

## Chapter 4

### Letters from the President

In January 2001 Mbeki began writing both to the South African public and to an international audience every week in an ANC on-line journal called ANC Today, in a column called “Letter from the President”. The on-line discourse contains two sections; one is signed “ANC”, and the other “Thabo Mbeki”. The ANC secretary-general Kgalema Motlanthe writes, “Not many countries can claim a head of state who themselves writes a weekly column for an on-line journal.”<sup>223</sup>

Whether it is appropriate that these letters be published has become highly debated, as the discussion below shows. Mbeki has been accused of using a “poisonous, invective pen” in these letters<sup>224</sup>. According to this criticism, the letters do not steer the country in the right direction in terms of national reconciliation. The question also arises whether the time of a person who is both head of state and head of government could not more fruitfully be spent on other matters.

#### I. The online debate begins

Although the altercation between Mbeki and Tutu that sparked many column centimetres in newspapers has been covered in the previous chapter, the ANC’s response and the manner in which it defended its president gives one insight into the thinking of Mbeki.

While the letter below is signed “ANC”, and is not in the name of Mbeki, it is reasonable to suppose that, as the head of the organisation, he would support the

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<sup>223</sup> Foreword to Letters from the President: Articles from the first 100 editions of ANC Today, 2003: Johannesburg, ANC Communications Unit

<sup>224</sup> Refer to the comment by *Sunday Times* editor Mondli Makhanya quoted in the ANC letter Shut up, Mr President!

response. The letter was written by the ANC in defence of Mbeki. The context requires that the full text be carried.

### Shut up, Mr President!

“We have asserted that the second lesson that should be drawn from the Tutu-Mbeki Debate is that part of the sociology of the public discourse in our country is the resolve of the ‘elite’ to silence the voices of those who might have the credibility and standing to challenge its views and those it considers as icons.

“The clear intention is to neutralise the voices of these opposing forces, to create maximum public space for the unchallenged propagation of the views of the ‘elite’ and its favoured icons. To achieve this goal, this elite is ready to consider, adopt and use absolutely every available weapon and instrument.

“This emerges very clearly from the way the ‘elite’ responded to ANC President Thabo Mbeki’s intervention in the ‘vigorous debate and dissent’ suggested by the Anglican Archbishop Emeritus, the Rt Rev Desmond Tutu.

“We deliberately use the expression, ‘ANC President’, to emphasise the point that in his ‘Letter(s) from the President’, Thabo Mbeki speaks as president of our movement, and not president of the republic.

“Strangely, the same people who accuse us of failing to make the vital distinction between party and state blithely ignore the obvious fact that President Mbeki writes for ANC TODAY as president of the ANC, and not president of the republic. He may therefore say various things in his capacity as the former, which he might not say in his capacity as the latter.

“Of the greatest significance in this regard is the fact that as the leader of our movement, ANC President Mbeki has an absolute and binding obligation to defend the ANC against its detractors.

“However, as president of the republic, he has a similar obligation not to use his position as head of state to promote and advance ANC partisan positions, oblivious of his constitutional responsibilities as a representative and leader of all South Africans.

“The ‘elite’, which regularly claims that the ANC does not understand this distinction, deliberately ignores the respect of the ANC for this distinction. To achieve its objectives, and knowing this to be false, it therefore deliberately projects the comments of the president of the ANC as comments of the president of the republic.

“Where it seeks to prescribe what the president may or may not say in his letters in ANC TODAY, it presents this advice or demand as a call made to the president of the republic, as though ANC TODAY is a publication of our democratic state, rather than the ‘party organ’ it is.

“The well-known journalist and columnist, Allister Sparks, spoke out loudly, but in elegant language, demanding that the president should shut up! This was in an article in the 16 December 2004 edition of *The Star*, in which he said: ‘President Thabo Mbeki really ought to consider dropping his weekly letter, or column, on the ANC website ... The problem with Mbeki’s column is that it has become a vehicle for personal attacks on individuals who have offended him in some way, or whose criticisms he finds objectionable or ill-informed or just plain annoying, and this is demeaning for both the president and the country...

“‘Taking public swipes in print at individuals, from lowly journalists to the country’s top businessman and now to its most respected cleric and moral guardian is not being ‘presidential’. It is not being smart. Too often that is what one has come to expect from President Mbeki’s weekly column...The column seems to have become a receptacle for the periodic emptying of his spleen.’

The ANC continues: “As an aside, we should note that, during the four years of the existence of the journal, the president has contributed something like 200 letters to ANC TODAY. Only four of these could ever qualify as ‘public swipes in print at individuals’, to use Sparks’ categorisation, which we contest. Given this verifiable statistical reality, quite why Allister Sparks ‘too often expects’ that the President’s Letter will be such a ‘public swipe at individuals’ is difficult to explain. The fact, however, is that his intention was not to give an objective characterisation of the President’s Letters, but to stop the president writing and publishing these letters. In these circumstances, the truth becomes a disposable nuisance.

“*Sunday Times* editor, Mondli Makhanya, had, earlier than Sparks, expressed similar sentiments in the 5 December 2004 edition of his newspaper, saying: ‘Mbeki has been an editor’s dream - the kind of columnist who readers cannot wait to read, whose writings they talk about long after the publication date. His is a feared pen, full of anger and invective.

“The question is whether this is what South Africa needs rights now; a presidential pen that is at war with various sections of society. The answer has to be a definite NO... Far from being an educational tool that explains policy choices and political positions, Mbeki’s letter has become a poisoned arrow.

- \* represents a poisoned arrow that South Africa does not need, because it does not point our country and people in the right direction and does not serve as an educational tool that explains policy choices and alternative political positions;
- \* undermines the spirit and values underpinning democracy, threatening the still fragile post-apartheid transition;
- \* constitutes an attempt to silence the expression of different and critical points of view that is essential to democracy, not different from what the apartheid regime did to silence such free public debate; and that,
- \* all this is representative of the typical expression of the ego-fixation of African political leaders, who ineluctably pretend to be the only national fount of wisdom, and who, therefore and necessarily, oppose the expression of any view either than their own: in the South African case, this problem is further compounded by the irrational and negative sensitivity of these black leaders to the role of the white minority in democratic South Africa.'

"The long and the short of this message is that the president should shut up, unless, as the government presidential spokesperson Bheki Khumalo put it in an article published by the *Sunday Times* on 12 December 2004, the 'President (becomes) dispenser-in-chief of Prozac (to update Marx's opium) to what have been called 'the voting cattle'.

"The *Sunday Times* editor put the latter observation differently when he said that what is expected of the president are anodyne interventions...

"In his column, 'The Thick End of the Wedge', on 6 December 2004, *Business Day* editor, Peter Bruce, wrote: 'My main thought is that President Thabo Mbeki is in trouble of a sort. Instead of being a chap on a pedestal, he is becoming just another chap in the bar. His snapping through his Internet column at Cosatu and Desmond Tutu has done him real damage...' said Bruce.

The ANC Today letter continues: "The president's fault is that he constantly challenges these boundaries. Because of the position he occupies in our country, it becomes difficult to ignore or suppress what he says. A determined effort is therefore made to shut him up, to stop him denying the 'elite' the possibility to sustain its false claim to what Steve Biko described as its claimed 'monopoly on intelligence and moral judgement'.

“Among other things, this ‘claimed monopoly’ is used to ensure that such issues as the persisting racism in our country are removed from the public discourse, giving the necessary space to the icons to make their reassuring statements to allay ‘white fears’.”<sup>225</sup>

There are a few comments to make here. The first is that it is very hard to disagree with the analysis and comments that Sparks, Makhanya and Bruce make about the “Letters from the President”. Far from these letters serving Mbeki well, they have had the reverse effect. The “Letters from the President” are critical in understanding Mbeki’s discourse on race, as this issue is arguably the one he attaches more importance to than any other. They show the excess attached to race and the passion invested in it.

## **II. Letters from the President**

To highlight just how important, it is necessary to refer to Mbeki’s own words in various “Letters from the President”.

I have included extracts from Mbeki’s first letter<sup>226</sup>, entitled Welcome to ANC Today, in which he sets out his rationale for his on-line discourse with the public.

### Welcome to ANC Today

“First of all I would like to congratulate the Communications Unit on its decision to publish ANC Today. It is of critical importance that the ANC develops its own vehicles to communicate news, information and views to as many people as possible, at home and abroad. Clearly, the Internet provides an added possibility to achieve this objective.

“Historically, the national and political constituency represented by the ANC has had very few and limited mass media throughout the 90 years of its existence. During this period, the commercial newspaper and magazine press representing the views, values and interests of

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<sup>225</sup> The Sociology of the Public Discourse in Democratic South Africa, Part III: Shut up, Mr President! ANC Today, Vol.5 No.4 28 January - 3 February 2005

<sup>226</sup> Letters from the President, ANC Today, Vol.1 no.1 26 January - 1 February 2001

the white minority has dominated the field of the mass media. This situation has changed only marginally in the period since we obtained our liberation in 1994.

“We are faced with the virtually unique situation that, among the democracies, the overwhelming dominant tendency in South African politics, represented by the ANC, has no representation whatsoever in the mass media.

“We therefore have to contend with the situation that what masquerades as ‘public opinion’, as reflected in the bulk of our media, is in fact minority opinion informed by the historic social and political position occupied by this minority.

“By projecting itself as ‘public opinion’ communicated by an objective press, this minority opinion seeks to get itself accepted by the majority as the latter's own opinion.

“With no access to its own media, this majority has had to depend on other means to equip itself with information and views to enable it to reach its own conclusions about important national and international matters.

“The world of ideas is also a world of struggle. ANC Today must be a combatant for the truth, for the liberation of the minds of our people, for the eradication of the colonial and apartheid legacy, for democracy, non-racism, non-sexism, prosperity and progress.”<sup>227</sup>

In this first letter Mbeki sets out his “logic” or reasons for the need to write to the South African public as well as to an international audience. The themes are: he feels the mass media reflect white minority views and are unsupportive of the ANC therefore he has a duty to communicate with everyone so that the majority’s views can be heard. The logic appears to be that if you are not supportive of the party, then you are unsupportive of the national transformation project in the country. He conflates support of the transformation project with the Party. It seems to be that Mbeki regards the ventilation of different ideas on transformation as a threat, as seen in Chapter 3 (The key issues of Mbeki’s Presidency), where he makes a distinction between legitimate adversaries and antagonists. This is ironic in light of the fact that he ends his letter by applauding the fact that “The world of ideas is also a world of struggle”.

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<sup>227</sup> Letter from the President: Welcome to ANC Today, ANC Today, Vol.1 No.1 26 January - 1 February 2001

The following extracts from “Letter from the President” deals with race.

