

## Mark Mathabane's *K\*ffir Boy*, Black Consciousness, and the Fallacies of Liberalism

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**Abstract:** Offering a sustained reading of Mark Mathabane's *K\*ffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa* (1986), this essay examines the autobiography in light of Steve Biko's thought to demonstrate how Mathabane's stated goals of challenging racism and advancing liberation for Black people are in conflict with his liberalism. Interrogating the autobiography in view of Black Consciousness philosophy brings into stark relief the contradictions that inform its racial politics. As I read the work against the grain and probe the reasons for its enduring popularity among US readers, I show that, paradoxically, Mathabane both conceals and makes visible the workings of white supremacy. While Mathabane argues that white liberals are not responsible for apartheid, he unwittingly demonstrates the opposite, thereby exposing how white liberals worked alongside white nationalists to uphold racial dictatorship in South Africa. The autobiography thus illustrates what Biko calls "the totality of the white power structure," namely how white people work as a collective across ideological boundaries to maintain the racist status quo. In the process, the work shows that the attempt to fold Black people into the logics of liberalism upholds the racism that liberalism depends upon. Ultimately, *K\*ffir Boy* reveals not only the fallacies of liberalism and impossibility of white antiracism, but also the unwavering importance of Black Consciousness in the ongoing struggle for Black liberation.

**Keywords:** Mark Mathabane, Steve Biko, Black Consciousness, liberalism, whiteness, apartheid, Alan Paton, South Africa

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Our attitude here is that you cannot in pursuing the aspirations of black people achieve them from a platform which is meant for the oppression of black people.

Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* 146

A year prior to the publication of Mark Mathabane's autobiography *K\*ffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa* (1986), Ronald Reagan said about South Africa in a radio interview: "They have eliminated the segregation that we once had in our own country—the type of thing where hotels and restaurants and places of entertainment and so forth were segregated—that has all been eliminated" ("Telephone Interview" 1011).<sup>1</sup> Even after he was forced to admit that segregation had not actually been abolished in South Africa, Reagan insisted that he "was talking about improvements that actually do exist there. . . . There has been a great improvement over what has ever existed before" ("President Reagan"). These words were spoken in bad faith. Far from improving conditions for Black people, just one month before Reagan's statement on WSB Radio, the apartheid government had declared a State of Emergency, a violent crackdown on Black resistance that led to thousands of deaths and mass arrests. The appearance of *K\*ffir Boy* on the literary scene could not have been timelier. This harrowing story of a Black boy subjected to the daily terror of life under racial dictatorship responded to a growing international interest in South African affairs and offered a unique lens into apartheid. European American critic Charles Larson noticed in a 1986 review of the book the irony of anti-apartheid sentiments gaining momentum in the United States while the vast majority of South African writers published in the country were white and provided a one-dimensional picture of apartheid. "Perhaps the publication of *K[\*]ffir Boy* will help change this," he wrote, optimistically. The book, Larson believed, "might acquire the same status that Richard Wright's *Black Boy* or Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land* had for earlier generations of American readers. It is in every way as important and as exciting a book—with the additional factor of showing us apartheid's horrors through the victim's

eyes.” Larson accurately predicted the work’s popularity among US readers. One of few autobiographies by a Black South African author published in the United States, where Mathabane migrated in 1978 at the age of eighteen thanks to a tennis scholarship, the book became an immediate bestseller.<sup>2</sup> Its popularity and that of its author only continued to grow over the years. Following the publication of the autobiography, Mathabane was the recipient of the Christopher Award in 1986, appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* with several family members in 1987 (Bravo), received a year-long writing and teaching fellowship from Cornell University in 1987–88, and was a White House Fellow in 1996–97 in the Department of Education under Bill Clinton’s presidency. *K\*ffir Boy* catapulted Mathabane to overnight fame.

But the book has also been the object of much controversy. While white US critics praised it in glowing reviews, some African American readers took issue with Mathabane’s sympathetic depiction of white South Africans.<sup>3</sup> South African musician and Black Consciousness activist Molefe Pheto also harshly critiqued the book, arguing that Mathabane writes “as if he were an outsider, an unsympathetic sociologist from Europe, or in this case, America, where he now resides” (1354). Zambian American sociologist Mwizenge Tembo, on the other hand, argued that the autobiography “is perhaps the best ‘insider’ account to be published about *apartheid* and its black victims in recent times” (724; emphasis in original). Meanwhile, the apartheid government retaliated against its publication by banning the book, revoking Mathabane’s passport, and killing two of his brothers-in-law (“Book Plumbs Agony”).

