



The Other Battle:

Postcolonialism and *Ressentiment*

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“Once victim, always victim – that’s the law!”

Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*

In *Black Skin, White Masks*,¹ a book now considered a classic of anti-colonial struggle, Franz Fanon diagnosed the process whereby a mix of envy and hatred, resulting from a deep sense of inferiority, wreaks havoc on the black psyche. Enslaved by his/her own self-contempt as much as by a Western master; trying in turn, and equally in vain, to gain access to the oppressor's whiteness or to regain self-confidence by celebrating his/her race, the black subject,² Fanon explains, is despairingly caught in the trap of *ressentiment*.

That was in 1952³, when most of what later came to be known as the “postcolonial world” was either still under the yoke of domination or had just risen to independence. More than half a century later, a long way seems to have been gone towards the recognition of the dark races: the number of colonised countries is insignificant in comparison with Fanon's time; racial segregation in America is now a thing of the past; apartheid has been defeated in South Africa. What has become, meanwhile, of the feeling of weakness and impotence whose dangers were analysed by Fanon? It is on the problem of postcolonial *ressentiment*, which, I think, is widely ignored in current debates, that I would like to focus in this essay. Inasmuch as one avowed task of postcolonialism is to unmask Western discursive strategies of domination, the common tendency to weigh its achievements against its ability to conquer Western tactics of subjection is plausible; nevertheless, it seems to me that postcolonial discourse should also take stock of its gains

¹ Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1993).

² Though Fanon analyses the complex of inferiority in the black individual – mainly in the Antillean – he also often draws analogies between the condition of the latter and that of other oppressed like the Algerian Arabs.

³1952 being the date of the first publication of Fanon's book, under the French title *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*.

and losses in the more challenging battle which opposes it to the combination of spite and hatred that disempowers those for whom it speaks.

More than to Fanon, the word *ressentiment* is an obvious reference to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1887) and to his analyses of the creative drive in the malcontent oppressed. In *The Genealogy of Morality*,⁴ Nietzsche contrasts the masters' self-centered world view, in which "goodness" is synonymous with excellence – that is, with a health, a beauty, a wealth, and a strength that they confidently think they embody – with the equally master-centred "slave" outlook. Coveting their oppressors' power but unable to access their privileges, the "slaves" stifle their envious hostility, which Nietzsche calls precisely *ressentiment*, and create a morality based on compassion, renouncement, and meekness, which reverses the masters' values and, once insidiously instilled in the latter, loads them with guilt and causes them to relinquish power, thus eventually allowing the rise of the weak. This moral schema seems to me analogous to the coloniser/colonised relationship in which, to the former's confident Eurocentrism, the latter opposes a moralising discourse of victimisation and/or self-negation. In such a relation, however, "the rise of the weak" is not the end of the story; as will be developed in the final section of this essay, the discursive strategies of the subaltern are appropriated by the dominator not to atone for, but to act as a cover for his/her domination.

Drawing on Nietzsche's philosophy in a text on the evolution of postcolonial discourse is anything but new; he is one of the Western thinkers who have most inspired postcolonial thinking. While his analyses of Greek tragedy provided a background for

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Wole Soyinka's (1976) readings of African tragic myths⁵ and his healthy-versus-sickly moral dichotomy proved relevant in the medically-oriented discourse of militants like Fanon, his analyses of the interplay between discourse and power, though revolutionary in his own time, are now not only widely accepted by, but indeed central to postcolonial criticism, one of whose chief concerns has traditionally been to unmask the discursive strategies informing (Western) imperialist practices while relying itself on discourse as an empowering weapon.⁶ In taking up the Nietzschean paradigm, so often exploited (either explicitly or implicitly) in postcolonial discourse, this paper distances itself from the trend within this discourse which advocates total enfranchisement from Western structures of thought⁷ and locates the postcolonial disempowerment it discusses elsewhere than in the mere resort to the West's theoretical tools. Rather, it shows it to lie in the move from an effacement imposed by Western domination towards a wilful self-renunciation surprisingly at odds with the avowed claims of postcolonial discourse.

Indeed, what this paper seeks to highlight is that in the evolution of postcolonial discourse from the turn of the twentieth century to the present, the early "lordly" stance, marked by a discourse of pride and self-love, has gradually dwindled in favour of a slave discourse of victimisation, self-effacement, and invisibility. My argument is that if a painful and overwhelming sense of belatedness and inferiority lingers on – and I will give

⁵ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁶ In particular, this Nietzschean perspective is known to underlie, through the mediation of Michel Foucault, Edward Said's 1978 key postcolonial text. See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1995).

⁷ Indeed, as will be illustrated later, the case of such advocates themselves shows the impossibility of such a task.

instances of this persistence – notwithstanding the subaltern's⁸ access to independence and his/her numerous triumphs over Eurocentrism and over the white man's injustices, it is not only because of the effect of the discourse with which s/he has long been indoctrinated by the white dominator, but because these very triumphs, which have been made possible by creative *ressentiment*, have necessitated a wilful adoption of a “slave stance,” hence confining the enslaved races to the state from which they are supposed to have set them free.