### New Patriotism for a new South Africa

“For some years now we have called for the nurturing of a new patriotism among all our people, both black and white. We have considered this important because for three centuries our people have been separated into antagonistic racial components.

“This legacy is part of our daily reality. It also informs our thinking about ourselves, about others and about our country. It is out of this legacy that stereotypes of one another were born and maintained. Some of these stereotypes are indeed most offensive.

“As long as they persist, so long will it be difficult for us to achieve the necessary unity across the colour line, focused on a common national effort to eradicate the unacceptable legacy of the past. Yet, we have to think and act together both because need to pool all the resources we have as a country and because we must ensure that the new South Africa is a product of the common efforts of all our people.

“The only way this will happen is if we proceed from common positions about the nature of the problems our country faces. We must share a common recognition of the fact that all of us stand to gain from the transformation of South Africa into a non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous country...Unless we build such a society, the better life for all that we all seek would be realised neither for the whites nor the blacks. This means that all of must engage in a difficult and protracted struggle to defeat the accumulated prejudices that all of us harbour in our minds.

“Nobody is born either superior or inferior. No people is predestined to succeed or to fail. No child is born hating. Our neighbours, whether black or white, are as human as we all are and as South African as we all are. Because none of us is an island, none of us can succeed without the co-operation of the next person, regardless of race, colour or gender ...”<sup>228</sup>

While it might seem here that all Mbeki is doing is articulating his commitment to a non-racial future for South Africa, closer examination, however, reveals the passionate attachment to race.

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<sup>228</sup> Letter from the President: A New Patriotism for a new South Africa, ANC Today, Vol.1 No.4 16 – 22 February 2001

First, he says that antagonistic racial compartments are part of daily reality. This is part of Mbeki's unconscious racial fantasy which sustains his compulsive perception of "race" as the *a priori* organising principle of South Africa's social life.

Second, he asserts that everyone harbours prejudice and that stereotypes are maintained. This, again, expresses what Žižek calls the "social fantasy". Mbeki is unable to abandon the notion that the nation is drifting in a sea of racial stereotypes, showing his stubborn attachment to, or pursuit of, wretchedness, in Butlerian terminology.

Third, the legacy of the past "informs our thinking about ourselves, about others..." is an assertion that fixes our thinking and identity, and implies that because of the history of apartheid, South Africans are therefore necessarily stubbornly attached to this political consciousness of race at the master signifier, the way he is. What he does here, then, is to take South Africa as himself 'writ large', a quintessentially anti-democratic move. It does not take into account that the majority of South Africans – black and white – may find this view offensive. The legacy of the past, is in Butlerian theory, a melancholic turn, a reflexivity that turns one towards one's own oppression. It is about a turning back on oneself or a turning on oneself. "As a form of power, subjection is paradoxical,"<sup>229</sup> is the starting point of Butler. Without Mbeki's traumatic reference, ie to the wretchedness of colonialism, slavery and apartheid, which forms his identity, he would lose this very identity.

Fourth, the following sentence of how unity of the nation can be achieved, "The only way this will happen is if we proceed from common positions about the nature of the problems our country faces." What this surely implies is that there is only one view of transformation – all of society has to the same opinion on change. It is a dogmatic

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<sup>229</sup> Butler (1997:1)



position<sup>230</sup> that places political unity above all. This is also what Mouffe's argues against in her analysis of Schmitt.<sup>231</sup> In placing political unity above all else, she says, the space for pluralism, and therefore more tolerance in a democracy is closed off. In Zizek's view democracy is really a series of floating signifiers, in which identity politics is merely one signifier.<sup>232</sup>

Another trend that emerges from the letters is that Mbeki sees "enemies" everywhere. In the next example, Mbeki writes of "reactionary forces" that "wear the clothes of the ANC". This viewpoint will be analysed deploying the theories of Laclau and Mouffe, Zizek and Butler.

#### Transformation hinges on the ANC's ability to mobilise the people

"...As we have said before, the success of the programme, [government's programme for action for the year] focussed on accelerating the process towards a better life for all, will also depend on the involvement the masses of the people in its implementation.

"It has been a matter of concern to our movement as a whole that after the victory of the democratic revolution in 1994, both the masses of our people and various formations of the democratic movement became immobilised.

"They became passive observers of the process change and mere recipients of the benefits of this process – the objects rather than the subjects of policy.

"Any genuine leader of our movement, who is in contact with our grassroots, knows that the masses of our people have consistently objected to this negative development. For this reason, these masses have consistently demanded that the leadership should maintain continuous contact with them and report to them honestly on both the problems and the progress we experience, as we struggle to rebuild our country and move towards the realisation of the goal of a better life for all.

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<sup>230</sup> See also Laclau and Mouffe (1985:193). In their argument for a democratic revolution they assert that politics, rather than founded on the dogmatic postulation of any 'essence of the social' should be founded "on affirmation of the contingency and ambiguity of every essence, and on the constitutive character of social division and antagonism."

<sup>231</sup> Mouffe (1999:5)

<sup>232</sup> See Zizek (2004:110) *Iraq: the Borrowed Kettle*, Verso London. "Is democracy a master signifier? Without a doubt. It is the master-signifier, which says there is no master signifier ..."

“Because of our weakness with regard to the discharge of this task, various reactionary forces have sought to mobilise these masses against our movement and against their own interests, taking advantage of the vacuum created by our own mistakes.

“Some of these reactionary forces have worn the clothes of the ANC and the rest of the democratic movement, pretending that they, and only they, are the genuine voice of the people. The masses of our people have a long and unbroken history of direct involvement in the struggle for the fundamental transformation of our country.

“They trust the ANC as a political force that has stayed at the helm of our struggle, regardless of the sacrifices that its leaders had to make. Accordingly, they are not deceived. They are not ready to be swept of their feet by populists and demagogues. All efforts to turn them against the movement have therefore failed, despite a sustained and continuing political and media barrage directed at alienating them from their tried and tested political vanguard.

“Nevertheless, we need to bear this in mind that the opposition does not sleep. It works patiently for the victory of its cause. It is convinced that all it has to do is steadily and incrementally to corrode our support. It believes that time is on its side.

“The opposition plans carefully and in detail. Among other things, it works to turn members of our movement against our movement. It tries hard to foment division within our ranks so that we turn against one another rather than unite in action for progressive change. It works to confuse the people about who genuinely represents their interests, to demobilise them as an agent of change, to encourage disaffection among them and ultimately to detach them from our movement...”<sup>233</sup>

This is an important letter in that it reiterates the pattern of Mbeki’s discourse. It does not make a distinction between legitimate adversaries and antagonists, and therefore his main concern, as Mouffe argues against Schmitt, is not democratic participation but political unity. Mbeki does not specify who these “enemies” are that are bent on dividing the ANC and he treats the “masses” as one fixed entity, a homogeneous whole. He is “paranoid” in this way because so much is threatening to his narrowly drawn identity, which he can’t get away from (compulsive, rigid, circular) and which just is “overflown” by South Africa’s reality; therefore he’s just got to keep on going.

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<sup>233</sup> Letter from the President: Transformation hinges on the ANC’s ability to mobilise the people, ANC Today, Vol.1 No.5 23 February – 1 March 2001

Again, the emergent pattern is that anyone or any organisation with a different view to the ANC should be viewed not only with suspicion but deep distrust, and as an enemy.

It is worth noting Mbeki's statement, "The opposition does not sleep ...The opposition plans carefully and detail." Who is this opposition? Mbeki's articulation is a dominating, anti-democratic, hegemonic one in which two opposition poles are set up: those within the ANC who support Mbeki and those who have different views and who, if one considers Mbeki's previously identified patterns, could be widely defined as all "subversives"<sup>234</sup>, Vavi, Tutu, the official opposition, whites and so forth. Using Zizek's analysis of Stalinism<sup>235</sup>, it would seem in Mbeki's world if you are not with him, or the Party, then you are part of the enemy. Zizek<sup>236</sup> explains this phenomenon in terms of the "Stalinist universe": "The party thinks that it is the Party because it represents the Party's real interests, because it is rooted in the People, expressing their will; but in reality the People are the People because – or, more precisely, in so far as – they are embodied in the Party ... in the Stalinist universe, 'supporting the rule of the Party' is 'rigidly designated' by the term People – it is, in the last analysis, *the only feature which in all possible worlds defines the People.*"

This pattern of the 'rigid designator' is seen clearly in the next example, where Mbeki talks about 'the people'.

#### Extracts from We must build a caring and people-centred society

"Our Human Rights Day, March 21, was born in struggle. Lives were lost in a struggle against what the oppressed had described as 'the badge of slavery' – the reference book or 'the pass'.

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<sup>234</sup> See Laclau and Mouffe (1985:170) in their discussions of hegemonic articulations and "subversives" in their example of the conservative hegemonic articulation, for instance, feminists, blacks, young people, permissives of every type.

<sup>235</sup> See Zizek (1989:146)

<sup>236</sup> *ibid.*

“The pass meant that those who carried this badge of slavery were African. It meant that those who were African had to live with the reality that they would be treated as a lower class of citizen of South Africa, humans who were less than human.

“It meant that the lower class of citizen had to accept a life of subservience, intentional impoverishment, denial of human rights and human dignity.

“The struggle against the badge of slavery was therefore the struggle against slavery itself. It was a struggle for human rights and dignity, for an egalitarian and humane South Africa.

“If our national Human Rights Day was born in struggle, a struggle that led to the birth of a new South Africa, the extension of the frontiers of human rights demands that we sustain the struggle for human rights.

“And yet some in our society believe that the days of struggle are over. They believe that to talk of struggle today is to create an atmosphere that does not help us to achieve national unity and reconciliation. Indeed the accusation is repeatedly made the ANC has so far failed to transform itself from a liberation movement into a political party – from an organisation of struggle into a machine for the conduct of parliamentary politics. Nevertheless, we have continued to insist that the struggle continues!

“... the continuing struggle would no longer have the objective to defeat and destroy the contemporary state power, which had been put in place by the people themselves. It would no longer aim to make the country ungovernable as the interests of the people are best served by good governance. No longer would there be a need for an armed insurrection.

“Despite all this, we have seen people from among the formerly oppressed conduct themselves as though they define the democratic order as an enemy of the people.

“These have also acted as though they believe that the democratic freedoms we won through a costly struggle give them the freedom to create as much chaos and anarchy as they choose, to advance their cause...”<sup>237</sup>

Here the ‘rigid designator’ is at work, especially in Mbeki’s sentence, “Despite all this, we have seen people from among the formerly oppressed conduct themselves as though they define the democratic order as an enemy of the people.”