Published three years after Lewis Nkosi’s anti-apartheid novel *Mating Birds* (1983), which was also written in exile and banned under the 1950 Suppression of Communism and the 1963 Publications and Entertainments Acts, Mathabane’s autobiography stands out from the work of other Black South African writers of the time who provided unapologetic critiques of white supremacy. Perhaps this is why in South Africa it never reached the status of predecessors such as Es’kia Mphahlele’s *Down Second Avenue* (1959), Noni Jabavu’s *Drawn in Colour* (1960), Bloke Modisane’s *Blame Me on History* (1963), and Ellen Kuzwayo’s *Call Me Woman* (1985).<sup>4</sup> Already the title, with its disparaging

racial epithet, invites scorn in the South African context (Smith and Schaffer 268). In the United States, however, Mathabane's autobiography remains the single most read and celebrated account of life under apartheid. The book is considered a classic, continues to be heralded as a pillar of US multicultural education in high school curricula, and is taught in many colleges and universities, while to this day Mathabane is invited to give lectures about the book across the country in a variety of institutions, from elementary schools to Ivy League universities.<sup>5</sup> For all the interest that *K\*ffir Boy* has generated—and continues to generate more than three decades after its publication—it is surprising that no article offering an in-depth reading of the work exists. And yet the autobiography is much more than the story of a Black youth's coming of age in apartheid South Africa: it is a story that, albeit unintentionally, makes visible “the totality of the white power structure” (Biko, *I Write* 89) and the necessary collusion of liberalism with white supremacy.<sup>6</sup>

*K\*ffir Boy* was destined to become a US bestseller. The book tells a quintessentially USAmerican story of individual success achieved through determination, education, and white saviorism. In the process, it supports Reagan's stance that segregation is a thing of the past in the United States, something “that we once had in our own country”—once, but surely no more. The treatment of racism in South Africa is also paradoxical in the work, as Mathabane denounces apartheid, yet also reproduces the logics of colorblindness by arguing that white liberals are not to blame for it. Central to this disavowal is Mathabane's location in the United States and his implied audience. On the one hand, Mathabane addresses an audience that is fundamentally white and USAmerican. On the other hand, the autobiography is a testimony that seeks to provide white South Africans in particular with a picture of the atrocious conditions that Black people endured under apartheid through the story of one exemplary individual. Mathabane writes, “my story is intended to show him [the white man of South Africa] with words a world he would otherwise not see because of a sign and a conscience racked with guilt and to make him feel what I felt when he contemptuously called me a ‘K[\*]ffir boy’” (*Boy* 3). As the passage suggests, Mathabane hopes to draw sympathy for the plight of Black people as

a collective by eliciting a vicarious identification with his own suffering. The assumptions within this gesture are, first, that white people are fundamentally ignorant about apartheid; second, that they can feel what Black people feel in real life and can do so through the mere act of reading; and, finally, that if white people feel what Black people feel, they will be compelled to bring about change.

In appealing to the conscience of white people, Mathabane's autobiography mirrors the agenda of nineteenth-century abolitionist novels of which Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (not coincidentally, another bestseller) is emblematic. At work in these texts are politics of sentimentality that rely, in Nancy Armstrong's terms, on "the principle that one individual comes to know how another feels by witnessing the spectacle of the other's suffering" (13). As Faye Halpern argues, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and other sentimental texts "connect identification . . . to political action" (xx). These works presume that the white identification with the oppressed that they aim to elicit can itself lead to counterhegemonic action. However, Blackness throws into crisis these assumptions given that Black people, as Frank B. Wilderson writes, are barred "from the conceptual framework of Human empathy" (*Red, White and Black* 12). Black people, in other words, are not granted the privilege of recognition.

In the attempt to prompt empathy from white readers through the mediated transference of pain—"to make him feel what I felt" (*Boy* 3)—Mathabane gives his readers ample chance to dwell on Black suffering. He does so without considering that white readers may derive pleasure from the distanced observation of Black pain. Saidiya Hartman shows in *Scenes of Subjection* that white readers' attempts to empathize with the enslaved rely on imagining oneself in the place of the slave and warns against the pitfalls of "an empathetic identification in which one substitutes the self for the other" (7). White empathy, Hartman contends, erases the pain of the slave and instead produces a narcissistic self-pity as the white subject who imagines herself as a slave will end up feeling sorry only for herself (19). Mathabane ignores that consuming spectacular narratives about Black pain and death can be a self-indulgent endeavor for white readers, a cathartic exercise through which white people attempt to relieve a "conscience racked with guilt" (*Boy* 3) and

position ourselves within an imaginary community of good white people. The voyeuristic white desire to access narratives of Black pain places Mathabane's autobiography in the long tradition of slave and neo-slave narratives avidly consumed by white readers. These narratives become bestsellers also because of their unintended capacity to make those of us who are white feel like good, moral subjects.

