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Kiasha Naidoo

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# Between racial madness and neoliberal reason: metonymic contagion in apartheid biopower

Kiasha Naidoo 

Centre for Humanities Research and Department of Philosophy, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa

## ABSTRACT

I will seek to consider the simultaneous workings of race and capital in apartheid biopower. J.M. Coetzee offers a reading of apartheid racism as racial madness which is imbricated with economic reason. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have witnessed instances of the biopolitical making live and letting die. The Strandfontein homeless camp set up just outside Cape Town in 2020 is an instantiation of a particular normative order, wherein contagion was used to justify the movement of black, homeless people outside of the city's *cordon sanitaire*. This is resonant of apartheid racial segregation in which the fear of race mixing is sometimes described in terms of contagion where whiteness represents that which is pure while blackness that which is dirty and infectious. Despite this desire for racial separation, apartheid biopower depends on exploitable black labour to sustain white domination. The figurative work of racial contagion is then undercut when the black worker is to be present and available in white areas to work. Neoliberal modes of power inherit the dual work of race and contagion in apartheid when the poor and black are let to die.

## KEYWORDS

Race; apartheid; neoliberalism; contagion; spatial segregation; biopolitics

## Introduction

Situations of pandemic and viral disease make for interesting studies in the humanities and social sciences because they call for direct and specific action from governing bodies. In turn, we are then given a set of responses from which we can glean something about power and its mechanisms. The nature of top-down responses to contagion, which intervenes at the level of social interaction, means that it lends itself readily for figurative use in describing social relations, in one way or another. The metaphor of contagion finds particular resonance in relation to race and racism due to the reification of race which occurs in situations of urban segregation, often as a result of some instance of actual contagion. What this indicates is that, when we abstract away from particular instances of contagion, we can consider the uses contagion as a part in a conceptually complex justificatory order. These links between contagion and racism are especially clear in analyses of spatial separation in South Africa before, during and after apartheid. This is particularly so in Cape Town, the former Cape Colony, which is the site of two events of contagion that will animate my ultimately conceptual discussion: an outbreak of the

bubonic plague in the Cape Colony in 1901 and the COVID-19 pandemic in Cape Town in 2020. The 120-year interval between these outbreaks was punctuated by formalised apartheid segregation, in which the figurative use of contagion finds expression in racial dynamics, those considered by J.M. Coetzee, the prolific South African author and scholar. Coetzee's astute reading of Geoffrey Cronjé, which will appear alongside this text, remarks on contagion situated in a broader project of writing what he calls Cronjé's "racial madness" into apartheid history.

Exploring the role of contagion in explaining this racial madness, as Coetzee points out, comes up against explanatory limits when faced with the economic aspect of apartheid which depends on black labour. Like Ross Truscott (2013, 538) in his writing on Coetzee's paper, I too seek to "trouble the strict division between an economic investment and libidinal investment." It is noted by Coetzee and others who consider race and class in South Africa (see Posel 1983; Maylam 1995), which in this context, racism and the unequal distribution of wealth should be examined not in terms of which carries more explanatory weight but as jointly operationalised forms of oppression, the nature of which warrants consideration and reconsideration. Premesh Lalu has argued that while British colonialism was premised on ideological racism, there is a shift "to the biopolitics of race in the governmentality of apartheid" (Lalu 2015, 446), an insight which frames my discussion. Where ideological racism finds its justification in race-science, eugenics and Social Darwinism, the architects of apartheid did not afford purchase to this basis for race. While the blood-purity idea was carried through in the idea of the *volk*, key apartheid architect Hendrik Verwoerd, a trained sociologist, justified apartheid in terms of separate *social* destinies.

Heeding the validity of this insight leads us to ask about the interaction between racial madness and economic reason in apartheid biopolitics and its remnants in neoliberal South Africa. With Agamben (2005) we can consider the way states of exception, such as epidemics and pandemics, allow decision-makers to push the bounds of what is considered acceptable action even when the crisis is in the distant past. I will consider these effects through an instance of what Foucault (1979) calls *the plague town*, the homeless camp set up in Strandfontein in 2020.