My definition of postcolonialism here is similar to, though broader than, that given by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989). I use the word to mean not only “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day,”⁹ but also every discursive attitude in the face of *racial* domination, whether this domination takes the shape of colonisation or not. Afro-American and South African liberation movements and discourses, for example, are integrated into postcolonialism. However, my focus will be solely on postcolonial discourse as voiced by the African, the Afro-American, and the Indian. Not that these groups form a homogeneous whole, of course; however, despite recent critics' accurate observation that the postcolonial colonised/coloniser dichotomy tends to disregard cultural and historical specificities of the widely heterogeneous groups that constitute the

⁸ The term “subaltern” was first used by Antonio Gramsci to refer to “non-hegemonic groups or classes” and has been taken up by Subaltern Studies historians like Sumit Sarkar, Ranajit Guha, and Gayatri Spivak, who focused their research on classes/groups unable to represent themselves such as the peasantry in colonial South Asia. See Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and the Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 96-99. As used in this essay, however, the term is limited to non-hegemonic *racial* groups.

⁹ Bill Ashcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 2005), 2.

former category, the experience of subjection by the West (the White European/American) common to these groups does make them share not only an economic and discursive belatedness, but also identity issues. It is on account of these shared experiences and concerns that Fanon's analyses of the Antillean or North African colonial reality, for instance, can be referred to in the writings of Said; that the latter's discussion of Orientalism can be taken up and expanded upon by Indian scholars like Bhabha and Spivak,¹⁰ thus justifying the convenient though otherwise simplistic West/Rest and white/coloured categories of which this paper makes use.

The Priest, the Poet, and the Tiger

Though the liberation struggle against the Westerner has adopted strategies too numerous and diversified to be covered in this essay, I think it possible to argue that, by and large, such a struggle often takes one of the three following orientations: moralising, idealising, or aggressive. On the two former tendencies often falls the charge of ineffective mildness. The likes of Booker T. Washington and Léopold Sédar Senghor, whom I take to be representatives of the moralising and idealising postures respectively,¹¹ were, and still are, often reproached with the fact that their idyllic preaching was unable to cope with the harsh reality of colonisation and enslavement. A pioneer of Afro-

¹⁰ Spivak, precisely, advocates "strategic essentialism": uniting subalterns' heterogeneous voices into a single one, so as to make themselves better heard. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

¹¹ Other "moralists" were, for instance, Mahatma Gandhi in India and Martin Luther King in the United States, though, of course, the policies adopted by the three leaders showed obvious differences. On the other hand, different romantic idealisations of race, culture, and country as in the Harlem or Irish Renaissance are comparable with Negritude.

American emancipation, Washington had to face severe criticism regarding his excessively compromising stance, his repetitive “strategic” silences regarding the atrocious injustices inflicted on the black (mainly lynching) and an altogether too meek tone when addressing white unfairness;¹² his project to lift up his race from wretchedness and exploitation by forcing the white man’s respect through education, loyalty, hard work, and decent behaviour was thought to place too much naïve faith in the white man’s benevolence and sense of justice.¹³

Similarly, though, instead of the typically bourgeois Western values that Washington advocated, Negritude celebrated what it considered to be the Negro’s inherent features, as much criticism was directed at its leaders in the Caribbean and Africa. Senghor’s oft-quoted affirmation that emotion was black while reason was Greek, hence Western,¹⁴ which went along with the celebration of the Negro’s intuition,¹⁵ sense of rhythm, and pantheistic osmosis with nature,¹⁶ was meant to neutralise racist discourse through a proud love of those very features that the white man despised in the Negro. Nevertheless, Negritude was dismissed by its opponents as precisely too egocentric to intervene effectively to change the lot of the African, whose experience of his Africanness rarely matched the beautiful image given of it by Senghor.¹⁷

¹² Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 54-55.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁴ Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Liberté 1: Négritude et humanisme* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1964), 24.

¹⁵ Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Liberté 3: Négritude et civilisation de l’universel* (Paris : Le Seuil, 1977), 92.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24-26.

¹⁷ Ali Saad El Kenz, “Africanité et universalité de la littérature africaine,” *Passerelles* 41 (Jul. 2009): 57.