Having experienced white people's self-interested involvement in the struggle against racism, Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko challenged liberal assumptions such as those underlying Mathabane's attempt to change the minds and hearts of white people and enlist them to the cause of Black liberation. While Mathabane believes that white people can be persuaded to change their oppressive ways, Biko contends that it is futile to convince white people to act outside of their interests. Biko writes: "We must realise that our situation is not a mistake on the part of whites but a deliberate act, and that no amount of moral lecturing will persuade the white man to 'correct' the situation. The system concedes nothing without demand" (*I Write* 91). For Biko, trying to convert white people is unproductive and Black people must "reject the beggar tactics that are being forced on us by those who wish to appease our cruel masters" (91). Biko recognizes that colonialism is the calculated and collective creation of white people who have no interest in altering a condition we have intentionally produced to secure advantages for ourselves and future generations of white people. Liberation, Biko insists, lies in the hands of Black people alone.

Reading Mathabane's work in light of Biko's thought, as I do in this essay, brings into stark relief the ideological pitfalls and textual paradoxes that a commitment to liberalism produces in the autobiography. Black Consciousness philosophy, as reflected in Biko's work, grapples with the role that liberals, especially white liberals, play in the struggle for Black liberation. It matters that liberalism emerged in South Africa as a stronghold of British imperialism, rather than as the product of anticolonial struggle.<sup>7</sup> Charles Mills argues in *Black Rights/White Wrongs* that the European political ideology of liberalism must be understood as "racial liberalism" given that it is a fundamental instrument of colonial rule. Liberalism and liberal humanism equate the human with the

European, while Black people are relegated to what Frantz Fanon calls “a zone of nonbeing,” a location in which “the black man is not a man” (8). This is precisely the zone that Mathabane inhabits: the anti-Black world in which white people subject him to hunger, violence, deprivation, dispossession, and premature death. As he strives to be an individual—to be seen as a human being by white people—Mathabane unwittingly reveals the impossibility of achieving collective liberation for Black people from within the frames of liberalism.

In refusing to treat liberalism as an abstraction and refusing to disentangle liberal ideology from white people (its main proponents), Biko left a blueprint for understanding how institutional and individual racism work together to ensure the maintenance of the racist status quo.<sup>8</sup> Mathabane subscribes to the liberal tenet that “Blacks and whites come in different stripes. People are individuals” (“Interview: Mark Mathabane” 44). Biko, however, does not subdivide the white community into good and bad individuals but argues that white supremacy is sanctioned by the white community as a collective, for racism “works with unnerving totality, featuring both in the offensive and in our defense” (*I Write* 50). Within the totality of white power, Biko contends, white liberals pose a particularly insidious problem for Black people. Biko describes white liberals as “that curious bunch of nonconformists who explain their participation in negative terms: that bunch of do-gooders that goes under all sorts of names—liberals, leftists, etc. These are the people who argue that they are not responsible for white racism and the country’s ‘inhumanity to the black man’” (20). Biko indicts white liberals not simply for being uncommitted to racial justice, but for being at the forefront of preventing change through a variety of tactics aimed at perpetuating the racist status quo. As I will show, the white people that Mathabane describes in his book deploy many of these tactics, even as Mathabane attempts to demonstrate that white liberals are on the right side of history.

Of course, Biko was not alone in viewing white liberals as paramount obstacles to Black people’s quest for freedom. Black radical thinkers from Kwame Ture to Huey P. Newton have highlighted the dangers of white liberalism. Ture denounces the futility of appeals to the conscience of white people as follows:

We have repeatedly seen that political alliances based on appeals to conscience and decency are chancy things, simply because institutions and political organizations have no consciences outside their own special interests. The political and social rights of Negroes have been and always will be negotiable and expendable the moment they conflict with the interest of our 'allies.' (38)

Newton, too, critiques the white establishment's resistance to Black self-determination, arguing that "Black people desire to determine their own destiny. As a result, they are constantly inflicted with brutality by the occupying army, embodied by the police department" (149). Biko's critical position on liberalism, then, must be placed within a larger context of global Black resistance against white power and the centrality of the Black Radical Tradition to this resistance.<sup>9</sup>

As Biko indicts white liberals, he does not spare Black liberals from criticism. Some of the Black liberals that Biko criticizes were members or sympathizers of the mainly white Liberal Party, such as African National Congress (ANC) president and 1960 Nobel Prize winner Albert Luthuli, whose words about apartheid being "utterly indifferent to the suffering of individual persons" Mathabane cites in the first epigraph of *K\*ffir Boy*. According to Biko, Black liberals are preoccupied with a fallacious agenda: changing white people's image of Black people (More, *Biko* 181). Black Consciousness, instead, wants to change Black people's image of themselves, "to show the black people the value of their own standards and outlook" (Biko, *I Write* 30). Biko considers Black liberals dangerous because of their willingness to be defenders of whiteness and engage in what Biko defines as "beggar tactics" (91). Seeking out the help of white people is precisely Mathabane's strategy. In contrast with the Black Consciousness credo "Black man, you are on your own!" (Biko, *I Write* 91, 97), Mathabane argues, not without internal conflict, that Black salvation lies in white hands.