## The Strandfontein homeless camp

In the midst of the first wave of COVID-19 infections in South Africa, during which the national government mandated lockdowns, constraining people to their homes, local and provincial governing bodies were faced with a dilemma: what is to be done about those without homes? The COVID-19 homeless shelter provided by the City of Cape Town, set up in Strandfontein, just outside of central Cape Town, sought to address this problem of the homeless. The shelter was a temporary set-up, and homeless people from all over the city were rounded up and bussed off to Strandfontein where they were expected to remain during the lockdown (Kiewit 2020). An initial, important question raised was why the homeless were moved *out* of the city, to its margins, rather than making arrangements *in* it. This response to the black and poor in Cape Town during a crisis of viral infection mirrors aspects of urban segregation deployed in the Cape Colony during the bubonic plague in 1901, suggesting that there may be some justificatory reason similar to both this event and the COVID-19

pandemic, despite them occurring almost 120 years apart. Swanson (1977) helps to build a conceptual apparatus to describe the urban segregation of the Cape Colony during an outbreak of the bubonic plague in 1901. The study of urban segregation in Cape Town is typically rigorously articulated in geographical and historical grammar. While I will not delve into this here, there are substantive studies of the association between geography and practices of racialisation and segregation. Pinto de Almeida (2015, 2022), for example, describes the relation of race and place in Cape Town, by attending to how the mode of interiority comes to be constituted. I will focus here on the abstraction of a logic of contagion as a way of understanding something of this interiority and, in turn, the logic of relegation to marginality. As per Swanson's (1977) *sanitation syndrome*, contagion functions as the justificatory logic by which black people were removed from white areas of "the town" – that is, any given town's imagined *cordon sanitaire*: spatial restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of infection. Being couched in medical concerns and language, the supposed unclean living conditions of black people in slums around the city served as a (pseudo-)scientific-rational guise for enforcing spatial racial separation, which was in fact a consequence of nothing other than ideological racism (Lalu 2015) in the Cape Colony. The set-up of the shelter in Strandfontein in 2020 has an eerie similarity to the removal of black people in 1901 despite the apartheid-driven shift to biopolitical racism, focused on (black) blood and racial mixing.

The Strandfontein shelter itself garnered attention from social activists in the light of reports expressing concern over the unsafe set-up of the camp, the protection of human rights and especially the safety of women, a worry raised by the Women's Legal Centre (2020). The worries were exacerbated when independent monitors from the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC 2021) were initially denied access to monitor ongoings. While they were eventually given access after a court ruling (SAHRC 2021), it is disturbing that the City was to be found *opposing* independent monitoring – one of the few ways in which the homeless in these shelters were able to communicate wrongdoings committed against them, including being forced to remain in unsafe or unsanitary conditions. The resistance to monitoring caused outcry perhaps not only because of potential abuses of power but also because of the biopolitical reasoning, which makes it clear that those in the camp, the homeless (who are also black), are dealt with as though they are disposable. It is important to note that the journalistic outcry is about two things at once. The first is explicit: that biopolitics is at work in this particular camp. The second is that biopolitics is not *only* at work in this camp but is at work on a much larger scale. This is what I am interested in. The camp will then be threaded through this paper, not as an example, but as an instantiation of the convergences of power (working in a similar way as with Foucault's *plague town*) which I will begin to describe shortly.

Short of being merely "controversial," the Strandfontein camp marks a culmination of the mutual functioning of neoliberal reason and the madness of racism couched in the metaphor of contagion. While its uses come and go, in the throes of global pandemic in 2020, we are called upon once again to consider the metaphor of contagion and make clear its explanatory limits, particularly with regard to race. Coetzee (1991) alerts us to the use of this metaphor in the racial thinking behind apartheid.

## The mind of apartheid: an iteration of race and conceptual context

In Coetzee's "The mind of apartheid: Geoffrey Cronjé (1907-)" published in 1991, he considers the rationalisations of apartheid-era urban segregation through the writings of Geoffrey Cronjé, a pivotal figure in Afrikaner Nationalist circles in 1940s South Africa. As described by Coetzee (1991, 4), Cronjé "represented the pro-Nazi Pan-Dutch Studentebond in the breakaway from the National Union of the South African Students in 1933 and helped found the Afrikaanse Nasionale Studentebond." In his reading of madness into apartheid history, Coetzee gleans meaning from the margins of Cronjé's writings, considering what is left unsaid and picking up on the moments which reveal the madness of Cronjé's ideas of race and the spread of this madness throughout racist South African society during apartheid. Cronjé's ideas reveal an obsession with race – what Coetzee describes in terms of desire and the repression of desire (1991) in relation to so-called race mixing/miscegenation.

