

To Face the Inhuman: A Critique of Colin Richards' Critical Humanism



A thesis submitted in fulfilment of requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts (Coursework & Research Report)

of

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES, UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND,
JOHANNESBURG

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4 May 2020

DECLARATION

I declare that this research is my own and unaided work. It has been submitted for the degree of Masters in Fine Arts (by Coursework and Research Report) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other university.

Declared at the University of Witwatersrand on the 4th May 2020

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Signature

Abstract

This study looks into the critical writings of late South African art critic, Colin Richards, and his deployment of the concept of ‘critical humanism’ as a way of understanding and engaging with post-apartheid contemporary art. Premised on the desire to subject art writing to a much needed reflective treatment, this study takes upon itself, the responsibility to trace out a specific, yet central, aspect of Richards’ critical discourse as a way of engaging his interpretative practice and the aporias of liberal humanism that remain hegemonic and unchecked within the cultural field and beyond. Posited from the perspective of black radicalism, the study engages Richards’ critical humanism in so far as it is juxtaposed or takes seriously the work of post-colonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, and Edward Said as key co-interlocutors. The study’s contention is that Richards’ critical humanism, despite its assumed discursive relational contact with anti-colonial humanism, when studied closely, shows an uncritical liberal disposition that the aforementioned post-colonial critical thinkers opposed and fought against.

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Introduction

This study is concerned with the aporias of liberal humanism and the structural negations of race in post-apartheid South African art writing. It is particularly concerned with a certain strain in the critical discourse of the post-apartheid integrationist agenda and its positioning of racial blackness. It asks whether our critical practices enable for us to peel through the heavy layers of racial domination, or further obscure them. No one in the local art scene has hankered more, with theoretical luxuriance, on the impacts of the 1990s political shift and its attendant humanist proclivities in South African art than the late art critic, Colin Richards. One of the key figures in South African art criticism and theory, Richards passed away in 2012, leaving behind a rich and textured body of work.¹ The ideology of humanism has been a pervasive anchor in Richard's oeuvre, informing his writings, art, and even curatorial practice. Richards believed "humanism...has profound possibilities for understanding the critical force of creativity and the work of the imagination in developing a democratic civil society" (2008:264). As I will explain later, Richards' turn to humanism is tied with, or comes into prominence during the transitional period, precisely by 1990. For him "art and art writing *from the 1990s onwards* offers us some powerful ways of not only understanding and appreciating, but actually constituting the project of 'critical humanism'" (Richards 2011:56-57 emphasis added). More clearly, Richards connected this humanism in art to the "miracle of April 27th, 1994" (2006:131) and Nelson Mandela's inauguration speech, as the newly elected first black president of the Republic of South Africa on the 10th

¹ Colin Richards' untimely death in 2012 was followed by a number of posthumous writings of remembrance and obituaries from colleagues, former students and friends namely Robyn Sassen, Sean O'Toole, Sue Williamson and Gerrit Olivier.

May 1994, when he uttered the famous words, “[N]ever, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world.”². The promissory power of those words, have indeed remained the cornerstone of much of our liberal discourse and its juridical arm. More than decade later Richards would write:

Endings often linger, and the end of apartheid has now been with us for just over a decade. In that time South African democracy, civil society and a reconstituted public sphere, have been developing, albeit in fits and starts. Two decisive events during this decade shaped, energized and directed South African art: the controversial Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and the inauguration of South Africa’s remarkable new Constitution. In some measure our creative imaginings refer to, draw from, and are framed by these events, however mediated. These events, in their turn, owe everything to the first democratic elections ever held in South Africa on April 27th, 1994 (Richards 2006:130).

Richards returns to these events for their seemingly paradigm shifting and humanistic promise in the quest to finally put to rest the racial order. The “TRC — based on something named African Humanism — manifestly became part of South Africa’s new integration of its divided self and its integration into the later, global human community” (2004:17). The discourse of Ubuntu or “African Humanism” that had overtaken the *lingua franca* of the early 1990s by storm, also features prominently in Richards’ theorizing of his critical humanism as a kind renaissance that is

² To read the complete speech, see: http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/1994/940510_inauguration.htm

descriptive of “the humanism underpinning the TRC, and, in fact, our new Constitution” (2008:260). Ubuntu not only “provided an ethical compass for the TRC” (Richards 2004:17) but also “provoked one way of engaging artistic change and renewal throughout the land” (*ibid* 18). In a different context (circa 1962) art theorist Selby Mvusi drew a similar conclusion, arguing that the “quality of ‘Ubuntu’ is the fountainhead of all art” (2014:45).

The relationship between art and humanism undergirds Richards’ major assumptions about the burgeoning critical subjectivity and national consciousness. Therefore, the political discourse that underpins such art allegedly provides new possibilities for a different kind of human relation. By delineating a difference between colonial and critical humanism, a distinction he relentlessly recites as predicated on a fundamental overcoming of the past, and a statement whose veracity I will tease out in the course of this study, Richards’ articulates the seriousness of his enterprise. However, as the reader will see in the course of this study, Richards’ work seems to also afflicted and conflicted by this very distinction at the level of ideological and theoretical adjudications of the radical project of anti-colonial humanism in the wake of the post-apartheid dispensation. Perhaps as Richards himself once noted, “A ‘critical humanism’ that is not simply naive advocacy, liberal hubris or indeed wishful thinking is difficult to envision” (2011:49). Speaking at the South African Student’s Congress’ National Education Policy Conference in December 1994, Frank B. Wilderson III, writes *apropos* the newly adopted policy of Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and Curriculum Reconstruction and says:

To begin with, there's not a person in this room who would question the nobility of the aims — however limited — of the RDP. But the RDP as a narrative strategy functions as what Foucault calls 'a system of containment' and a strategy for excluding a range of interventions within the political economy which would destabilize capital... To put it crudely, social democratic logic disallows even the thought of putting a loaded gun to capital's head to insure that wealth and development spreads to the periphery (1995: 174 & 176).

Considering these words, the task of constructing a critical humanism on the grounds of a globally triumphant neoliberalism threatening to re-settle in the new democracy, does indeed seem like liberal hubris or wishful thinking. However, elsewhere Richards asks, "[H]ow do we build on the struggles of the past without remaining a slave to that past?" (2005). The rather disconcerting metaphoric utility of slaveness aside, it seems like, not only is Richards asking us to think about translation, he is also suggesting translocation. If translation implies re-rendering what was articulated in the struggles of the "past" in another form, translocation means shifting our geographies of meaning of what was meant by struggle then, to suit the present. In other words, struggle becomes a euphemism for collective sacrifice and protection of the new dispensation. But some are struggling to reach that goal. What ties us to the "past," according to Richards, is that "[I]n South Africa the selectively blind Apartheid vision of culture and society, still very much with us, has been conditioned and regulated literally and metaphorically by thinking in terms of black and white" (1995:152-3). Race and racial consciousness is what ties us to the past according to Richards.

What he refers to as “past” or the regulatory condition of visual impairment that can only see life binaristically; cultural historian Saidiya Hartman might characterise this dis-ability “in terms of the afterlife of property, by which I mean the detritus of lives with which we have yet to attend, a past that has yet to be done, and the ongoing state of emergency in which black life remains in peril” (2008: 13). In other words, the post-apartheid haste to think beyond race and racial identity, is not determined simply by switching one’s consciousness or merely suspending one’s ideas about race, more so if the socio-economic and historical conditions that have given rise to race and racial subjugation have remained unattended to or unaddressed. This critical attitude towards race and racial identity under the circumstances in which historical conditions of racial conquest remain unchanged, becomes another way in which the racially subjugated peoples are subtly told to either “turn the other cheek” or “turn a blind eye” to their continued marginalisation. Therefore the racially blind critique of the status quo amounts to what Wilderson describes above as disallowing to put a loaded gun, not only capital, but also on the historical materiality of white supremacy.

Richards relies on the work of anti-colonial humanists such as Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, and Edward Said, to position his ‘critical humanism,’ and readily denounce any ‘liberal hubris’ or colonial nostalgia. However, as I will try to show, this denunciation only stops at the announcement. His critical dalliance with race politics function as a form of containment of the very radicalism that undergirds his theoretical art discourse. In other words, what I am trying to do here is to show that Richards’ humanism does not, in spite of assuming otherwise, recover from the same liberal hubris he is trying to give a wide berth. To give a cursory demonstration of what I

am trying to do say, consider his statement in the 2010 roundtable discussion in the arts journal NKA hosted by Chika Okeke-Agulu. There Richards arrives at a very peculiar proposition that the xenophobic attacks of 2008 in South Africa that culminated with the fatal immolation of Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave, a Mozambican refugee, transformed the Rainbow Nation into an onion. “Rainbowism, always hobbling in sentiment, died a decisive death (if it really ever lived) with the out-break of xenophobic violence recently, where the rainbow became an onion” (2010:89). The reason Richards’ gave for this is that “race understandably dominates our consciousness in different, serpentine ways; it is continuously present and alive for many, or most” (*ibid*). Race here is articulated the motivation behind the killing and harassment of African foreign nationals, but it is not explained why the other black aggressors attack only African foreigners and not their white counterparts. In other words, if race is indeed the serpentine evil and motivation behind these attacks, why is it merely unfolding its wrath on other blacks/Africans and not on whites? Of course, to connect race and xenophobia is not necessarily anomalous, but it is the conflation and confusion that renders that connection erroneous. At the heart of what was called xenophobia, wasn’t simply a fear or phobia towards foreigners but specifically a fear and phobia for Africans. Racism, as the structuring logic of white supremacy, over-determines the socio-existential conditions of racially marginalized subjects, including through “xenophobia.” It therefore perfects itself when “it appears as what it is not, as something other than it is” (Sexton 2008: 27).