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<sup>237</sup> Letter from the President: We must build a caring and people-centred society, ANC Today, Vol.1 No.8 16 - 22 March 2001

What is apparent is that Mbeki values loyalty and political unity above all else. This, in the theories of Mouffe, is to the detriment of a diversity of views, and therefore to the detriment of greater democracy. As shown in the letter above, he resorts to the rhetorical device of employing phrases such as “some in society”, “some amongst us”, and “these reactionary forces”. It serves a twofold purpose: it avoids having to mention names (those mentioned could always respond) and conjures up images of furtive malevolence, in the same way Jews figure in anti-semitic discourse according to Žižek. Implying that the ANC is always correct and that those who dissent in any way are the “enemy”, it reveals a lack of tolerance of other views. Because the People doesn’t exist independently of Mbeki’s articulation of it, any element exceeding this *must be* against the People and South Africa.

The following letter has a similar theme, in which Mbeki is at pains to point out that endemic poverty is the legacy of apartheid and is not to be attributed to a lack of service delivery by the government.

#### Extracts from The tasks facing the ANC two years into our second term

“...This struggle is focussed on the eradication of the legacy of colonialism and apartheid.

“Encapsulated in 500 pieces of legislation and various White Papers and other policy documents, these foundations aim to end all the discriminatory practices of the apartheid system. They seek to transform the racist, sexist and oppressive socio-economic order that had been imposed on our country over centuries. They open the way for the construction of a humane and people-centred society.

“As we would expect, there are some in our society who are opposed to these changes. These have therefore fought all along the way and on all fronts to defeat the transformation agenda, in an effort to preserve as much as they can of the racially and gender based privileges of the past. In this struggle they have opposed all measures we have introduced aimed at the necessary fundamental social transformation of our country.

“They have tried to shift the blame for the legacy of white minority domination on to the shoulders of the democratically elected government and the democratic order. Accordingly,

they have striven to present the reality of the persisting results of the apartheid crime against humanity, such as poverty, disease and crime, as failures of the democratic order. They have sought to deny the progress we have achieved towards the provision of a better life for all our people.

“Even as we have moved forward towards a non-racial society, they have attempted to incite fear among the national minorities, presenting our non-racial future as being inimical to the interests of these national minorities.

“They have sought to divide both the ANC and the broad democratic movement, to reduce our capacity to discharge our responsibility as a movement for progressive change. In this regard, they have openly stated that their only hope of undermining and blocking the process of change is to defeat our movement from within its own ranks, relying on weak and unprincipled elements that are ready to side with the forces of reaction.

“Simultaneously, they have lost no opportunity in an attempt to present our movement and its leadership as corrupt, racist, anti-democratic, pathologically opposed to the free flow of ideas, and incapable of leading and governing a modern and changing South African society. They have spared no effort in seeking to erode the confidence of this leadership with regard to its capacity to lead, as well as the confidence of the masses of our people that this leadership will continue to represent their interests.

“Those opposed to the transformation agenda have also waged an unrelenting struggle to set the national agenda, presenting their own programme of reaction as the only path available to our country and people to a stable, democratic and prosperous society. Thanks to the maturity and resilience of both our battle-tested movement and the masses of our people, we have withstood and will continue to withstand this onslaught ...”<sup>238</sup>

Again, Mbeki makes reference to those within the democratic movement who are “opposed” to transformation. The use of the word “onslaught” indicates just how threatened Mbeki feels by different views on transformation. Mbeki has created “demagogic fictions” such as “the people”, “the masses”, Pecheux would argue.<sup>239</sup> These projections are fictitious in that they impose a priori unity and identity where

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<sup>238</sup> Letter from the President: The tasks facing the ANC two years into our second term, ANC Today, Vol.1 No.23 29 - 5 July 2001

<sup>239</sup> See Pecheux (1982:88)

these are lacking. Without these projections he would, however, not be able to sustain his self-identification. In this way, they can be said to be 'ideological'.

As well as being highly concerned about "enemies", the examples show the passion invested in race. There seems to be an over-determinism in Mbeki's discourse on the importance of race. According to Butler's definition of "passionate attachment", a huge investment is placed in a particular issue. Butler, using Hegel's argument in The Unhappy Consciousness<sup>240</sup>, argues that a "passionate attachment", a sort of turning back on oneself, is about the pursuit of wretchedness, the attachment to wretchedness.<sup>241</sup> This issue is also illustrated in the following example.

Through his deeds Tata Sisulu has won our love<sup>242</sup>

"Speaking of the hero in Shakespeare's Coriolanus, an officer in the play says: 'He hath deserved worthily of his country: and his ascent is not by such easy degrees as those, who have been supple and courteous to the people, bonneted, without any further deed to have them at all into their estimation and report: but he hath so planted his honours in their eyes, and actions in their hearts, that for their tongues to be silent, and not confess so much, were a kind of ingrateful injury; to report otherwise were a malice, that, giving itself the lie, would pluck reproof and rebuke from every ear that heard it'.

"We too have our own that we can assess in like manner- our own Coriolanus! Of him too we can say that he is both eminently worthy of our country and that our country owes him much. Neither a smooth talker nor a dissembling actor, he has won the love of our people through his deeds. To be silent in our praise would indeed show a hurtful ingratitude.

" ... From our very first contact and interaction with the European peoples over 400 years ago, our people have shown the greatest heroism. Throughout this period, they have produced countless heroes and heroines who have dedicated their lives to the service of the people. Patriots such as Walter Sisulu therefore both represent and continue a deeply entrenched culture and tradition among our people.

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<sup>240</sup> See Butler (1997:61)

<sup>241</sup> However, if one takes Butler's argument forward there are possibilities for Mbeki. In the pursuit of wretchedness, lies the condition and potential to undo subjection. This is what is meant by reflexivity. (1997:61)

<sup>242</sup> On the occasion of Walter Sisulu's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.

“But whence this culture and tradition! The indigenous people of our country have no history of the practice on their part of discrimination against other human beings on the basis of colour, race or ethnicity. Whatever the differences among our people, our culture celebrates and emphasises the common humanity of all humanity of all human beings. It recognises it as the task of society to protect and guarantee the welfare of every individual, including strangers.

“It was for this reason that our forebears were happy to welcome visitors and settlers from Europe, including ship-wrecked sailors who were absorbed into African communities before the formal colonial process commenced 350 years ago. Strange as these Europeans would have seemed to the African, and perhaps a little frightening, they were nevertheless welcomed and treated as human beings who were entitled to such help as they needed as travellers or new arrivals.

“This celebration of our common humanity, so inherent in our culture, is one of the critical elements that has formed the characters and personalities of many of our heroes and heroines. They have loved all our people, regardless of race, colour or ethnicity. While recognising our diversity, they have drawn on the culture of their people to assert the greater unifying identity of all of us as human beings.

“Related to this, is the equally deeply entrenched respect in our culture for all human life, once again without regard to race, colour or ethnicity. Traditionally, this informed the behaviour of the people with regard to a whole variety of matters.

“For example, it would never be permitted that any family in a village should go hungry simply because it was poorer than others. Such a family might, for instance, be given a herd of cattle to look after, enabling it to milk the cows in the herd and to keep some of the calves from the herd as their own.”

The letter proceeds to describe the positive features of African society.

“Once again it is from this culture and tradition of respect for principled behaviour, especially in defence of life and the people that heroes such as Walter Sisulu were born...

“The heroes and heroines that we have known in a period of over four centuries of our most recent history have been people who have respected our past and honoured the traditions of which I have spoken. They have been accepted among the masses of our people



as their true sons and daughters because these masses knew, even instinctively, that these represented the best of the personality that gave them their identity.”<sup>243</sup>

It would appear that even on the occasion of Sisulu’s 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, a happy occasion, Mbeki seems to be unable to break free of the baggage of South Africa’s colonial past. He makes a melancholic turn to recall subjection from 350 years ago. Looking backwards, or making reflexive turns, occurs again, but for this occasion while it might be appropriate to make *some* reference to the colonial legacy, given that this defined and set the co-ordinates for Sisulu’s life, Mbeki goes overboard. He uses nearly every opportunity to hark back, even arguably, inappropriate occasions such as this one, the birthday of one of the struggle’s veterans. Butler<sup>244</sup> writes, drawing on Hegel, about a “stubborn” attachment, a sort of “self-enslavement”, and “self-beratement” or the double-edged nature of subjection and freedom. I argue that Mbeki too seems to have an inability to detach from subjection; but what accounts for this compulsive repetition, whose features comprise paranoia, repetition, narrow exclusionist definitions of identity, and circularity? In other words, why does he treat race as a rigid designator? It is because of his investment and attachment to the signifier race, as a master signifier and because this is unconscious.

In yet another letter, which follows, The Freedom Charter still unites South Africans, Mbeki again shows just how tied to racism he is while speaking of “some in our society who are trying to resurrect this demon”. The first part of the letter expands on the participatory process that led to the Freedom Charter. Midway through the letter Mbeki quotes one of the founders of the ANC, Pixley ka Isaka Seme, who wrote in a newspaper article, *Imvo Zabantsundu* on 24 October, 1911, “I write on the simple subject of Native Union, for after all, this is what the Congress shall be. There is today among all races and men a general desire for progress ...The greatest success shall come when man shall have learned to

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<sup>243</sup> Letter from the President: Through his deeds Tata Sisulu has won our love, ANC Today, Vol.2 No.20 17 - 23 May 2002

<sup>244</sup> See Butler (1997:32)

cooperate, not only with his own kith and kin but with all peoples and with all life ...The demon of racialism must be buried and forgotten; it has shed among us sufficient blood! We are one people. These divisions, these jealousies, are the cause of all our woes and of all our backwardness and ignorance today. We shall have to come together to bury forever the greatest block to our security, happiness, progress and prosperity as a people. We shall have to come together truly, as we are, the children of one household to discuss our home problems and the solution of them.

Then Mbeki continues, "The values in the Freedom Charter stand in direct opposition to everything that would divide the people, creating a situation against which Pixley Seme argued when he said 'these divisions, these jealousies, are the cause of all our woes and of all our backwardness and ignorance today'. In the face of the most determined implementation by the apartheid regime of policies based on the racial and ethnic division of the people of South Africa, our movement defended the principles contained in the Freedom Charter. It kept before the people the vision stated in the Freedom Charter that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white.

