

# Hijacking Subaltern's history (broken bodies, broken voices): Decolonial critique of 'Subaltern whiteness' in South Africa

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This article uses decolonial to critique the discourse of 'subaltern whiteness' by questioning some Afrikaner scholars' morality of regarding 'white Afrikaners as subaltern'. Subaltern designates submerged, subordinated, exploited or suppressed – those whose voices have been historically muted, their humanity stripped by those with sociopolitical and economic power. Within South Africa, this raises the question: to what extent can white Afrikaners be regarded as subaltern? The article proposes indivisibility of epistemic vulnerability and regenerative theological praxis both emerging within Afrikaner theological discussion as viable response to broken bodies of those who still bear the marks or scars of apartheid and rather not to seek to hijack their voice.

## Introduction – 'Can the (true) subaltern speak?'

I first heard about the notion of 'subaltern whiteness' from Jeremy Punt at the Summer School held at Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, from 27 February to 01 March 2017. The theme was 'Transformative Religion: Religion as Situated Knowledge in Processes of Social Transformation'. Punt, an Afrikaner Associate Professor in New Testament at the University of Stellenbosch, was invited to give a keynote address. The title of his paper was '(South) African Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation: A White African Perspective'. He acknowledged that it was an edited version of the paper presented at the Annual Meeting co-hosted by the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion in San Antonio, 18–22 November 2016. He revealed that a participant had questioned the legitimacy of combining the notions of 'subaltern' and 'whiteness'. The argument was that the two concepts are mutually contradictory. This, Punt rejected.

As I listened to the presentation, I could not help but wrestle with swirling questions in my mind: If the two concepts were mutually contradictory during apartheid, are they still not mutually contradictory and mutually exclusive in between post-apartheid? Who are really the true subalterns in historical South Africa? Why has Jeremy Punt chosen to begin positioning Afrikaners as subaltern now? Is this a shrewd strategy to reposition neo-Afrikaner identity as historically victimised whiteness, which black South Africans should pity for having oppressed them? Could it be that there is a realisation that neo-Afrikaner whiteness is on a deep slippery slope of possible dewhitenisation? How can decolonial critique subaltern whiteness position as a smart move to blame history as a reason for Afrikaners' perpetrated injustices in the name of apartheid? Is promoting the victim Afrikaner discourse robbing Afrikaners the opportunity to take full responsibility for apartheid? Are these Afrikaners seeking for cheap reconciliation? I am not going to be able to respond to all these complex questions as the aim of this article to reopen an already opened conversation.

The article begins by framing decolonial turn, and then proceeds to critique racialised history of South African since the arrival the Dutch in Cape Town. The final section reconstructs De Kock's 'regenerative theology' in dialogue with Snyman's 'epistemic vulnerability' as viable stance in continuous search for costly reconciliation that can bring about racial healing and wholeness in South Africa. I am arguing for indivisibility of 'epistemic vulnerability' (Snyman) and regenerative theological praxis (De Kock), both paradigms proposed by Afrikaner theologians as viable response to the broken bodies of those who still bear the marks or scars of apartheid and rather not to seek to hijack their voice.

## Decolonial turn

When two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers. (African Proverb)

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The current debates in decolonial thinking seek to challenge the limits of Eurocentric informed ideology which too often disguised as true interpretation of the reality and history (Grosfoguel 2007; Mignolo 1995; 2007). Decolonial sees history as instrument of power which could be manipulated by the powerful to protect their interest in the present and mute the voice of the historically oppressed and exploited. It problematises the very problematic initial European contact with Africa which resulted in the production of two unrelated people, juxtaposed the dichotomies of white and black, Christian and heathen, pure and impure, civilised and primitive, master and slave, merchant and commodity, coloniser and colonised, united and unified, gentle and barbaric, matured and infantile, fixity and fluidity and so on. There is little to celebrate about such a history, rather everything to mourn. Decolonial, therefore, unravels how dominant Europeans commodified Africa and African humanity first through trans-Atlantic slave trade, which began in mid-1400s and lasted until 19th century. It has been reported that slave trafficking became a colossal business with the colonisation of Americas in 1500s. This resulted in ferocious battles to dominate the enterprise among competing European nations by 1600s. The Dutch, Britain, French and Portuguese were the main contestants to dominate the trade. By 1713, Britain had emerged as the dominant slave-trafficking nation in the world (Falola & Warnock 2007:1).