Thus, South Africa’s rainbow was never not an onion (whatever that means) as it had remained racially and economically stratified, and therefore constantly predisposed to gratuitous forms of

violence. “Township life alone makes it a miracle for anyone to live up to adulthood. There we see a situation of absolute want in which black will kill black to be able to survive.” (Biko, 2006: 82). That Richards seems impervious to the stubborn afterlife of apartheid, let alone the violence that announces itself as the permanent existential feature, only enriches our incredulity towards his theoretical system. Critic and historian Eddie Chambers once argued that “[R]acism is after all a deeply dysfunctional pathology in which the white people of any given country tend to be scornful of their fellow countrymen and women who are black, yet simultaneously relatively embracing of black people in their midst, who hail from elsewhere” (2014).

The anxiety race conjures and the vehemence with which it is readily denounced, explicitly indexes the scandal any critical race theorizing brings to dominant liberal and leftist narratives. Apartheid was dissolved as a system of governance, but the racial structure and the discursive system from which it unfolded, remains. For that reason, this paper interrogates the underlying assumptions of Richards’ critical humanism *vis-a-vis* the anti-colonial humanism that purportedly subtends it. Considering my brief framing of Richards’ discourse above, I argue that his invocation of the anti-colonial humanism of Fanon and Biko, in particular, to justify and give leverage to a neoliberalism, refortifies anti-black racism. A discerning eye will certainly see the conspicuous distortion almost immediately and make reasonable re-adjustment as to what Richards attempts to do with black thought. At the centre of my discussion here is the argument that despite his seeming impatience with race and racialism, they both inform and permeate the basic assumptions of his discourse, however, not necessarily in the ways he believes he is doing. The

point is to strip these attenuated layers of radical phrase mongering, and get into the meat of his humanistic enterprise.

To achieve this, I will focus on Richards' writings and not his art — a decision whose intention is not an attempt at “atomising and fragmenting what should be an integrating experience” (1987: 71). I do not delve into or contest Richards' interpretative practice of specific artworks or artists but instead, I treat the problematic of Richards' critical humanism at a meta-critical level from the perspective of black radicalism. To a great extent, Richards' art and writing are inseparably continuous elements of a singular whole, but they are also not reducible to each other. One could talk, write, or even theorize about Richards' art, as we have already seen in numerous texts,³ without necessarily needing to have an extended treatment of his writings, which remain largely undiscussed. As such, my decision to focus on his art writing is partly based on the scarcity of scholarly attention given to art historiographic work generally in South Africa. This project therefore, attempts to take seriously post-apartheid art writing through the figure of Richards and the reigning theoretical (humanist) assumptions that underwrite it. Art writing here, if it must be stated, refers to Richards' specific, if casual, formulation of it; that is, art history, theory, and criticism (1987; 2004) as opposed to referring, as Adrian Rifkin invites us to, writing as art,⁴ or

³ This pertains to scholars who read Richards art works, often either do not refer to his written work or when they do they do not bother interrogating its premises. I am thinking of Shannon Hill's *Bantu Ghost* (2015) and Kylie Thomas' *Impossible Mourning* (2014).

⁴ In his essay 'Dancing Years, or Writing as a Way Out', art historian Adrian Rifkin tries to demonstrate not so much the art of writing *tout court*, but attempts to demonstrate in writing the “art writing.” “Evidently, then, one of the things I most dread in the writing of art history and criticism is the dithyramb, the clumsy athleticism of exalted prose, the rush of ontologically laden anxiety that more often than not asks of even the most complex or difficult of images an order of response that no image need make; the projection of the writer's actual or rhetorically assumed burden as a character of the image as other, or as ego ideal — either in an individual poesis or a wider field of political or religious agency and argument which is a different kind of object” (2009: 813).

“criticism that regards itself as an artform” (Schoeman 2013). Also worth noting is that, throughout the course of this paper, the terms art writing and criticism, will, at times, be used interchangeably.

The legacy of black radicalism, particularly in the form of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), despite its consistent attack as “racialist” and “narrow nationalism”, mostly by ANC aligned non-racial formations, has been a terrain of interests for white liberal and left-wing scholarly research recently. It is such that recently one art historian argued that “the new descriptor [non-racialism] subtly challenged Black Consciousness by typecasting it as fundamentally racial in orientation when in fact it was about the power of voice not race” (Hill 2015:118). Such an argument, strange as it is, isn’t unexpected considering BC orientated organizations own recanting from their own positions.⁵ But it is certainly mischievous to decolourise that voice as it is nonsensical to render blackness as quiet. Therefore, in an attempt to position Richards’ humanism along-side this liberalism, I will approach the writings of Afropessimism, whose analysis remains to cast doubt on the emancipatory potential, at least for blacks, of the much purported post-racial, humanist discourse. Afropessimists posit that the historical concept of “the human” doesn’t only exclude blacks *qua* slaves but is, without failure, continually defined and parasitically positioned against them. Therefore, they argue, it must be decisively abandoned. If, as Cedric J. Robinson argues, for the black radical tradition “the purpose of the struggles informed by the tradition became *the overthrow of the whole race-based structure*” (2000:xxxi emphasis added) my task here boils down to demonstrating how black radicalism has paradoxically been

⁵ For a discussion on how BC organizations have recourse to non-racialism, see Andile Mngxitama’s “Letter to the Black Consciousness Collective” (2008), and his “Why Biko Would Not Vote” (2009).

“tucked away” (Hill 2015: 189) in non-racialist discourses as a form of systematic containment of its radical possibility.

Race-ing the Post-Apartheid Culture.

In the 1990s, the erasure of race, that is of whiteness and blackness alike, prefigured much of the talk about the idea of freedom. In other words, race did not only enter into a renewed stage of signification within classificatory systems of cultural difference but also seemed, in other instances, to have acutely “loosened” its socio-political discursive hinges — at least in terms of their public enactment. Being white sank into the pit of cultural unpopularity, such that some liberals began to justify why they too were Africans.⁶ The notion of “Africa” shifted from its colonial discursive field formation views pertaining to anthropological defection, or later its political reinvention to a positive expression of continental personality, to a putatively multi-racialist national sign. What about blackness? “What Makes you Black?” asked a famous Metro FM radio advertisement. “Is it the colour of your skin, your eyes, the shape of your nose, your hair, is it where you live, or is it your soul?” Of course, these discourses were not new but rather banned utterances during apartheid because they carried a politically inciting content. And as such, their anti-apartheid rhetorical power has to be thinned down in order to fit into the new local imaginary.

⁶ see for example Frederick Van Zyl Slabbert’s “Some do Contest the Assertion That I am an African” in *Becoming Worthy Ancestors: Archive, Public Deliberation and Identity in South Africa*, ed. Xolela Mangcu. 2011

The 'local' needs to be understood differently, as itself heterogeneous and differentiated. If we do this the 'global' will come to seem less out there than within. The us-them is ever more destructive as it becomes ever more fixed... We need to develop a critical terminology, positions and strategies. Take the use of the word 'African.' African is not simply or only black and we need to really understand 'Africa' as an (often contradictory) construct (Richards 1998: 83)

Indeed terms such as African personality, or later Africanity⁷, from the early 20th century onwards, articulated a certain continental fidelity and affirmation of indigenous people's sovereignty contra to the colonial jurisprudence; a position that would be central to the political ideology of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC).⁸ Additionally, BCM argued in the 1970s that blackness went beyond the concept of ethno-biocentrism, stating that being black is a reflection of a mental attitude. This is a position that has been subject to grievous distortions and liberal opportunism.⁹ The affirmation of such terms shifted the cultural insult and signifying power of racial degrada-

⁷ To indeed appreciate the contradictory discourses on the notion African culture and Africanity, it is advisable to visit two texts, one by art historian Olu Oguibe and another anthropologist Archie Mafeje. Oguibe maintains that 'the concept of an African culture, or an Africanity, which is quite often taken for granted, is equally problematic. It seems to me that we cannot discuss an African modernity or 'modernism' without agreeing first on either the fictiveness of 'Africanity' or the imperative of a plurality of 'modernisms' in Africa" (1999: 322). Mafeje argues "Unlike Afrocentrism, which we argued was basically referential, Africanity has an emotive force. Its connotations are ontological and, therefore, exclusivist. This is to be expected because its ontology is determined by prior existing exclusivist ontologies such as white racist categorisations and supremacist European self-identities in particular. These insinuated that blacks were inherently inferior. Hence, the blacks in the New World, especially, felt the need to prove themselves and thus produced what Martin and West call the 'vindicationist' intellectual tradition....Africanity is an assertion of an identity that has been denied; it is a Pan-Africanist revulsion against external imposition or refusal to be dictated to by others. In this sense it is a political and ideological reflex which is meant to inaugurate an African renaissance. In our view, this should not be confused with black solidarity in the original Pan-Africanist sense, which included blacks of African descent in the diaspora" (2008: 107).

⁸ see Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe's 1959 Inaugural Speech as the President of the PAC.

⁹ This is a well-known phrase taken from Steve Biko's essay "The Definition of Black Consciousness" that has been the subject of distortions, which lead to justifying that BC wasn't about race or colour but simply how people behaved. It is advisable that people read the article themselves to arrive at a proper and comprehensive position as articulated by Steve Biko. What is clear though in the article is that Biko is directly addressing Blacks and only them.

tion first attached to these terms. African, I.B. Tabata argued in 1959, is a term most whites “abhor.” “It is officially taboo” (1980:9).

Former president Thabo Mbeki (deputy president at the time) in his famous ‘I am an African’ speech insisted that “[T]he constitution whose adoption we celebrate constitutes an unequivocal statement that we refuse to accept that our Africanness shall be defined by our race, colour, gender of historical origins” (1996). Prominent judge, Albie Sachs’ just a few years before that also argued in a rather debasing and sleight of hand way that “[B]lack is beautiful, Brown is Beautiful, White is Beautiful” (1990: 27). However, writing in response to David Elliott’s show ‘Art from South Africa’ at MOMA, novelist Wally Serote in a rather exasperated tone, writes (1990: 31):

It [the show] will also declare that it has always known that white is beautiful but there is a difference in meaning from that when blacks say black is beautiful for in that case, it meant a choice between death and life. When blacks said that, they were bound by steel and rusted chains. And saying it has resulted in the deaths of many. No white will die for saying white is beautiful in a new [or even old] South Africa.

