth accounts of their experiences. The statements cited do not support all of Naicker's inferences; one, for example, simply expresses disgust with both Rhodes's legacy and the university authorities. Others indicate that the movement itself involved political commitments similar to Naicker's. This might not mean that they express the social dynamics Naicker infers; it might just mean they are drawn to the same politics. That these politics are the same as Naicker's are taken as proof that the movement is somewhat virtuous, and that its perceptions are somewhat true: it is reacting to *actual* supremacy, not perceptions of it. When the conclusions differ from Naicker's, he takes this to prove that the movement is insufficiently virtuous. By implication, Naicker (or his theoretical sources) sets the ideal against which all others are assessed, and in relation to which they might 'fail better' or simply fail. The authoritarianism involved in such positioning is staggering, and nearly always unrecognised by those articulating it.

Some parts of his discussion are based on assimilationist pressures on school students. I'd have to look at his sources to assess his reading. But this seems likely enough to be true. However, one would have to unpack the idea of racial assimilation from the general authoritarianism of modern schooling, and make clear whether decolonisation entails the abolition of authoritar-

ian schooling. Changing the curriculum, staff, or symbols of schools would not overcome the authoritarian aspects of schooling. Another point here is that Naicker focuses exclusively on *successful* school students, who suppress their awareness of and resistance to assimilation in order to succeed. These are likely the students who go on to university, but there are many others who "fail," resist, drop-out, and so on. These will typically be both the more conscious and the more oppressed, and they will not suppress awareness of oppression so forcefully. However, Naicker is implicitly against the violent and separative affects which come from a *refusal* of assimilation. In South Africa, some of those who resist assimilationist schooling become gangsters. They, of course, are found wanting according to moral criteria set by those who submitted, assimilated, and succeeded, and who now speak on behalf of "the black body."

Naicker's method is rooted in psychoanalytic *concepts,* but not the psychoanalytic *method.* There are detailed considerations of how psychodynamic and macrosocial dynamics interact, not just in Fanon but also in Reich, Fromm, Marcuse, Vaneigem, etc. Most of these recognise complex processes mediated by microsocial relations and particular family environments. However, Naicker uses the most simplistic version possible. He talks as if nominalised sociological categories *are* psychodynamic human beings, and the real human beings studied in psychoanalysis are merely effects of these categories. Of course, this raises the question of why such categories would be assumed to have traits akin to a human psyche, and also, why a (presumably false) model of the human psyche, which relies on *individual* motivations, should be used as the root-metaphor for understanding these categories. Even if these particular egregores exist, there's no reason to assume they function in anything like the manner of a Freudian unconscious – and if the egregores exist and determine real events, then the Freudian unconscious does not.

As for the concepts, there is a lot of theoretical confusion. The themes discussed here – mourning, melancholia as incomplete mourning, manic defences which deny the need to mourn – are distinctly Kleinian. Yet Klein is never mentioned or situated, and the context of these concepts in Kleinian theory (in relation to good/bad object splitting and the gradual realisation that the good and bad objects are physically the same, such that one's aggressive magic against the bad object might have harmed the good object) is completely ignored. The causal matrix has no analogue for an abstract category. I'd add that Kleinian therapeutic models (passage from melancholy to gratitude) are tendentially conservative if left unmodified. Fanon is cited constantly, but his specific concern with muscular rigidity and constant threat is ignored, along with the entire basis for his theories of violence.

Lacanian writers are also cited, and Lacan's ideas are in the background of the ego-bashing involved here. But Lacan is an anti-humanist, and the themes of mourning and melancholia take a very different form in his work. Lacan seeks to undo, not strengthen, fundamental fantasies of the kind which would have 'whiteness' fighting 'blackness' in a shadow-realm. In some places, furthermore, Naiker clearly relies on modern trauma theory, which not present in Klein, Lacan, *or* Fanon. For example, the idea that protesters are re-enacting colonial scenarios based on inter-generational trauma arising from colonial conditions they themselves can't remember is a claim imported from outside psychoanalysis. The evidence for intergenerational trauma is patchy, and it's likely mediated by the complexes of those who an infant directly interacts with.