Although not central in his thematic analysis of Cronjé's writings, Coetzee turns, for a moment, to a consideration of race in terms of the metaphor of contagion. He explains this device of figurative contagion as put to work in racism, which, as he argues, is indicative of a neurotic obsession with (preventing) miscegenation. Coetzee draws on Swanson's *sanitation syndrome* (1977), explaining that the apartheid thinking of race in epidemiological terms was deployed to justify the codification of separation and the general social-apartness characteristic of apartheid practice in urban areas. This epidemiological-racial justificatory order used during apartheid and later in setting up the Strandfontein homeless camp can be thought of, à la Swanson, as an import from the segregation playbook of the Cape Colony. Sanitation syndrome explains the conceptual deployment of contagion for these extreme instantiations of race insofar as it involves the relegation of black people to the margins of South African social, political and economic life.

Urban segregation under apartheid is thus resonant of a quarantine-like, forced separation in the name of protecting whiteness from being dirtied by blackness. Blackness, associated with infection, would be prevented from "dirtying" or "blackening" the cleanliness and purity of white areas and, consequently, of dirtying and infecting white people. Coetzee explains that this is the way in which sanitation syndrome comes to function in the racism of apartheid segregation. He states, however, that rather than a *metaphor* of contagion, it is in a gesture of *metonymy* that the virus goes from being something which the black person carries, to being that which is inherent in blackness itself. While metaphor is "a shift from one term to another because the two are in some sense equivalent," contagion works as metonymy, "a slide of meaning from one thing to the next because the two are adjacent" (Coetzee 1991, 26), the two adjacent things being race (black essence/blood) and contagion (viral infection). That is, in this iteration of biopolitical race thinking, black blood comes to stand for contagion. While the ideological racism of the Cape Colony may have used contagion in a metaphorical sense, comparing strategies of contagion management to strategies of race segregation, it is in the biopolitical order of apartheid wherein it comes to function as metonymy.<sup>1</sup> Following Coetzee's ideas, I will consider two aspects of contagion at work in this metonymic sense: as used in biopolitical governmentality and as racism and a madness about *mixing*.

## Biopower and blood

The operationalisation of race as a device of stratification, for Foucault, is a new expression of power: biopower, described in *The history of sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction* (1978). Foucault explains the difference between prior forms of power and biopower. The exercise of sovereign power (of the King and thus the sword) constitutes the right to kill or put to death (or refrain from killing); this is the right to “take life or let live” (Foucault 1978, 136). In contrast, the biopolitical is the exercise of power directed at controlling the body at the level of the population,<sup>2</sup> it is the power to “make live and let die” (138). The work of making live and letting die requires techniques of both biological division and control: race and sex. For Foucault, it is the function of blood as a racialised manner of ordering, which comes to be the defining mode of power, tracking when the power of the state becomes the *accomplice* of the sovereign rather than its challenger (Frazer and Hutchings 2011, 8). That is, rather than political power being a sap on the power of the sovereign, power alters its modality. Discord comes to be expressed in terms of races, “[w]ar is no longer the destruction of a political adversary, but of an enemy race” (Frazer and Hutchings 2011, 8). Biopower’s deployment of race is divisive. In thinking the biopolitical work of the apartheid state, this work of blood informs the obsession with mixing precisely as a racial madness which is not extraneous, but which is *necessary* to the proper exercise of biopolitical power.

Coetzee’s thematic analysis reveals the primacy of mixing in the madness of Cronjé’s racial thinking. We are inclined to first ask *mixture of what?* He (Coetzee) offers an answer through his constellated consideration of instances of mixing: sexual mixing resulting in “bastard” children, “viper[s] nurtured in the bosom of the *Afrikanervolk*” (1991, 7); Cronjé’s claim that “venereal diseases are passed on to white babies by their black nurses” (25); the mixing implied in living together in a mishmash (*mengelmoes*) of races which will inevitably lead to a blunting of any sense of racial difference. At its core, the obsession with mixing, discussed throughout Coetzee’s analysis, is about *blood* mixing. We can turn, in this instance, to Foucault in his elaboration of blood in biopolitical power. He explains:

A society of blood – I was tempted to say, of “sanguinity” – where power spoke *through* blood: the honour of war, the fear of famine, the triumph of death, the sovereign with his sword, executioners and torture; blood was *a reality with a symbolic function*. (Foucault 1978, emphases in original)