Still, few people saw how this semantic shift was part of an insidious pact between the black petit-bourgeoisie, the liberal establishment and white monopoly capitalism.¹⁰ Political economist Sampie Terreblanche has also argued that “the pressure on the ANC to seek a negotiated settle-

¹⁰ For an elaborated criticism of this relation see, Archie Mafeje. 1992. In Search of an Alternative: A Collection of Essays on Revolutionary Theory. Sapes Trust: Harare. 103-115

ment came in 1986 from Moscow, and in the same year South Africa's white government was pressurised to do the same by Washington" (Terreblanche 2012:14). In his study *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa*, political theorist Patrick Bond argues that "not only were free enterprise and property rights enshrined in every major economic policy statement and the Constitution itself, full-blown neoliberal *compradorism* became the dominant (if not universal) phenomenon within the ANC policy-making elite" (2000:16). On the other side, in praise of the legacy of anti-apartheid liberal parliamentarian, Helen Suzman, leader of the Democratic Alliance, Helen Zille stated that "liberals have already witnessed the power of their ideas when their time came at Codesa, where they largely won the negotiations after decades of intellectual preparation" (2006:103). This led Neville Alexander to argue that "the 'new South Africa' is actually going back to 1948, it's actually pre-apartheid, not the post-apartheid South Africa" (1992:117). A tension definitely exists between the language of recognition and humanization, and the social reality that it claims to represent. What Richards' sees as a miracle, is in fact a staged possibility to continue business as usual. Reflecting on the election of the first black president in the U.S., Frank B. Wilderson argued:

Neoliberalism with a Black face is neither the index of a revolutionary advance nor the end of anti-Blackness as the constituent element of U.S. antagonisms. If anything, the election of Obama enables a plethora of shaming discourses in response to revolutionary politics and "legitimizes" widespread disavowal of any notion that the United States itself, and not merely its policies and practices, is unethical (2010: 4).

I raise this point to argue that the moratorium on race, which I argue above, paradoxically manifests in the appropriation of not only racially signifying terms, thereby gaining unlimited predisposition to the unsovereign captive body and leverage in a fraught cultural context or market. Additionally, it is a much more sophisticated and insidious thing in which the disappearance of whites from the legislature proved to be a good strategy, given that the democratically elected heroes of yesteryear seem more committed to fortifying the racial structure rather than eviscerating it. Such a discourse bolsters the veracity of non-racialism as a lived experience, and propels the likes of Richards to police all those supposedly thinking in terms of black and white. In the wake of curator Okwui Enwezor's rather unflinching opprobrium in his seminal 'Reframing the Black Subject: ideology and fantasy in Contemporary South African Art,' and responding, in particular, to Kendell Geers' criticism of several white female artists, for laying "claim to the moral high ground" in the discussion, Richards writes that

...what seems surer is that his [Geers] criticism dramatizes current tensions around positioning and the accrual of cultural capital. Cultural 'Africa' is in demand, and 'liberated' South Africa has become a significant site for a scramble to export a (re)nascent cultural 'Africa' to international markets. Prominent in this scramble is the question of who has the right 'nativist' credentials to effect such export (1999: 167).

This scramble over access to black people's bodies is directly proportional to the redefinition and scramble of black identities in what John Picton calls "the new way to wear black" (1999: 125) at the level of culture. Writing against the celebrationist ethos of the early 1990s that turned

Richards into a fervent humanist, artist and critic David Koloane observed that “there is an almost obsessive imperative to embrace a supposedly ‘user-friendly’ post-apartheid era. Surprisingly, it is not the suppressed communities who are heralding the new era, but those who are the beneficiaries of apartheid” (1997:35). Koloane understood this embrace as an opportunism of those “eager to become an integral aspect of global developments in the visual arts” (*ibid*). Given that Richards had just a few years earlier questioned the political commitments and leadership structure of Thupelo Art Workshop (in which Koloane held a leadership role) for pursuing abstraction during the state of emergency,¹¹ it is not clear that Koloane’s criticism of white excitability was actually checking Richards’ own about-face. The generalized white thrill and preparedness for “freedom” extended beyond the realm of visual arts and even culture, such that Koloane’s circumspect remarks do not seem farfetched. In a conversation with curator Gilane Towadros, South African expatriate art historian Sarat Maharaj buoys what Koloane sees in the visual art world, pointing out how the TRC provides “a tricky exit from apartheid” (2007: 303). By this Maharaj is referring particularly to the performative nature of the trials and how the “cross-examining it staged saw ‘perpetrators, beneficiaries and victims’ tussling to find a common wavelength” (*ibid*). He continues: “The Commission’s legalistic drive — keen to wrap up matters in the interests of the overall political settlement — functioned with a *readymade lingo* that some used simply to ‘perform’ their way through the ritual of ‘asking forgiveness and receiving it’” (*Ibid, emphasis mine*). Much like Koloane, Maharaj equally observes how the role of

¹¹ For a serious engagement of the politics governing this particular issue, it is advisable that our readers get hold of John Pepper’s insightful book that offers a historical overview on the matter. John Pepper. 2009. *Art and the End of Apartheid*. Minnesota Press: Minneapolis. 129-171. However, elsewhere in a footnote Richards does seem slightly convinced that Koloane is angry and might be addressing him directly in one of his texts relating to this same incident: “Koloane’s bitterness is evident in the following passage which I offer without comment” (1998: 79).

the artist becomes crucial in this solicitation — or is it coercion? — of forgiveness from victims of the travesties of apartheid:

The Commission's proceedings were riddled with a tension between the timescale of juridical 'due processes' and the durations of truth-telling, the stretched-out temporal cycles of art processes. The latter come into their own as legal procedures reach an impasse or dead end because of lack of hard facts or reliable witness. They carry on the scrutiny by other means (*Ibid*).

The problem of forgiveness, particularly in its Judeo-Christian iterations, argues literary scholar Rey Chow, is to claim that "[L]ike everything that can be acquired through the conduits of global mass circulation, forgiveness has become self-serve fare" (Chow 2012: 120). Indeed, benediction in a Christian sense is not for the victim or the violated to grant the atoning aggressor, but it is, rather, something the latter can access for themselves without even reaching out to the aggrieved party. "Far more than the pardoning of a particular debt, forgiveness is considered the kind of transmission and exchange that brings about *a new beginning*" (*ibid* 127). Chow is particularly concerned with the inevitability of disappointment when subalterns buy into the narrative of progress as contingently grounded in forgiveness and as possibility for long-awaited racial respite, which more often than not, is a discourse peddled by and on behalf of the ruling structures.¹² Appealing in the name of a new beginning, all disciplinary and professional boundaries — be it art, law or even religion — melt and march in the uniformed rhythm of the dominant

¹² Adorno argues that the "attitude that every- thing should be forgotten and forgiven, which would be proper for those who suffered injustice, is practiced by those party supporters who committed the injustice" (2005: 89) See Adorno, 2005. The Meaning of Working Through the Past, in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. Columbia University Press: New York. 89-103

narrative. Those who refuse to be demure or acquiesce to the temporality of freedom, risk being condemned.¹³ Consider how Richards mobilizes Ubuntu here:

Ubuntu readily risks becoming so much Teflon spin to serve state and sectarian corporate interests. Like any humanist project, it can be deeply reactionary and parochial, honoured more in the breach than the observance. Yet it seems too easy to succumb to lazy luxury of cynicism about the idea. Sentiment and scepticism can co-exist beyond caricature and cliché. *Ubuntu* may be an occasion for critical and energetic forms of self and other recognition and comprehension, beyond narrow nationalism and ethnocentrism (2011:61).

If indeed “documenting redemption is not itself redemptive” (Richards 2011: 48) it certainly can be that merely identifying with *ubuntu* is not necessarily an act of *isintu* (culture that reinforces the concept of ubuntu) and taking seriously the structural position of *abantu* (the people to whom the culture of ubuntu is practiced by).¹⁴ To enable a process of redemption, art and indeed critical reflections on art must “ventila[te] unspeakable things” (2005: 16-17). Responding to the 1994 famous photograph of the dead right-wing paramilitary members of the group Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) in Mahikeng, in the North-West, who were gunned down by the police

¹³ Award winning journalist and scholar Antjie Krog, quotes Archbishop Desmond Tutu when he writes, giving context to the latter’s words: “Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s reconciliation theology ties in with the classical definition of reconciliation. Academics say that reconciliation has formed an integral part of his theological thinking since 1979. But Tutu has ‘Africanized’ the concept of in such a unique way that it shows up the usual Western Christian motive for reconciling as sometimes being too far removed from the world to be of value. The Church says: ‘You must forgive, because God has forgiven you for killing His Son.’ Tutu says: ‘You can only be human in a humane society. If you live with hatred and revenge in your heart, you dehumanize not only yourself, but your community’” (2002:110). See Antjie Krog, 2002. *Country of my Skull*. Random House: Cape Town

¹⁴ See Ndumiso Dladla, *Towards African Critical Philosophy of Race: Ubuntu as a Philo-Praxis of Liberation*,” *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions*, Vol.6.No.1. (June 2017).

after sporadically shooting black people, leaving forty dead and more injured, weeks before the first national elections, Richards writes:

While this event spoke to the justifiable death of a small marginal group of armed extremists, often more farce than force, the photograph touches on something far larger: a radical cut in a profound cultural and personal boundary, a dense psychological space that provided the imagined if anxious illusion of security for the ruling majority of a ruling white minority. This photograph, ostensibly about something else, broke much more than bodies, it breached the imaginary but very real boundary that held the hearts and minds of white security together (2013:245).