Secondly, through colonialism and imperialism in the late 19th century, highest European nations violently scramble for the African continent as though there were no human beings who owned the continent. This was because Europeans did not see African people as human beings, rather as nonhuman creatures, that perhaps, through 'divine mistake' looked like humans beings or a humanoid from which humanity had evolved to follow Charles Darwin's evolution logic. As each European power became an industrialise capitalist through colonisation, they tried to catch up with British economic strength. This resulted in fierce battles to colonise spaces, human beings, minds, religions, cultures, agencies and subjectivities in Africa (Sherman et al. 2008:127). The partitioning of Africa was a means to avoid nationalistic and ethnocentric wars among rival Europeans who sought to colonise Africa (Gallagher & Denny 1961). Thus, decolonial theory perceives European historical relations with Africa and African people as history of violence, colonisation and subjugation; of racial or ethnonational domination which subalternised African people to historical objects, 'relegated to a lifeless form of identity (objecthood)' (Mbembe 2002:24; see also, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:102) or as Fanon (1961) classifies as 'wretched of the earth'.

As the proverb above stresses, decolonial argues that though European powers fought each other on African soil (as articulated below) for African resources for their own interest, it was African people who really suffered more than any European ethnic group could ever claim – in terms of human lives, culture, land, religion, resources and everything. The present South African history is fundamentally a history of land dispossession, history of institutionalisation of racism and

history of black oppression. This is true even in the context where whites oppressed one another, the people who were truly oppressed and exploited were black people for they are the true owners of the land that was fought for. Thus, the legacy of racialised history from decolonial vantage remains a fundamental problem in post-apartheid South Africa (Kaunda 2015). Under European nationalistic struggles, black Africans endured 'hellish life experiences informed by racialized' and nationalistic hierarchies of power that prevented any humane coexistence between Britons and Afrikaners (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:8). The continuation of this situation is classified as coloniality – depicting the longstanding racial relations of power that remain as material legacies of European nationalistic or ethnocentric wars, materialised in apartheid which continues through paternalistic apartheid thinking, in the mentalities, psychologies and world views of both white and black people. Within South Africa, apartheid was fundamentally a climactic expression of colonialism and Eurocentric modernity.

Decolonial/de-apartheid critique, as a form of the epistemic struggle, aims to move towards subaltern suspicion of history and white theology articulated from above. Too often history and theology from above have been utilised as strategic weapons to legitimise past wrongs, resulting in oppressive representation of history (Vázquez 2012). Decolonial helps in unveiling epistemic schemes, disguises and hidden agendas within which neo-apartheid Afrikaner epistemology functions to justify and downplay apartheid regime and rob the epistemic rights of black African people to enable them overcome material legacies of apartheid. This also robs some Afrikaners the opportunity to accepting forgiveness and others from seeking for radical reconciliation that can facilitate in overcoming the mutually opposing discourses – black and white.

Decolonial/de-apartheid critique aims to foster spaces for 'epistemic vulnerability' (Snyman 2015b) where the covert perpetrator or innocent beneficiaries of apartheid takes responsibility over past wrongs without taking clever stance to shift blame to historical oblivion. From a decolonial perspective, modernity cannot be thought without its darker side – coloniality (Mignolo 1995; 2007). Therefore, decolonial maintains the structures of power, control and hegemony that emerged during apartheid era and continues to shape South Africa's practical spheres of political administration, education, economics, personal life and reproduction, world view and interpretation of reality.

## The myth of white subaltern in colonial-apartheid South Africa

### Revisiting racialised history

The fact that the majority of black South Africans remain peripheral and subaltern is not historical coincidence, rather a deliberate and intentional historical conspiracy of racial colonisation, which started with the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck through the Dutch East India Company (VOC) at the Cape of Good Hope in 1651. Since the arrival of the Dutch, the northern frontier of the Cape colony was in a state of

continuous warfare, the Khoikhoi and the San suffered grievously. Scholars of history believe that the Khoikhoi–Dutch war was a result of land seized from the Khoikhoi and later the San, to increase Dutch grazing pastures (Adhikari 2010;<sup>1</sup> Katzen 1969; Mbaku 1997; Worden 2016). The Afrikaner farmer (*Boers*) hunters systematically exterminated the San, their ancestral lands expropriated, and the few survivors were enslaved (Adhikari 2010; Katzen 1969; Worden 2016).

The British arrived in South Africa with its imperialistic agenda in 1795, and in the fourth Anglo-Dutch War despite the French help, the Dutch were defeated in the Battle of Muizenberg on 07 August 1795 and British took control of Cape colony (Worden 2012). One of the earliest writers on this event, Campbell (1897), observed that:

The captured were treated with great leniency; their laws and customs were guaranteed to them, property was to be respected, no new taxes were to be levied, and the Dutch Reformed Church was to keep its rights and privileges. (p. 4)

The elite Afrikaners became prominent in the colonial bourgeois. The situation in the 18th and early 19th centuries was characterised by radical nationalism and exclusive ethnocentric tendencies among Europeans (Falola & Warnock 2007; Giliomee 2003). The battle for control of trade routes and colonies that were fought between British and Dutch wars between 1652 and 1674 and 1781 and 1810, doubtless, had a profound effect on the relationship between Britain and the Netherlands and explains the Dutch anti-British attitude and resistance of Anglicanism and mutual suspicion that continued with the Afrikaners (Giliomee 2003).