Having proved ineffective, the sole merit that is now usually acknowledged for the Negritude movement and for Washington's Strategy of Accommodation is that of pioneering the black race's struggle for recognition. Yet a much greater merit in these "rose water methods"¹⁸ seems to me to lie in that both of them saw beyond the necessity to fight Western abuses. For Washington and Senghor alike, the urgency was to redeem the Negro in his/her own esteem rather than in the oppressor's, alert as they were to the fact that the discontent of those of their race was as much due to the inner contempt they felt for their blackness as to the derogatory image and unfair treatment imposed on them by a racist environment. Significant in this regard is Washington's qualification of antagonists like W. E. B. Du Bois, who called for more radical action, as a "class of coloured people who are ashamed of the race to which they belong and are angry because they are not white people."¹⁹

The argument that Washington's was a "stance of lords" might sound inconsistent, from a Nietzschean perspective at least, given that the meekness and patience on which it laid such a strong emphasis have been identified by Nietzsche as typical of a slave morality. But though the extreme forbearance which characterised it may seem servile, as it often has, it is possible to read it as an awareness of the danger of letting loose black *ressentiment*; of the importance of harnessing it to avoid a total submersion in a feeling that might otherwise lead to not necessarily useful violence and destruction. Not necessarily useful because, as the quotation given above indicates, Washington believed

¹⁸ Milholand, quoted in Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 55. Milholand's comment, however, was directed at Washington alone.

¹⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 57.

that the Negro's *mal-être* did not only stem from the injustices of the white man but from his/her unhappiness with his/her blackness. Washington's willingness to cooperate with, rather than fight, the whites is therefore comparable with the Fanonian assertion that "the black man who wants to turn his race white is as miserable as he who preaches hatred for the whites,"²⁰ as well as with Fanon's mistrust of fervour,²¹ and his appeal to "[his] brother, whether black or white, to tear off [...] the shameful livery put together by centuries of incomprehension."²²

Because he redirects his fellow black people's destructive energy towards work and learning, Washington was a "*direction-changer of ressentiment.*"²³ Like Nietzsche's "ascetic priest," he defended the weak against their own potential for hatred and wickedness and "exploited the bad instincts of [the] sufferers for the purpose of self-discipline, self-surveillance and self-overcoming."²⁴ However, Nietzsche's contemptuous remark that the priest's narcotic methods only fight the *ressentiment* of the weak without attacking the reason behind it – weakness itself²⁵ – does not apply to Washington, whose policy aimed at conquering both the black men's anger and pain and, by encouraging their social ascension, what had provoked such feelings. For the same reason, his insistence on the importance of work is different from the ascetic priest's encouragement of mechanical activity as a way of deflecting the weak from their pain.²⁶

²⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 11.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 14.

²³ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 93. Nietzsche's italics.

²⁴ Ibid., 94.

²⁵ Ibid., 99.

²⁶ Ibid.

The “lordly” bent in Negritude is perhaps less difficult to detect. Senghor defined Negritude as “*nothing but a will to be oneself to reach fulfilment*”²⁷ and defended the choice of the word as one which was meant to reflect pride in blackness: “Even we, in our Negro-African languages, perceive and refer to ourselves as [black] without shame, and even with a touch of pride.”²⁸ The very message at the core of Negritude, which, simply put, is something like “this is what we are, and it is beautiful, regardless of how those who are not us look at it,” echoes Nietzsche’s description of the masters’ method of valuation, which “seek[s] out its opposite only so that it can say “yes” to itself even more thankfully and exultantly.”²⁹ It is this being a “yes” to itself rather than a “no” to the whiteness of the Other, or even to his power, which makes Negritude a seigneurial stance, and it is in this that Negritude resembles Booker T. Washington’s policy. Priding oneself on one’s strength rather than reproaching the white man with his own; settling scores with oneself and setting to action; in this these philosophies agree, thus proving able to take their distance from the attitudes of lament and ruminating anger that Nietzsche saw as characteristic of “slaves.”³⁰

Ironically, though, it is these policies’ excessively marked focus on the necessity of overcoming *ressentiment* that has nurtured this latter feeling as well as quickened their failure. The too numerous concessions which were dictated by Washington’s eagerness to neutralise the anger of the ill-treated blacks eventually themselves fuelled discontent –

²⁷“*rien d’autre qu’une volonté d’être soi-même pour s’épanouir.*” Senghor, *Liberté* 3, 91. Senghor’s emphasis, my translation.

²⁸ “*nous-mêmes, dans nos langues négro-africaines, nous nous voyons et nous appelons comme [noirs], sans honte et même avec une pointe de fierté.*” Ibid., 272. My translation.

²⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 20.

³⁰ Ibid., 90-91.

the very *ressentiment* which was his chief target. Negritude, for its part, was soon attacked as symptomatic of a deep complex of inferiority. While Anglophone Africans like Wole Soyinka faulted it for its obsequiousness towards French language and culture³¹ and its dependence on European intellectual categories,³² others, like the South African Ezekiel Mphahlele, called it a concept of “self-enslavement” and “auto-colonisation.”³³ Eventually rejected by the blacks themselves, the attempts of Negritude to sublimate the black man’s sense of inferiority met with as little success as those of the Strategy of Accommodation to harness the wicked feeling.

With a contemptuous charge of inadequacy, these two methods were ousted by much more violent strategies of resistance. That the stances of leaders like those of the Black Power movement in the USA and what I will henceforward call “tigritude”³⁴ in black Africa were far more radical needs no further evidence than the bloodcurdling rhetoric of a Malcolm X whose contempt for nonviolence went so far as predicting massive bloodshed and a “day of slaughter for the sinful white world.”³⁵ The emergence of such an extreme form of protest roughly coincided with that of movements for independence in Africa and Asia – by which Malcolm X was indeed very much influenced³⁶ – which in their turn were accompanied in the fields of politics and culture

³¹ El Kenz, “Africanité et universalité,” 58.

³² Aschcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back*, 20.

³³ Quoted. in Addison Gayle Jr., “Under Western Eyes,” *Black World/Negro Digest* 22, no. 9 (1973): 43.

³⁴ I use the word here to refer not only to Wole Soyinka’s oft-quoted aphorism, “the tiger does not boast its tigritude, it pounces,” but also to every manifestation of radical opposition to white domination, whether it manifests itself through armed struggle or through discursive advocacy of thorough decolonisation and rejection of all forms of Western influence.

³⁵ Quoted. in Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 308.

³⁶ Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 307-308.

by a Manichean discourse that unambiguously pointed to the white man as the cause of both the African's social destitution and his cultural depersonalisation, and which aimed at nothing less than total decolonisation.

The chief difference between the radical black leaders and their predecessors is that instead of seeking ways of transcending *ressentiment* (or hiding it, as they would probably have preferred to call it), they saw in voicing it a more effective method of management. From a Nietzschean perspective, this is, at least, certainly a healthier way, healthiness being in *The Genealogy of Morality* associated with the masters' attitude, and sickness with the slaves'. Nietzsche argues that though a "lord," being so confident in his superiority, rarely experiences such a feeling as *ressentiment*, his impulse, should he suffer it, would be to exteriorise it immediately.³⁷ The fear that all too often prevents slavish natures from voicing their discontent has no such crippling effect on the "lord," as it is not reason but passion, that mark of nobility of soul, which rules the noble man's reaction. The passionate drive in the "lord" is thus prompt to chase the unhealthy feeling away, and a serene confidence is soon resumed.³⁸

The problem in the case of black violence is that *it did not*, as in the case of Nietzsche's lord, abate black *ressentiment*, for the simple reason that the black man was *not* in the position of power which makes such quick abatement possible. While in the case of the lord the expression of *ressentiment* has no more than a cathartic function and is thus an end in itself, the revolted subaltern needs to feed the painful feeling if s/he wants to prevent his/her protest and demands for change from waning. As long as the

³⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 22.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

white man's subjugation persisted, radical action was condemned to nurture the feeling of hatred and rancour if it was not to return to what it had criticised as ineffective mildness – a mildness which, as we have seen, had much to do precisely with the wish to conquer *ressentiment*. The black subject, and more broadly the “subaltern,” has to keep the role of the humiliated Caliban (or a female version of it), as the recurrent metaphor goes, if his/her curses at white Prospero are to be legitimised; but in so doing s/he shows complaisance towards his/her victim-status. After all, putting aside the fact that he is a white man's exploited servant, Caliban is many things at once in Shakespeare's play: the cursing ugly savage, the sturdy and productive hard worker, and the author of melodious poetry. It is not without significance that the radical leaders focused only on the cursing exploited savage and missed the positive images – those of the healthy worker and of the aesthete-poet that Booker T. Washington and Léopold Sédar Senghor respectively saw.

Enter the Scholars

Postcolonial discourse started to turn its back on the oppositional outlook of radical protest in the 1980s, when what might be called “academic postcolonialism” began to dismiss Manicheism as typically Western and, still more often, as being at odds with postcolonial reality.³⁹ Indeed, opposing the Rest to the West stumbles over the fact that the former, in its attitudes, discourse, and culture, irreversibly bears the trace of its subordination to the latter. Whether this takes the shape of borrowing its theoretical tools,

³⁹ Although, despite its claims to denounce Western Manicheism, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the publication of which in 1978 is commonly thought to have inaugurated the entry of postcolonialism in academia, is itself Manichean as critics like Ahmad Aijaz have noted. Aijaz, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992; reprint London and New York: Verso, 1994), 183.

quoting from its literary classics, using its languages, or simply dressing after its fashion, the trace can simply not be erased. One glaring contradiction in the advocates of thorough decolonisation and radical opposition to the West is indeed that they were themselves more or less heavily indebted to what they claimed to reject so uncompromisingly. Eloquent in this sense are the examples of the Kenyan writer N’Gugi Wa Thiong’o⁴⁰ and, ironically, of the coiner of the word “tigrityde,” Wole Soyinka, himself, whom the radical *bolekaja*⁴¹ criticism of Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike attacked for “imported imagery,” “divorce from African oral tradition,” and “lifeless attempts at revivalism.”⁴² Contradictions of this kind gave “academic postcolonialism” a solid argument for rejecting the former discourse of opposition in favour of so-called new forms of resistance. Hybridity, contagion, and invisibility are now lauded as more effective than traditional Manicheism and as more creative in that they are different from the white dominator’s strategies.