The two citations quoted above arguably show how concepts of like *ubuntu* are culled out of an equally marginalized African jurisprudence, and engineered to instill a certain degree of amnesia. For Richards, “the impulse is surely not to transfix the past but to remember in order to *constructively forget*” (1994:8 emphasis mine). *Ubuntu* as mobilized by Richards becomes such a discursive item, an emotive traditional garb worn conveniently and to re-stabilize the imaginary threat to the historical sanctuary of whiteness. Apart from turning the concept of *ubuntu* into a derivative of the Christological dogmatic theme of “turning the other cheek,” whose topological structure of humanism actively belittles what Dladla calls “a philo-praxis of liberation” (2017), the concept of *ubuntu* also takes on a strange bias and proclivity towards ratifying the ideological construction of a vulnerable postcolonial whiteness trapped, if you like, in what Richards himself calls, (but in reference to Enwezor) “a condition of absolute pitifulness, reproducing a disem-

powered victimography” (Richards 1999:170). Thus, when he says “[P]art of the critical traction of ubuntu lies in...its radical potential openness to the strange, unstable idiosyncratic heterogeneity of otherness” (2011:61) it is not hard to comprehend who this “stranger” is. Similarly, artist Sue Williamson and critic Ashraf Jamal (1996:7) claimed that “[I]t was the spirit of ubuntu that pulled South Africa from the brink” of war thereby exemplifying this ignorability of black existence.

This narrative is sustained despite the full display and spectacular evidence of death and bloodshed which claimed close to a hundred thousand black lives over a period of five years in the 1990s by way of black intramural forms of gratuitous violence.¹⁵ The reverence around a bloodless and peaceful revolution — a miracle? — can hardly be a topic to blacks as the transition was replete with macabre images of black corpses. The strange unthinkability of black death during what appears as a meteoric canonization of *ubuntu* as a peace-keeping magic wand, is a curious one. Nevertheless, these deaths aroused no ethical crisis in the political sphere, but instead, the crude photographic representations of the carnage not only provided psychic relief for whites but also international prominence for others.¹⁶ With respect to Richards, one might assert that this argument does not hold. That, in fact, Richards’ conspicuous silence on what he beautifully dubs the “funerary remembrance of the dead” (2011:49) is rather deliberate and a self-conscious refusal to reproduce the spectacle. I return to this topic again below regarding his “uses” of Biko. However, this is hardly the truth.

¹⁵ See Frank B. Wilderson 111, 2008. *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid*. South End Press: Cambridge

¹⁶ See Okwui Enwezor & Rory Bester, 2013. *Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life*. International Centre of Photography: New York. 472-499

The selective nature of Richards' engagement with spectacular representations, including those of the dead, is replete within his writings. What is peculiar however, is that such representations often relate to those of whites over blacks, which Richards has spent most of his critical work trying to defend. Several examples are readily available, including his polemical rejoinder to Enwezor's charges against white visual representations of black bodies in the mid-1990s.

Richards' unremitting return to Steve Hilton-Barber's photographs and the dispute that occurred in 1990, contradicts the much asserted disinterest in spectacular imagery and events.¹⁷ By consistently returning to this dispute, Richards critiques the censorial black response to Hilton-Barber's photographs as "solidarity of an imaginary 'us' against a symbolic 'them'" (Richards 1999: 352). Elsewhere he writes that his notion of "'self' is inevitably and unavoidably relational. It is inconceivable to me, as it must be to many, that one could develop a sense of 'self' without a sense of 'otherness', and indeed, the actual, historical presence of and experience of others" (2005: 36). This censorial attitude for Richards, therefore mirrors the "reactionary ethnocentric essentialism" (ibid), which, at the end of the day is nothing but a variation of Afrikaner nationalism that took power in 1948.

¹⁷ In 1990 South African photographer and member of famous photography collective Afripix, Steve Hilton-Barber, exhibited pictures of half-naked Sotho initiates whilst still in the "mountains" in an exhibition curiously titled "The savage noble and the noble savages. Photography and an African Initiation". The show was severely criticized for taking advantage of black people's traditions and disrespecting the rituals meant to be kept "secret" by publicizing the images for public consumption. The show caused and was eventually closed down. What is often left out in Steve Hilton-Barber's controversy however, including in Richards' accounts, is that the head-principle of the initiation and his mother worked for Hilton-Barber's family and that the land in which the ritual took place, belonged to Steve Hilton-Barber's family. This particular details show light into the asymmetrical power differentials involved and the influenced Hilton-Barber had in order to get access into such closed and guarded seclusion schools.

“Whiteness” claims Richards is “like its other — black — an over-determined colour, if a colour it is” (1994:4). For purposes of illustrating Richards’ flawed theoretical posture, and the politically inflammatory comparative treatment in just the last two previous sentences. Thus, it would be cogent at this point to recall the words of the trial judge, one judge Boshoff, during the 1975 famous PCP-SASO trial:

Mr Biko, why do you people then pick on the word black? I mean black is really an innocent reference which has been arrived at over the years the same as white; snow is regarded as white, and snow is regarded as the purest form of water and so it symbolises purity, so white there has got nothing to do with the white man? (in Biko 2006: 115).

Interesting! It is perhaps useless to ask why is it that Richards notices the social overdetermination of the colour, but refuses to complete his commentary and ask: “for what and by whom?” According to Jared Sexton, an “originary difference” exists here: “black, the presence of noncolour, is black only *in relation to* white, the color of absence” (2017). Sexton’s move is essential here not only to understand the metaphysics of colourism, but also to place colour within a world that its instrumentalization bears on racial differentiability and subjectivization. Black is a non-colour in so far as blackness instantiates an ontological lack, in relation to white, whose whiteness marks an absence of colour as it is the background from which colours emerge. Blackness is the presence of an absence of colour and white, an absence of the presence of colour.

Black is not the ‘other’ of the white, but its slave. The discourse of otherness presupposes a certain relational coequality between contemporaries. However, Richards’ attempt here is to present a narrative arc that constructs whites as analogous with blacks, or masters with slaves, conqueror with conquered: all being equally and devastatingly under the victimizing influence of an unknown force. Like a religious fanatic’s attempt to atone for his sins without admitting his wrongs, Richards’ metaphor of colour is not just a deracializing device but also a means of sidestepping histories of racial culpability by blaming things on the devil. As colours are over-determined differently, one of the enslaved and the other of the enslaver — the black people are overdetermined from without, whilst whites determine the world. Richards has forgotten his own words and we remind him: “We know only too well that the imperial self gives itself life at the other’s expense” (1994:1).

Richards’ pressing frustration is the stubbornness of racial nationalism in a political climate he believes is in a better situation, and not the racial structure that makes that nationalism an ethical recourse. The blanket association of nationalisms, from which, on occasion, the leading political formations in the liberation struggle (ANC, PAC and BCM) are exempted whenever he remembers, into one and the same thing tends to read quite awkwardly because no examples are given. That is, hardly does he walk his reader through the follies of a particular grouping that warrants being associated with the apartheid regime. Comparing the relentless attack on this generalized nationalism and its imaginaries on one side, and the silences of, say, Biko’s fervent nationalistic sentiments on the other, leaves room for one to secretly wonder what Richards’ humanism is really about. Was Richards perhaps afflicted by the irresolvable tensions between his humanist

affinity with Biko and the differential characteristic of BC? What is increasingly becoming apparent is that Richards' critical humanism is not just incompatible with Biko's but also stands diametrically in opposition to it. In my view, Richards' project mirrors that of Sachs:

If we [South Africans] wish to break down the habits of thinking in racial categories and to encourage the principles of a non-racial democracy, we must produce a Constitution that contemplates the rights of all the citizens of our country, not just a section, however large and however abused in the past it may have been (Sachs 1990:187).

Sachs continues, "if the Constitution is suffused with the longing of ordinary people for *simple justice* and peace, then freedom in South Africa is ensured" (ibid:188 emphasis mine). Worth noting is that, the erasure of race as a discursive and political term is not coterminous with or equivalent to the destruction of the racial structure itself. That Sachs pays no mind to the victims of the "past" speaks to the negligible injury of blacks. Again, note the temporality of the democratic paradigm, how it operates between neat and linear categories of past, present, and future — the diachronic line of reasoning that has proven to be central to art writing. Art historian Keith Moxey is quick to remind us that the "linear and teleological temporal system on which the discipline [art history] was founded in the late nineteenth century continues to inform its disciplinary organization today" (Moxey 2018: 94). The anxiety race conjures and the vehemence with which it is readily denounced, explicitly indexes the scandal critical race theorizing and organizing brings to dominant liberal and leftist temporalities. Apartheid was dissolved as a system of governance, but the racial structure and the discursive systems from which it unfolded, remains.

It is therefore this architecture of race and the historicity of racial subjection that troubled post-apartheid whiteness, as its existence remains tethered to responding to the question once posed by Du Bois: “what does it mean to be a problem?” Blackness is a structural position of the impossibility of being something and nothing, but no *one*, at the same time. Literary critic Lewis Nkosi was occupied with these questions when he argued that the new dispensation’s racial blindness was reconciling us to the status quo. For him:

In present-day South Africa, members of the black and white communities, rich and poor, still conduct themselves in accordance with solidarities based on colour or race. Increasingly, it now appears, the major purpose of ‘reconciliation’ is to promote *multiculturalism*, while attempting to banish altogether from our minds (though never out of sight) thoughts of ‘race.’ As a result a certain schizophrenia has developed in the country whereby those who benefit most from racial identities denounce its manifestations in others (2016: 153).

Anti-Blackness

At the level of theoretical procedure, it is important that I turn to the unflinching meta-commentary provided by Afropessimism, whose methodological thrust takes the form of a paradigmatic analysis. To paraphrase Huey Copeland, to think about art writing in structural terms is not to essentialize historically contingent practices and discourses, but to position them in relationship to a centuries-old antiblack global hierarchy, which darkens the marginal, the fugitive, and the socially dead wherever they appear (2013:11). In a sense, art writing is not merely a discursive

peeping tom looking in innocently and bemusedly. Instead, it enters with its “searching look” (Richards 1999: 359) and “plays a role at many levels on the construction of a South African cultural identity” (*ibid* 353). It functions from within a set of ontologically grounded axiological precepts essential to the matrix of power and its visual apparatus. Critique from this classical European disposition, as Foucault reminds us, always meant, in a simpler sense, a subject’s attitude of refusal or a “say” in how one is governed or represented. Such an attitude belonged to a subject recognized within the governing structures, described in law as “due process.” At the same time, Foucault also argues, critique “by its function...is condemned to dispersion, dependency and pure heteronomy...it is an instrument, a means for the future or a truth that it will not know or happen to be, it oversees a domain it will want to police but will not regulate” (2007:42).