"...It is interesting that once again some in our society are trying to resurrect this demon. Once more because the truth is not on their side, they have to resort to a campaign of disinformation to divide and defeat our movement, to halt the birth of a new South Africa based on the perspectives contained in the Freedom Charter. Old habits die hard."<sup>245</sup>

Mbeki once again uses the terms "some in our society" but he gives no concrete examples of who these "some in our society" are nor what they are saying or doing. Based on the examples highlighted so far I argue that Mbeki's discourse on race is highly ideological and much of it is based on the stereotypes he himself despises. When Mbeki says "the truth is not on their side", is he not saying he owns the "truth"? And isn't this then an example of the Stalinist universe described by Zizek.<sup>246</sup>

I do not contend that racism did not or does not exist, but what is under consideration here is the extraordinary amount of energy Mbeki expends on the issue, the extraordinary investment and passion he invests in the issue of race. This

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<sup>245</sup> Letter from the President: The Freedom Charter still unites South Africans, ANC Today, Vol.2 No.25 21 - 27 June 2002

<sup>246</sup> See Zizek (1989:146-147)

compulsive 'return' to race by Mbeki is, as we have seen, marked by a paranoia that reduces all difference to antagonism, leaving no room for the democratic interaction of adversaries.

From the evidence in the letters Mbeki thus expends a vast amount of energy on: Race and stereotypes – making it the master signifier; harking back or making melancholic turns to the days of colonialism; the need for political unity, common purpose, loyalty and consensus in politics while viewing all dissenting voices as “enemies” and the “some out there”.

### **III. Letters 2003 – 2005**

To ensure a fair representation of Mbeki's discourse the following letters have been transcribed verbatim to show how Mbeki formulates his arguments.

#### South Africans of all races will vote for a people's contract

“This is the last edition of ANC TODAY ahead of the April 14th elections. We would therefore like to take this opportunity to wish all our people peaceful and successful elections. Once more we urge all the political parties contesting the elections to do everything possible to contribute to this outcome.

“We also extend our best wishes to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and its entire staff to continue to discharge its responsibilities to our country and people to ensure that we hold and free elections, as it has done in the past. We will also continue to count on all our country's security forces and agencies to support the IEC in this regard.

“We would also like to urge that all the political parties participating in the elections should deploy party agents in the voting stations as provided for in the IEC procedures. This must be done to assist the IEC to ensure that the elections are both free and fair and are accepted by all, including the political parties, as having been free and fair.

“It is clear that some parties are preparing for their possible defeat in a special way. They are hoping that they can concoct sufficient 'evidence' to argue that their defeat is due to fraudulent activity.

“The deployment of party agents, who will monitor the voting process and verify the vote count, will play an important part in defeating the schemes of those who, for purely partisan purposes, will try to discredit our hard-won democratic system by attempting to deny the fact of their rejection by the people.

“Again, the security forces, working with the people and all organised formations committed to the protection of the democratic victory, will have to do their best to ensure that these party agents are not exposed to violence and intimidation by those who want to win votes by resort to illegal means. As we have said before, our country enters its Second Decade of Liberation with great possibilities to record important victories in the continuing struggle to defeat poverty and underdevelopment. And as our movement has said, this will require, among other things, that our country unite in a people's contract to bring together the capacities of all our people to confront the common challenge to build a winning nation.

“The achievement of this objective demands that we ensure that the government that leads our country derives its legitimacy from the free expression of the will of the people. This obliges us to ensure that the forthcoming elections are truly free and fair, and are accepted by the masses of our people as having been truly free and fair.

“This will enhance the possibility for the new government to mobilise the people into the united national movement for progressive change represented by the concept of a people's contract.

“The question of the response of the people to the national challenges of our democracy has been one of the central issues defining the role and place of the various political formations in the reconstruction and development of our country. Naturally, the 2004 elections have brought this matter to the fore, as each of these formations has sought to win the support of the people.

“Throughout its history, the ANC has understood and projected the view that our people, black and white, are confronted by a number of common challenges. Convinced that our country belongs to all who live in it and that, regardless of differences of race, colour and culture, our citizens share a common destiny, our movement has for more than nine decades fought for the unity of all our people in the struggle to determine that shared destiny.

“Pixley ka Isaka Seme presented this view as early as 1911 when he and his fellow patriots were working to convene the founding conference of the ANC on January 8th, 1912. In an article in the newspaper *Imvo Zabantsundu*, explaining the purposes of the ‘Native Union’ that was still to be, he wrote: ‘There is today among all races and men a general desire for progress, and for cooperation, because cooperation will facilitate and secure that progress.

Cooperation is the key and the watchword which opens the door, the everlasting door which leads into progress and all national success. The greatest success shall come when man shall have learned to cooperate, not only with his own kith and kin, but with all peoples and with all life.'

"The 1944 Manifesto of the ANC Youth League contains the following interesting observation: 'The African regards the Universe as one composite whole; an organic entity, progressively driving towards greater harmony and unity, whose individual parts exist merely as interdependent aspects of one whole, realising their fullest life in the corporate life where communal contentment is the absolute measure of values. His philosophy of life strives towards unity and aggregation; towards greater social responsibility.'

"In its January 8th, 1982 Statement marking the 70th anniversary of our movement, the ANC NEC said: 'We have striven for seven decades to build one common nationhood with one destiny. All of us - workers, peasants, students, priests, chiefs, traders, teachers, civil servants, poets, writers, men, women and youth, black and white, must take our common destiny into our own hands.'

"In the document 'Ready to Govern', adopted at the 1992 National Conference of the ANC, we said: 'We have to develop a truly South African vision of our country, one which is not distorted by the prejudices and sectarianism that have guided viewpoints on race and gender in the past. We have to rely on the wisdom, life experiences, talents and know-how of all South Africans, men and women. There can be no 'apartheid' in finding solutions to the problems created by apartheid.'

"The sentiments expressed so eloquently in 1911, 1944, 1982 and 1992, for cooperation with all peoples and all life, for unity and aggregation, for building one common nationhood with one destiny, for the development of a truly South African vision of our country, find their expression today in the people's contract that our movement has presented to our country.

"Opposed to this perspective in whose defence many sacrificed their lives, is the view advanced by some of the political formations in our country that the central task facing the masses of our country is to divide into two opposing political factions that must engage in an endless struggle to gain supremacy one over the other.

"Our movement upholds the view that the central challenge facing the masses of our people is voluntarily to use the space created by our democratic system to act in unity 'to build one common nationhood with one destiny'.

“Our opponents propagate the view that the masses of our people should use this space to polarise themselves into contending entities with no shared destiny. They characterise the entrenched national division for which they are working as the very essence of our democracy.

“White minority power in our country, in all its forms and manifestations, was necessarily always founded on the division and polarisation of our people and the denial of our common nationhood, sharing one destiny.

“Whereas our movement has always urged progress for our country achieved through cooperation ‘among all races and men’, our oppressors have treated this movement as an opponent that must be defeated and destroyed.

“Thus they decreed that not only the survival of the system of white minority rule, but also the very welfare of white society depended on the interaction between our movement and themselves as opposing entities.

“This approach finds expression today in the view advanced by some opposition parties that the litmus test defining whether we have a genuine democracy or not is the strength of the Opposition, and therefore the division of our country into permanently antagonistic camps.

“The principal task of this Opposition is then defined as opposing everything the government does, with no concern about participating in the effort to address the fundamental challenge our country faces to eradicate the legacy of colonialism and apartheid.

“This leads naturally to the result that the weakening of the ANC, ‘cutting it down to size’, has become the beginning and the end of the campaigns of these opposition parties, rather than the projection of their programmes. This opposition at all costs will then be extended to the period after the elections.

“The ANC is determined to unite our people in the struggle to build a non-racial society, speaking for all South Africans. However, some among the Opposition are equally determined to emphasise our racial and ethnic divisions, to polarise our country along these lines, informed by the ‘prejudices and sectarianism’ of the past.

“To this end, these opposition parties claim special status as representatives not of our people as a whole, but of particular ethnic or racial groups. They argue against affirmative action, such interventions as the Employment Equity Act, minimum wages and other measures for the protection of workers’ rights.

“They assert that individual merit should be the determinant of what happens to each South African, knowing very well that the persisting impact of the legacy of the past denies the

majority of our population the possibility to compete on an equal basis with those who were advantaged by the apartheid system.

“All this is nothing but a camouflaged message that black upliftment is contrary to the interests of the white section of our population. By this means, these opposition groupings indicate their opposition to the perspective projected by the ANC that ‘there can be no ‘apartheid’ in finding solutions to the problems created by apartheid.

“They continue to advance a particular view about what we should do with our democracy, basing themselves on what the ANC characterised as an approach that is ‘distorted by the prejudices and sectarianism that have guided viewpoints on race and gender in the past’.

“Necessarily therefore, one of the central issues that will face the electorate during the 2004 Elections will be to decide whether we want to conduct ourselves as a diverse but united nation, or prefer to divide ourselves into polarised and competing political, ethnic and racial factions.

“The electorate will have to decide whether it agrees with the ANC when it says that to achieve our goal of providing a better life for all, ‘we have to rely on the wisdom, life experiences, talents and know-how of all South Africans, men and women’ and that all of us ‘workers, peasants, students, priests, chiefs, traders, teachers, civil servants, poets, writers, men, women and youth, black and white, must take our common destiny into our own hands’.

“The votes this electorate will cast on April 14 will indicate whether it believes that we should perpetuate the racial, ethnic and gender divisions of the past, making the statement that we should use the apartheid divisions of the past to ‘find solutions to the problems created by apartheid’.

“The key challenge facing our electorate is not whether our country should have ‘a strong opposition’ or not, responding to a fictional threat of a one-party state. The key question is whether our people, black and white, men and women, are ready to give further impetus to the process of national reconciliation by acting together in unity in a people's contract focused on building a caring, people-centred and winning nation.

“We have no doubt that South Africans of all races will vote to return the ANC to power with a decisive majority, and thus vote in favour of the people's contract that will further reinforce the process of national reconciliation for the promotion of social transformation.

“By this means, our people will make the unequivocal statement that they reject the dismal vision of some of those who define themselves as the

Opposition, of a South Africa that would continue to be characterised by the divisions, tensions and conflicts deliberately created and entrenched by the apartheid system. Thabo Mbeki."<sup>247</sup>

The above letter was written just before the national election, in 2004, exactly 10 years after the first democratic election. Mbeki anticipates that during the election there will be "those" who, for purely partisan purposes, will try and "discredit our hard-won democratic system ...". Mbeki shows his insecurities and his fearfulness of others which is extraordinary given the fact that at this election the ANC scored a two-thirds majority.