It is, of course, to Homi K. Bhabha (1994) that we owe the most intensive analysis of the positive role played by hybridity in postcolonial resistance. His celebration of cultural in-betweenness rests on the hard-to-refute arguments that cultures are eternal building-sites rather than static entities inherited in a state of unaltered purity from a mythical past⁴³ and that the hybrid’s “incalculability” thwarts all projects of effective domination because it slips the Western dominator’s knowledge and, in consequence,

⁴⁰ Ngugi’s plea for total decolonisation is mocked by the persistence of Western influence on him, an influence made obvious in the novelistic form which he kept despite his rejection of English in favour of his local dialect, as well as in the Marxist paradigm that supported his stance.

⁴¹ Literally “come down and fight.” Aschcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back*, 127.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2006), 50.

control, by blurring the frontier between the categories into which this dominator is wont to divide the world.⁴⁴ To these plausible arguments, it might be added, with more relevance to this essay, that hybridity's subversive tearing apart of dichotomies like white-versus-black or, more broadly, West-versus-Rest bears the promise of being *ressentiment*-neutralising, since doing so displaces the non-Westerner from his/her status of a weak victim while also delivering the Westerner from the guilt that exposes him/her to the "slave's" hostility. Instead of the traditional dialectical master-slave schema, what hybridity proposes is a constant negotiation of one's identity through contact with the Other.

The problem with the Bhabhaian concept is that it erases neither power relations nor oppositional (self-)definitions. An inherent feature in culture, hybridity is nothing new; it is as old as Manichean definitions of Self and Other, which it prevented no more than it did slavery, imperialism or racist discourse. As two instances of hybridity, going native or conceiving half-breed children (as a result of intercourse with natives) are typical in such practices as imperialism and slave-owning, and have all too often gone together with racist/imperialist discourse. In the world of the 21st century, such practices seem to be a thing of the past and hybridity has never been so celebrated by official (media and academic) discourse; yet this age, where the over-used concept of globalisation⁴⁵ itself sounds as the blurring of frontiers so dear to Bhabha, is as much shaped by power

⁴⁴ Ibid., 162-166.

⁴⁵ "Globalisation" is used in this essay to refer both to an economic order marked by international trade and production networks and the accelerated world-wide circulation of people, (industrial or cultural) goods, ideas, and information made possible by technological progress. For more on this concept, see George Ritzer, *The Blackwell Companion to Globalization* (Malden: Blackwell, 2007).

relations as that of centuries marked by a more essentialist discourse on culture. Critics like Ali Behdad and James Ferguson are therefore right to point out the illusory character of the argument that globalisation dismantles hierarchies.⁴⁶ What hybridity means in a world with an unbalanced distribution of power is giving worldwide circulation to the ideology, world view, and cultural practices of the powerful, and offering the “Rest,” with veiled condescension, the “consolation prize” of seeing the whites listen to jazz or rap and eat fajitas, couscous, and tandoori chicken.

Stanley Fish has termed “boutique multiculturalism” to describe this willingness to welcome the superficial aspects of cultures other than one’s own while rejecting the central and more consequential aspects, which include, for example, ideologies and religious practices that are at odds with, or seem repellent to, one’s own values and outlook.⁴⁷ But according to Fish, even strong multiculturalism – that which claims to be so tolerant as to accept even those world visions that most clash with the West’s – finally withdraws in the face of the Other’s intolerance, which, if accepted, would be in contradiction with the very principle of tolerance supposed to underpin strong multiculturalism.⁴⁸

Fish’s explanation of the limits of multiculturalism, boutique or otherwise, is concerned with highlighting the “uniculturalist,” hence conservative, bent in *all* cultures,

⁴⁶ Ali Behdad, “On Globalization, Again!,” in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, eds. Ania Loomba et al. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 76; and James Ferguson, “Decomposing Modernity,” in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, eds. Ania Loomba et al. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 177-179.

⁴⁷ Stanley Fish, “Boutique Multiculturalism or Why Liberals are Incapable of Thinking of Hate Speech,” *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 2 (1997): 378.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 382-384.

which tend to tolerate the presence of other cultures rather than to express a readiness to assimilate those of their features that matter the most. In Bhabhaian terms, what is in force today is “cultural diversity,” a sort of relativism which admits that manifestations of culture other than one’s own are possible, rather than “cultural difference,” which, in viewing cultural identity as an endless process of renegotiation, ought logically to accept to redefine one’s culture (which, of course, involves one’s system of values and world view) through contact with the Other⁴⁹. For all its pertinence, though, Fish’s analysis looks solely from the angle of the West. Obviously, the standpoint of cultural difference makes more sense for the “subaltern,” who indeed sees his/her culture being constantly redefined under the influence of the powerful white Other. The latter, meanwhile, seems more immune to such a process of change and is more inclined to “uniculturalism,” confident as s/he is in detaining the “right” values, the “right” conception of the world. In such a context, preaching hybridity is not far from preaching self-effacement. Bhabha’s analysis of the evolution of culture might be sound, but such analysis is, or ought to be, more descriptive than prescriptive. Hybridity is an undeniable feature of the postcolonial world that has to be coped with; but as a strategy of resistance, the persistence of unbalanced power relations despite the discursive valorisation it currently enjoys point to its limits.