Still, a contradictory moment in the autobiography gives away that Mathabane himself is ambivalent about white people's commitment to antiracism. After having witnessed the violent repression that followed



the 1976 Soweto uprising, Mathabane writes: “We must start fighting for our rights. I and those of my generation thought we could talk to the white man and he would listen; but we were wrong. The white man listens to nothing but his fears, greed, and mistaken beliefs” (*Boy* 379). Despite this realization, Mathabane continues to place faith in white liberals, whom he views as “the only hope for South Africa” (353). To cope with the anguish of a lifetime of absolute subjection, Mathabane resorts to bad faith—“a flight from displeasing truths” (Gordon, *Bad Faith* 29). Bad faith leads Mathabane to rationalize away and suppress the racism of the white people whose help and approval he seeks. Mathabane insists that white South African liberals “are not racist. . . . They are fighting for what we are fighting for—an end to apartheid” (*Boy* 283). However, Mathabane fails to demonstrate that white liberals are committed to racial justice. Instead, he reveals precisely the opposite as the white liberals depicted in his autobiography ruthlessly exploit Black people, disavow white supremacy, and generally express an attitude that Biko describes as “being quite comfortable as things stand” (*I Write* 22). In this way, Mathabane’s autobiography unwittingly testifies to what Biko calls “the totality of the white power structure” (89), revealing how white people work as a collective across ideological boundaries to ensure the maintenance of the racist status quo. Read against the grain, then, *K\*ffir Boy* provides a powerful indictment of white antiracism: it suggests that there is no such thing.

### **I. Of Good Whites and Other Culprits**

*K\*ffir Boy* opens with the following sign:

WARNING

THIS ROAD PASSES THROUGH PROCLAIMED BANTU LOCATIONS, ANY PERSON WHO ENTERS THE LOCATIONS WITHOUT A PERMIT RENDERS HIMSELF LIABLE FOR PROSECUTION FOR CONVENING THE BANTU (URBAN AREAS) CONSOLIDATION ACT 1945, AND THE LOCATION REGULATION ACT OF THE CITY OF JOHANNESBURG. (3)

Looming large over the page, the sign stands as a testament to apartheid, providing material evidence of its segregationist policies. The sign warns white people to stay away from “Bantu locations,” the impoverished and segregated spaces called townships in which Black people were forced to live during apartheid and in which the majority of Black South Africans continue to live today. In Mathabane’s words, the sign “is meant to dissuade white people from entering the black world” (3). The sign also functions as a gate that “welcomes” white readers into the narrative, inviting us to glimpse a forbidden and foreign world that we can now access vicariously from the comfort of our sofa or desk chair.

It is curious that in an autobiography that tells the story of a Black boy subjected to the daily horrors of living under a racial dictatorship, the material symbol of racial segregation that opens the text is directed not at the people whose freedom and livelihood apartheid encroached upon, but at those who orchestrated and benefited from apartheid. The sign constructs what Robyn Wiegman calls “a mutuality of harm hypothesis that powerfully appends whites to the harmed position of people of color” (183). Obscuring the racially differential application of the law, Mathabane posits a false equivalence between the condition of Black people and white people, whose freedom of movement is imagined as being equally restricted. Contrary to what the sign suggests, apartheid influx control laws distinctively restricted the movement of Black people.<sup>10</sup> Signs such as the one in Mathabane’s narrative existed, but they were of little consequence for white people *de facto*. Biko makes this clear when he writes that “a white guy is free to move to Cape Town tomorrow, to Durban tomorrow, and some other place without being indexed, and I have got to go through a whole rigmarole of red tape in order to move from one area to another” (*I Write* 110). Only Black people were constantly surveilled and forced to carry the infamous pass that determined where they could live, work, and travel, while people classified as Coloured or Indian were not required to carry passes and certainly neither were white people (Biko, “Interview” 23).<sup>11</sup> The sign that opens Mathabane’s autobiography obscures how Black people, the vast majority of the South African population, were policed in a manner not comparable to any other racial group as a means of social control.