The treatment of Afrikaners by the British must be understood within the prevailing exclusive nationalist ideologies among European powers of the time which would later also result in the scramble for Africa (Falola & Warnock 2007). There was pressure for each European nation to acquire an empire status symbol. Nationalistic rivalries, together with an overarching compulsion to maintain international prestige, played an indispensable role in the way the white Afrikaners were treated by British colonialists. The Afrikaners could have been easily perceived as rival group and hindrance to British interest to freely exploit South African resources (Giliomee 2003). It is important to highlight that with abolition of human-trafficking business, Europeans turned to exploiting natural resources in the continent. In essence, this was the continuation of exploitation of African humanity. Thus, the Afrikaners who were part of the defeated imperial powers could have expected to be despised. This did not necessarily turn into oppression, even exploitation as the resources in South Africa did not belong to them. Perhaps, major oppression was until the Second Anglo-Boer War.

British sought to establish its cultural and political hegemony by first removing the Dutch language as national language in 1822. This could be expected as the Dutch were defeated and had no

1. In *The Anatomy of a South African Genocide*, Adhikari has written a comprehensive work outlining what he regards as genocide on the indigenous people. The indigenous people could have easily positioned themselves as vengeful victims of Afrikaner massacre and dispossession of ancestral land.

legitimacy over the Cape colony. However, unlike black Africans and mixed race, the Afrikaners were given political space in urban economy of Cape Town. Afrikaners formed a third of the representation in the Cape legislative (Giliomee 2003:201). This means that they had a political and economic voice which other racial groups did not have. For the Afrikaner farmers, the grievance arose when the British abolished slavery on which their economy had thrived. Some Afrikaners saw the abolition of slavery as British oppression to their way of life, and thus they made the *Voortrekkers* (Great Trek - 1835–1834) into the mainland to create independent republics, to preserve what they regarded as ‘proper relations between master and servant’ – enslaving Africans (Burridge 2007; Etherington 2001; Hyam & Henshaw 2003; Theal 1904:266–267). Ronald Hyam and Peter Henshaw (2003) observe that:

The fundamental constitution (*grondwet*) of the South African Republic (Transvaal) made their intransigent Bantu policy all too plain (clause 9): ‘The people will admit no equalising (*gelijkstelling*) between the white and coloured inhabitants whether in church or state’ (February 1858). (p. 1)

Hyam and Henshaw (2003, italics as found) add that:

It was not simply that the Boers [*sic*] would not accept or admit black equality (for which the word would have been *gelijkheid*), but, more uncompromisingly, no assimilation, *no making equal* or treating as if *equal*. (p. 1)

The problem of apartheid does not seem to have emerged as a result of Second Anglo-Boer War or any form of British oppression; it was nurtured within the Afrikaner racial imagination. In actual fact, scholars have argued that Afrikanerdom was born not only out of fears of black majority and assimilation into British cultural hegemony (Steyn 2004:137) but also as a reaction to fear of imminent danger of ‘Boer’ dewhitenisation into ‘the coloured’ (Adhikari 2005; Du Toit 2003; Erasmus 2005; Van der Westhuizen 2016). They sought to liberate themselves from disgraceful whiteness. Thus, the aim was to achieve equality with hegemonic global whiteness, as epitomised by British colonialist and later white English-speaking South Africans (Steyn 2003).

## Victim imagination – Who’s a true victim?

The Afrikaner scholars Melissa Steyn (2004), South African National Chair in Critical Diversity, University of Witwatersrand, and Jeremy Punt (2017) position Afrikaners as victims of British imperial oppression and prey of indigenous aggression. The victim discourse in Afrikaner imagination seems to position their whiteness as vulnerable because the perpetrators were in the position of power over them, at least the British conquerors. Steyn (2004) notes that:

the self-esteem, indeed the very self-image, of Afrikaner nationhood was forged within a *mythology* that celebrated the courage of a people who refused to be subordinated to the British Empire on more than one occasion in their history. (p. 137)

She (2004) further argues:

As a resistant whiteness, the *constellation of the victim* has been highly salient in the discourses of Afrikaner whiteness. They saw



*themselves as besieged*, having to fight for the 'right' to their own brand of white supremacy, in which claiming the land for themselves and appropriating black labour featured prominently. The role of such feelings of prior, and even continuing, victimization of the Afrikaner by the British in bringing about the mindset that enacted the brutal racism of Apartheid fits a pattern that has been recognized in other perpetrator groups. (p. 138, [author's own italics])

Steyn (2004) believes:

Afrikaner whiteness has an affinity with *subaltern whiteness*, in that Afrikaners contended with the more powerful forces of the British Empire throughout their history. As a resistant whiteness, the whiteness of the Afrikaner has historically been rolled into ethnic/nationalistic discourse. (p. 143, [author's own italics])

She (2004:143) further argues 'there certainly always has been an element of defiance in Afrikaner whiteness against the more secure, powerful, whiteness of the English who had the culture of Empire backing them'.