So, if critique is the ability of each subject to refuse subjugation and state quite openly, and be heard, the availability of critique for black people must be questioned. Meaning, if critique is available to reinstate the dignity of others and assert their humanity, because it can articulate a discourse that is already culturally and sociologically continuous with the human polity, but cannot necessarily regulate the world; then critique isn’t enough to assist the experiences and conditions of people ontologically exiled from such a world. In other words, critique assumes relationality between subjects and the world, then black demands to destroy the very foundations of the world exceed the limited scope critique offers. Afropessimism helps us see through the machinations and limits of the anti-black world’s critical theories of resistance, freedom and being human. It takes racial slavery as a form-providing metaphysical prototype of anti-blackness, whose

ethos or structure of feeling has been distilled or dissolved across time and space. It is also a grammar of suffering that feeds into “the question of the possibility of global modernity itself, including the development of historical capitalism and the advent of European imperialism and its colonial devolutions” (Sexton 2018:83). Suffice it to say, the paradigm of slavery was not abolished, it simply changed into colonization, apartheid and exists in the post-apartheid era (Gordimer 2003:27).

The concept of social death that is crucial to Afropessimist discourse, comes from Orlando Patterson’s 1982 seminal study, *Slavery and Social Death*, and attempts to theorise the liminal state of black existence. Put differently, it articulates the position of how the black subject’s open vulnerability to death “depends on the total degradation and disavowal of black life” (Marriott 2007:231). Afropessimism draws “a distinction between the experience of slavery (which anyone can be subjected to) and the ontology of slavery, which in modernity (the years 1300 to the present) becomes the singular purview of the Black” (Wilderson 2010: 18). It “explores the meaning of Blackness not — in the first instance — as a variously and unconsciously interpellated identity or as a conscious social actor, but as a structural position of non-communicability in the face of all other positions” (Wilderson 2010: 58). In this sense, it might seem that Afropessimism creates problems for Black Consciousness whose notion of Black¹⁸ is rather more programmatic than paradigmatic, for the sole purpose of isolating whites on the basis of shared struggles against white supremacy. However, it should be noted that this singularity of the indigenous peoples of South Africa was not totally lost to BC nor simply repressed.

¹⁸ According to BC ideology, blacks are all those people racially discriminated against by the apartheid regime namely the African, Coloured and Indian.

On the question of the human(ism), Afropessimism has rather broached the much-guided space, offering neither prescription nor respite on what to look forward to in the absence of the figure of the human. “The explanatory power of Humanist discourse is bankrupt in the face of the Black. It is inadequate and inessential to, as well as parasitic on, the ensemble of questions which the dead but sentient thing, the Black, struggles to articulate in a world of living subjects” (Wilder-son 2010: 55). According to Calvin Warren (2018: 170) “we have invested unbelievable value in the human — it constitutes the *highest* value in the world. And for this reason, we are terrified of letting go of it because we believe this value will protect us against antiblackness (it will not).” For Richards, the processes such as the reconciliation commission and adoption of the Constitu- tion in 1996, enabled the possibility of humanization to take the stage. Such that for Richards to “reject these recent efforts to rearticulate “the human” is critically and culturally myopic” (2008:263). And that is where everything stops!

On the other hand, this rejection of the human according to Zakiyyah Jackson need not be blind to how anti-colonial discourses positioned the human differently from its European supposition. For instance, when Steve Biko argues that the “great powers of the world may have done won- ders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa — giving the world a more human face” (2006: 51). That the “gift” — still on its way — will come from the place where nothing comes from, rather articulated an ante-humanist posi- tion. To simply and categorically say “Biko was a humanist” might miss the oblique nature of the discourse propounded here. Jackson cautions us further that:

sentiments [by black humanists] have been largely misunderstood. It is not that critics such as Gordon simply sought admission into the normative category of “the human”; rather, they attempted to transform the category from within, and in fact they hoped to effect a greater understanding and appreciation of the transformative potential of Africana thought more generally. The hope was not that black people would gain admittance into the fraternity of Man — the aim was to displace the order of Man altogether. Thus, what they aspired to achieve was not the extension of *liberal* humanism to those enslaved and colonized, but rather a transformation within humanism (2013: 672).

The revolutionary imperative of “anticolonial social-protests movements and intellectual” resistance emerged, as Wynter (2003:262) teaches us, as a reaction to Western secular reason and its ethnoclass distinction and overrepresentation of the occidental “man” as human subject. As such, it was onto-existentially differentiated from its enslaved, conquered, oppressed, dispossessed, displaced, excluded, and starved “others.” This proprietary conception of the human as a singularly blue-eyed anthropomorphic white subject status, was first defined through a difference established in accordance with Western secular theology, and what William Jones called “whiteaninity” (1998), and “its correlated postulates of power, truth, freedom” (Wynter 2003:282). Secondly, the recourse to the colour-line, as Wynter argues, was predicated on a “set of environmentally, climatically determined phenotypical differences between human hereditary variations, as these had developed in the wake of the human diaspora, both across and out of the continent of Africa”. According to this logic, the African or “Negroid physiognomy” instantiated a “symbolic

death,” first articulated via a theological reference to an irrational barbarity, and secondly, an ontological anthropology of racial subalternity. As a result, according to Wynter again, our conception of “human” remains tethered to the socio-economic exclusionary capitalist order and its inevitable survival on the proceeds of colonial conquest, and remains the “answer that we now give to the question of the who and what we are” (317).

Interestingly, Césaire’s critique of this “pseudo-humanism” (2000:37) which both anticipates and is critical towards what, for instance, philosopher Louis Althusser, who would also reject this prevailing conception of “man” as “bourgeois or Christian... humanism” and opts instead for a humanism that “recognizes its arms in the proletariat” (1964), is revealed in Césaire’s 1956 resignation letter from the French Communist Party where he states that although solidarity with the French proletariat he does not reject, he does reject its exclusivist politics. French communism swung, according to Césaire, between a narrow particularism and universalism, which at every gesture of its oscillation, Black Africa remained eviscerated and insularized — an ultimate vassalage.¹⁹ This led Césaire to write, “[O]ne fact that is paramount in my eyes is this: we, men of color, at this precise moment in our historical evolution, have come to grasp, in our consciousness, the full breadth of our singularity, and are ready to assume on all levels and in all areas the responsibilities that flow from this coming to consciousness” (1956: 147).

Although Wynter lays ground for a new humanism, in spite of her unflinching criticism of the ethno-class version of the European “man,” hers seems rather different from Said’s ‘critical hu-

¹⁹ See Louis Althusser. 1964. *Marxism and Humanism*.

manism' I have been alluding to in the course of this study. Wynter responding to David Scott's question on her enchantment with "the human" of humanism instead of ditching it, or leave it to the Europeans — she says:

Because we have to recognize the dimensions of the breakthroughs that these first humanisms made possible at the level of human cognition, and therefore of the possibility of our eventual emancipation, of our eventual full autonomy, as humans... But those breakthroughs were only able to go only so far. They were/are unable to go further. You see the paradox here is that they themselves are only partial humanisms, only, so to speak, ethno-humanisms. Or to put it more precisely, in our case, an ethno-class or Western-bourgeois form of humanism, whose *truth-for* at the level of social reality, while a truth-for man, cannot be one for the human (2000: 195).

However, we find in Said's 'critical humanism' a slightly different version, and indeed a more affirmative account of what Wynter indiscriminately calls "Western-bourgeois form of humanism." Said writes:

I believed then, and still believe, that it is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism and that schooled in its abuses by the experience of eurocentrism and empire, one could fashion a different kind of humanism that was cosmopolitan and text-and-language bound in ways that absorbed the great lessons of the past from, say, Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer and more recently from Richard Poirier, and still remain attuned

to the emergent voices and currents of the present, many of them exilic, extraterritorial, and unhoused, as well as uniquely American (2001: 11).

Critical humanism as explored by Richards in his writings, is developed from the late Palestinian-American scholar, Edward Said's posthumously published work, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2002). Although this particular book is dedicated to humanism as such, Said's work can arguably be said to have been in a long engagement with the shadow western bourgeois and colonial humanism has cast over the potentiality of a democratic humanism ever emerging. The book maintains a particular focus on intellectual-scholar-teacher responsibility, its general tenets, insofar as they are steeped in anti-colonial humanism, in some respects correspond with various other iterations of new-radical-revolutionary humanisms. *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, explores the interconnectedness humanism, criticism, and democracy — a triad that deceptively seems like a regular match up.

According to Akeel Bilgrami who prefaces it, the book “gives humanism rigor and intellectual muscle, as well as a topicality and political relevance, that makes it unrecognizable from the musty doctrine that it had become earlier in the last century — and it gives those disillusioned or just simply bored with that doctrine something more lively and important to turn to than the arid formalisms and relativisms of recent years” (2002:xiii). Accordingly, thrust between humanism and a critical disposition, the book, in all its intentions, wants to make palpable the coextensivity between being two isms — humanism and criticism — which Bilgrami assures us have remained Said's avowed *isms*.

Consequently, criticism and humanism tend to each other in spite of their seeming self-cancellation. Criticism, in this sense, is always already instantiative of a self-reflexive consciousness, almost in the Cartesian sense. Humanism itself, stripped of all its functionalist attitudes, which is to say its ethno-anthropological Euro-modernist proclivities, is necessarily a (self)critical disposition. What of democracy? Just like he had opted not to relinquish humanism to Western rationality or criticism to formalists, Said refused to renounce democracy to liberalism. Mitchell explains it better when he argues that Said's position insists that the "language of democracy, of equality, of power sharing, of justice, of secular self-governance must not be co-opted by ideologues who use it as a cover for imperialism, but must be reclaimed and reinfused with practical meaning for human relationships" (2010:491).