Mathabane further constructs a colorblind equivalence between the condition of Black and white people by contending that white people “are in some ways victims of apartheid, too” (*Boy* xi). This gesture transforms the agents of apartheid into its victims. Adding insult to injury, Mathabane turns Black people into culprits. It is striking how often he tells readers that most of the policemen who terrorize the Black population in the townships are themselves Black. The obsessive reiteration of this detail constructs Black people as central agents of apartheid while mitigating white responsibility. The mention of Black people who terrify Mathabane is not confined to police. The autobiography is so saturated with threatening, even animalistic, images of Black people that a naïve reader could be inclined to believe that the greatest threat that Mathabane faces are other Black people. Mathabane writes that he “froze with terror, thinking that [he] had entered a cannibal cave” (88) when he first visits a sangoma (whom he calls “witch doctor”); describes the men who attempt to take him to circumcision school as “two pitch-black men as huge and wild as grizzly bears” (223); writes about tsotsis (gangsters) hacking “dying dogs into bloody pulps” (265); and portrays the Mai-Mai as “notorious cannibals who regularly kidnapped people, carved them into pieces and sold these chunks of human flesh to witches and sorcerers back in the tribal reserves for use in voodoo ceremonies and in concocting magic potions” (101). It is significant that Mathabane uses terms such as “voodoo” (a religious tradition that is not practiced in South Africa) to indicate indigenous religions, refers to traditional healers using the derogatory term “witch doctors,” misrepresents the Mai-Mai as “cannibals,” and paints African religions and practices as irrational. These representations pander to a foreign white audience. They also speak to Mathabane’s rejection of indigenous South African traditions and his belief in the superiority of Western customs.

In the autobiography, Mathabane is emblematic of the colonial subject who has internalized the values of the colonizer and perceives these as being superior to African values. Mathabane the narrator evokes Sambo Diallo, the protagonist of Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s 1961 novel *L’aventure ambiguë* (*Ambiguous Adventure*). Sent to France to learn the ways of the West in the hope of returning home to use the acquired

knowledge to empower his people and help them confront colonial power, Diallo is seduced and perverted by white mores and ills. He becomes a cultural eunuch, castrated from his values and ideological frameworks. Mathabane, too, is subjected to “the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment” (Fanon 30). This is reflected not just in his rejection of African cultural practices, but also in his inability to sympathize with his father, who values these practices. It is also reflected in Mathabane’s love for the English language and his desire to master it as a means to achieve the humanity denied to him. Mathabane writes: “When I finally learned how to count up to ten, and to spell my first and last names, in English, I was so overjoyed that I constantly begged my mother to listen to me ‘talk’ English” (*Boy* 141). The subject of Mathabane’s autobiography is the exceptional Black man who has learned the ways of white people yet cannot free himself from racial subjection, illustrating how the path to humanization via assimilation is itself a racist trap. As Fanon puts it, “[t]he colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards” (18). This elevation is, by design, always incomplete so that it cannot prevent Mathabane from being “an object in the midst of other objects” (Fanon 109). For Mathabane, the cost of identifying with white society is his alienation from the Black community, which appears as a backdrop in a narrative fixated on documenting the gestures of white “benefactors.” The alienation runs deep—to the extent that, for Mathabane, Black people can also represent a “phobogenic object, a stimulus to anxiety” (Fanon 151). Ironically, friendships with white people appear to provide Mathabane with solace in the midst of the terror that marks township life under apartheid.

If other Black people scare Mathabane, they seem to pose an even bigger threat to white people, so much so that the autobiography capitulates to the swart gevaar (Black peril) propaganda that the South African government fabricated and disseminated during apartheid. Mathabane writes that, when the 1976 student uprising spread to Alexandra, “[i]f it had not been for the cordon the army had formed around Alexandra, there would have been a massacre of whites” (*Boy* 265). Mathabane also claims that, after Biko’s murder, he attended meetings in which “black

youth sought ways to get hold of submachine guns and grenades with which to storm white kindergartens and schools and shopping malls in the name of liberation” (297). Never did a Black massacre of white people occur in South Africa, nor have Black people assaulted white neighborhoods. Mathabane nonetheless reproduces the myth that white South Africans as a collective were vulnerable to Black violence. This is problematic given that the *swart gevaar* myth, as Biko shows, served as a powerful means to garner consent among white South Africans across ideological boundaries and consolidate white liberal support for the apartheid regime.<sup>12</sup> Published at the height of apartheid repression, Mathabane’s autobiography feeds into white narratives of Black people as threatening.