Punt (2017:4) affirms 'an appropriate example of both the diversity as well as ambiguity of whiteness is its subaltern form, which confirms the constructed nature of whiteness'. For Punt (2017:4), 'subaltern whiteness experiences and practices challenge the ready equation or even association of whiteness and racism as synonymous'. Punt (2017) underlines:

in South Africa I would designated as and grouped with Afrikaner whiteness, which shows similarity with subaltern whiteness which, notwithstanding an element of defiance, in its vulnerability over time had (have?) to compete with the more secure, powerful, British whiteness of the English which rested on imperial culture. (p. 4)

He (2017:5) states, 'Subalternity is not invoked here to claim hermeneutical privilege; rather, the purpose of referring to Afrikaner subaltern whiteness is to point out the complex intersections informing this very identity'.

Punt's very act of suggesting that he is not claiming 'hermeneutical privilege' is an epistemologically covert attempt not only to claim epistemological privilege but also to silence the voice of those who apartheid reduced into nonhuman. Punt takes a position of both protecting Afrikaner whiteness and simultaneously categorising it as an oppressed, vulnerable form of whiteness. It is important to highlight that whiteness is not only a position of privilege but also synonymous with hegemony, especially in relation with other races. This means that while whiteness is not synonymous with racism, it is rather synonymous with racial superiority because as a discourse, it 'confers on a designated group unearned privileges' (Better 2008:15). The Afrikaners were indeed marginalised by British colonialist, but to demonstrate their equality with them, they had to behave like them by being against black Africans who were even more inhumanly oppressed and exploited by both the Dutch and later by British colonialists. This for Afrikaners meant institutionalised racism as national ideology. For instance, during the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, the

British and Afrikaners utilised colour category to segregate others. South African History Online (n.d.), reports:

Politically, it was nothing short of a miracle that the British and Afrikaners were able to unite to form the Union of South Africa despite the hatred, tensions and damage that the two South African Wars had inflicted on the psyche and landscape of the country ... By ignoring the wishes of the majority of the population, the formation of the Union of South Africa contributed to the political upheaval and turmoil that would engulf the country for the next eighty years.

It cannot be denied that Afrikaners used whiteness as an instrument to create apartheid in order to advance their socio-economic, political and cultural hegemony (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Norval 1996). That is, whiteness as power of apartheid continues to be reproduced through the construction of white identities of Afrikaner subjects in post-apartheid (Dyer 2005). Christi Van der Westhuizen (2016), an Afrikaner scholar, stresses that most Afrikaners have not given any allowance to blackness to enhance the value of whiteness. The white supremacy continues to be 'reproduced through social interactions with black others degraded as socially inferior' (Van der Westhuizen 2016:8). Van der Westhuizen (2016:8) further observes that most Afrikaners continue to deploy 'culture, ethnicity, and class' 'as Trojan horses to continually whiten spaces and retain racial hierarchies'.

Steyn's and Punt's arguments have potential to mislead, because of their essentialist perception of Afrikaner identities which are reducing to a single group of victim-perpetrators thereby robbing them of their humanity that could aid them in taking responsibility for their actions – oppressors as victims who perpetrated apartheid. While some Afrikaners depict themselves as historical victims, the facts from history do not correspond with an essentialised self-imposed fear and victimhood. As already alluded to Khoikhoi massacred before British invasion, some Afrikaners were part of an imperialistic group that subalternised black Africans. It is unfortunate that Steyn (2004:138; Punt 2017:4, 5) thinks 'Afrikaner whiteness has an affinity with what has been described as *subaltern whiteness*'. While it is true that Afrikaner whiteness has emerged out of complex history, from the beginning there was no homogeneous Afrikaner identity. Some Afrikaners were powerful in the Cape colony and even fought against fellow Afrikaners along with the British troops in the Second Anglo-Boer War (Adhikari 2010; Giliomee 2003; Katzen 1969; Mbaku 1997; Worden 2016). This has left unresolved generational bitterness and anger among many Afrikaners and remains one of the most terrible and destructive warfare in South Africa's history. The problem of this 'whiteman's' war that was fought for the resources and land that did not belong to neither of them.