The abstraction from actual human beings is embodied in phrases such as 'whiteness,' 'the white subject,' 'the black body,' and so on. These are placed grammatically where there ought to be actual human beings or other agents, and talked about *as if* they have a human-like psyche, an unconscious, desires, moral responsibility, etc. In other words: *as if* they were individual hu-

man beings. At various points we're told of 'the refusal of whiteness to relinquish its narcissistic centrality'; we're told that there is a 'white superego' which is a sum of prejudices and myths; we're told that there is a 'racial melancholy' (of whiteness), and a 'melancholic settler society.' These phantasms, summoned from the imaginal realm into material substance, are then placed on the couch and psychoanalysed – badly, in the style of a judgemental schoolteacher or a psychiatrist. The categories, spooks, or egregores which are psychoanalysed are assumed to somehow determine or overlap with actual people in the sets with which they share a name ('whiteness' or 'the white subject' must refer to actual white people at least enough to explain the beliefs and feelings of, say, white genocide conspiracy theorists).

To take a particular example and show the problems, consider the following statement by Naiker: 'This inversion enables whiteness to avoid working through its issues by externalizing guilt and reasserting its innocence through the scapegoating of the black body.' Here we find an abstraction, a spook, 'whiteness,' which can 'work through its issues' like a good psychiatric patient, which can feel and maybe *be* guilty or innocent, which can use the classic psychoanalytic mechanism of projection (which is what Naiker means by scapegoating), and which is motivated by its desires and complexes to act and feel in certain ways. That's a very high degree of anthropomorphosis of an abstract category. The entity 'whiteness' either does not exist or exists only as an egregore in the imaginal realm. There's no reason to assume it has a human-like psychology. Crucially, it does not have the body and the early infantile experiences which provide the basis for humans to form an ego and superego. By extension, it cannot feel guilt; it cannot project/scapegoat; it cannot work through, or fail to work through, psychodynamic issues; it cannot mourn; it cannot suffer melancholy. Its supposed target, 'the black body' (as opposed to individual bodies labelled as black), has a similar phantasmal status.

The article thus posits a shadow-play in which real events in sensuous reality actually express a battle among egregores in the imaginal realm, but these egregores are imagined to be substantively, sensuously real. If someone attributed to an animal the kind of motivations Naiker attributes to an idea, people would think it ridiculous. 'The wolf's identity as predator enables it to avoid working through its issues by externalizing guilt;' 'the zebra, in kicking the lion, re-enacts rather than overcomes a historical trauma' – would anyone say such things? And yet, humans are more alike to animals than to ideas. On the other hand, the attribution of such power to ideas *takes it away from* human beings, which *removes the very basis for the metaphors used.* If humans are puppet-mastered by egregores such as 'whiteness,' then they aren't motivated, say, by *their own* narcissism or melancholia or sense of guilt; *their own* psyche is just a reflective surface. It is no wonder Naiker sees projection everywhere. His own method systematically projects everything human and individual onto egregores, leaving individuals empty. And a humanist ethics cannot fill them again.

Whiteness figures here, as so often in such accounts, as a cartoonish supervillain. It's evil because of a psychological deformity (narcissism, ego, a megalomaniacal failure to work through its lack of omnipotence), and it constantly attacks the slightly less cartoonish figure of 'blackness' (which is often identified with the author), only to be defeated over and over. 'Blackness' wins because of its superior humanistic ethics, in much the same way as a cartoon hero. The complexity and vagueness of the language covers-up the absurdity of the empirical claims being made, and the fantasmatic nature of the concerns articulated "theoretically." If someone said the same things directly about actual people ("all white people are narcissistic," "all black people disavow their assimilation"), the absurdity would be all too obvious. But when it's pointed out, the theorist

can respond that they aren't talking about actual people, they're talking about 'whiteness' and 'blackness.' I'd add here that in Naicker's case, the account is completely binary – there is only whiteness and blackness – even though he himself belongs to a group defined as intermediate in the South African context. In Bhabha's theory, intermediate people are the revolutionary subject.