He then takes issue with the official opposition for its criticism of Employment Equity and Affirmative Action, arguing its message is that black upliftment is contrary to the interests of "the white section" of our population. But the question is, does *all* criticism of these policies, ie any criticism of them at all, have to express a defense of specifically white interests? This seems to be another case of Mbeki automatically imposing his own perception of South Africa as a zero-sum struggle between the People, the masses, ie blacks on the one hand, and whites, the Other, on the other hand, a symmetrical inversion of the racial fantasy he attributes to whites. He thinks this further justifies his politics of transformation, but couldn't it be considered as itself a function or effect of his own "rigidly antagonised" perception? In the subject position of Mbeki, in his equivalences, Black equals "People", and in the Žižekian sense this would be why he can't acknowledge the new unpatriotic black capitalist class, nor can he answer the question, at what point does a black billionaire cease to be historically disadvantaged?

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<sup>247</sup> Letter from the President: South Africans of all races will vote for a people's contract, ANC Today, Vol.4 No.14 9 - 15 April 2004



### Dislodging stereotypes

(ANC Today's Editors Note: On 21 October, President Mbeki answered questions in the National Assembly. One of these, about HIV and AIDS, was posed by a Democratic Alliance MP, pretending to be following up observations made by the President in his Letter in ANC TODAY Vol 4. No.39. In the light of the MP's reference to matters published by this journal, and the importance of the issue of racism discussed in the Vol.4 No.39 Letter and revisited by the President in his response to the DA MP, the President has agreed that we can use his response to the DA MP as this week's Letter. That response therefore follows below.)

"Let me start with some preliminary comments. The remarks to which the Honourable Member refers appeared in a recent edition of the weekly journal, ANC TODAY. As I stand here today, as on previous occasions, I do so as President of the Republic and not as President of the ANC.

"Ordinarily, when I speak as President of the Republic, I would decline to engage any Honourable Member of the House to speak on matters I have raised as a member of the ANC. However, in the light of the important matter at issue, I will, today, somewhat depart from this rule. This is my first preliminary comment.

"Secondly, I will only address the central issue raised in the Letter in ANC TODAY. This is the issue of racism. Contrary to this, the Honourable Member wants us to discuss questions that refer to the Government's attitude towards, or information about various matters that relate to HIV and AIDS.

"Among other things, the Honourable Member wants us to discuss what he describes as 'pervasive rape in South Africa' and 'prevailing sexual practices and the attitudes of some men towards women', asking whether these 'do not account, in large part, for the spread of HIV in the country'.

"With regard to the third part of the question, which asks whether I 'will now play a more active role in leading the fight against HIV/AIDS', whatever this means, I would like to inform the Honourable Member that the Government has taken no decision to change the manner in which it is handling the challenges of better health for our people, both with regard to

HIV and AIDS and all the other health conditions we have to confront. We will continue to intensify our efforts to ensure that our people have better access to quality health care. This is my third preliminary comment.

“As was the case when I was Deputy President of the Republic, with Nelson Mandela as President, the Deputy President, supported by the Minister of Health, the Ministerial Committee on HIV and AIDS, and the Cabinet, chaired by the President, will continue to lead the Government's response to HIV and AIDS.

“In the Letter to ANC TODAY to which the Honourable Member refers, which discussed the serious, continuing and pervasive challenge of racism in the context of particular responses to the Annual Report on Crime Statistics, I said: ‘Despite the advances we have made, all of us know that the problem of crime persists. Among other things, we must therefore use the Crime Statistics to improve our effectiveness in both areas of preventing and combating crime.

“In this context we must take note of the concern of the SAPS at the continuing high levels of crime. We must also express our appreciation for the commitment made by the National Commissioner that the Police Service would make a special effort to give additional attention to the crime categories that continue to increase.

“For those genuinely interested and involved in the national effort to improve the safety and security of our people, the crime statistics must indicate that more work needs to be done to prevent the commission of these ‘contact crimes’ especially in their areas of concentration, as identified by the Crime Statistics.

“All those of us who are engaged in the fight against crime have to find the ways and means successfully to motivate and mobilise even the most depressed communities not to impose additional pain on themselves by allowing for the perpetuation of a permissive atmosphere that encourages members of the community to do crime.’

“Even a perfunctory study of the Annual Crime Report would show that one of the ‘contact crimes’ to which I referred is the crime of rape. I would like to take this opportunity once more to call on all our people to do more work within our communities to combat the terrible crime of rape, as well as violence and other forms of abuse against women and children.

“I trust that the Honourable Member [Ryan] Coetzee will also devote time to work among the people, to promote the achievement of this objective, centred on the fundamental task to improve the safety and security of all our people, as I said in ANC TODAY.

"As the Honourable Members are aware, and as I have said, rather than discuss the central issues I discussed in ANC TODAY, the Honourable Member Coetzee wants me to engage in a televised debate that will help some people in our country to perpetuate the very dangerous pretence that racism in our country died with the holding of our first democratic elections 10 years ago.

"I do not agree, and neither do many concerned South Africans, black and white. Neither do many people everywhere else in the world, who are deeply troubled about racism and xenophobia in human society globally.

"Whatever the circumstances, and regardless of the regularity of catholic incantations about 'playing the race card', I, for my part, will not keep quiet while others whose minds have been corrupted by the disease of racism, accuse us, the black people of South Africa, Africa and the world, as being, by virtue of our Africanness and skin colour - lazy, liars, foul-smelling, diseased, corrupt, violent, amoral, sexually depraved, animalistic, savage -and rapist.

"The question posed by the Honourable Member, arising out of a Letter to ANC TODAY about racism, suggests that he believes that this particular matter, racism, is not serious enough to deserve his attention. Accordingly, in the parliamentary question we are now discussing, he does not raise even one query about racism, the subject matter of the ANC TODAY Letter to which he refers.

"He wants me to cooperate with him to put the challenge of racism in our country out of sight, and therefore out of mind. As I have already indicated, I have absolutely no intention to cooperate with the Honourable Member in this dishonest and dangerous exercise.

"Recently, death robbed us of a distinguished and humble South African, Dr Franz Auerbach, a first generation citizen of our country, who was born a German Jew. May he rest in peace. Speaking in 2001, he said: 'Beliefs based on fixed impressions we call stereotypes are quite hard to dislodge. If you believe MOST young black men are criminals, the experience that a majority of petty thieves and hijackers in your town are in fact young black males (of whom there are in any case about six times as many as young white males, quite apart from poverty and unemployment), will make you think that your stereotype of them is correct, even though it's clearly not true.'

"Referring to two 19th century Western theoreticians of racism, Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Franz Auerbach said, 'The racism built on the Gobineau-Chambelain foundation permeated much economic, social and political thought and practice, particularly during 1850-1950. I believe it remains widespread in many heads in many parts of the world.'

"In the same year that Franz Auerbach made these comments in 2001, about racist beliefs that are widespread in many heads in many parts of the world, including our country, another honest white person, but this time an American, Cynthia Kaufman, published an article in the journal *Radical Philosophy Review*, entitled 'A User's Guide to White Privilege'. She wrote:

"Because of our racist history, in the United States, we have a cultural system that often creates the meaning of whiteness as good, through a complex dialectical dance with the identities of people of colour, constructed in our imaginary worlds as 'the other'.

"Somewhere in our cultural unconscious lies the image of the brutal, animalistic, sexual, savage. This image was created long ago as part of the cultural work that was done to make whites feel better about slavery. But even now, with slavery long gone, the images are still part of our cultural system and they impact the cultural meanings of white and black especially. A stereotype of African-Americans as savage leads many whites, often against their conscious intention, to fear blacks and to mistrust them.

"When I walk into a store and the clerks look at me with respect and assume that I am not going to steal anything, the trust that I receive is at least partially built upon the foundation of my distance from the image of the savage. When an African American walks into the store, that unconscious material comes into play in the opposite way. The tom-toms start to beat in the subconscious mind of the clerk.'

"This year, in an article entitled 'The Continuing Miseducation of the Negro', an African American Associate Professor at the University of Massachusetts- Dartmouth, Dr Edward Rhymes, wrote, 'We are portrayed as oversexed or lascivious, and yet the porn and adult entertainment industry is dominated by whites. It is African Americans that get accused of being rampant sexual beasts, unable to control our urges, unable to keep our legs crossed, unable to keep it in our pants.

"As we, as a community, declare war on irresponsibility, ignorance, crime, poverty and the vast number of concerns that we face, we must be circumspect. I would think that we, who live in present-day America, would know exactly what it means to declare war on flawed and unproven information.'

"In the Letter in ANC TODAY to which the Honourable Coetzee refers in his question, I cited two instances of people, one of them a white South African woman, who have written that our cultures, religion and social norms as Africans condition us to be 'rampant sexual beasts, unable to control our urges, unable to keep our legs crossed, unable to keep it in our

pants' – the rapists the Honourable Coetzee says that, 'in large part, account for the spread of HIV in the country'.

"I would like to assure the Honourable Coetzee that the millions of Africans in our country, in Africa and the world did not fight against apartheid racism and white domination to create space for them to continue to be subjected to dehumanising, demeaning and insulting racism.

"On the eve of our liberation, in 1993, a fellow South African, Frank Meintjies, wrote: 'The only way to dismantle (our) racist system is by working for increased understanding in the society of the insidious and pervasive ways in which racism functions. It calls for a willingness to re-examine what would be regarded as normal and everyday. It presupposes opening up the subject of racism - no longer isolating and alienating those who dare to raise it. It involves listening and creating the spaces to hear the hurt, anger and aspirations of those expressing race oppression. It means dragging racism from the hushed conversations and murmurs and silences, into the arena of public discussion.'

"I pray that one day, the Honourable Coetzee, and others like him, will discover within themselves the intellect, the courage and the humanity to hear and understand what Frank Meintjies, Franz Auerbach, Edward Rhymes, Cynthia Kaufman, as well as millions of people in our country and elsewhere on our globe are saying, about the hurt, anger and aspirations of those who know the meaning of race oppression, which the Hon Coetzee clearly does not.

"In the interest of all humanity, including those who are unwilling to free their minds of the stereotypes that Franz Auerbach said are 'quite hard to dislodge', which encompasses those who believe that the African male is conditioned to commit the crime of rape, I do indeed pray that sooner rather than later, all of us, South Africans of all races, will dare to drag racism from the hushed conversations and murmurs and silences, into the arena of public discussion.

