

Discontinuity and Postcolonial Discourse

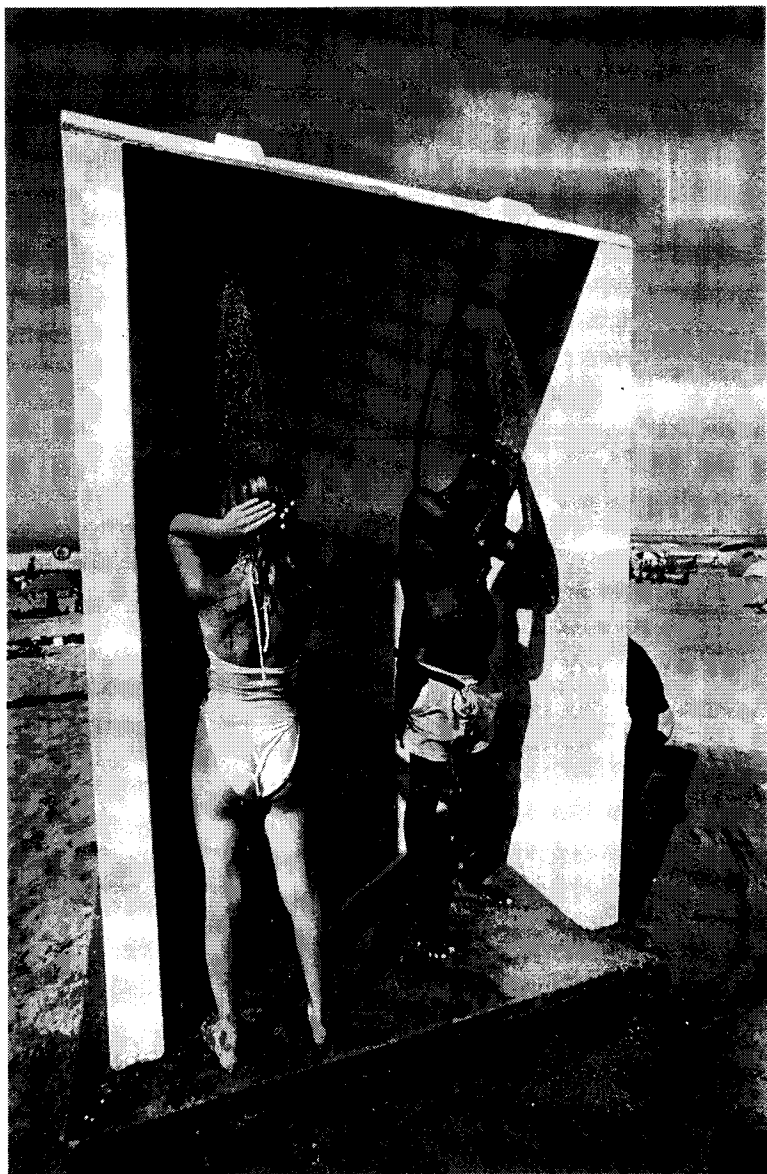
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IN *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault develops the notion of radical discontinuity in discursive structures. In many postcolonial contexts, however, discursive frameworks generated by colonialism are still in active circulation. This rather puzzling evidence of discursive remnants extending across historical locations and cultures leads me to conclude that discourses tend to lumber on through time, being activated in circumstances where their use is anachronistic. The clear discursive breaks that Foucault discerns as marking the ending of one episteme and the beginning of another seem to occur only when a discourse finally conflicts with other discourses to the extent that its "logic" becomes foregrounded and can no longer be regarded as "self-evident" or "transparent."

In order to re-examine the Foucauldian notion of discontinuity, I interrogate a photograph that appeared on the cover of the journal of Amnesty International British Section in May/June 1994. The photograph depicts a black man and a white woman showering on a beach in South Africa, with the caption "After the Polls: South Africa cools off . . . and hopes." I will consider the contradictions that this image presents in order to explore some of the difficulties of theorizing postcolonialism and its constitution in discursive structures.¹

Foucault theorizes the beginnings of discourses in some detail and draws attention to the difficulty of starting to speak, except within the clear limits of a discursive domain sanctioned by institutions; he speaks of the desire

to be on the other side of discourse from the outset, without having to consider from the outside what might be strange, frightening and



perhaps maleficent about it. To this very common wish, the institution's reply is ironic, since it solemnises beginnings, surrounds them with a circle of attention and silence, and imposes ritualised forms on them, as if to make them more easily recognisable from a distance. ("The Order of Discourse" 51)