One way of coping with hybridity despite the subaltern’s position of powerlessness might be what James Snead (1990) has called “contagion.” Snead uses this term to refer to the way the non-Western world spreads its “knowledge” through sheer contact

⁴⁹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 49-53.

between people, in opposition to the West's tendency to subdue the world, through constant overthrows or undermining, to its culture, a tendency which often manifests itself as a *collection* of people, texts, nations under one canon, one empire, one ruler – the West, of course – and exclusion of everything that is not Western⁵⁰. Snead argues that contagion has in many instances got the better of the West, so that “even as they tried to collect ever newer local cultures and races, dominant powers found themselves caught up in the contagion they tried to put down.”⁵¹

The major difference between “contagion” and “collection” is, in short, that the latter, following the Western logic of verticality, imposes its knowledge, while the former causes it to be “caught” unawares – much as one catches a disease, as the very word “contagion” suggests⁵². What Snead implicitly praises as a method that is free from greed for power in fact seems to me a method that does *not* have the advantage of power. Contagion, in other words, is another strategy of the weak; it acts by stealth, as what Nietzsche calls “slaves” are wont to. In this, it is like another of Bhabha's key concepts – invisibility. Bhabha explains that invisibility is an effective strategy for the oppressed in that it is a shield from the necessarily distorting and condescending gaze of the dominator. To the “I” of the latter, which, in negating his/her own identity, s/he alienates

⁵⁰ James Snead, “European Pedigrees / African Contagions: Nationality, Narrative, and Communitarity in Tutuola, Achebe, and Reed,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 244.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁵² Though Snead, anticipating such an analogy, takes care to add the adjective “benevolent” to qualify his term and insists that the contagion he is speaking of is not one of disease but of “a shared awareness of a shared energy.” Snead, “European Pedigrees / African Contagions,” 245.

by thwarting its will to look, the subaltern opposes his/her “evil,” critical *Eye*.⁵³ However, invisibility is like playing dead – an insect’s trick to which Nietzsche has compared slave strategies⁵⁴ – and singing its praises sounds like singing the praises of one’s weakness and is once again reminiscent of Nietzsche’s parody of the slaves: “We weak people are just weak; it is good to do nothing *for which we are not strong enough*.”⁵⁵

Invisibility and contagion are the strategies that the weak can afford, as is the strategy analysed by Henri Louis Gates Jr. (1988), another prominent figure of “academic postcolonialism.” In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates seeks to demonstrate the existence of a black literary tradition in which the central metaphor is the “Signifying Monkey,” a mythical trickster.⁵⁶ Signifying and (linguistic) trickery are precisely “the discrete black difference”;⁵⁷ the features which, according to Gates, distinguish black writers from white ones. Gates’s stance is ambiguous in that while he does celebrate the existence of a separate black (literary) identity,⁵⁸ he identifies self-effacement through cunning as the central feature of this identity: what defines the black subject, represented by the Monkey in Gates’s study, is his/her inability to affirm himself/herself and his/her constant hiding

⁵³ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 66-76.

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 27.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Nietzsche’s emphasis.

⁵⁶ Who, as such, opposes guile to strength. Recurrent in the black oral tradition, one of his stories goes as follows: to escape the anger of the lion, whom he insulted, he claims with feigned nonchalance that the insults are not his and that he has merely repeated what he has heard the elephant say. Rushing, in his fury, to challenge the latter, the lion is quickly trounced. Henri Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: a Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 55-56.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

⁵⁸ A task somewhat analogous to Negritude’s attempt to define the intrinsic traits of the black “soul.”

behind/self-humbling before the powerful⁵⁹. Whether such representations can raise the subaltern's (here, the black subject's) self-esteem is very doubtful.

Another form of self-negation is the stance chosen by Anthony Appiah, another scholar who, in claiming that there is no such a thing as race⁶⁰ and faulting W. E. B. Du Bois for having constructed his whole policy on this fake notion, comes very close to a denial of what Fanon called the "fact of blackness."⁶¹ It is ironical that Washington's comment (cited above) on those who are unhappy with their blackness, which was initially directed against Du Bois, should apply so well to Du Bois's critic Appiah.

Arguably, invisibility and cunning have traditionally been the weapons of those incapable of open confrontation; but though they might be clever ways of slipping or going round the oppressor's domination, it is very doubtful that they can allow the oppressed to rise above their victim-status. They are, in other words, strategies for survival under an otherwise unbearable domination rather than for actual empowerment. But, it might be objected, is it not a sign of empowerment that the white man has come to appreciate "subaltern music" or relish "subaltern food"? Is this not in itself a victory over Western arrogance, which used to look down on all aspects of non-white communities' lifestyle? Perhaps. But such a stance, I think, would justify the phrase "consolation

⁵⁹ The elephant and the lion, respectively, in the Signifying Monkey myth. Perhaps it is worth noting here that, having rejoiced for a while at his victory over the lion, Gates's Monkey quickly turns to tearful apologies as he senses the menace of the powerful animal's wrath. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 57.