As Mathabane represents Black people as complicit with apartheid, he suggests that white people are fundamentally ignorant about racism and live in a world that they do not know or understand. The warning sign that opens *K\*ffir Boy* is followed by an explanatory commentary that further mystifies the workings of white power and reproduces the myth of white ignorance.<sup>13</sup> Mathabane writes:

The above message can be found written on larger-than-life signs staked on every road leading into Alexandra, where I was born and raised, or for that matter, into any other black ghetto of South Africa. It is meant to dissuade white people from entering the black world. As a result, more than 90 percent of white South Africans go through a lifetime without seeing firsthand the inhuman conditions under which blacks have to survive. (3)

The township of Alexandra is merely a few kilometers away from the affluent white suburb of Sandton. Even so, the reader is led to believe that “more than 90 percent of white South Africans” did not know that Black people suffered immensely under a white supremacist regime.<sup>14</sup> Against his own evidence, Mathabane insists that white people are ignorant of the conditions in which Black people live and assumes that, if only white people knew better, they would act differently. In contrast to Mathabane, Biko rejects the myth of white ignorance and argues that white people “sit to enjoy a privileged position that they do not deserve, *are aware of*

*this*, and therefore spend their time trying to justify why they are doing so” (*I Write* 19; emphasis added). If the problem that Mathabane sets up is white ignorance, the solution he proposes is education for white people—precisely the kind of education that his book embodies.

Wilderson writes that the radicalization of white South African liberals in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which was a direct consequence of Black Consciousness’ critique of their hypocrisy, was succeeded in the 1980s by white liberals’ resentment against Black Consciousness and their unwillingness to let Black people decide the terms of the struggle (“Biko” 101). In reality, already before the 1980s, white liberals feared the rise of Black Consciousness and mobilized against their own potential loss of power. Alan Paton’s defense of apartheid and attempt to delegitimize Black Consciousness testify to this fact.

Perhaps the best-known white South African liberal, Paton is made to embody the voice of reason in Mathabane’s autobiography and continues to be praised among white South Africans as an antiracist activist who fought for the abolition of apartheid. But his own work reveals a more somber reality. In “Black Consciousness” (1972), Paton attacks Biko and the South African Student Organization (SASO) for directing their critique at white liberals. He paints Black Consciousness as a dangerous organization and the potential for Black rule in South Africa as a threat that white people should prevent at all costs:

Does Mr. Biko believe that black people in power would have a Nobility that white people in power do not? . . . I fully realize that Mr. Biko is not concerned with the needs of white people in South Africa, but I am. White South Africans—unless they are going to be driven out of Africa altogether—need to be confronted with the realities of Black Power and Black consciousness—and by the realities of their demands—not by the kind of idealistic platitudes that were once supposed to be the monopoly of liberals. (9)

Paton makes clear that he is “concerned with the needs of white people in South Africa” and that he considers “black people in power” a threat to white people. Paton is concerned about Black political empowerment.

He can accept that Black people are “proud of black skin,” but not that Black Consciousness gets “mixed up with black power” (9). For Paton, power must remain firmly in white hands. In the same vein, Paton insists on speaking for Black people, illustrating how white people, as Biko puts it, “see nothing anomalous in the fact that they alone are arguing about the future of 17 million blacks—in a land which is the natural backyard of black people. Any proposals for change emanating from the black world are viewed with great indignation” (*I Write* 89). Adamant about keeping the racist status quo in place, Paton tries to maintain control of the terms of liberation.

It makes sense, then, that in the same essay Paton defends the racist statement that he had made during an interview in London, namely that “perhaps apartheid is worth a try” (10). However, Paton argues that in making that statement he is not “speaking about apartheid at all,” but about “those instruments of power which the Government has created, namely the territorial authorities” (10). Also called Bantustans, Homelands, or tribal reserves (the term used by Mathabane), the territorial authorities that Paton invokes were reservations—veritable concentration camps—that the apartheid government created in order to keep the vast majority of the land and resources in white hands and force Black people into the most inhospitable regions, create a vast pool of perpetually exploitable labor, divide the Black population to stifle resistance, and manipulate international opinion by making it appear as though Black people had achieved some kind of independence. Biko vehemently opposed the Bantustans, arguing that “[t]he whole idea is made to appear as if for us, while working against our very existence” (*I Write* 82). Paton disavows his support of apartheid, yet the Bantustans *are* apartheid. They represent one key implementation of the separate development policy, which aimed to keep Black people in perpetual poverty and powerlessness while locking land and wealth in the hands of white people, where they remain today.<sup>15</sup>