This idea of blood in biopower does not stand on its own for Foucault, it is related to discourses of sex. Coetzee suggests that the apartheid articulation of power operates on mixing involving both blood and sex, in which he locates their simultaneous function. In reading Cronjé, we see the symbolic work of race (needed for racism) in his obsession with race-mixing deployed through figurative contagion. If contagion is *metonymic*, as Coetzee posits, there is a shift from a view of the black man as carrying infection to seeing the infection as blackness itself. The metonymic slide of meaning which Coetzee explains is a slippage of factual contagion into metonymy precisely because of the symbolics of blood, since it is (black) blood which comes to represent viral infection. That is, figurative contagion, in relation to race, is rooted in an argument from blood.

The exercise of biopower is in part a symbolics of blood and in another part the analytic of sexuality. It is through the careful control of sex and sexuality (which is necessary to ensure the continuity of certain blood) that a control of women occurs. Foucault describes this function, for example, by discussing the notion of hysteria in women as involving “a medicalisation of their bodies and their sex, carried out in the name of the responsibility they owed to the health of their children, the solidity of the family institution, and the safeguarding of society” (1978). This is a culmination of the characteristically biopolitical activation of a power over life and its proliferation rather than of (putting to) death.

In a similar vein, Coetzee considers a dedication made by Cronjé, which prefaces “*n Tuiste vir die nageslag*” (1945) and “is dedicated to the author’s wife” and other “*Afrikanermoeders*” [Afrikaner mothers] as “protectors of the blood-purity of the *Boerenasie* [Boer nation]” (1991, 6). This indicates the “duty” of the Afrikaner woman in the continuity and blood integrity of the Afrikaner *volk*. For Cronjé, then, it is the race of the mother which the child inherits, and if intercourse with non-Afrikaners yields children, they will be “an insidious, weakening force within the nation” (Coetzee 1991, 7). Cronjé pleads with Afrikaner women not to become “race-blunted,” and the risk of this implies that the role of the Afrikaner man is to assume the patriarchal duty, as Cronjé supposedly has, to protect Afrikaner women, their bodies and their blood, from this risk to the “integrity” of the *Afrikanervolk*. This risk arises from the fundamentally biopolitical function of race which “allow[s] power to treat that population as a mixture of races [. . .], to treat the species, to subdivide the species it controls, into the subspecies known, precisely, as races” (Foucault 2003, 254). Subdivision here comes to inform decisions and policies of segregation during apartheid and in the establishment of the Strandfontein homeless camp. While Agamben understands “the camp as biopolitical paradigm of the modern” (Agamben 1998, 119) rather than the city (Ek 2006), this point about subdivision opens up a line of analysis that allows us to see the city out of which the camp is formed as similarly important as the camp itself. Understood in this way, we are urged to consider them both as well as their relation – what is the biopolitics of the city such that life may be discarded and kept *over there*, in the camp? In continuing with considering the biopolitical logic as one of the subdivision, we can consider the response to the mixture.

It is the mobilisation of this suddenly perceptible “mixture” (as opposed to biopolitical separation of races) which draws on the idea not only that the “weaker” race should reproduce (produce life) separately for the sake of future generations but that their death, “the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race [. . .] is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer” (Foucault 2003). Coetzee’s thematic analysis hits upon mixing as *antithetical* to Cronjé’s desire for segregation of races in South Africa and more generally in its espousals of apartheid. In Truscott’s (2013, 539) psychoanalytic reading of Coetzee and of Cronjé’s racial madness, it is through a strict governing of populations that the desire to which Coetzee gestures is not necessarily a repression but offers a “path for the satisfaction of desire.” He states that, “if it is prohibited desire that pulses through the prohibition, then this ‘counter-attack upon desire’ could only have led to further anxiety, to a horrified sense of contamination, creating further need for rituals of purification, for stricter, tighter controls on segregation” (539). Whether the prohibition of race mixing is the repression



or satisfaction of desire, the obsession with miscegenation is evidently inconsistent with the rational, social-scientific image which apartheid ideologues desperately sought to maintain. The supposed reasonableness of the “separate destinies” thesis, couched in the language of *volk* nationalism, is betrayed by nothing other than disgust (desire? satisfaction?) with the idea of mixing.