If indeed "[M]otives might not matter in art criticism [art writing], but when one lays claim to the moral high ground, motives do enter the picture and do impact on the credibility of one's critical position" (Richards 1999:167), what, beyond a suspicious conceptual mischief, lies in Richards' humanism? Richards builds his critical and theoretical project as legatee to Said's humanism; not to mention Fanon and Biko. Put differently, Richards' claims to have built his concept of humanism on thinkers whose works have been devoted to challenging the historical violence of European liberal and hegemonic humanism. As Richards prompts, "Frantz Fanon and our own Steve Biko reminded us, Enlightenment "humanism" went hand in hand with our rapacious European imperialism" (2004:19). Indeed, in their works, Fanon and Biko — as we have

briefly seen with Said —critiqued ethno-biological determinism of Western humanist rationality, and/or paradoxically, intimated a need for a liberatory human consciousness in the world.

As Caribbean scholar Aaron Kamugisha has said “when one begins to reflect on ‘radical Africana humanism’ as part of the ‘nature of the black radical tradition’ we find it appears in places we might not have previously thought it existed” (2006:139). Black radicalism because of its unflinchingly critical attitude towards white liberalism and its color-blind approach, seems to always, without fail, cast in a negative and caricatural light, if not, as is the case in South Africa after 1994, to violently apprehend and destroy them using the court of laws, the media and money. It is such that “the *history* of black counter-historical projects is one of failure, precisely because these accounts have never been able to install themselves as history, but rather are insurgent, disruptive narratives that are marginalised and derailed before they ever gain a footing” (Hartman 2008: 13). On the question of nationalism, all three men have maintained similar positions, which are critical of a what Fanon calls a “sterile formalism”. In fact, for Fanon, what leads to a narrow nationalism, in the form of ethnic and even xenophobic outburst is the lack of a sensible nationalistic orientation:

What can be dangerous is when they [the people] reach the stage of social consciousness before the stage of nationalism. If this happens, we find in underdeveloped countries fierce demands for social justice which paradoxically are allied with often primitive tribalism” (2001:164).

Fanon goes further: "...if nationalism is not made explicit, if it is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words into humanism, it leads up a blind alley. The bourgeois leaders of underdeveloped countries imprison national consciousness in sterile formalism (2001: 165).

Biko on the other side, articulates black consciousness as a philosophy predicated, in the last instance, not on one's pigmentation, but a reflection of that *black* person's mental attitude. However, he is not saying, as is usually interpreted, that one's phenotypical blackness is a secondary issue. In fact, he argues that though black consciousness isn't determined by this biocentric focus at the level of political consciousness (being black doesn't automatically make one a revolutionary) but it is a project solely dedicated to and can only be enhanced by those who are discriminated against on the basis of their skin colour. Thus, the black consciousness articulates a position of black solidarity:

For the *liberals*, the *thesis* is apartheid, the *antithesis* is non-racialism, but the *synthesis* is very feebly defined. They want to tell the blacks that they see integration as the ideal solution. Black Consciousness defines the situation differently. The *thesis* is in fact a strong white racism and therefore, the *antithesis* to this must, *ipso facto*, be a strong solidarity amongst the blacks on whom this white racism seeks to prey. Out of these two situations we can therefore hope to reach some kind of balance---a true humanity where power politics will have no place (Biko 2006: 99).

Said's well known rejection of essentialising and totalising modes of discourse, is itself not essentialist and totalising. He writes:

Humanism as protective or even defensive nationalism is, I believe, a mixed blessing for its sometimes ideological ferocity and triumphalism, although it is sometimes inevitable. In a colonial setting, for example, the revival of the suppressed languages and cultures, the attempts at national assertion through cultural tradition and glorious ancestors (Yeats's poetry as part of the Irish literary revival in the face of British rule is a case in point), and the insistence in scholarship on the preeminence of the great national classics-these are explainable and understandable (2001: 37)

Considering Richards' position on race and his celebratory, if triumphant, acceptance of a decidedly racial capitalistic order — as a white male critic — can only be abstract and exaggerated reconfigurations of the status of what these thinkers had in mind when they wrote about the critical, new and revolutionary humanism. They, all three of them, either anticipated and remained critical of post-colonial states whose struggles they died fighting for. Therefore, the task at hand has been about making legible the gaps in Richards' 'critical humanism'. That is, to argue that at the heart of Richards' project lies a justification for the same liberal humanism, which he purports to dispel. As a consequence, not only does he turn Fanon, Biko, and Said into "common liberals,"²⁰ or "palatable" figures,²¹ but I also argue, Richards' writings provide radical cover and

²⁰ See Vladimir Lenin's "How Kautsky turned Marx into a Common Liberal" in *The Proletariat Revolution and Kautsky the Renegade*.

²¹ See Frantz Fanon, 2008. *Black Skin, White Mask*. Pluto Press: London

theoretical fortification for the same “racially hierarchal polity” (Mills 1999:27). Therefore, I want to put forward a proposition that we cannot lay a firm grip on this without, first, taking seriously Richards’ critical positioning and self-distinguishing accent in the discursive terrain of South African art world.

Richards and Art Writing

It must have been circa 2010 that I first came across Colin Richards’ writings. At the time, I read them intermittently, but with relish, and at times with incredulity. I had also just come across a number of other interesting South African critics, in literature and in the visual arts: namely Lewis Nkosi; Njabulo Ndebele; Thembinkosi Goniwe; Gerhard Schoeman; Alex Dodd and so on — all of whom had made a similar impression on me. Having said that, two things drew me to Richards’ work in particular. My initial attraction to Richards was based on his articulateness on the burgeoning humanist turn in South African visual art discourse as a response to the “habitually separatist culture” (1987:70), in what J.M. Coetzee called “apartheid thinking” (1996). For Richards, this “tainted humanism” (2005:74) not only others the subhuman and animal, but when studied closely, its inhuman actions also “allowed us a glimpse of the animal dimension of the human” (2011:63). Possessed by the hopeful words of Steve Biko that “the great gift still has to come from Africa — giving the world a more human face” (2006:51), Richards’ writings sought to find this facial representation in the artworks of artists like Penny Siopis, Durant Sihlali, Sandile Zulu, and others.

However, as a corollary to this, what also drew my attention to Richards' work, was his repeated invocation of, and connection to, Steve Biko's death. This was not unprecedented in terms of visual representations, as Kylie Thomas noted: it was his murder and brutal death that "drew the attention of the world" as it also "possessed the minds of several South African visual artists and writers" (2014:127). These artists include Simon Stone, Paul Stopforth, Sam Nhlengethwa, Ezrom Legae, Jane Alexander, and also Colin Richards himself. Although the visual handling of Biko's death by this pantheon of artists has aroused critical interests amongst art historians and social critics alike, rarely has there been a "reckoning" in Thomas' sense with the historiographic materials themselves. As far as I was concerned, people like Mangaliso Sobukwe and Steve Biko, let alone the Azanian movement at large,²² have remained incendiary figures for much of the left-wing and liberal circles alike that had found political acquiescence in the ideological strictures of the ANC. In fact, what these figures represent ideologically equally remains in contradiction to Richards' critical investments as I alluded earlier. That their deaths and/or travails have attracted far more interest than their philosophical discourse, shows us how even the quiet resilience of the concerns over Biko's death, does not extend far from what Africana existentialists Mabogo More calls the "locking African thinkers and their productions in the biographical moment" (2008:46). Earlier on I spoke of how the ignorability of black death can function as a necessary correlate for white people's insurance of sanctuary. However, I must also hasten to state that such an ignorable death also draws various kinds of affective and scopic pleasures. The mutilated and disfigured necropolitical body of the black, lifeless and on display in broad day-

²² see David Duke, 1983. *The Rise of Azania: The Fall of South Africa*. Lusaka: Daystar

light, circulated on social media or revisited in historical catalogues as a commemorative sign, regenerates the psychic economy of the world, for better or for worse.

Owing to his post-1990s position on self-reflexive art, Richards seems to have been aware of the nature of the spectacle, particularly the easy availability of black bodies as spectacular props for display. Richards' installations during the 1996 exhibition, *Faultlines: Inquiries into Truth and Reconciliation*, the work titled Veils, "is partly autobiographical and questions forensic truths within narratives that include the state's 1977 inquest into Biko's death, its 1975 invasion of Angola, the artist's childhood, and his abiding fascination with Samuel Beckett" (Hill 2015: 216). Without going deep into the visual characteristics of Richards' works, in case I lose my point, it is worth remembering that as a thinker (artist, scholar, and critic) Richards understood the dynamics of visual representations in what he calls the funerary remembrance of the dead. But most importantly, as an ardent reader of Njabulo Ndebele's work on the spectacle, he also understood that for the spectacle "[S]ubtlety is secondary to obviousness" (Ndebele 1991: 38). Quoting Peter Wollen, Richards argues further and I paraphrase him, that by effacing the trace of the symbolic, we condemn the viewer into a world in which they see everything but understand nothing (2008:258).

When perusing the archives at the Mayibuye Centre at the University of the Western Cape I was very undecided about what images associated with Biko I might use in the first installation. There were so many, and so many obviously shocking. I decided to stay away from the more gruesome images. I also decided against using the body of Biko itself save

for two images. Both of these are unidentifiable; in a sense generically human and radically decontextualised (Richards 1999: 10).