Thus the break between one discursive structure and another is marked by clearly defined rituals that reflect some unease at the possibility of venturing outside discursive frameworks. It is evident that Foucault argues against a simple "liberal" notion of progress; as he states, "the rhythm of transformation does not follow the smooth, continuist schemas of development which are normally accepted" (*Power/Knowledge* 112). Yet it is unclear to me that discourses necessarily end simply by being overtaken by shifts in larger epistemic frameworks, as Foucault assumes in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Objects and knowledges are brought into existence, according to Foucault, by "the group of relations that discourse must establish in order to speak of this or that object" (46). Once instituted, these discursive formations are difficult to shift or modify: although their contradictions are constantly confronted and exposed by the desires and will of individuals, discursive formations continue in existence, according to Foucault, because of a certain entropy and because of "a number of supports and material techniques . . . and certain statutory modalities" (123). For Foucault, statements, which are the basic building blocks of discourse, roughly corresponding to speech acts, are "managed" by what he terms "archives," which ensure that there is a certain regularity in discourse.² But while discursive histories obviously are not continuous, neither are they simply discontinuous, with a range of discursive frameworks ending and another set of frameworks taking its place. Even if Foucault cannot admit that the actions of individuals fundamentally shape and modify discursive formations, despite their resisting institutional structures, it is clear that discourses are changed by their coming into contact and into conflict with other discourses which make visible the conditions of their existence.

This conflict can most clearly be seen at work in the post-colonial period where discursive remnants of the colonial context are still in evidence, and where discourses generated within very different conditions begin to mark out colonial knowledges

as aberrant for many of those who interact with them. Thus, rather than the postcolonial being considered a period or condition which is marked off from the colonial in a clear way, I am arguing that certain discursive structures begin to decline or disappear only when they are challenged sufficiently by other discourses. For some individuals, whose worldview is still shaped by these anachronistic discourses, they may have some resonance; however, for other individuals, exposed to different discursive structures, they are merely anachronistic.³

This problem with the demarcation of the postcolonial has been discussed by Anne McClintock in her essay "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism,'" in which she identifies certain troubling tendencies within postcolonial theorizing, namely, that at the very moment when the end of empire is being addressed, events are being theorized solely in terms of their relation to the colonial. As McClintock puts it, "[c]olonialism returns at the moment of its disappearance" (293). This results in the discussion of events as postcolonial where, in fact, their relation to the "colonial" context is not perhaps their most salient feature. McClintock also argues that this focus on the *postcolonial* leads to the assumption of postcolonial theorists that colonialism itself or neocolonialism is no longer active; McClintock states that she would like to question the orientation of postcolonial theory, which, "in its premature celebration of the pastness of colonialism, runs the risk of obscuring the continuities and discontinuities of colonial and imperial power" (294). In order to counter this globalizing move within postcolonial theory, clearly in evidence in works such as Bill Ashcroft's, Gareth Griffiths's and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back*, McClintock makes critical distinctions between types of colonial and postcolonial relations.

My analysis of the image representing peace in South Africa will serve to test out these ideas concerning the discursive structures of postcolonialism. In this image of two people, the political state of a country is represented metonymically. South Africa has been described by McClintock as a "break-away settler colony" that has not yet achieved decolonised status (295); therefore it cannot be considered within the same frame of reference

as countries such as India and parts of Africa, which can more aptly be described as postcolonial. As Graham Pechey puts it,

“[p]ostcolonial” has a banal sense which might apply equally to South Africa after 1910 and India after 1947; the sense of formal political independence, of having gone through a transfer of power. The reality of course is that “postcolonial” is only too often a polite expression for states that are both economically and culturally *neo-colonial*. Indeed . . . South Africa might be called the first neo-colonial state in Africa. (152)

Pechey argues that it is a mistake to see the situation of apartheid South Africa simply as colonial, to see apartheid, for example, as a form of “internal colonialism”; instead, “we need to see that what coincides in South Africa are not two ‘superstructural’ spheres on one ‘infrastructure’ but rather so many ‘nows’ lived alongside each other” (155). This distinction between postcolonial and post-apartheid is crucial to understanding the way that the image of South Africa “cooling off” may be a moment in which a discursive structure is coming to the end of its coherence.