### **Mixing: Cronjé and Verwoerd**

Miscegenation, referred to by Cronjé as something to be avoided at all costs, includes and results from a “*mengelmoes* [mishmash] of races” which is “something unnatural,” as stated by Cronjé (quoted in Coetzee 1991). Coetzee cites an example from Cronjé’s writing: a vignette of a white man who had married a coloured woman and expressed happiness with his own decision and circumstances. Cronjé comments that this man is not privy to his own dissatisfaction with his circumstances, suggesting that no white man can legitimately *be happy* in such a situation. This is, for Cronjé, a consequence of “race-blunting:” the blunting of a “sense of racial difference” (Coetzee 1991, 12) whereby white people come to think that race mixing is acceptable, or worse, desirable. Coetzee describes this madness, the racial madness of Cronjé, as something which seeped into white Afrikaner thinking, yielding a “mass irrationality” (22).

Cronjé’s obsession in this regard exemplifies a line of thought of which the logical conclusion is the *total* segregation of races. Cronjé’s practical propositions, arising from his ideas about difference, are simple: total racial segregation to the end of a communitarian (and only) Afrikaner *volk*. Although madness is conceived as being in opposition to *reason*, we should not think that madness cannot be consistent. Consistent racial madness and the accompanying relegation of groups to sub-human status culminates in a multiplicity of horrendous social orders. The justifications thereof may be fallacious, but they may still be applied consistently. Consistently applied race madness is the driver of atrocities including Nazi Party ideology, the Rwandan genocide and, also Cronjé’s desire for total segregation. Nevertheless, Cronjé’s racial madness is only understood by apartheid architects, at best, as holding a valuable *emotive* import for the project of formal apartheid, not as containing wholesale practical use.

Cronjé was, in this respect, an extremist, even to advocates and architects of apartheid. Coetzee states of Cronjé’s madness, “[h]is heirs are silent about it or euphemise it; as clearly as decency permits they signal that it is extraneous, unnecessary, even an embarrassment” (1991, 24). This, of course, does not suggest a lesser propensity to commit atrocities, merely a more sly and cunning way to do so which would thereby ensure the sustainability of at least *some* segregation – enough to oppose race mixing. Verwoerd understood that for apartheid to be viable, it had to be *economically* viable. A necessary dimension to apartheid was economic rationality which was used to justify partial rather than total segregation, that necessity which ensured the economic reign of white South Africans to the detriment of their black counterparts.

Verwoerd, leader of the National Party from 1958 to 1966, lets slip a disgust for mixture similar to that of Cronjé, despite the fact that his justificatory arguments for segregation are defended as non-discriminatory reasons of separate development for separate destinies, i.e., segregation based on so-called good-neighbourliness.<sup>3</sup> He was a strong proponent of separate living for defined racial groups. It is significant to note,



however, that the idea of the racial madness behind total segregation is kept at bay where the reliance of white South Africa on cheap black labour is concerned. Verwoerd reads:

Natives from the country districts and the reserves will in future be allowed to enter the white towns and villages only as temporary workers, and on the termination of their service contracts they will regularly have to go back to their homes. (Verwoerd 1966, 10)

This is affirmed subsequently: “surely no thinking person would be so stupid as to deny our present dependence upon Native labour, or the presence of Natives in our urban areas” (Verwoerd quoted in Coetzee 1991, 14). Verwoerd’s expressions of racial disgust are veiled precisely in order to cater to the demands of the apartheid economy, necessary for the financial sustainability of apartheid. It is then not just sheer distance between black and white people which apartheid sought to achieve, but it was also, through and through, a project of economic exploitation.

### **Economic reason**

Between the instantiation of biopower in apartheid spatial segregation and the Strandfontein homeless camp outside the city of Cape Town, the racial and sexual conditions on which control acts are fundamentally also economic decisions. This exercise of biopower “targets the capacities of bodies, even transforming bodies and desires into commodities, as it is threaded through an apparatus established to address poverty, security and development” (Lalu 2015, 448). In a capitalist system of value, who is made to live and let to die depends on who proves to be economically valuable. The latter point will be explored later as the other side of what we have just considered: race. That is, if neurotic obsession with race and race-mixing is one side of the apartheid coin, the other is economic reason on which basis black workers enter the town. Unlike racial madness, which depends on a visceral response to miscegenation in the form of disgust or desire, economic reason demands exactly that – reason. It is a force which, evidently, compelled Verwoerd to abandon any desire for total racial segregation.