Richards met Biko posthumously, that is, through images of his mutilated body in 1977 whilst working as a medical illustrator at Wits Medical School. Unbeknownst to Richards, these post-mortem prints he was tasked with labelling were of a figure he admittedly knew little of then, and that would haunt his entire practice. Dr. Philip Tobias quotes from a resolution by the Board of Wits Medical School on the “Biko doctors” which problematized the racial bias of the South African Medical and Dental Council arguing that despite “sufficient evidence for a disciplinary inquiry”, “there was no evidence of improper or disgraceful conduct on the part of the doctors who treated Mr Steve Biko before his death, and that there was thus no need for disciplinary hearing” (Tobias 1991: 394). Here, Wynter’s concept of No Humans Involved (NHI), which argues that “[B]y classifying this category as N.H.I. these public officials would have given the police of Los Angeles the green light to deal with its [black] members in any way they pleased” (1994:1). Of course, Biko predicted that his death was not going to be simply a political matter but also be a politicizing one. It is the *how* he did not foresee. As we will see with Richards’ work, Biko — isolated from his political project into “the man” — in some insidious way provides the possibility to treat his humanism as an extension of the Freedom Charter’s non-racist views, which he, by the way, rejected as “objectionable” (2006:37). Nevertheless, I thought to myself, here was a “peculiar” figure, after 1994 and in the visual arts — white — turning to Biko, when he and “BC [had] been written out of the struggle” (Moodley 2008:274).

Ironically, it would also be Richards' own untimely death that would become my own rude awakening, not only to the state of the visual arts, but also of art writing. In other words, like Biko's dead body "came...to mark one important stage in a continuum... about what in short-hand I must call 'Apartheid'" for Richards (1999: 10) — as theologically discontinuous and non-analogous as these deaths were — it was Richards' own death that calibrated my interest in the shortcomings of South African art writing. Put differently, Richards' critical stance on South African art writing's apathetic and journalistic pandering, opened the possibility for me to situate my critical practice within the larger South African art criticism. As Svetlana Boym has observed, "[T]he death of the critic...serves for the survivors and interpreters as a pretext to capitalize upon their own views" (1991:243). However, mine is not to capitalize on Richards' views but rather on the views of those I believe his misinterpretations capitalize on and whose work he is parasitic to, in his pursuit of a questionable endeavor, towards a form of non-racial 'critical humanism.'

There is no doubt that Richards is a committed critic and theorist. Here I use commitment in the untidiest of ways, so as to delineate persistence, as short-lived as it might be sometimes. Still, we can always say — even if we look askance at the theoretical flamboyance of his discourse — that once upon a time there existed a Richards more agitative than we would care to admit. In other words, we could say, with sympathetic certainty, that his younger self knew how to throw stones at the glass house of apartheid. This is not to say though, that Richards was an exception, but rather that he was an inevitable product of the mid-1980s that made being a detached artist or academic not only akin to collaboration but also helped assuage the metaphysical guilt of racial

privilege. As Mnyele would say in a letter addressed to Bongi Dhlomo, “[I]t is out of duty I make available our services as cultural workers as well as members of the community of the liberation struggle” (1988:301). The forceful nature of that required service to the racially excluded black majority in the name of a non-racial future, contained its own symbolic and libidinal warranties for the largely protected descendants of the white settler-minority, who were eager to wage their own psycho-political battles with the father, the state. Feisty and unrelenting, Richards writes without academic verbosity but a critical journalistic temperament so suited for the mid-1980s:

Certainly [Thupelo’s] the cult of the individual, its rhetoric of “freedom of expression”, its “apolitical” posture have precedents in the history of American cultural politics and foreign affairs. And these seem to have more to do with the maintenance of American hegemony than the cultivation of an indigenous or “alternative” culture (Richards in Pfeffer 2009:162).

Richards would later recant parts of this harsh criticism.²³ Richards’ critical work, then and now, has always been directed towards the intramural, that is, within the domain of the Fine Arts and its discursive spaces, and always pointed at how the solipsism bears serious ramifications for art’s own discursive growth. Richards’ writing has always taken the appearance of a very thoroughly workshopped idea, peppered with all kinds of references, such that sometimes one ought to, for strategic reasons, divide his/her attention between reading the main text the one day and then, soon thereafter, dedicate more time to studying his elaborate footnotes. His work was, most

²³ see Richards, *Peripheral Visions*

times, verbose and playful in its lyrical delivery, and often at the risk of sounding unnecessarily complex and repetitive. At other times, I have found myself unable to truly pin down what Richards' scholarly project was because in most instances his work tends to appear sketchy and indecisive — seemingly always switching its positions — but not anything substantial. This is not to say Richards' work did not demonstrate convictions or scholarly proficiency, he did, but in ways that fortified an anti-black status quo.

If there is something to really notice, it is the presence of repetition in Richards' work: not just of ideas but also of whole sentences, reference to artists, artworks, quotations, texts and favorite figures. The repetition is quite pervasive, that it can, to some relative degree itself become an idiosyncrasy, a stylistic inscription. I mentioned earlier that Richards' position on the spectacle, its commendable foresight notwithstanding, raises very interesting questions about the works scholars dedicate their time to. The relentless return to topics such as TRC's importance for art, Biko and conscription, Kaolin Thomson's *Useful Vagina*, Steve Hilton-Barber's Sotho photographs and indeed 'critical humanism' become indicative of a pattern of concerns in Richards' writings. Richards' relentless invocation of humanism, whether attacking the Western liberal version or justifying its post-apartheid liberal iteration, is always articulated with a sense of urgency. Its repeated enunciations are of a reverent nature, declaratory in its advocacy of the status quo, but hardly written from the position of a critical expository perspective. I am referring to those moments of seeming frustration, as if the critic wants to ask in plain language "why aren't we getting along."

‘White’ consciousness is perhaps most damaging when it is unaware of itself, when individuals deny, disavow, and defend the fact of ‘whiteness’. Equally damaging is when that awareness is not denied but apologetic, leading to a mawkish, solipsistic introspection or breast-beating, however leavened by wry irony...I am profoundly uncomfortable with dealing in simplistic racial black/white Manicheanism (of which Fanon has much to say, advertently and otherwise), at both a personal and a public level, but it remains a reality. We are all Africans, are we not?” (Richards 2004:19).

A genealogy of Richards’ commitment to liberal humanism, here conceived broadly, also dates back to this tumultuous moment; albeit buried somewhat. Then, it seems, Richards understood the systemic necessity, if not structural restraint, of the conflicted academic ravine and the attenuated justifications of suspicion as linked to a power far greater than the academic space itself. Academia was and remains, in the Althusserian lexicon, a state apparatus. In his early mid-1980s conference paper on the bifurcated logic that traps art departments, Richards attempts to make a pact, between art writing and art making to overcome, as it were, the departmental disciplinary cleavage between theory and practice, which retains the hierarchical ordering of knowledge between thinking and doing and thereby between whiteness conceived as thought and blackness conceived as corporeal. The latter connection between blackness (as work) and whiteness (as thought), however, is not one that Richards makes here, however it is not hard to miss that when this argument is stretched, it opens up the possibility to make that analogy. As a result, Richards proposes a move away from “disciplines,” into what he calls “discursive practices” and that “this moves away from the idea of ‘disciplines’ the original distinction between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’

dissolves” (1987:70). Here, one sees, glimmering in the distance, influences of the 1980s non-racialist and post-structuralist discourses operating surreptitiously in the margins through the questioning of hegemonic logics and power relations in art writing and practice. He writes:

It is clear that under the present conditions a ‘national’ culture is impossible. Nor can it be otherwise until the material relations and conditions of the *social change radically*. It is in the face of that impossibility, and in the service of such a change that a new cultural praxis must be established. It is in view of this coming ‘world of difference’ that the new art history must be written. A history in which internationalism will be put in its place, where the (yet unwritten) history of black urban art, the cultural work of collectives — ‘the peoples’ parks’, the community arts projects, popular culture and what remains of the value in ‘high’ culture...will all find their rightful place. (1987:83 emphasis mine).

That the ‘national’ culture is impossible without radical change, and that new cultural praxis must be established, are words totally manicured out of Richards’ critical discourse later on. These are words of Richards before the infamous 1990s, whose disappearance owe it to the emergence of the liberal democratic order as an instantiation of a radical possibility.

Richards’ views on art writing in South Africa are not so deferential. For him, what went under the rubric of art writing was “a great deal of fragmented, often superficial writing, but little of which frames the field of art conceptually, or gives a particular shape and direction to the history of that field” (Richards 2004:18). From his earlier writings, Richards maintained a critical pos-

ture towards South African art writing, particularly the hierarchical and temporal order with which it imposed itself upon its objects of investigation — more so the visual materials. Whilst art, as we would like to assume, operates *as if* unhinged from and uncontained by any order, time, or schema, a text tends to obey a linear structure of disciplinary rules and methodology with which it analyses the object. As I will soon show, those disciplinary and methodological rules remain to structural assumptions of scholarship, despite ideological convictions. According to Keith Moxey, “[T]he linear and teleological temporal system on which the discipline [Art History] was founded in the late nineteenth century continues to inform its disciplinary organization today” (2018: 94).

This is something Richards had noticed even in his earlier writings on art writing. Here, as I briefly outlined earlier, Richards pays attention to the disciplinary cleavages uncritically retained in art academic departments, notably between theory and practice, which have caused both sides tremendous scholarly strain. His position criticized disciplinary manichiasm, but articulated this problem as general gangrene in academic art writing broadly. In keeping with this regimented temporal ethos, art writing “commits to adopting a critical, and at times clearly dissenting position in relation to practice” (Richards 1987: 72). Indeed, a deep examination of the racial cartography of South African art historical and critical writing analogically takes the structure of the prevailing ethnoclass’ social composition in which Whites think and Blacks do.²⁴ This problem remains with Richards throughout his career, as a problem of South African art writing lagging behind a meteorising art scene that, in particular, has been thrust with the responsibility of culti-

²⁴ See Leoni Schimdt, 1976. Aspects of South African Art Criticism. unpublished Doctoral thesis, Wits University.

vating “a sense of national identity” (Richards 1998:74). In essays like *Desperately Seeking Africa* (1990), *Peripheral Visions: Speculations on Art Criticism in South Africa* (1998), and last but not least, *Our Giftedness* (2004), Richards is, in fact, nonchalant about the decrepitude that thwarts art writing, going as far as to say “I can think of no writing of relatively sustained, integrated, theoretically informed art history of South African art” (2004: 18). He goes further to say:

There is, I think, a very real risk of critical sterility, stasis, sclerosis in local art critical writing of any substance. It may be that art critical discourse has probably always been undervalued in the country. Theoretical sensitivity and reflexivity, which I take to be central to art criticism has certainly been largely absent, strangled perhaps in the grip of larger macro-ideologies to do with political orthodoxies at least as much as art orthodoxies (1998:75).