⁶⁰ Appiah, Anthony "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986). More exactly, what Appiah explains is the absence of a scientific definition of race, which, for him, is reducible to a number of gross physical features. One wonders about the usefulness of such an argument (widely taken up today), when it is in the name of the concept that Appiah rejects that many injustices are precisely inflicted.

⁶¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109.

prize,” which I have used above, as well as betoken a persistence of the deep-rooted inferiority complex that non-white races have carried as a burden ever since their first subjugation by the Westerner. The white man does not feel particularly proud of the fact that the overwhelming majority of the human population dresses after his fashion or speaks at least one of his languages; that they should do so goes (for him) without saying. That the subaltern’s modest contribution in hybridising the whites should give rise to so much enthusiasm says much about the important role that the West is still playing in feeding or bringing down his/her self-esteem.

Again, it may be objected that if what matters is constructing a positive image of oneself and killing the torturing hatred that rises from one’s sense of inferiority, then the subaltern’s satisfaction with his/her role, no matter how secondary, is at any rate at odds with anything resembling *ressentiment*. If the non-Westerner is happy with his/her lot and, rightly or wrongly, confident that s/he is playing an active role in the evolution of the world’s map (the cultural one, at least) and that the domination under which s/he used to writhe has nearly passed, would insisting on showing him/her the contrary, on feeding the *ressentiment* from which s/he seems to have freed himself/herself, not itself be a manifestation of *ressentiment*, if not of malevolence? Such arguments might be valid if a great number of the subalterns of the world were not actually fully aware of its characterising imbalance in power and of the illusory abolition of categories that marks contemporary discourse and undermines the seemingly positive word “globalisation.” *Ressentiment* is therefore far from having left the subaltern; no proof of this is better than the resurgence of extreme forms of opposition to the Western world – principally Islamist

terrorism. In turn, this is often used as a pretext to promote a Western oppositional discourse of intolerance. So here we go again – back to Manichean hostility.

Whither Now?

This essay has attempted to show that twentieth (and early twenty-first) century postcolonial struggle, starting from Booker T. Washington to the present, has always failed to cope with the problem of *ressentiment*, though the pioneers seem to have been more alert to it and to have deployed greater efforts, no matter how awkward, to overcoming it. Academic postcolonialism has the merit of denouncing the discursive fallacies of Eurocentrism, securing the dominated races a voice, and, let it be said *en passant*, offering to many of their members easier access to university chairs⁶²; but it has also taken a pathological delight in highlighting, and perpetuating, the subordination of those it claims to set free. Because of the “slave strategies” it deploys, and regardless of how effective it has proved in neutralising Western invectives and discriminations, it falls short of empowering the postcolonial subject. The celebration of strategies like cunning, invisibility, and other forms of self-effacement as typically subaltern can only comfort

⁶² A somewhat similar charge has been levied at Said’s *Orientalism* by critics like Aijaz Ahmed, who has argued that Eastern immigrants have found Said’s “narrative of oppression” useful in securing for themselves preferential treatment in Western countries. Aijaz, *In Theory*, 196-197. The proliferation of postcolonial studies chairs in Western academia is perhaps in itself a manifestation of the West’s recuperation of postcolonial discourse.

the postcolonial subject in an already all too well-encrusted sense of weakness,⁶³ as shown by the postcolonial subject's over-sensitivity.⁶⁴

In the lament over the insults and injustices of which the subaltern is (supposed to be) a victim, the Westerner, interestingly, very willingly takes part.⁶⁵ Is it that, following the process analysed by Nietzsche, the "slave morality" has mollified the "master" and awakened his/her compassion? Or is it rather that the eternal dominator has found in the very weapons of his/her weak victims a convenient way of maintaining them in their weakness? "Modern" postcolonial methods are doomed to inefficacy not only because they are based on self-negation, thus continuing the long process started by the coloniser, but also because colonialism is, to appropriate Behdad's phrase, "in a continual process of transformation and restructuration that ensures [...] its [...] hegemony"⁶⁶ and is thus quick to absorb the subaltern's tactics and recuperate them to its advantage. In *The Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche associates the rhetoric of "fine sentiments" with weakness, and as such, with the disempowered alone; in the (post)colonial reality, however, such rhetoric is all too often utilised by the dominators to disguise their exercise

⁶³ In this connection, Fanon relates the Antillean's pronounced feeling of inferiority to the fact that his/her rights have been received as a "gift" from a magnanimous West rather than fought for. *Black Skin, White Masks*.

⁶⁴ An example of this fragility is the fact, noted once again by Fish, that derogatory words used to refer to minorities are catalogued as politically incorrect, while no less pejorative words, like "honky" or "redneck," directed at the whites, are assumed to be harmless. Fish, "Boutique Multiculturalism," 382.