A conventionally Marxist reading suggests that a key function in capitalist modes of production is the extraction of surplus labour value from workers, an extraction which is aptly described as exploitation. Without workers to exploit in this way, the profits to owners of capital goods are low and the economic sustainability of the structure is diminished.<sup>4</sup> Verwoerd’s idea of apartheid based on separate destinies functions to place white people as natural owners of capital and black people as natural workers.

We are then not asking why black labour was *allowed* in white areas during apartheid but rather why it was *required*. As discussed, Verwoerd proved to be cognisant of the need for black labour in jobs which were considered low-class, unskilled and (because of this) were low-paying. Verwoerd (1966) quotes from an Economic Plan for South Africa stating that, “the non-European population is an important and valuable economic factor. As such its place in the development of society and the achievement of the greatest possible welfare must be properly recognised.” This was what made so-called total segregation unviable for the architects of apartheid. To put it in simple terms: cheap, black labour and the exploitation thereof was necessary to the functioning of apartheid. Racism is an obsession used to justify subjection; the visceral disgust to blackness proves useful for its function in producing cheap labour or what Paul Maylam calls the “racial

division of labour” (1995). Apartheid white domination is essentially racial *and* economic. It is not economic only *after* the fact of racism. Moreover, it depends upon the presence of black people rather than their complete eradication, a point made by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri,

apartheid is not simply a system of *exclusion*, as if subordinated populations were simply cut off, worthless and disposable. In the global Empire today, as it was before in South Africa, apartheid is a productive system of *hierarchical inclusion* that perpetuates the wealth of the few through the labour and poverty of the many. (Hardt and Negri 2004, 167)

Apartheid biopolitics is then a governing rationality of capitalistic reason which puts individual madness to “good use,” to be clear, the salience of economic reason is evident when it even dictates the terms of racial madness. Max Horkheimer says, in *Eclipse of Reason* (1948, 104), that “it must be observed that economic significance today is measured in terms of usefulness with respect to the structure of power, not with respect to the needs of all.” While this statement may hold true in its assertion that controls on productivity yield to the structure of power, complete and unbridled capitalism was held off by race. In a similar way that capital puts a limit on racial madness, racial madness keeps neoliberal reason at bay. For instance, the denial of proper education to black people during apartheid due to the racial division of labour (among other things) proved the economic undoing of apartheid when there were greater demands for skilled labour in the South African economy (Van der Westhuizen 2016). That is, the limits imposed on economic logic by race rendered apartheid unsustainable as a formal project.

If formal apartheid operationalised racism to form a permanently destitute (read: exploitable) group, how does this point about race and the economy carry into contemporary neoliberal, post-apartheid South Africa? Brown (2015) argues that neoliberalism constitutes the vanquishing of *homo politicus* – the political subject – in favour of *homo oeconomicus* – the economic subject. *Homo oeconomicus* is the subject who, in every aspect of life, is attributed a rating like a credit rating, the ultimate and wholly encompassing determinant of their “value.” While Marxist critique of capitalism emphasises the extraction of surplus labour value from the worker, neoliberal reason is more all-encompassing; it is a logic through which everything becomes an economic problem. We can explore how biopolitical racism in the neoliberal age (however rooted in madness) continues to serve in its production of a subject who is made so desperate that they are forced to submit to economic exploitation. The Strandfontein homeless camp in Cape Town, where the homeless and black are let to die, is a reminder of the continued deployment of apartheid biopower and the simultaneity of race and capital as oppressive forces. In other words, the introduction of this economic aspect to the analysis tracks the tension between repulsion and necessity in the working of race in the city, which is made even clearer when it is these same conditions which determine the conditions for expulsion from the city to the camp.

### **The plague town: Cape Town and neoliberalism**

In writing about the plague town, Foucault comments, “[t]he plague is met with by order; its function is to sort out every possible confusion: that of disease which is transmitted when bodies are mixed together, that of the evil, which is increase when fear and death

overcome prohibitions” (1979, 197). What is intimated here is how the exercise of power functions in the wake of contagion to sort and separate, bearing similarity to the biopolitical apartheid deployment of race and metonymic contagion. An analysis of the plague town calls for a consideration of what precisely necessitates removal from the town’s *cordon sanitaire*. Those removed are also those who, in a biopolitical gesture, are let to die. Foucault offers a parallel between the plague victim and the leper. Due to the visibility of the leper’s condition and the contagious nature of their condition, they are sent away to be put out of sight and thus out of mind.