The choice of an image of two people to represent a crisis or resolution in history, particularly British colonial history, is quite common within colonial representation, as I will demonstrate. Yet it is a curious choice in this context, in that it draws attention to the contradictions in the position of the “liberal” Amnesty International. The image implies, in contrast to the predictions of many British commentators, that the prognosis for the new South African regime is good and that race relations under Black majority rule will be harmonious. To symbolize the establishment of peace in South Africa and the changeover from a white supremacist regime to a black democratic government, the photographer and Amnesty International have made a number of choices that seem determined by anachronistic and a-contextual features of colonial discourse. Their choices become most apparent when we focus on what they have not represented. They have chosen to represent civilians, rather than, for example, white members of the departing government in dialogue with black members of the new government. They do not depict this moment by focusing on a representation of a triumphant Nelson Mandela greeting crowds of people, shaking hands with ex-

president F. W. de Klerk, nor do they show the new black government in power, for example, in the process of drafting new legislation. Thus, although the situation is political, it is not represented in strictly political terms. The photographer and Amnesty International have also made very definite choices in representing the political situation in terms of a personal relationship. Rather than representing black people and white people talking, socializing or working together peacefully either in the private sphere, for example, at a party or discussion group in a private home, or in public, for example, in parliament or at a workplace, the photographer has chosen to depict two people in the public sphere, yet in a curiously intimate act, that of casually showering together.

A benign "liberal" reading of this image would simply see it as referring to a history of segregated public places, where black people were not permitted to use the same beaches and other public facilities as white people, and where even their presence in cities was regulated by the infamous pass laws. In this sense, the image implies that black and white people in the new South Africa have, on the surface at least, equal access to public facilities. The image is thus positioned as an index of change and as a hopeful message for the future of peaceful coexistence. However, this "liberal" reading of the image effaces the inequality embedded in the system by years of white rule, which has not been eliminated overnight by the change in government. It will take much longer before more fundamental access to high quality education, senior management positions at work, ownership of the means of production, and adequate health care, for example, is granted to the majority of the population. What the image erases is the fact that although white supremacy in South Africa has been effectively altered through the extension of the franchise, the change in the government, and the de-segregation of public spaces, much remains to be changed before South African black people have even nominal political and economic equality with the whites.⁴ Thus a "liberal" reading of the image, which I assume Amnesty International "intended," masks a fundamental inequality while gesturing towards a "cosy" message of "let's all be friends now." Pechey notes that the term "post-

apartheid" can be used in a range of ways: by the ruling party, for example, to signify that, at least on the surface, segregation is now officially at an end; or by middle-of-the-road whites to signal optimism for the future, while rigorously maintaining the status quo and their own positions of power. Pechey points towards a more radical definition of post-apartheid that has some resonance in the context of this article:

Against this banality of usage, the sense of post-apartheid that I am invoking here defines a condition that has contradictorily always existed and yet is impossible of full realisation; always existed, because apartheid as a politics of permanent and institutionalised crisis has from the beginning been shadowed by its own transgression or supersession; impossible of realisation, because the proliferating binaries of apartheid discourse will long outlive any merely political winning of freedom. (153)

If we examine the image still further, it points to some of the potential discontinuities in postcolonial discourses. The hopes for peace that this image represents are displaced onto the bodies of two people, as if the negotiations over peace that have taken place through public demonstrations, armed militancy, and state-level discussions could be reduced to a simple, seemingly innocent image of two semi-clad people. These two people are emblematic of South Africa; just as they cool off by showering, South Africa cools off politically, after what is seen by the "liberal" press as a time of excessive political activity and violence. The use of the term "cool off" is symptomatic of an attempt to elide a political relation with a personal relation, and it is noteworthy that the phrase "cool off" is generally used to describe the situation after a temper tantrum or argument, rather than after major political upheavals. Rather than focusing on the fundamental shift of power from the white minority to the black majority, and rather than viewing this shift as exhilarating, the liberal discourses seem to be suggesting that what has taken place is a simple argument, which can either explode into a more serious row, or be smoothed over through "common sense." The notion of "cooling off" thus calls attention to the possibility of violence, rather than to the productive nature of the new political situation. It is as if liberal discourse cannot speak in terms of liberation or positive political struggle; when faced with change

or conflict, liberal discourse can articulate only personal and individual argument, which is to be overcome through "hope."