## The Afrikaner whiteness discourse

Empirical evidence suggests that Afrikaners have 'maintained whiteness as central to Afrikaner identity, thus maintaining their claim to white privilege' (Verwey & Quayle 2012:552). Verwey and Quayle (2012) observe that:

Historically, Afrikaner identity has drawn heavily on Afrikaner nationalism, which depended on several tightly interwoven discourses. These centred on the themes of religious, racial, and cultural purity, superiority, calling, and the struggle for autonomy against oppression – which included the struggle for an independent language. (p. 553)

Throughout history, Afrikaners have maintained whiteness for self-legitimation and reduced black Africans to subalternity. The white Afrikaners as a dominant group in South Africa have utilised whiteness as exclusionary identity of power and dominance. Whiteness as racial category is historically entrenched with the ability to manipulate power and control other races and resources. This means that Afrikaners as white people, even during British colonialism in South Africa, had more advantage over and above black Africans (Giliomee 2003). It remains that white people have had a historical and contemporary advantage that ‘colour’ has given them. All forms of whiteness have either perpetrated or innocently benefited from oppression and exploitation thereby reinforcing the ideology that justified the subordination of black Africans.

Hence, it cannot be regarded as subaltern at least in the South African context but rather as an identity that has contributed to subalternise black South Africans. Especially that most Afrikaners from the start have intentionally functioned with classical whiteness which remains as a determinant of social relationship and material benefits. It is important to highlight that whiteness is by no means monolithic, not even within the same ethnic group, but immensely diverse, not everyone has the same amount of power (Punt 2017:3). However, recognising this fact does not mean Afrikaners did not reproduce classical whiteness in its excessive as a dominant and segregating identity. The Afrikaner’s continuous colour consciousness means that whiteness is perceived as superior and blackness is despised, which in turn challenges their sense of racial identity (Grosfoguel 2007; Snyman 2014). They managed to transcend Dutch cultural heritage and became a distinctive racial group but failed to transcend whiteness and become a hybrid racial group in keeping with their new language.

### Victims of faith – Afrikaner religious imagination

Christian-nationalism played a vital role in the process of consolidating Afrikaner self-conceptualisation (Bloomberg & Dubow 1990; Dubow 1992). They believed in Calvinist faith – in a God who providentially led the Afrikaner nation. In *White Theology*, James Perkinson (2004:58–59), notes in Dutch-Afrikaner Calvinist version, the ‘Black skin posed the question of salvation in its starkest form’. Blackness was conflated ‘with Calvinist notions of predestination’. They came to a conclusion that dark skin was a curse, which was destined for damnation. They needed to protect themselves from such pollution and impurity to avoid perdition. For Afrikaners, whiteness was divine’s positive predestination and blackness was negative predestination (Snyman 2011b:12). In essence, Afrikaners were victims of their

unreasoned faith, their uncritical biblical interpretation. If anything, they were manipulated and domesticated by fellow Afrikaners who wield religious power to interpret the Bible and Calvinist faith to them. In this way, one is tempted to agree that they are historical victims, fundamentally in relation to their blind and unquestioning faith. The close identification of Calvinist thinking with whiteness resulted in an unquestioning conviction that God had clearly and decisively acted in Afrikaner history and that black Africans were under divine curse to live as their slaves. This is a danger of an irrational or unexamined faith. The Afrikaner theological myopia left no room to accommodate other more open and life-giving Christian perspectives in other traditions. The Afrikaner proponents of Calvinist faith did not bother to ask a simple question: could it be possible that God acted in a different way in black African histories and what those histories could have revealed to them about God, as well as whether history is the only arena of God’s self-revelation to his people?

Nevertheless, some Afrikaners saw British occupation of Cape colony with its political and cultural hegemony as oppression and started identifying their experiences with Israelites’ experiences of Exodus and later as in Babylonian exile. During *Voortrekkers*, the victory of a small contingent of Afrikaners against a vast Zulu army at Blood River in 1838 was celebrated as the Day of Covenant (later changed to the Day of Vow and current the Day of Reconciliation). Paul Kruger, the 1881 President of Transvaal, preached that the Blood River victory was a proof that God had selected Afrikaners as his chosen people of God. The covenant theology formed Afrikaners over and against African people. The black African and Afrikaner juxtaposition came to represent the theosophical dichotomies of inferior and superior, natural and supernatural, impure and pure, slave and master, chosen and heathen and so on. In 1944, J. C. van Rooy (cited in Verwey & Quayle 2012), as chairman of Afrikaner *Broederbond*, made the following statement:

God created the Afrikaner people with a unique language, a unique philosophy of life, and their own history and traditions in order that they might fulfil a particular calling and destiny here in the southern corner of Africa. We must stand guard on all that is peculiar to us and build upon it. We must believe that God has called us to be servants of his righteousness in this place. (p. 553)