The interfacing of political and cultural orthodoxies in South Africa are characterized, according to art historian Lize van Robbroeck, by the “successive and overlapping cultural paradigms of Western colonial imperialism and Modernism...demonstrat[ing] the underlying continuity and shared ontological grounds between the two” (2010:172). These “shared ontological grounds” between politics and cultural production, particularly in art writing, are enunciative of the Western centric linear, hierarchal, and racial ordering in apartheid art historiography. That is, an authorial disposition inscribed in the very racial sociality from which it draws its explanatory powers. In other words, mid-century apartheid art writing was, as van Robbroeck has argued, nothing other than “white writing on black,” and by which “the voice of the black artists is conspicuously

silenced” (Robbroeck 2010: 173). For Oguibe this “silence is not literal” but a voice “relegated...to the site of the guttural...unintelligible...sounds turn into noise” (2004:11). Yet, according to Richards, silence is what people suffer, albeit differently, however, my concern here is principally what he calls the “very real political silencing of others” (1999:183). This is to say, central to the “cultural paradigm” of western imperialism, which van Robbroeck argues shaped our art historical discourse, what is required is a systematic interdiction of the other’s point of view. For Richards, this not only “fails to register force involved in that contact” but also “emphasises the subjected communities’ “adjustment” to the dominant culture — which in South Africa is a minority culture” (1990:39).

Secondly, while van Robbroeck limits her study periodically and ideologically (that is, 1960s to 1990s, and between conservatives and liberals) where this feasibility or ontological ground of colonial imperialism in art writing takes place, her omission to even suggest the elasticity of colonial power beyond stated time and framework; in the final analysis, like Richards, she treats the 1994 moment as an arrival of freedom for blacks. That is, her intention is to show that “apartheid-era discourses may be recognised as part of the strategic containment and disablement of African Nationalist struggle” (182). That she strategically leaves out the much noted ideological corrupting hand of the white left in the “strategic containment and disablement” of the ANC is revealing enough. Here, the task is to show the paradigm as more elastic, capacious, and ongoing than we are willing to acknowledge; blurring the lines in which this containment occurs, from liberals to leftists, and from pre-to-post apartheid: or does the racial grammar disappear with the ending of apartheid and the emergence of the constitutionalist order? Is racial writing

simply denotative of white over-representation, than, say, a supervening anti-black grammar in the democratic paradigm? If “the racist’s purpose has become a purpose haunted by bad conscience” and therefore “no longer dares appear without disguise” (Fanon 1988:36), considering the “historical stillness” (Wilderson 2010: 299) of the black condition in the afterlife of apartheid, what masks does the racist system wear today? Was the fight for human dignity, ultimately a fight for recognition and representability: becoming white?

I ask these questions simply to gesture that though the “absence of black art practitioners in the writing and rewriting of the history of South African contemporary art render[s] them unofficial and their intellectual contribution marginal” (Goniwe 2004: 39), the precedent set by the triumph of the liberal democracy, whose highest offices are managed by blacks, should be considered a red flag of the ruse of inclusion and representation. In other words, “[F]ar from being a matter of those who were once marginal asking for inclusion so as to make good past omissions of race and ethnicity in art history’s narrative of civilizational value, the questions erupting from the epistemological break of the 1980s call for a rethinking of the entire field in which the study of visual art upholds the humanistic vocation of critical self-knowledge” (Mercer 2016:3).

By way of conclusion

This study attempted to make several interventions all at once. The first, and maybe the most important, was an attempt to situate art writing as an important endeavour that, like the objects it reflects on, also needs to be reflected upon. The work of art writing, which I take to mean the theoretico-textual engagement with art and cultural works in the form of prevailing academic and

non-academic discursive practices such as art history, criticism, and theory, has been less focused on than other disciplines in the art world. In South Africa, we do not have a thriving art historiographical tradition, and this is one of things that people like Colin Richards, as well as Gerard Schoeman, always touched on in their works. In fact, Schoeman went as far as to publish a public denunciation claiming that South African art criticism seldom went beyond “prattling”. He reduced the entire critical practice to mere “glib-journalism...pandering ready-made slogans.”²⁵ Considering Richards’ tireless critical jabs at the state of art writing in South Africa, Schoeman’s inflammatory remarks on the state of art writing paled in comparison. Richards, as I mention in the body of the text, becomes important for me (unlike Schoeman) because he was a thinker who did not seem resentful of being stuck in South Africa. By that I mean, a cursory overview on the citational practices of both men, one is bound to assume that Schoeman was writing from a bungalow somewhere in a rural European village. Whereas Richards, as flawed as his writings were, always articulated his position as a primarily South African one, which means, the enunciatory point of departure was not a generalized idea of belonging and locatedness, but one firmly placed in ideas (contradictory as they were) in the politics of a contemporary South African reality. Thus, this attempt to engage him, and also oblige his persistent invitation to solve what he describes as “the paucity of substantive research and focused critical writing on recent South African art history, theory and criticism” (2004: 18).

As I mention in the text above, Richards’ obsession with the absence of a locally focused historiographical practice extends as far back as the mid-1980s. This is seen in his earlier academic

²⁵ see Gerhard Schoeman. 2013. On The Concept of Criticism at Twilight, Art South Africa; Winter Vol.

writings which took seriously the question of how to write about South African art, much like it took seriously the questions posed by Njabulo Ndebele and Albie Sachs on how to re-imagine South Africa. Writing was and shall forever remain to Richards a “discursive practice” (1987: 70) simply in the sense that “the thought is the thing” (2002:35). What Richards meant by the thought being “the thing,” was that, because “ideas inflect” and reflect on “any material production,” “it is hard to imagine a cultural object without imagining ideas” (Richards 2002: 35). This is precisely what he also meant by discursive practice whereby discursivity is not just a mere privileged notion of a pure and immaterial pie-in-the-sky logic of “the idea.” Ideas live in the world on which they develop. Thus, art and art writing are always posited towards a higher socially conscious discourse which was, for Richards, non-other than addressing the “complex reality” of South African society and its cultural practices. To illustrate this, I shall quote two essential passages. The first is his piece *Our Giftedness*, where he writes *apropos* art writing:

Perhaps such a project — if “national” histories of art are desirable and feasible — needs greater distance and time, things we never have. It surely needs us to identify and tap the intellectual resources liberated by democracy, to work through deep questions about knowledge construction itself, and to deal coherently with the cultural cauldron of art from different, contending perspectives (2004: 18).

The second citation comes from his piece *Peripheral Vision: Speculations on art criticism in South Africa* and here he says:

Apart from important questions such as who such work might address, and on which intellectual traditions it might fruitfully feed, is the large question of the relation of art criticism to other modes of social critique. Currently, social criticism cannot be assumed coterminous with art criticism, something we tended to take for granted in the past (1998: 83).

The difference, which I wanted to make an intervention on, was precisely on the nature of this relation between criticism and social theory. Though Richards, like Sachs, rejected the idea of “culture as a weapon of the struggle,” unlike the latter, whom I am certain did not cast as wide a net as the former on the very question of the role of culture, Richards understood quite clearly the contradictory nature of his own endorsement of it. This means that he understood it to mean that saying culture is not a weapon is not any less idealist. In a sense, my wager has been that the construction of the human subject through the negotiated settlement, did not consider the structural wideness, and indeed deepness of what it means to be free. The declaration human, much as the “to free”, can never be determined by those whose humanity was never denied, and those whose freedom remains always presumed. Thinking along these lines it became apparent to me that Richards’ discourse was not any different from the liberal quietism that he endlessly criticized. I based this critical overview on a very basic and yet profound materialist reality. That Richards’ work contained not a single critical response to the post-apartheid state — both at the level of policy and ideology — is what propelled me to look more seriously at what underwrote Richards’ critical humanism. Basic questions about land, decolonization, appropriation, to issues

about exploitation, exclusion, poverty, and existential disregard were never key questions that took any serious shape in Richards' body of work.

As my project tries to show, while taking into account any existing limitations it might have, is that Richards' humanism imposes a feeling of freedom on black people in post-apartheid South Africa and positions white people as the co-bestowers of this freedom. Thus, not only are blacks prevented from acting out their reality, but they are equally discouraged to respond (according to their own blackened views) to the situation in which they find themselves. Here I am thinking of Nelson Mandela's statement that I opened this study with, which says "[N]ever, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world." The retroactive implications of this utterance always presume the future safety of the oppressing race. They take into consideration the bodily integrity or inviolability of whiteness and the psychic health of whites because they reassure them by guaranteeing that the social structure remains the same. This verbalization, as much as the representational power vested on racial differentiability at the level of daily life, becomes a sort of surety of the continuity of things. The psychic and social health of white stability is diametrically opposed to the prosperity of blackness and to the recognition of black humanity materially and ideationally. The incorporation of blacks into existing categories of being, in which whites become the standard of humanity, excellence, virtue, and value are automatically predicated on the axiological premises of anti-blackness.

I close this study with the hope that in the near future, I will dedicate enough time to revisit this study and rework some of the provocations that I attempted to make here. The point is not simply to resist Richards' critical humanism but also engage South African art writing, from an honest and deeply captivated position. Ultimately, the objective of this study is the concern about what to do with how black people have been treated. It is as much about the question of history as it is about the question of the present. It is an attempt to revolt and resist the discursive closure of the white narrative and discourses of inclusion. The aim, as imperceptible as it might seem, is to make a revolution.

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