The figures in this image are not actually engaging with each other, not, for example, speaking; instead, they are offering each other, in Irving Goffman's terms, "civil indifference." Their actions are mirror images of the other: they are facing in opposite directions, spatially close but also spatially distant. As Doreen B. Massey has shown, geographical space can most usefully be described as "social relations 'stretched out'" (2). Thus the social relations of the figures in the photograph are still those of separation, despite that fact that these two people have access to the same space. As Pechey states, "[t]he project of apartheid could be seen as an attempt to binarise the diverse times lived by South Africa's communities and to translate these times into (grossly unequal) spaces, freezing a heterogeneous history into the stasis of a Manichean racial geography" (155).

However, it is the blithe indifference of these two individuals to one another that speaks most loudly: that they can be semi-naked in each other's presence and yet ignore each other would appear to be the underlying message of the image. Peace in South Africa seems in this image to depend on the fact that a white woman can shower with a black man and not be at risk of rape. The fact that they are not interacting is important, since this again reduces the liberal reader's view of peace in South Africa to a concern with co-existence, rather than with legislating for peace or acting in order to bring about peace. It is almost as if the change of government is enough to ensure that personal and sexual relations will somehow miraculously follow suit. This predisposes a liberal British reader to view the conflict in South Africa in terms of a strictly British colonial history, which foregrounds discursive structures concerning the vulnerability of white females to sexual attack. It also leads the liberal British reader to focus on the relations between white women and black men at a sexual and personal level, when, in fact, the situation in South Africa under apartheid was one in which black women and men were oppressed by a white regime. While it is true that sexual relations between blacks and whites were subject to legislation, and that white and black people were forced to live largely separate

existences, such an image encourages the reader to focus on this officially separate existence rather than on the economic and political oppression which black people in South Africa had to endure and struggle against.⁵ The reader is also enabled to contemplate these semi-naked bodies with a gaze that, although it purports to be political, is actually sexual. As Richard Dyer states, this is both “a way of producing potentially erotic images while denying that this is what is being done, and also a way of constructing a mode of looking at the naked form ‘dispassionately,’ without arousal” (qtd. in Ching-Liang Low 201).

To continue the preceding discussion of what could have been represented instead of this image, and to foreground the history of this image, we need only to think of the very different readings that would have resulted had the photograph represented a black woman showering with a white man, or a black man showering with a white man, or a white woman showering with a black woman. In each of these alternative scenarios, different scripts are activated.

As Jenny Sharpe has shown, the figure of rape and of white women’s vulnerability to sexual attack has altered over time. This complex of events, ideas, and images is not a constant of colonial discourse or even of postcolonial discourse. There is great variation in the meaning of this figure and, in fact, in the very presence or absence of this figure within the representation of relations of power between countries. Furthermore, Sharpe has noted that “race” itself is not constant; she states that “by treating race as a transhistorical category, we . . . fail to dislodge the dominant discourses that wrench racial (and sexual) constructions out of history and present them as essentialising categories of difference”; it is therefore the task of contemporary theory to “disrupt the taken-for-grantedness of such categories through an excavation of the histories that produce racial and sexual difference” (“The Unspeakable” 222). Sharpe argues that rather than seeing this figure of the violated white woman as transhistorical, as some feminist theorists have done, it is necessary to locate each image within its own historical setting. As part of her attempt to map out the history of “what it means to be rapable” (226), she focuses on the fictional “origins” of the image of British woman

subjected to rape by “native” insurgents in the 1857 Indian Uprising. According to Sharpe,

the idea of rebellion [in the 1857 revolt] was so closely imbricated with the violation of English womanhood that the Mutiny was remembered as a barbaric attack on innocent white women. Yet Magistrates commissioned to investigate the so-called eyewitness reports could find no evidence to substantiate the rumours of rebels raping, torturing and mutilating English women. (*Allegories* 2)

By meticulously examining the fictional accounts and historical records, Sharpe is able to document the way that this figure of woman serves to displace consideration of the oppressiveness of colonial rule and also to obscure its fragility in moments of conflict. She states that the “savaged remains [of British woman] display a fantasy of the native’s savagery that screens the ‘barbarism’ of colonialism” (“The Unspeakable” 233) and also “displaces attention away from the image of English men dying at the hands of native insurgents” (231). She shows how focusing on representations of the rape of British woman at times of conflict in colonial rule also has the effect of moving attention away from political insurrection towards a concern with racial difference and Otherness. Thus, rather than thinking of such representations as solely racist, Sharpe stresses that it is important to see them as serving a function within the maintenance of colonial rule in a time of crisis, a crisis that was both a political crisis within India and also a wider crisis relating to the moral and ethical position of colonial rule (see Donaldson, and Sunder Rajan).