Theorists taking such tickbox approaches, and analysing in terms of egregores only they have access to, sit in judgement over social movements and ordinary people in the manner of a priest-hood or a mandarinate. Drawing on precedent in the writers of their own school, they pass judgement on anything theoretically deviant from it, without ever providing any grounds for their fatwas beyond the opinions of their school. Naicker repeats Xaba's sniping at the movement for the supposed sin of valuing violence and for supposed resultant mistreatment of those too traumatised to keep protesting. However, neither author realises that this sniping at social movements *contributes to* the very practice of control they criticise. If a movement takes trauma as lack of commitment, this is certainly an error of judgement and misunderstanding of sensuous reality. But it does not say anything about the importance of empowered agency. The state uses brutality to traumatise people *because* this suppresses the sense of empowered agency which is expressed in forceful protest. Taking the valorisation of forceful agency as an underlying sin has the effect of blaming the victim for the psychological wounds inflicted as psyops by the state. One never "heals" because one never returns to a position of agency, instead remaining forever under the shadow of trauma.

The effects of Naiker's position are reactionary. Naiker operates like a cleric for a reformist sect, which condemns more radical sects because they have not yet overcome their own sinful urges to violence and pleasure. Those who are truly devout, the reformist cleric pronounces, are those who denounce the system's sin and yet restrict themselves to moral appeals and efforts at moral reform (most often through the same systems they denounce). Is it any wonder that the powerful prefer the reformer to the radical? In a way, they play the same role as a social-democratic union leader – except that these reformists sought *concrete* reforms. Today's reformists simply seek moralisation, in the manner of old-fashioned conservatives.

It's ridiculous to see clashes between protesters and police as symptomatic. One does not need a psychoanalytic interpretation when something is clear on the conscious level. The police and other such agencies seek to suppress resistance, defiance, and alternatives in order to keep imposing a violent social system. They can't magically be wished away by cultivating a humanist ethics, working through one's own trauma, or moaning about white people's failure to give up their privilege or their narcissism. Social conflict (violent or otherwise) always shows that there are unresolved disagreements which indicate the absence of any harmonious reconciliation, but that is a truism. By not distinguishing between protesters' use of force and police aggression, Naiker effectively repeats the fallacy that protesters, by defying the powerful, bring about their own traumatisation. The fact that it's the police traumatising them – that they themselves do not bring it about – is elided so as to render *the system* innocent. Naiker thus performs exactly the projection or disavowal that he accuses white people of!

Traumatic re-enactment can take different forms. Sometimes, it acts-out on someone else the very actions one has been subjected to. Sometimes, it involves pursuit of a repetition of the traumatic experience. And sometimes, it involves facing and resolving the situation of powerlessness which caused the trauma to begin with. Trauma probably arises from a collapse of the sense of agency and bodily integrity, and often also the sense of moral order, due to being rendered completely powerless or overpowered. One only feels empowered again by removing the

blockage which rendered one powerless. Revolt against police does not compulsively re-enact trauma. It re-enacts the site of trauma, a relation to a coercive authority, in a way which breaks the power of the authoritarian actor to impose trauma. It s therefore empowering, disalienating, and de-traumatising, as is often shown in participant accounts of revolt. However, the state systematically uses tactics which re-traumatise people, during or after revolts, in order to recreate a feeling of powerlessness and a culture of silence. *This is a deliberate political act, not a natural consequence.*

I don't find the idea of 'racial melancholy' a helpful category at all. To begin with, white people aren't necessarily as thoroughly and consistently obsessed with race as the idea implies. *Some* white people care a lot about race, but this is a variation to be explained, not a basic axiom. Secondly, melancholia is not simply failed mourning. It involves splits within the self, the formation of introjects of lost objects, and violence *between* the introject and the ego. Thirdly, the positioning of certain "losses" as matters of fact is contentious. One easily ends up with a situation where one has to posit that white supremacy *has* ended (since there has to be something to mourn), at the same time as positing that it remains dominant. The failure to mourn something *which is really dead* does not have the effect of really resurrecting it or keeping it alive.

Fourthly, the proposed solution is basically liberal: people need to pass through the depressive position and arrive at a healthy subjectivity which accepts loss. (I don't think this is limited to white people; it's a general Kleinian claim). Fifthly, there is the problem that racial claims often index *other* forms of loss which are *not* the kind of thing which should simply be "accepted." It is in the context of rustbelt decline due to neoliberalism, and in relation to wider problems of capitalism, that certain kinds of identity-political racism have become so prevalent. It is also partly a reaction to the aggression embedded in the type of authoritarianism Naiker enacts. And sixthly, we don't really know which psychological factors apply case-by-case. It might turn out that a lot of white racists are motivated by a sense of loss of the power and substance of a vicarious racial ego, or it might not; it needs to be tested case by case.