Paton’s defense of apartheid and his delegitimization of the Black Consciousness Movement illustrate how white liberals worked alongside white nationalists to protect white supremacy in South Africa. Despite this reality, Mathabane writes that white liberals “are the only

hope for South Africa" (*Boy* 237) and that his "only chance to make something of [himself] depended very much on [his] cultivation of genuine friends among whites" (240). *K\*ffir Boy* thus reproduces a white savior narrative that supports the myths of Black inferiority and white superiority. Mathabane's asymmetrical characterization of Black and white people mirrors colonial modes of representation. This disparity in characterization is present already in the dedication: "This book is dedicated to those handful of white South Africans who helped me grow as a human being and a tennis player, and with whom I share the hope of someday seeing a South Africa free of apartheid; and to Stan and Marjory Smith, who believed in me and gave me a new lease on life by providing me with the opportunity to realize my dream." Mathabane mentions "white South Africans" before he alludes to his family and the millions of Black people "who still remain slaves in the prison house of apartheid." Stan and Marjory Smith, the white USAmericans who helped Mathabane get a tennis scholarship, are mentioned by name, while his Aunt Bushy and Uncle Piet, who made great sacrifices to help put him through school, are not acknowledged. In fact, no Black person is named in the dedication.

This trend continues throughout the autobiography as Mathabane mentions hardly any Black friends, yet takes the reader through a litany of white acquaintances who are given names and a round characterization. The few exceptional white people who were arrested after Biko's murder are also named, while the much larger number of Black people who were arrested are lumped together and left nameless. Mathabane writes: "Dozens of black leaders were also detained, including several prominent whites opposed to apartheid: Beyers Naude of the Christian Institute, and Donald Woods, editor of the *East London Dispatch* and a friend of Biko's" (*Boy* 297). Mathabane also silences the influence of the Black Consciousness Movement on the 1976 Soweto uprising, mentioning instead that the government blamed the ANC for the protests. Biko himself is named only twice in the book: first in a newspaper headline announcing his death and then, in the passage above, as a friend of Woods. Mathabane only says about Black Consciousness that it is "a body formed in the late 1960s



and made up of black, Coloured and Indian students whose goal was to fight for the ending of apartheid without the assistance of what it called ‘paternalistic white liberalism’” (296). This emphasis on Black Consciousness’ critique of white liberalism infers a self-conscious anxiety about Mathabane’s own position in relation to white liberals.

Naming white liberals who were arrested by the apartheid government serves Mathabane’s larger agenda to demonstrate that white liberals are not racist. In the preface, he describes meeting the Smiths—a white family who “did not fit the stereotypes” that Mathabane had about white people—as the “turning point” in his life (xi). “Most blacks,” Mathabane writes, “exposed daily to the virulent racism and dehumanized and embittered by it, do not believe that such whites exist” (xi). Mathabane knows better. His heart boils “with resentment and anger” (172) when his teacher argues that there is no such thing as a nice white person. Mathabane makes it a point to prove the reader otherwise. And yet, not even the Smiths, the first “nice white people” (171) that he encounters in his life, are as nice as Mathabane would like his readers to believe.

An English family for whom Mathabane’s grandmother Ellen works as a gardener, the Smiths give Ellen old comic books that spark Mathabane’s passion for reading and soon convince him that not all whites are racist. Eventually, Ellen begs Mrs. Smith to let her bring her grandchild to the house, a meeting that Ellen describes as “a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity” (184). To prepare him for the occasion, Mathabane’s mother lectures him on how to behave among white people: “Talk only when talked to; wear a smile, preferably your widest one, at all times; say, ‘Yes, madam,’ to Mrs. Smith, and ‘Yes, *baas*,’ to Mr. Smith, and ‘Yes, master,’ to their son” (184). She gives him “the most thorough bath ever” as he is “to spend an entire day among white people, the cleanest people on earth. The last thing they need is a filthy black boy contaminating their home” (185). The association between Black people and contagion implicit in the reference to Mathabane as a “filthy black boy” hinges on colonial discourses that portray Africans as carriers of disease and death.<sup>16</sup> By imparting racist ideologies onto her son, Mathabane’s mother contributes to planting feelings of shame and inferiority into his young mind.

Once at the Smiths' house, an even more pitiful play unfolds. Mrs. Smith addresses Mathabane as "pickaninny" and her own son Clyde, who is the same age as Mathabane, as "little master," while Mathabane uses "pidgin English" to communicate with her in a deliberate performance of racial subordination (188). Mathabane experiences a Fanonian moment in his encounter with Clyde. It does not matter that Mathabane is as neat, clean, and well-mannered as anyone can possibly be. Neither his mother's thorough bath, nor her lessons about etiquette can prevent him from being subjected to Clyde's violent words: "I don't play with K[\*]ffirs" (190). Clyde sees in Mathabane nothing but a thing, an object, just like the white child who points to Fanon in the train and yells, "Look, a Negro!" (Fanon 109). Meanwhile, Clyde's mother—similar to the speaker who tells Fanon, "Take no notice, sir, he does not know that you are as civilized as we" (Fanon 113)—disavows responsibility for her son's racism, suggesting that Clyde does not know any better as he learned "all that rubbish about K[\*]ffirs in the classroom" (Mathabane, *Boy* 190). She continues by saying, "You know, Ellen, I simply don't understand why those damn uncivilized Boers from Pretoria teach children such things. . . . I sometimes wish I hadn't left England" (190), as though there was no racism in England and she was not benefitting from it herself. As Mrs. Smith projects her own racism onto the Afrikaners, one cannot help but wonder what kind of education Clyde is receiving at home. Mathabane, who blames only the Afrikaners for apartheid in his work, colludes with Mrs. Smith in disavowing the role that other Europeans, and the British in particular, played in maintaining racial dictatorship in South Africa.