⁶⁵ Examples are the promptness of the British press to detect racism in Prince Harry's use of the word "Paki" to describe a military colleague, or, much more absurdly, in Prince Charles calling, not without affection, his Indian friend Kolin Dhillon "Sooty."

⁶⁶ Ali Behdad, *Belated Travellers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 137. To be precise, Behdad's phrase is about Orientalism rather than about colonialism as such.

of power as an enlightening mission of some sort or another. Today, the celebration of equality, the “tabooing” of terms like “race,”⁶⁷ and the (seeming) overall abolition of cultural distance prevent neither racist discriminations nor suspicion towards unfamiliar “barbaric” or “immoral” cultural practices.

It is therefore perhaps time to deflect postcolonial discourse from the fundamentally moral (and, as such, hardly academic!) perspective of condemnation from which it tends to approach power to one which acknowledges the latter as central to human relations and seeks not to transcend it,⁶⁸ but to attain it; which, in turn, is the only way of overcoming *ressentiment*.⁶⁹ It is this task that the precursors of postcolonial discourse discussed in the first part of this paper have, in different ways, undertaken; and because empowerment implies both socio-economic advance and inner confidence – the two being often intertwined – Senghor’s celebration of self-affirmation and Washington’s emphasis on individual achievement are, despite the validity of the critiques directed against Negritude and the Strategy of Accommodation, not altogether obsolete.

⁶⁷ The following is an example: on November 13th, 2008, French journalist Eric Zemmour caused a stir by simply declaring on a TV programme (on the Franco-German channel *Arte*) that there was such a thing as human races, a declaration from which *Arte* hastened to distance itself. Zemmour’s controversial intervention can be accessed online at <http://www.acrimed.org/article3003.html> ; the full programme is available at <http://www.arte.tv/fr/accueil/Comprendre-le-monde/paris-berlin/paris-berlin/-Demain-tous-metis-/2324634.html>.

⁶⁸ Or to strategically claim to. If a genuine attempt to erase power relations is utopian, resorting to such a utopian discourse as a strategy of empowerment proves ineffective, since, as has been argued, it is in turn quickly recuperated by the dominator to his advantage.

⁶⁹ From the Nietzschean perspective from which this essay has been written, the only remedy against *ressentiment* is first, to rise to power and, second, to enjoy this power for a long enough time to forget, or not to mind, one’s former weakness. Nietzsche makes no such plain statement, but he obviously associates aristocratic self-confidence with long-held power in *The Genealogy of Morality*, as in most of his other writings.

The imperative of reflecting on postcolonial economic dependence in today's globalised world, often disregarded in the context of postcolonial focus either on cultural identity or national histories, has recently started to be signalled by critics like Aijaz and Spivak. But while these two authors correctly point out that the structures of economic power are more relevant to the postcolonial masses than the traditional postcolonial concerns⁷⁰, their arguments, too, are articulated on an ethical, denunciative mode, failing to provide a useful (empowering) postcolonial approach to economics, which, as Eiman Zein-Elabdin observes, still widely ignores postcolonial comments.⁷¹ One of the tasks of postcolonialism is therefore to discuss the possibilities of economic empowerment for the postcolonial world. Of course, this will not avoid a number of dilemmas⁷² and should be envisaged as a long-term challenge.

Meanwhile, a less arduous task would be revising the postcolonial approach to the subaltern's history. Besides the traditional indictments directed at the "coloniser-villain," a less passionate reflection on the experience of colonisation is perhaps one that would focus upon the enabling conditions of such an experience, the subaltern's intervention in it and the implications of his/her possible silences or complicity as well as resistance,

⁷⁰ On these two authors' critiques of postcolonialism, see Aijaz, *In theory*, and Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); for a more general discussion of postcolonialism and economy, see Eiman O. Zein-Elabdin, and S. Charusheela eds., *Postcolonialism Meets Economics (Economics as Social Theory)* (London : Routledge, 2004).

⁷¹ Zein-Elabdin, "Articulating the Postcolonial (With Economics in Mind)," *Postcolonialism Meets Economics*, 21.

⁷² One of which relates to the degree of interconnectedness between economic progress/belatedness and culture, as Zein-Elabdin argues. "Articulating the Postcolonial," 28. Does postcolonial backwardness relate to some cultural features? If yes, to what extent, if at all, should these be given up in favour of the triumphant liberalism?

whether flawed or efficient. If, because the dominator cannot be expected simply to renounce power in a magnanimous gesture,⁷³ only such a contextualised assessment of one's past successes and defections can help shape an adequate strategy of empowerment, it also makes it possible to transcend both self-idealisation (Negritude's chief defect) and self-deprecation. Indeed, while the history of the subaltern is one of long subjection and imperfect resistance, it is also one of successful ambitions, valiant confrontations, and charismatic leaders. It is such figures, not a gesticulating monkey, who can enhance the self-love and healthy pride that postcolonialism ought to promote.

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⁷³ And because his doing so would not be of much help to the subaltern's self-image, anyway.

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