The political alternatives suggested in the article are predictable for a piece drawing on Derridean ethics, although again Derrida, like Klein, is never mentioned. (I wonder, in this context, how far the idea of disavowed assimilation applies to the author's own relationship to European theorists). The difference between "failing better" and "succeeding" seems to be rather relative; the purpose of positing the former is moral rather than political, i.e. moral hatred of confident egos. But "failing better" depends as much as "succeeding" does on the existence of a hierarchy of values determining which failures are "better" (and which asymptotically approach success). Naiker positions himself as the judge who decides this. What's more, effective change comes down only to the invention of new "values." This exaggerates the role of values in social life, and also leaves it indeterminate what these "new values" will be. Yet the paper itself insists on a determinate, rigid moral position which is not particularly "new" and is not open to any novelty which contradicts it.

Naiker also dips into the issue of white genocide conspiracy theories in South Africa. Naiker's approach to this issue is more political than psychological, and shows the limits to psychoanalytic theory when used without depth engagement or clinical knowledge. From what I can establish, the theory has arisen in relation to violence (sometimes murders, sometimes robberies) against white farmers, in a context where anti-colonial parties also call for land redistribution. It probably relates also to the tactic of killing farmers which the PAC adopted right before the transition to democracy. It shows all the signs of a moral panic about deviance: a focus on an ill-defined

category of supposedly novel or increasing deviance, which is perceived as a general existential crisis of moral order. Attacks on farmers are relatively rare, are at least as likely to affect black farmers as white farmers, and usually have no political or racial motive. But "crime rates" have increased in post-apartheid South Africa, as poor people struggle to survive and compete for status a the context of neoliberal destitution. Nearly everyone treats "crime" as a moral rather than a sociological problem, which means it is easily exploited by the right. Once people stop hallucinating sinners (by imagining that sacred values have any basis in sensuous reality), they also start seeing "crime" more clearly, as a mainly socioeconomic question with aspects related to psychodynamics and intergroup conflict. Obviously Derridean moral theory is not going to get us there, even if it sort-of-believes that sinners don't really exist (but have to be posited). I'd also add that it's not impossible that a formerly oppressed group could genocide its former oppressors, or indeed an unrelated group (compare here Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Israel, Cambodia, etc.). It's just not happened in South Africa.

Since we're dealing here with a marginal belief which is not held by scientists or the mainstream media, it's evidently not a phenomenon typical of white people or dominant systems. Analysis of people who believe white genocide conspiracy theories would have to proceed either through psychoanalytic case-studies or a careful engagement with their texts (in the manner of Theweleit). Big general claims about the psychodynamics of egregores would generate more problems than insight in both cases. In a Kleinian frame, I think it's quite possible that fears of white genocide are sometimes rooted in a desire to commit genocide, or a sense of guilt for having done so or fantasised about doing so, which are either denied and projected onto others, or which generate a fear of tit-for-tat retribution. In other case, however, they might well be generalisations of individual paranoia arising from real situations of erasure or danger (e.g. in the family). They might even reflect post-traumatic stress arising from actual experiences of racial or other hostility. I also think a Theweleitian exaggeration of the danger-sense in relation to difference is probably involved in many cases. There's likely cases where someone's own sense of being at risk or disposable is articulated to wider political ideologies. And individual paranoia is not at all reduced by moralistic judgements of people's insecurities. All Naiker can do is make paranoiacs feel more persecuted.

This type of judgemental moral theory has proliferated in the last decade or so, and reflects the emergence of a new church or mandarinate, positing itself as an academic specialism in ethics and oppression, and articulating claims which simulate expertise. It is instantly recognisable by its reliance on characteristic mythologies as defined by Barthes, and intensional thinking as defined by Korzybski. This is particularly visible in the use of "-ness" and "-ity" words, of nominalised collectives ("the black subject"), and of absolute claims. Fanon sometimes uses similar language, as do many writers, but he worked with solid awareness of psychodynamics and microsocial complexities. He did not see the world in terms of a shadow-play of egregores. The reduction of human, worldly, sensuous life to a shadow-play of spiritual forces is a hallmark of authoritarian religion. It can be overcome either by a more thoroughgoing materialism, or a shamanistic and pluralistic approach to the imaginal realm.

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