"When that happens, we will all of us, at last and in rage, confront the insult that K. Wailoo wrote about, as reported by Shalini Bharat of the Indian Mumbai Tata Institute of Social Sciences, which portrays the non-European peoples as 'a social menace whose collective superstitious, ignorance and carefree demeanour (stand) as a stubborn affront to modern notions of hygiene and advancing scientific understanding (a people best understood as) a disease vector.'<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Letter from the President: Dislodging stereotypes, ANC Today, Vol.4 No.42 22 - 28 October 2004

In this letter, Mbeki again examines the question of stereotypes and is concerned that lest people forget that racism exists, he should remind them. His excessive focus on race and stereotypes is clear in the statement, "Whatever the circumstances, and regardless of the regularity of catholic incantations about 'playing the race card', I, for my part, will not keep quiet while others whose minds have been corrupted by the disease of racism, accuse us, the black people of South Africa, Africa and the world, as being, by virtue of our Africanness and skin colour - lazy, liars, foul-smelling, diseased, corrupt, violent, amoral, sexually depraved, animalistic, savage -and rapist."

The statement is a passionate rage.<sup>249</sup> Mbeki refers to 19<sup>th</sup> century theorists of racism and says that "I believe it remains widespread in many heads in many parts of the world." To use Butler's argument on passion<sup>250</sup>, what does passion do? "...it tears us from ourselves, binds us to others, transports us, undoes us, and implicates us in lives that are not our own, sometimes fatally, irreversibly."

My argument is that Mbeki has a passionate attachment to race; an attachment to subject; and a subjection of the past, where he embraces the terms that injure him. And rigid identity politics, binary opposites, are part of this embrace. Butler's<sup>251</sup> asserts that no subject emerges without a psychical and passionate attachment to norms (the very norms which subjugate it); but no subject can ever afford to "see" its radical dependency on and vulnerability to terms of its own making. This applies appositely to Mbeki's investment in race.

He quotes what he calls, "another honest white person". Cynthia Kaufman, who wrote that in the United States there exists a cultural system where whiteness means

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<sup>249</sup> Butler (2004:195) says that one may rage against one's attachment to some others (which is simply to alter the terms of attachment), but no rage can sever the attachment to alterity ...

<sup>250</sup> See Butler (2004:20)

<sup>251</sup> See Butler (1997:102)

good, while people of colour are constructed as “The Other”. Kaufman might well be correct but Mbeki stretches the point when he then says: “Somewhere in our cultural unconscious lies the image of the brutal, animalistic, sexual, savage.” It is emotionally violent language and portrays what can only be termed a passionate attachment to race. It shows the excess he attaches to race.

“One day many years ago, at the age of 10, attracted by the sound of brass bands and booming drums, I took one of my cousins to find out what was going on at the nearby Queenstown Agricultural Showground. We could not enter the grounds, and therefore joined others who watched what was going on inside the Showground, standing along the fence enclosing the grounds.

‘Inside the grounds there was a sea of white people participating in all manner of activities that suggested that, clearly, they had come together to enjoy themselves.

“We could not stay for too long because that day we had to water the vegetable garden in front of our house in Scanlen Street. We knew that my uncle would not be very pleased with us if on his return home from the school where he taught, he found that we had not done our work.

“To our consternation, when we glanced down the road running outside and along the fence of the Showground, we saw my uncle on his bicycle cycling towards the end of the perimeter of the grounds, constantly casting his eyes at the crowd lining the fence.

“When he was some distance away from where we were, and with our curiosity having been satisfied that the noise we had heard had to do with some exclusive white activity to which we would not be admitted, we rushed home, hoping that my uncle would find us hard at work, hosepipes in hand, which, to our relief, he did.

“But it was not our lucky day. We finished our gardening chores confident that we were safe. But after we had cleaned ourselves to prepare for supper, we were summoned to appear before my uncle. He inquired what we had done in the afternoon, after we returned from school.

“Of course we replied firmly that we had immediately attended to the watering of the vegetable garden, determined to say absolutely nothing about the visit to the Agricultural Showground. Unfortunately, my uncle did not believe us. That earned us a few hard spansks on our bottoms for having gone to the Showground.

“At that point we did not know what was so grievously wrong about our visit to the Showground, that we should be punished. But, of course, there was no superior court to which we could appeal against what we thought was unjust treatment, merely because we had satisfied our curiosity about the noise of the brass bands and the powerful drums, with no negative effect on the vegetable garden.

“Some years later, we discovered that the wrong we had done was that we had been badly misbehaved to have left home to join the spectators who, by their presence along the fence enclosing the Queenstown Agricultural Showground, gave legitimacy to the celebrations that were taking place within the Grounds.

“The year was 1952, during the month of April. The whites inside the Queenstown Agricultural Showground were celebrating the tri-centenary of the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck at the Cape of Good Hope.

“My cousin and I had erred in that, to demonstrate our opposition to colonialism and apartheid, we should have deliberately ignored the brass bands and the drums that were sounded to celebrate the beginning of the process of the colonisation of our country. In this instance, certainly ignorance was not bliss. It would have been much better to be wise.

“The month of April 2005 has been very different from the April of 1952. 353 years and 3 days after Jan van Riebeeck landed at the Cape of Good Hope, the Federal Congress of the New National Party (NNP) resolved to dissolve the Party, recommending that its members should join the ANC.

“Two days later, on 11 April, our movement, the ANC, held a formal meeting with the Afrikanerbond, the transformed successor of the Afrikaner Broederbond, at Luthuli House, the National Headquarters of the ANC.

“These events took place shortly before we celebrate Freedom Day, on 27 April, which will also mark the beginning of our 12th year of freedom. That they took place during the month of Freedom Day makes a powerful and moving statement about what our people are ready and willing to do, to translate into reality the perspective contained in the Freedom Charter and the National Constitution, that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in their diversity.

“The arrival of the Dutch settlers at the Cape of Good Hope on 6 April 1652, led by Jan van Riebeeck, marked the beginning of a long period of immense suffering for the black people, and intense bloody conflict among mutually hostile national forces, that formally ended a mere 11 years ago.



"In the end, that conflict, an inevitable outcome of the process set afoot by the colonisation that began on 6 April 1662, polarised our people into two opposing camps, ready to fight to the finish. One of these, a product of the suffering of the black masses, grouped around and was led by the ANC.

"The other camp, which was an expression of the resolve of the European settlers to secure their domination over these black masses, an objective that had been pursued since the days of van Riebeeck, grouped around and was led by the National Party and the Broederbond.

"In reality, the National Party and the Broederbond had been born as a consequence of two historical processes. We have just mentioned one of these - the black/white conflict. The second was the white/white conflict described in historical accounts as the conflict between Boer and Briton.

"This second conflict started in the old Cape Province as the British imposed themselves on both the Africans and the Boers. It culminated in the brutal imperialist South African War (Anglo-Boer War), which began in 1899, during which British imperialism successfully sought to subjugate the Boer Republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, as it had subjugated the African people in the Cape and Natal Provinces.

"The National Party and the Broederbond were therefore also formed to defend and advance the particular interests of the Afrikaner people. They constituted a response to the defeat of the Boer Republics and therefore the defeat of the efforts of the Afrikaners to secure for themselves the right to self determination and independence from British rule, which had found expression in the Boer Republics.

"But, of course, both Boer and Briton shared a common objective to subjugate the African majority. Whatever the differences among themselves, they were able to combine their efforts to achieve the goal of white domination, resulting in what came to be categorised by the broad movement for national liberation as colonialism of a special type.

"Peace came to our country because the ANC on one hand, and the National Party and the Broederbond on the other, agreed that the time had come to end the bloody tragedy that would inevitably occur, if they and our people as a whole unwisely accepted that our future should be determined by the imperatives dictated by the historical circumstances created by the settlement of Jan van Riebeeck at the Cape of Good Hope.

"The April 2005 events we have mentioned, namely, the decision to dissolve the New National Party and the meeting between the ANC and the Afrikanerbond, constitute historically

important strides forward, towards breaking with a past that divided our country into two warring and implacably opposed factions, one white and the other black.

“At the dissolution Federal Congress, the leader of the NNP, Marthinus van Schalkwyk spoke honestly when he said: ‘For many of us, today is a day of mixed feelings. It is a liberating day, and at the same time it is tinged by a degree of sadness.’ He explained: ‘What we do today is part of our contribution to finally ending the division of the South African soul...The National Party, over the course of decades, restored to Afrikaners their self-respect and their dignity following a period of intense humiliation, but, at the same time, almost destroyed the self-respect and dignity of millions of other South Africans.’

“He went on to say: ‘What we do today is liberating because it frees many South Africans, especially from minority communities, to accept full responsibility for building this country without the burden of the past. It empowers us to throw off the yoke of history and to accept a new and important burden - the shared responsibility for building a South Africa that belongs to all who live in it.’

“When it constituted itself as part of the process of the transformation of the Broederbond, which had worked side by side with the National Party, the Afrikanerbond adopted a ‘Credo’ which, among others says:

“‘We, the Afrikaners, are the only people on the continent of Africa that...named ourselves spontaneously and of our own accord after the continent on which we and our forebears were born;...our language, Afrikaans, originated and developed here on African soil and was likewise named after the continent of Africa...

“‘We hereby declare (that we) are, and want to be children of Africa and, more specifically, children of South Africa; that our loyalty is focused on South Africa as our country and Africa as our continent because South Africa is our past, our present and our future.

“‘Whereas we are firmly convinced and do believe that our own interests as well as those of our fellow Afrikaners are altogether inseparable from the interests of all other South Africans and every other people in South Africa, and that therefore the interests of all other South Africans are also our interests too: therefore we unreservedly commit ourselves to devote our energies and capabilities to our fatherland without reserve, in order to enhance the quality of life and human dignity of all people in South Africa.’

“In the past, the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK) had been described as the National Party in prayer. As with the National Party, its leaders were also members of the secret Broederbond. Its Tenth General Synod took place in 1998.

"The Pastoral Letter issued at the end of the Synod said that the NGK 'dismisses apartheid, which as a repressive system, in a forced manner separated people who are created in the image of God and unjustly benefited one group above another, as being fundamentally sinful. With this the Dutch Reformed Church makes it clear that it has the sincere wish now to meet the challenges of the new South Africa and the new century together with the other Christians in the land, and along with our Reformed partners in the world...

"While the salvation in Christ is stressed, there is also the vocation to promote reconciliation between people and, in the transition to a new South Africa, to participate in society in a way which may even exceed that which is normally asked of citizens.'

"Thus have three central pillars of Afrikanerdom transformed themselves to give expression to the noble vision contained in the Freedom Charter and our National Constitution, that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in their diversity.

"The dissolution of the NNP is a logical outcome of this historic and extraordinary process that seeks to give expression to the affirmation made by the NGK, that all our people, black and white, 'are created in the image of God'. As Marthinus van Schalkwyk explained: 'The scope and extent of (the suffering brought about through a system grounded in injustice) was such that no party and no person could hope to successfully atone and move ahead in the same vehicle.'