This theology created a new history, new imagination, endowing Afrikaner national building in continuity with ancient Israel while demarcating community boundaries to exclude those they wished to subjugate (Sullivan-Gonzalez 1998:66). Calvinist theology was used to justify and legitimise the takeover of South Africa, a nation that some at once believed was their Babylonian exile, now had become the Promised Land. Saul Dubow (1992:209) argues that ‘Christian-nationalism played a vital role in this process, providing apartheid with a rationale distinctive from existing forms of segregation’. Charles Bloomberg and Saul Dubow (1990) notes:

Acts of religious piety became political acts; the political struggle became a religious cause; national salvation, in a Republic, was equated with religious salvation. Finally, Christian-Nationalism

on freed Afrikaner doubt over their destiny and, by calling on them in God's name to realise a Republic, released a flood of Afrikaner energy and justified their national existence in religious, ethical and historical terms. The new doctrine captured the imagination of the Afrikaner masses by giving them meaning, community, status, hope and self-respect. (p. 101)

They convinced themselves that God had given them South Africa. However, this perspective did not represent the general Afrikaner imagination. There were competing religious ideologies such as the Afrikaners zealots, *Jerusalem-gangers* who participated in *Voortrekkers* but they set to travel to geographical Jerusalem. These saw themselves as being in the wilderness, on the road to Jerusalem (Bosman 2014).

It is interesting to note that the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in the late 19th century was evangelical which maintained loyalty to secular authority and apolitical theology. The challenge came with the Second Anglo-Boer War, when the DRC revolted. It would become the most important institution in 1910 in the unification of Afrikaners (Giliomee 2003). Megan Lewis (2016:54) concludes, 'Faced with the "totality of [their] existence" (Agamben 1999) – apartheid, moral responsibility, blame, complicity – contemporary Afrikaners are in an ongoing process of confronting the shame of that totality'.

The foregoing shows that that one should not assume that there was a general thinking that associated all Afrikaners with the discourse of new Israel, only a few depicted the trek as exodus, with Jerusalem as ultimate goal. Care must also be taken to think that all Afrikaners have taken a victim imagination. In other words, scholars should beware of associating official discourses such as the political rhetoric as those from Smuts and De Villiers Roos (1899), 'A Century of Wrong' as a general feeling of all Afrikaners or representation of true history of Afrikaners as such were intended to manipulate Afrikaner nationhood by depicting them as victim to the international audience in order to mobilise the immediate audience of Afrikaners for war. It follows therefore that Afrikaner scholars, such as Punt and Steyn, should not assume that white Afrikaners should be positioned as white subaltern as there are too many historical trajectories of Afrikaner identity(ies) development.

## Decolonial as re-minding: Epistemic vulnerability, regenerative theological praxis

The seemingly blame-shift discourse by Punt and Steyn reveals that there are some Afrikaner scholars who have not yet begun to 'agonise' over the inhumane nature of apartheid, of the inherent contradiction between majority black South Africans living at the fringes of national economy and a minority of extremely wealthy whites with all the hegemonic trappings. It appears that some Afrikaner scholars are 'yet to consciously problematize, deeply reflect and *agonise* over their role and status as *perpetrators* and *beneficiaries* of' apartheid (Maluleke 1997:42, italics as found). The inconvenient truth is

that it is possible for white Afrikaners to join black social movements for human rights, even help the cause for economic equality, have black friends, write articles and books seemingly critical of racism, white economic privilege and apartheid, and make public responses against racial inequalities – 'and *still* remain beholden to the ideology of' whiteness in its classical definition 'either as perpetrator or as "innocent" beneficiaries, or both' (Maluleke 1997:43). How can Afrikaner scholars re-mind their ways of doing theology? I cannot really answer this question on behalf of Afrikaners. And that is not my intention. It is up to every Afrikaner scholar to seek for reasonable answers for themselves. The aim here is to try and reconstruct the discussion already taking place among some Afrikaner scholars who have refused to blame history for apartheid but chosen to take responsibility as either conscious or unconscious players in the making of human history.