From the mid-1800s until 1931, Robben Island, just off the Cape coast, functioned precisely to fulfil this purpose as a leper colony and a place to send those deemed insane (Deacon 1996). Those who are considered useless to society are cast off, prevented from sullyng the vitality of those in the city. Foucault states that the plague town comes to “treat ‘lepers’ and ‘plague victims,’ project[ing] the subtle segmentations of discipline onto the confused space of internment, combin[ing] it with the methods of analytical distribution proper to power” (1979, 199). Not only this, as noted by Deacon (1996, 291), in 1854, the Medical Committee proposed the separation of white and black inmates, even though all were sent off to Robben Island on account of their insanity or leprosy. This apartheid distribution of biopower I have discussed is an example of this strict ordering of the chaos of metonymic contagion (and thus of race mixing). Despite the prior use of Robben Island as a leper colony, in the apartheid shift to biopolitical exercise, it was used as a maximum-security prison for anti-apartheid dissidents where prisoners were forced to do hard labour in quarries, consistent with the apartheid dependence on cheap (or free) black labour. Apartheid economic reason deployed race in the creation of a division of labour and of a perfectly exploitable subject. The biopolitical work of contagion and capital keeps exploitable black people on the periphery, while they remain essential to its functioning. Those who are unexploitable are cast out and let to die.

In the work of metonymic contagion, black people, whose blood becomes co-terminus with contagion, are spatially separated, but still necessary. They are relegated to the margins of a city, the very city dependent on their marginality. They are *supplements*, conceptualised by Jacques Derrida and explained by Jonathan Culler as “inessential extra[s], added to something complete in itself” but “added in order to complete, to compensate for a lack in what was supposed to be complete in itself” (Culler 1985, 103). They are subjugated, and it is through this subjugation that whiteness maintains wealth and a sense of purity. This biopolitical apartheid model of separation based on metonymic contagion comes to inform governing over Cape Town in 2020 as a plague town. Taking the Strandfontein homeless camp as emblematic of the camp of disposables reveals the criteria by which biopolitical governmentality advocates the disposal of human life since it is the *homeless* who are let to die, the economically useless. They do not *supplement* the city but are completely extraneous.

Through the process of apartheid’s racialised impoverishment, in the present-day Cape Town, the unrecoverable unexploitable is black and homeless, lacking marketability in a racialised neoliberal order. In the shift from apartheid economy to neoliberal economy, a black economic elite becomes possible, but it remains that those who are *let to die* are still both black and unexploitable. That is, although capitalist interests certainly functioned in the urban segregation of the 1900s South Africa, neoliberalism has slightly altered the criteria. While blackness is a necessary condition for removal from

the town's *cordon sanitaire*, it is no longer sufficient. If the proliferation of neoliberal governmentality involves the measure of human value as a multidimensional credit-rating based on neoliberal values (Brown 2015), then it is the homeless (read: property-less) and black who are rendered virtually worthless. They do not contribute to the economy in the present and the "contagion" associated with their blood ensures that their social positionality is deemed devoid of economic potential. Lalu (2015, 449) calls this a *laissez-faire racism*, "in which the unemployed, the criminal, the diseased, the uneducated and the imprisoned are rendered distinct." They are not relegated to the spatial margins of the town which depends upon their labour, they are sent away and let to die.

While neoliberalism and race seem to hold one another at bay, they nevertheless operate jointly to fashion a unique force of oppression while its complexity aids in escaping detection. In the throes of neoliberal governmentality, care for lepers, as is the same with care for the homeless in the present day, would be nothing more than a cost which can be cut and so never gets "spent" at all. Despite the neoliberal premium on meritocracy and the rewards of hard work, this is shown to be a falsity when the homeless are cast out. We can draw on Mbembe's (2019, 167) discussion in *Necropolitics* to refer to this position as one of life suspended between man and animal/object (commodity). While biopower involves an aspect of a "letting die," it is through this letting that it also produces modalities between life and death. This slippage of life into the "world of objects" is a consequence of economism (Mbembe 2019, 167). In the neoliberal world of credit-rating-styled value, human life which does not serve economic interests is not even a commodity, but a broken object to be sent to the dump. In what Vergès (2019) refers to as the essential wastefulness of capitalism, so too is economically value-less life "wasted."