In concentrating on Sharpe’s materialist analysis of this image of the “rapable” white female in British colonial fiction, I am trying to move away from the notion that stereotypes are constant over time, which a certain type of psychoanalytical postcolonial theorizing seems to emphasize (see, for example, Bhabha). The concentration on psychoanalysis in colonial discourse theory leads to a fundamental ahistoricism that presupposes that stereotypes have no history—a view with which those in positions of power would concur. I prefer to draw here on Sharpe’s work on the persistence through time of certain representations within the colonial context, while drawing attention to the different meanings and functions that these representations embody in

different socio-historical contexts. Thus the representation of the potential rape of white women by Indian insurrectionaries served particular purposes at different stages in colonial rule in India, and, as Brenda Silver has shown, the myth of the black rapist—"the Black man as penis"—has served different, yet still, in essence, political purposes in the United States (118; see also Wells-Barnett). The Amnesty International photograph symbolizes the prospect of peace in the new South Africa by its implied negation of the stereotypes of the white woman as "rapable" and of the black man as potential rapist. I would argue, then, that the photograph draws on colonial history and is thus part of a colonial discourse; and yet, precisely because of the historically rooted nature of the image it deploys, the photograph forces the image into difficult contradictions.

To extend Sharpe's discussion to this image, it is quite clear that although rape itself is not focused on, it is the implicit message of the image, and this trope has been turned to in a moment that liberal discourses can only view as a potential crisis of rule in South Africa. However, it should be clear that the liberal view is far from being the only, or even the dominant, vision of the current South African political situation. Kenneth Parker has remarked that the spectre of the rape of white women by black men has not figured in any of the discussions and representations within South Africa itself, even within the most rabidly whites-only groups; he states that at the time of the elections, "inside the country virtually without exception the issues were those of ideology: between ANC and the National party; within the ranks of the ANC; between the National party and other largely white groups." In regard to the image of black male sexuality as a threat, Parker remarks, "I am not saying that these issues are expunged from mentalities; merely that they did not form part of the discourse of the first free elections" (personal communication with the author, 1995). The British liberal and right-wing press presented a very particular version of events, which seems to be informed by a neo-colonial frame of reference.

The image in the Amnesty International photograph thus resolves the current crisis in South Africa by referring back to an

earlier resolution of a problem of colonialism. The difference of situation is erased by the image, which presents itself as being without a history and therefore innocent. I would argue that images such as this, which pose as simple "liberal" narratives of peace and freedom, are actually chosen because Britain and the United States are still very clearly in a neo-colonial phase. Britain is still enmeshed within nostalgia for colonial rule to the extent that images such as the one discussed can be used to signify peace. Britain, which is still writing and rewriting its colonial history, seems able to view conflicts in the postcolonial world only as if they were conflicts within a colonial framework; it thus deploys a metaphorical and rhetorical structure that creaks under the strain of being used in contexts where the structure begins not to make sense.⁶ Perhaps this example indicates how discourses change; this particular discursive history is one that is at the limits of its comprehensibility.

This image also speaks to a wider problem with the liberal and right-wing British press's reactions to South Africa. The conflicts in South Africa have been figured, in the British press, in a number of ways that have focused on individuals such as Nelson Mandela, while at the same time representing other forms of black activism in South Africa as barbarous. To individualize events rather than deal with them in their complexity is a common ploy in the media. A liberal view of the events in South Africa has deified Mandela, so that he is seen as the "good" black politician, while, in contrast, all other black people and their actions have been demonized. It is unusual for any political activity by black people in South Africa to be reported in positive terms; for example, it is striking that other politicians in Mandela's cabinet are not featured in news reports. Thus, "we" have been on the side of the Mandela who has struggled for legitimate political change, and media coverage of Mandela has focused on his peaceful protests. In addition, "we" are against the white South Africans in government and at large, even though "they" are white like "us." Boers have always figured in British colonial representations as uncivilised and as Other (see Pratt). Yet, at the same time, in this image "we" are positioned in the same role as the Boers in that the white woman, here white South Africa, is