The most interesting book on regenerative theology in post-apartheid South Africa is written by an Afrikaner Professor of Practical Theology at the Palmer Theological Seminary and Global Associate for the Office of Innovation and New Ventures, both at Eastern University, Wynand de Kock (2014a). The book is rightly titled: *Out of My Mind: Following the Trajectory of God's Regenerative Story*. De Kock was born in 1960s. He uses narrative of his experiences growing up and living as a privileged Afrikaner under apartheid. He argues that he was indoctrinated to believe that God was sovereign who determined destinies of individuals and nations and that the same God inspired Afrikaner leaders to design the apartheid system to protect cultural purity and racial integrity of Afrikaner people. When he went to do theology, he begun to question the theology that informed him. He believes regeneration begins when an individual begins to ask life-affirming reasonable questions. The Afrikaner's 'inability to ask questions under Apartheid was a clear sign that we were in the grip of *unreasonable certainty*', De Kock argues (2014b). He stresses, 'Even Jesus asked questions as he faced death without certainty' (De Kock 2014b). Asking reasonable questions awakened a crisis of faith that made De Kock reach deep into the 'dark night of the soul' (2014a:35). This struggle and theological reflection forced him to dismantle and disentangle himself from the concept of God that formed his identity. The crisis also helped him realise that true hope for his salvation was found in 'regenerative theology'. This forms his new paradigm for doing theology. Doing theology became praxis of self-regeneration first and foremost rather than a mere academic exercise required by the university.

The process of regeneration in De Kock (2014a) could be seen in his human admittance that he was formed or deigned in the image of apartheid God. He acknowledges that there was a time when apartheid made sense to him. He affirms 'my racism' was deeply entrenched and was soon 'exposed'. He adds:

I was so locked up in my own mind of racial prejudice that I could not even compete with a stuffed toy animal. I knew I was a prisoner in my own mind. To be free, I needed to get the splinter out of my mind. (p. 26)



To make peace with himself and the people he despised, he needed to re-mind, mind regeneration – ‘a whole new mind’ (p. 35). De Kock lived in the head and had no touch with his heart. How many Afrikaner theologians do head theology with no connection to the heart? De Kock (2014a:16) argues that ‘The battle for the human soul is won or lost in the space between the head and the heart’.

De Kock’s theology of regeneration cannot be fully articulated without embedding it in ‘epistemic vulnerability’. This is another new way of doing Afrikaner theology proposed by Gerrie Snyman, an Afrikaner Professor of Biblical and Ancient Studies at the University of South Africa. Snyman (p. 284) gives an example of how attentive and constructive listening to the voices of African theologians in their writings exposed his racialised discourse. He refused to navigate the turbulent waters of racism and inner apartheid, rather chose to face them. He made himself epistemically vulnerable by epistemically privileging African scholarship. This resulted in regenerative theological praxis. Snyman’s search for epistemic turn in his theological approach began in 2005. He (2005) recalls:

Maseny’a’s (2002b) critique forced me to reflect on Western culture’s complicity in racialized discourse. I am looking for a way out, in other words, an approach or reading with which I can redeem myself from racism. I did not find that redemption in Kelley’s (2002) book. In fact, his arguments had a ring of familiarity with an earlier debate on racism with the Human Rights Commission’s inquiry into racism in the media in 2000. After reading his book, I still sit with the question: ‘If I take the argument about Western culture’s complicity in racism seriously, how do I move forward towards a hermeneutic that is racially sensitive but not racist?’ (p. 597)

Snyman (2011a; 2011b; 2015a; 2015b; 2016), in the numerous publications that followed this struggle to stay afloat, seems to have begun a process of delinking himself from racialised discourse with its trappings by framing himself within decolonial turn, which enabled him to become epistemically vulnerable. While he does not allude to this, epistemic vulnerability leads to regenerative process. He (2015b:284) argues that Afrikaner biblical interpreters should position them to expose their vulnerabilities such that ‘epistemology, socio-historical location, ideologies, and prejudices these vulnerabilities should be acknowledged’. He (2016) adds:

A hermeneutics of vulnerability is in tension with the exertion of power by way of biblical interpretation and theologising. Totalising happens when the vulnerables are expected to accept what has been argued in an authoritarian way ... A hermeneutics of vulnerability allows one to ask ethical questions about the marks left on others in the process. (p. 17)

Snyman (2015b:638) believe the ‘The current public discourse is not very conducive to the creation of vulnerability’. For him (2015b:638b, italics added for emphasis), ‘It is only when one realizes *vulnerability in the self* that one can enter [into fruitful and life-giving] conversation with the *vulnerability of the other*’. In the past, Afrikaners tried to make sense of black vulnerability through Calvinistic prism of the first Dutch

settlers, which positioned them as the powerful (Snyman 2011b:12). To avoid such racial trapping, even at the subliminal level, epistemic vulnerability is crucial because it recognises the mutual vulnerability of all human beings. Epistemic vulnerability affirms Achille Mbembe’s (2007) Afropolitan thinking as:

the way of embracing, with full knowledge of the facts, strangeness, foreignness and remoteness, *the ability to recognise one’s face in that of a foreigner* and make the most of the traces of remoteness in closeness, to domesticate the unfamiliar, to work with what seem to be opposites – it is this cultural, historical and aesthetic sensitivity ... (p. 27, [author’s own italics])

Snyman (2015b) further argues:

There is a direct relation between one’s critical awareness of vulnerability and shame. When there is little or no critical awareness, the situation is individualised with a concomitant feeling of unworthiness and being flawed, of feeling trapped, powerless and isolated. Critical awareness allows one to situate the feelings of shame in a larger collective context whereas those who fail to recognise their vulnerability react differently: with anger, rage and blame which are directed inwards and outwards. (p. 284)

It is within this frame of epistemic vulnerability that regenerative theological praxis should be understood. It demands that those classified as perpetrators acknowledge their vulnerability by *recognising their faces in those who were historically vulnerable*. This is what De Kock does in his narrative of vulnerability. He narrates the story during his theological studies in the United States. He was a co-janitor with a Ugandan student in the same shift. Night after night they ignored each as De Kock felt lowered to share the same work with someone coming from a ‘subordinate class of humanity’. His theology was all head and no heart. Regenerative theological praxis seeks to interconnect the head and the heart to gain a necessary balance in understanding and interpreting the world and relating to other human beings. It emerges out of indivisibility of mind and heart and is carried out in order to enable an individual or faith community to understand God’s mission in the world. Perhaps some Afrikaner theologians must learn how to connect their minds and hearts so that they learn how to listen to the cry of black people – *what* to listen to and *why*.

The Afrikaners and black Africans had lived too long in segregation and have been struggling to understand the language of relating to each other. Both have not unlearned the master-servant language of relating to each other. During apartheid, Afrikaners believed that violence was the only language of response to black Africans’ struggle for justice and equality. Thus, rather than putting forward some kind of clever theology and biblical hermeneutics, Afrikaners scholars ‘must learn to listen attentively to the voices of’ (Maluleke 1997:45) black African scholars and find tools to make reasonable sense of such voices. African scholarship has been a scholarship of struggle, fermented on wooden braziers, with watery eyes because of smokes of colonialism, neo-colonialism, hatred, violence, poverty, corruption, greediness, injustice and so on. It

is a scholarship that smells the stench of wood smoke. It merges out of gazing at the sky to make sense of the question: why under the same sky, despite the enormous riches on the continent, Africans continue to suffer so much than any other races in the world? This contradictory situation, as Tinyiko Maluleke (1997:46) argues, white Afrikaner theologians must attempt to hear the struggles in black African scholars with their 'hearts and engage in an informed, deep, dialogical but respectful and humble lament'. They should be slow to judge, quick to listen constructively. African scholarship is, in essence, a scholarship of lamentation, agonising and in some extreme cases, self-rejection.

## Conclusion??? – Nope!!!! To be continued ...

What I have done this far is to journey back into racialised history in order to try and make some sense in the present. I have followed Bell Hook's (1992) argument:

To bear the burden of memory one must willingly journey to places long uninhabited, searching the debris of history for traces of the unforgettable, all knowledge of which has been suppressed. (p. 172)

The burden of this article was to concisely respond to the question: can white Afrikaners be described as subaltern? I have argued that to theorise apartheid, we need to uncover, expose, restore and deconstruct the myth that constructed it. I have argued that the Afrikaners were an initial group of settlers who systematically exterminated the Khoikhoi people. Because Africans experienced colonisation, exploitation and domination as a racial group, their imagination of the nation emerged from the margins and the perspectives of the subaltern, where they had to struggle to transcend racism and ethnocentrism that was institutionalised by the colonial apartheid system, which consistently created citizens and subjects as permanently divided political identities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:176). The Afrikaners have maintained classical European whiteness that sought to dominate and enslave black Africans. Thus, to argue 'that contemporary Afrikaner oppression of other ethnic groups often simply mirrors earlier British' (Kamwangamalu 2001:366) is to rob Afrikaners of their humanity, for as Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu (cited in Adams et al. 2006) argues, 'Crime does not define the person completely', especially a repentant one.

I have further argued that the racial conflict that existed between the British and Afrikaners should be understood in the context of exploitation of African resources and it was such mutual hatred among European ethnic groups that resulted in the scramble for African as means to avoid rivalry. I have argued that decolonial thinking calls us not only to remember the necessary past wrongs, but also to enable people to take responsibility for either being 'perpetrators or as "innocent" beneficiaries, or both' (Maluleke 1997:43).

All this is based on understanding that while humanity is unable to change past wrongs, it is nevertheless embedded

with the ability to take responsibility to change the future. This is in affirmation of the indivisibility of 'epistemic vulnerability' and regenerative theological praxis is imperative. This stresses that individual transformation and social transformation in the context of post-apartheid cannot be artificially divided. The attempts to hijack subaltern theory and emphasising victimhood by Afrikaner scholars are epistemologically a narrative that reinforces white superiority. The inability of Afrikaner thought to harness victimhood so as to transcend false anthropologies, false theologies and false histories is a prime example of the logic of coloniality.

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