## The subject of global apartheid

If what I have said so far makes sense, then contagion is limited in its capacity to explain racism as it is implicated in economic exploitation. Metonymic contagion explains apartheid racial madness but comes up against limits when we are called upon to explain the economic dependence on black labour in white areas and households. The implication of pointing out this limitation is not to do away with the explanatory potential of figurative and contagion. Rather, we can draw on its very limits in order to think about capital. In thinking the dynamics of subjugation, race, then, can be thought of as one side of the coin with economic exploitation as the other. To consider racism without this understanding of its economic aspect is to miss an important facet of neoliberal subject formation. That is, it is precisely this neoliberal logic which posits the reality of meritocracy and the so-called "equality of men" as the same thing which depends upon this equality being a lie. There is no level playing field and thus no meritocratic basis of inequality but a racial inequality which ensures the production and reproduction of the subject as economically exploitable. The limits of contagion as analogy draw our attention *not* to the idea that racial logic is undermined by racists who participate in the economy, but that it is exacerbated. It is a sacrifice which makes exploitation possible while protecting oneself from this subjection. This sacrifice is, of course, the desire for total segregation.

Contagion as analogy, metaphor and metonymy, then, reveals a way to make sense of racism, racial violence, worker exploitation and other similar social ills not as distinct occurrences, which fit either into the box of racial injustice, otherwise economic injustice; rather, we can think of them as mutually dependent. While we sometimes see the question framed as the “race-class” debate, as discussed by Posel (1983), to ask which one, race or class, has analytic primacy, often leads to reductionist evaluations of these political, economic orders. To make the point clearly, racial discrimination functions alongside economic objectives rather than as distinct forms of subjugation. While the role of capital seems to disallow that racism be carried out to its logical conclusion, to its limit of complete eradication of blackness and, along with it, contagion, the convergence of race and capital has its own high-point of subjugation. The Strandfontein homeless camp is but one instantiation of power at work, inheriting the justificatory strategies deployed in the biopolitics of apartheid. This intertwining is not only true of apartheid South Africa, it is true of post-apartheid South Africa and potentially of the world. The simultaneous work of neoliberal capitalism and race can come to explain the prevailing dynamics of inequality. As per Hardt and Negri,

In the contemporary period of transition, the global interregnum, we can see emerging a new topography of exploitation and economic hierarchies the lines of which run above and below national boundaries. We are living in a system of global apartheid. (Hardt and Negri 2004, 166).

Maurits van Bever Donker et al., in their edited collection *Remains of the Social: Desiring the Post-Apartheid* (2017), think with Derrida (Derrida and Kamuf 1985) to explain that worldwide indictments of apartheid still keep “such a heinous crime against humanity *over there*” (van Bever Donker et al. 2017) thus repeating the racial logic of apartheid those indictments claim to deplore. The implicit idea that apartheid’s designata are *over there*, is then, to participate in its reinscription and recurrence as a global phenomenon. The concept of global apartheid thus has a knot: “that apartheid both *must* and yet *cannot* be detached from South Africa” (van Bever Donker et al. 2017, 21, emphasis in original). This is not a knot which calls for undoing but for *accedence* in its doubled meaning. Indeed, to accede to this characteristic of global apartheid implies both approaching (late Middle English: *accede*) and giving way (Latin: *cedere*). It is, perhaps, through a hermeneutic of the perfected neoliberal subject – the indelibly racialised *homo oeconomicus* – disclosed in the accedence to apartheid’s *over-there-ness* and its *everywhere-ness*, that we may further elaborate the notion of global apartheid.

## Notes

1. While my discussion consists of a conceptual untangling, using the bubonic plague, apartheid and the COVID-19 pandemic in order to do so, see Jackson and Robins (2018) for a socio-historical account of sanitation in Cape Town.
2. Rather than *disciplinary* power which operates as an individualising force.
3. Evident from a reading of his speeches (Verwoerd and Pelzer 1966) where he states that the National Party is “emphatically opposed to any mixture of blood between the European and the non-European races.”
4. That is, the structure is no longer sustainable for the owners of capital.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Kiasha Naidoo* is an Andrew W. Mellon fellow at the Centre for Humanities Research and a philosophy student at the University of the Western Cape. She is interested in social and political philosophy, critical theory and black consciousness with a focus on thinking about racialisation and neoliberalism.

## ORCID

Kiasha Naidoo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1627-9264>

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