"Recently, I received a moving and instructive letter from a leading Afrikaner and South African, in which he discussed the language issue. He wrote: 'I fail to see how we as a country can take pride in the destruction of great African languages like Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho. A language also serves as a cultural anchor and by blithely adopting a European one like English as a sole home language, our people are turning their backs on the African heritage as inferior...Far from making them better citizens, the rejection of Afrikaans in a white family is often indicative of a rejection of their African roots and of their emotional bond with this country.'

"It is because they share common African roots and are tied to our country by an emotional bond that it is possible for the ANC and the Afrikanerbond to work together, and for members of the NNP to join the ANC.

"In their joint statement, the ANC and the Afrikanerbond said they 'agree that through dialogue with one another, consensus is achievable in creating a South Africa that works for all its people. Through direct dialogue misconceptions can be removed and contributions can be made in forming the policy and processes that drive our nation...

"Both parties again committed themselves to creating a shared patriotism, and to actively work towards nation-building and reconciliation and the transformation of our society to give effect and meaning to the country's motto, 'Diverse People Unite'."

"The patriots who met at the Federal Congress of the NNP and at Luthuli House are determined that we will never again experience an April month like the April of 1952. During this and all the April months that are yet to come, all our people will come together to celebrate freedom for all, in a country they will build together into a winning nation. Thabo Mbeki"<sup>252</sup>

The above example is interesting in that Mbeki appears to have a magnanimous attitude to Afrikaners. After Mbeki says that Afrikaners share common African roots and are tied to our country by an emotional bond, he mentions that many members of the NNP joined the ANC. Is it because they are towing the party line? Is it because of an obsequious loyalty that the Afrikaners quickly adopted to adjust to the new democracy that Mbeki has this magnanimous attitude?

### Lies have short legs

"This year we were fortunate to spend a good part of Africa Day, 25 May, with the members of our National Assembly. This was because the Assembly had set this date for the discussion of the Budget Vote of The Presidency.

"Appropriately, this gave parliament and the representatives of the various political parties the possibility to convey our collective best wishes on this important day both to our people and the sister peoples of Africa and the African Diaspora.

"Since it had convened to discuss the budget of the Presidency, the Honourable Members were also afforded the time to address the Assembly and indicate what they thought might be done especially by the Presidency, to move our country further forward on its road to its successful reconstruction and development.

"One of the Members drew attention to persistent 'fears' among sections of our white population. She spoke about how these fears sometimes distort reality, leading people to feel terrified, even when in fact there is absolutely no threat of any kind. She explained that this

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<sup>252</sup> Letter from the President: Never again the divisions of April 1952, ANC Today, Vol.5 No.15 15 - 21 April 2005

happens because these white people have accepted particular negative stereotypes of black people, whom they then expect to act in a manner that is consistent with those stereotypes.

"She was supported by another Member of Parliament, who drew the attention the National Assembly to a specific stereotype. He spoke about the evident unease among some of our compatriots at the emergence of successful black business people, especially those associated with the ANC.

"He explained that this unease was based on the stereotype shared by some white people at home and abroad, that Africans are inherently corrupt. He said that it was therefore very easy to attribute the success of black business people to corruption, since the same frame of mind would also suggest that Africans are, in any case, not that competent to succeed as major business players in our economy.

"Interestingly, in a recent article Professor Willie Esterhuyse of Stellenbosch University discussed issues about perceptions of Africa that are related to the matters raised by the two Members of Parliament.

"He quoted one writer as having written that, 'Africa has been effectively been demonised in a post-colonial discourse of perpetual catastrophe and natural disasters'. Another, referring to the way the West discussed the issue of the incidence of AIDS in Africa, said: 'We are witnessing a fundamental reorganisation of Western racism, as the constitutive colonial analogy between race and class is dissolved, and African blackness is re-conceptualised as an analogue of the sexually perverse.'

"With regard to the latter, Professor Esterhuyse quoted 'a respected academic' whose comments were published in *Rapport* on 27 January 2001. The academic had written: 'Because (Mbeki) refuses to confirm the white perception that blacks are promiscuous, he fails to give critically important leadership on the AIDS epidemic.'

"This 'respected academic' wanted us to accept the age-old white stereotype that we as Africans are sexually depraved, which he/she described as the 'white perception' of the black majority.

"According to this 'respected academic', the task of leadership in this instance would be to confirm the gratuitous insult directed against Africans, which has been part of the armoury of white racism for at least the last 300 years, that as the academic said, 'blacks are promiscuous'.

"All these examples relate to the phenomenon described by one of the authors quoted by Professor Esterhuyse who wrote that 'Africa has been effectively demonised in a post-colonial discourse of perpetual catastrophe and unnatural disasters'.

“The stereotypes that our Members of Parliament spoke about are also of the same kind, in that they project a threat of perpetual catastrophe simply because we are an African country, led by an African government, as the two Members of Parliament pointed out.

“Of course, the other side of this projection of a perpetual catastrophe is the communication of the view that life was better when Africa and South Africa were under colonial and white minority rule. Seamus Milne, comment editor and columnist of the British Guardian newspaper wrote recently on this matter in an article entitled ‘British: imperial nostalgia’.

“Milne cited one Andrew Roberts as saying, ‘Africa has never known better times than during British rule.’ Milne describes Roberts as a ‘conservative’. It should therefore come as no surprise that Roberts sings the praises of colonialism and apartheid. What comes as a real surprise, and a matter for serious concern, are the comments made by the British Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, the presumed successor to Tony Blair as British Prime Minister. Seamus Milne says that while on a visit to East Africa in January this year, Gordon Brown said that, ‘the days of Britain having to apologise for its colonial history are over’. This followed on remarks he had made at the British Museum in London four months earlier, in September 2004, that, ‘We should be proud...of the (British) empire’.

“Milne makes the correct point that in reality, the UK has never apologised to the millions of people across the globe that it colonised. With regard to what British colonialism did, Seamus Milne writes: ‘Britain’s empire was in reality built on genocide, vast ethnic cleansing, slavery, rigorously enforced racial hierarchy and merciless exploitation. As the Cambridge historian Richard Drayton puts it (in June 2004): ‘We hear a lot about the rule of law, incorruptible government and economic progress – the reality was tyranny, oppression, poverty and the unnecessary deaths of countless millions of human beings.’

“Milne then refers to the book ‘Britain’s Gulag’, written by Caroline Elkins, and published this year. Elkins reports on the suppression by the British of the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya during the 1950s. She says that, among things, the British put 320, 000 Kikuyu in concentration camps, killed well over 100, 000 people, engaged in mass rape, and mutilated the bodies of dead Kenyan freedom fighters.

“Seamus Milne says that, ‘Like most historical controversies, the argument about empire is as much about the future as the past. Those who write colonial cruelty out of 20<sup>th</sup> century history want to legitimise the new imperialism...’

“The colonial cruelty of the 20<sup>th</sup> century described and treated Africans as barbarians blessed with the gift of colonial and white minority rule. The ‘fundamental (post-colonial)

reorganisation of Western racism' to which Professor Esterhuysen referred, maintains and perpetuates the stereotypes that informed the earlier ages of racism. As the authors quoted by Professor Esterhuysen said, those stereotypes include the projection of our country and continent as destined to experience 'perpetual catastrophe and unnatural disasters', given that we have now been deprived of benevolent and morally upright white rule!

"The 'freedom' we have gained is therefore but mere licence for us to behave as to the manner born, destined to build a society consumed by corruption, sexual depravity, autocracy and criminal violence. Professor Esterhuysen ends his article with the following paragraph: 'I think that Africans have forgotten how to clean up their own mess. The majority of Afrikaners and their opinion makers are still suffering from a historical 'black out' as far as white racism and destructive perceptions of black people are concerned. The second and third generation after 1900 will hopefully be different. Like Mikro's seven-year-old Afrikaner girl (where her mother also attended school), looking around the school asks her mother: "mommy, what's a non-white?" This normalisation at micro-level has fortunately already begun and gives cautious hope for the future.'

"Willie Esterhuysen is correct that normalisation has already begun. I would venture to say he is overly cautious about the future. In his article he also says: 'It is not that all Afrikaners are racist or voice destructive perceptions of black people ...Those who think otherwise, however, are not heard or seen.'

"The Afrikaners who are not racist and do not voice destructive perceptions of black people are the catalyst that will bring normalisation of relations in our country much sooner than Professor Esterhuysen allows for.

"Our passing misfortune is that as long as these very decent South Africans and Africans are neither seen nor heard, so long will negative messages remain the most easily marketable commodity in our country.

"Understanding these market conditions, and informed by false notions of 'the golden age of empire', the purveyors of pessimism will remain hard at work. They will continue to market the combined burden of rampant crime and corruption, maladministration, growing impoverishment, a lethargic economy and massive job losses, a rapidly increasing death rate, and growing marginalisation of national minorities.

"The passing advantage they have is that because of the durability of the negative stereotypes of which the Members of Parliament spoke, ours remains a seller's market, favourable to those who find it in their interest to peddle the certainty of eventual catastrophe.

“During the month of May, 2005, the international consultancy, Grant Thornton published its International Business Owners Survey 2004, covering 26 countries, including South Africa.

“Among other things the Survey reported that South African business people were more than twice as confident about their economic prospects compared to the previous year. Our business people came 4<sup>th</sup> in the level of global business confidence, with India topping the rankings, followed by Australia and the United States.

“The Survey found that during the previous year 56% of our companies had increased their number of employees. Thirty percent had maintained the same number, and 13% had cut down their jobs. During the previous three years 75% had increased their revenue/turnover.

“Concerning the current year, 79% expected to increase their turnover/output. Fifty-one percent expected to increase the number of their employees, and 6% foresaw a decrease. Fifty-four percent would invest in new plant and machinery, and 36% in new buildings.

“Compared to the previous year, 23% said they were ‘significantly more focused’ on attracting and retaining key skilled members of staff; 48% were ‘more focussed’ and 22% were ‘as focused’ as during the previous year.

“The business people identified regulations/red tape and availability of skilled workers as the two biggest constraints in terms of the possibility to grow their businesses. Most interestingly, contrary to everything said about the impact of crime, the threat of terrorism and insecurity in general were insignificant as causes of stress among the business people.

“Commenting on the employment situation globally, Andrew Godfrey, Head of International and European Services at Grant Thornton said that, ‘in this climate (consistent with the upward phase of the economic cycle) ... we are also seeing a renewed vigour in attracting and retaining staff. In India and South Africa where there is a healthy economic environment, this need is particularly acute. However, the converse applies in Singapore and some European countries like Italy and France where workforce skills are not seen as such a big plus’.

“This information from Grant Thornton Survey about our country tells a story that is radically different from the one communicated by those who find it in their interest to propagate negative stereotypes about us as an African country.