elided with the role of the vulnerable figure of the white British woman within a colonial setting. However, "we" are also against the so-called terrorism of black people, which has been reported as "rioting" and "unrest" in places called "black townships," a phrase which naturalizes the segregation of control. This unease with individual black South Africans and their political activism surfaces in the Amnesty International image. Here the black South African is represented as "tame" and unthreatening, in contrast to the series of images of necklace killings and large-scale rioting that has been consistently produced in the British press.

The Amnesty International image, then, seems to be part of a wider difficulty for liberal discourse in articulating black agency, a difficulty explored in such analyses of media coverage as Tony Trew's early work on the representation of conflict and agency in South Africa. Trew argues that liberal discourses are unable to decode events such as police attacks on unarmed black demonstrators as anything other than black rioting, and that therefore such events become "transformed" into more readily recognizable frameworks. He states that

[w]hite police shooting unarmed Africans expressing political differences by demonstrations is an anomaly—rioting and sad loss of life caused by factionalism is just what is expected by those who hold this view. When the original violence occurred, it could not be ignored or kept from the readers of newspapers. But the work of transformation following the path shown by the ideology produces finally a version of events fitting in with that ideology. (107)

Trew goes on to argue that in reporting events in South Africa, British discursive structures are finally unable to represent black agency without resorting to images of violence and terror. The violence is not coded as legitimate resistance to oppression, but as either the mindless violence of the mob, or as what the media terms "black-on-black" killing, that is, factionalism. Trew describes the manner in which the newspapers, in reporting an attack on demonstrators by police, gradually began to delete references to police activity and to focus instead on the objects of that activity, the black demonstrators, to the point that their very passivity, the very fact that they were acted upon, began to mark them out as insurgents. I would argue that in a similar way the use

of this photographic image by Amnesty International bespeaks a much more deeply seated and still-active "liberal" neo-colonial discursive formation that cannot articulate black political agency except through images that evoke fear of sexual attack. The British press seems unable to accept a version of South African history that is not written within the seemingly liberal framework informing its view of its own colonial history. Thus white liberal colonial discursive frameworks persist even though they do not make sense when imposed on other contexts. The image tells us more about the current colonial and neo-colonial discontent in Britain than it does about the situation in South Africa.

I should emphasize I am not arguing here that colonial discourses are all we have and all we will ever have; as McClintock states, if we simply analyze events in terms of their relation to the colonial, "we face being becalmed in an historically empty space in which our sole direction is found by gazing back, spellbound, at the epoch behind us, in a perpetual present marked only as 'post'" (303). Rather, I am arguing that it is necessary to be aware of the way in which discursive structures have built into them a tendency to endure, even when their "logic" radically conflicts with the situation they represent and with other discursive frameworks. However, this conflict within discourses, I have argued, signals the end of particular discourses and their modification or disappearance.

NOTES

- ¹ I would like to thank Kenneth Parker, Tony Brown and Zoe Wicomb for comments they made on a draft of this article.
- ² Even though Foucault states at some length that statements are not equivalent to speech acts and engages in debate with John Searle to this effect, finally it would seem that the two categories are functionally almost indistinguishable.
- ³ By terming these discourses anachronistic and therefore, in some senses, inapplicable to a current situation, I do not wish to be understood to argue that they were applicable to a past, colonial situation. As I explain later in this article, Jenny Sharpe demonstrates that these colonial discourses were no less effective and powerful for being fictional accounts of historical events.
- ⁴ By focusing on simple binary oppositions, the image also fails to represent the diversity of South African society, which is composed of Black, White, Coloured, and Indian groups.
- ⁵ Indeed, the whole notion of apartheid/apartheness itself erases the fact that while publically segregated in the use of public facilities, many black people worked providing services for white people and thus occupied the same physical space; the segregation that black people suffered was a separation from power.

- ⁶ I do not mean to suggest that this image went uncontested when it was circulated during British colonial history; nor do I mean to suggest that the image necessarily "made sense" to everyone within colonial relations (see Porter).

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