“This is a story of a growing and resilient economy. It is a story of increasing job opportunities. It is a story of hope for a better life for those who will qualify from our skills development programmes.



“It is a story that says the principal owners of productive property are supremely confident about the future of our country. It contains an appeal by these business people to our government, that it should make it easier for them to increase their productive activities and create new jobs.

“Seamus Milne ended his article with the appeal that rather than legitimising a terrible past, such as ours, what is required of those who belonged to the oppressor nations is ‘to celebrate those who campaigned for colonial freedom rather than racist despotism they fought against’. This is what our Members of Parliament did on Africa Day.

“They also acknowledged and welcomed the progress achieved to eradicate the legacy of that racist despotism. At the same time, they pointed to the challenges ahead of us in terms of realising the goal of a better life for all. They made the firm statement that hope and not despair is what will determine the future of our country and Africa as a whole.

“There will be no perpetual catastrophe. The stereotypes will neither define who we are nor dictate what we will be. Thabo Mbeki”<sup>253</sup>

The recurring theme of stereotypes occurs once more. The first stereotype Mbeki mentions is that Africans are inherently corrupt, the second is that “African blackness is re-conceptualised as an analogue of the sexually perverse and depraved, and that African countries are under the constant threat of perpetual catastrophe, simply because they are African countries. In the letter Mbeki interestingly also refers to “normalisation” that has begun, citing the example of the Afrikaner girl who asks “what is a non-white”. This gives him “cautious hope for the future”, showing in Butlerian terms, possibilities for resignification. However, while Mbeki seems to want this kind of hope, he slides quickly back into his usual mode of invoking the worst excesses of racial stereotypes. What this shows is that race is the pure signifier, the master signifier and the ideological nodal point in his discourse.

The final example from “Letters” shows how Mbeki has brought race into the issue of Zimbabwe. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to incorporate a full

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<sup>253</sup> Letter from the President: Lies have short legs, ANC Today, Vol.5 No.21 27 May – 2 June 2005

examination of South Africa's foreign policy on Zimbabwe, Mbeki's hyperbolisation on race nevertheless permeates his judgment on those who have been critical of recent events in Zimbabwe, as well as the South African government's response to that country.

### Clamour over Zimbabwe reveals continuing racial prejudice in South Africa

"For some time now, there has been a fairly high level of agitation among some South Africans about the issue of Zimbabwe. Indeed some politicians took the decision some time ago to use this question to make their careers and advance the fortunes of their parties.

"After a short study of our politics, a visitor from Mars might assume that Zimbabwe is a province of South Africa. With this understanding, the visitor would come to know that some South Africans are concerned that their country is wrongly handling such matters as land reform, the economy, the rule of law and the independence of the press and the judiciary in its province of Zimbabwe.

"She would come to realize that in large measure, the agitation about these questions is driven by a seemingly deep-seated concern that the misfortunes that had befallen the province of Zimbabwe were likely to spill over into or occur in the other provinces of South Africa. Naturally given the volume of voices about these matters in the other provinces, the Martian visitor would conclude that the South African government might have to change the policies it was pursuing in the specific province of Zimbabwe.

"Imagine the situation, later, when the Martian visitor comes to realize that Zimbabwe is not a province of South Africa but an independent state, with its own government, democratically elected by the people of Zimbabwe. The visitor would then begin to wonder about why some South Africans seem so convinced that the future of their country depends on what happens in Zimbabwe and what their government does about Zimbabwe, rather than what the people of Zimbabwe do about their own country.

"The point that our visitor would have missed, never having been exposed to racism, is that both Zimbabwe and South Africa have black African governments. It is this that provokes fears among white South Africans about 'contagion' and the 'Zimbabwe factor'. Consistent with their reading of the situation in Zimbabwe, they fear that, 'as is the wont of black governments', the South African government will act 'as to the manner born' with regard to such issues as property rights and the rule of law.

“Of course, in addition to the fact of black governments, the other critical link between Zimbabwe and South Africa is that they both have relatively sizable national white minorities. Thus it is not difficult for white South Africa to borrow the slogan from trade unions, relative to the link between itself and white Zimbabwe – an injury to one is an injury to all!

“Add to this the fact that the white minority in South Africa had worked itself into a frenzy of fear about and hatred of Mugabe of Zimbabwe, before that country’s independence, in much the same way that it had educated itself to fear and loathe an ANC composed of ‘terrorists and communists’. The response to the events in Zimbabwe has confirmed what many of us suspected, that the negative stereotype of black people in many white minds is firmly implanted in these minds.

“Accordingly, we had thought that many of our white compatriots would entertain doubts for a long time as to whether ‘the South African miracle’, centered on the notion of a ‘rainbow nation’, will be sustained. The price they demand we pay to ensure that they continue to believe in ‘the miracle’ is that we prove, relative to Zimbabwe, that we do not conform to their stereotype of black Africans.

“Accordingly, we must act to guarantee the property rights of white Zimbabweans. We must also act to ensure that the law is upheld to protect both the property and the freedoms of the Zimbabwean property owners. Thus will we convince them that we are committed to the guarantee of the property rights of white South Africans. And thus we will demonstrate that we are determined to protect the property and the freedoms of the white, South African property owners. Only in this way would the South African white minority be assured that in ours, they have an atypical black African government that would not behave as such governments have behaved, in the view and according to the norms of that white minority.

“As the Martian visitor would have learnt more about our country by now, she would be struck by the ironies that arise from this situation. One of these, among many, is that the ANC represents the section of our population that has been by far the worst victims of the denial of and contempt for property rights. Another, among many, is that the ANC represents the section of our population that has been by far the worst victim of disregard and contempt for the rule of law.

“Yet another, among many, is the fact that today South Africa has a constitution and laws that protect property rights, because members and supporters of the ANC engaged in struggle and paid the supreme price in a struggle to bring into being a law-governed society, in the interest of all South Africans.

“Many of our people died, suffered torture, imprisonment, banishment and exile in the course of a difficult struggle for the rule of law, the independence of the press and judiciary, property rights, a prosperous economy that would benefit all our people, democracy and human rights. The cruel irony, among others, is that the same people who against whom we waged this struggle, the people who killed, tortured, imprisoned, banished and exiled those who fought for property rights and the rule of law for all, are the most strident in demanding that we prove our democratic credentials.”<sup>254</sup>

Here Mbeki invokes those even less capable of responding to his letter: visitors from Mars.

He avoids dealing with the issues raised by “the whites”, such as the rule of law, but resorts to vitriol against his critics instead of dealing with the substance of the criticism. The vitriol is, once again, racially loaded. “The response to the events in Zimbabwe has confirmed what many of us suspected, that the negative stereotype of black people in many white minds is firmly implanted in these minds.” Race has become the *leitmotif* of Mbeki’s speeches and writings.

Throughout the letters can be found the obsessive Mbeki, the subject’s passionate attachment to the signifier, race. An example is the use of his quote from Kaufman, who published an article in the journal *Radical Philosophy Review*, entitled “A User’s Guide to White Privilege”. “Somewhere in our cultural unconscious lies the image of the brutal, animalistic, sexual, savage. This image was created long ago as part of the cultural work that was done to make whites feel better about slavery. But even now, with slavery long gone, the images are still part of our cultural system and they impact the cultural meanings of white and black especially. Stereotypes of African-

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<sup>254</sup> Letter from the President: Clamour over Zimbabwe reveals continuing racial prejudice in South Africa, ANC Today, Vol.1 No.9 23-29 March 2001

Americans, as savage, lead many whites, often against their conscious intention, to fear blacks and to mistrust them.”<sup>255</sup>

The investment in race takes on a passionate status. There is evidence of ambivalence, rage and melancholia<sup>256</sup>. I would argue that there is, in Mbeki’s discourse, reflexivity, internalisation and loss. Although Mbeki has lost his subjection (from the collapse of apartheid) he has so internalised this subjection that he cannot let it go. This is what the turning back on oneself is all about.

It is appropriate at this stage to return to “real politics”. Mbeki spent two decades in exile<sup>257</sup> and his enunciations in the letters show a mind steeped in the past. The 1980s in South Africa were a critical period in the struggle for democracy. It was during this period that the UDF and Cosatu were formed, with “bottom up” democracy governing these structures. Mbeki’s views and political leadership begs the question: Is Mbeki out of touch with South Africa, shaped as it is by *inter alia* the internal political movement of the 1980s?

Political commentator Drew Forrest<sup>258</sup> writes that when the ANC returned from exile in 1990 Pahad, a close friend and now minister in The Office of the President, instructed leaders of Cosatu that from now on they should take direction from the ANC. Forrest notes that the “unionists were speechless”. They operated on mandates from their members, from branches to regional structures to the national executive. Its “bottom-up” shop-floor traditions were not in tandem with this instruction. In addition, Forrest comments that the Gear document, that led to a

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<sup>255</sup> See Letter from the President Vol 4 No 42, 22-28 October 2004

<sup>256</sup> See Butler (1997:169-174) Using Freud’s analysis she writes that ambivalence may well be the result of loss, that the loss of an object precipitates an ambivalence towards it as part of the process of letting go. If so, she argues, then melancholia, defined as the ambivalent reaction to loss, may be coextensive with loss, so that mourning is subsumed in melancholia.

<sup>257</sup> Refer to Chapter 3 for biographical details of Mbeki

<sup>258</sup> *Mail & Guardian* 28 October -3 November 2005, Mbeki reaps as he sows

Cosatu anti-privatisation strike in 2002, had “Mbeki, and the exile mentality, stamped all over it”. “Significantly, the document’s intimidatory tone and bizarre conspiracy theories – among them that the union ultra-left and right were in ‘counter-revolutionary’ league – appeared to puzzle and embarrass, rather than outrage the ANC regions it was used to brief. As on other questions, Mbeki had deluded himself that the party’s rank and file thinks as he does.” While Forrest’s observations are useful, I argue further that if Mbeki is out of touch with his own party members, he might be even more out of touch with the reality of South Africa, and the “Letters from the President” show this.

They show, in my view, an Mbeki who is out of touch with many realities in South Africa, it shows Mbeki in thrall to fantasy. It shows how race as master signifier rigidly antagonises South Africa, where Mbeki equals ANC, ANC equals Blacks, Black equals People, People equals masses – all of whom are patriotic – and whites are the Big Other. It seems as though Mbeki is still reeling under the impact of colonialism whereas, it can be argued, today South Africa is a post-colonial society. And yes, Mbeki’s racial fantasy was once justified, and while race was indeed the traumatic wound for Mbeki’s generation, is he not obsessed with his wound today?