Far from being a rapport between equals, the relationship between Mathabane and the Smiths is one of racialized exploitation and subordination. In a key scene, Mrs. Smith gives Mathabane an old wooden tennis racket and encourages him to practice. The tennis racket that will change Mathabane's destiny is the meager recompense that little Mark gets for having done what Mrs. Smith calls "'a spending job' in cleaning her silver and brassware, and shining Mr. Smith's half a dozen pairs of shoes" (208). Mathabane received "the most thorough bath ever" only to clean at the Smiths' house, revealing how it is the labor of Black

people that allows white people to allegedly be “the cleanest people on earth.” Packaged as an altruistic gift that aims to inspire Mathabane to make something of himself and become the “next Arthur Ashe” (208), Mrs. Smith’s old tennis racket is not a generous offering; it is a miserable compensation for the child labor that Mathabane endures at the Smiths’ home. Mrs. Smith’s “gifting” of the old tennis racket is an example of what Paulo Freire calls “false generosity” (44), a gesture grounded in systemic exploitation and dependence. “In order to have the continued opportunity to express their ‘generosity,’” Freire writes, “the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this ‘generosity,’ which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty” (44). Mrs. Smith sees nothing wrong with exploiting both Ellen and her young grandchild. The gift that she gives Mathabane is dispossession itself.

Once he begins to play tennis, Mathabane meets other white liberals who invite him to play in white-only clubs. Again, Mathabane insists that these whites “are not racist” (*Boy* 283). Yet none of the white people that Mathabane describes is interested in changing the racist status quo. Tom, a Black man who also plays tennis in the white-only clubs, tells Mathabane that the white people who run these clubs are

mostly Germans and English liberals who don’t mind—in fact they like—mixing with blacks. The right blacks that is. Yes, there are a few Afrikaner bigots, but who cares? Anyway, these liberals love me because I’m neat, I’m in secondary school, I can speak English, Afrikaans and German fluently. What more could white liberals want? If all our people were like me, I strongly believe there would be no need for apartheid, not among white liberals anyway. (228)

Tom obscures the economic motives at the heart of colonialism and apartheid while he places the onus for racism squarely on the shoulders of Black people: if only all Black people were “neat,” educated, and spoke European languages, Tom’s argument goes, “there would be no need for apartheid.” For Tom, the problems are not institutional racism and anti-Blackness, but the fact that most Black people lack education.

Clearly, to cite Ture, Tom is “deluded by the fiction that if the black man would educate himself and behave himself, he would be acceptable enough to leave the ranks of the oppressed and have tea with the Queen” (89). Tom, a liberal himself, transforms anti-Black racism into a matter of class. At the same time, Tom tellingly contradicts himself and reveals that white liberals are not actually willing to accept Black people as equals. They merely interact with *some* token Black people on the condition that these are, in Tom’s words, the “right blacks”—those who are educated and middle class, the kind of Black people who white liberals consider to be, as Ture puts it, “the ‘acceptable’ Negroes” (37). These are the white liberals who, according to Biko,

[a]s a testimony to their claim of complete identification with the blacks . . . call a few “intelligent and articulate” blacks to “come around for tea at home,” where all present ask each other the same old hackneyed question “how can we bring about change in South Africa?” The more such tea-parties one calls the more of a liberal he is and the freer he shall feel from the guilt that harnesses and binds his conscience. Hence, he moves around his white circles—whites-only hotels, beaches, restaurants and cinemas—with a lighter load, feeling that he is not like the rest of the others. (*I Write 22*)

By interacting with what they perceive to be a selected group of “intelligent and articulate” Black people, Biko argues, white liberals attempt to merely appease their own guilty conscience and serve their own interests.

Mathabane shows how at liberal parties, to use Biko’s image, the tea is not free. Rather than being committed to the struggle for Black liberation, the white liberals that Mathabane befriends exploit and manipulate him for their own gain. At the same time, they actively disavow any responsibility for white supremacy. Wilfred, a German expat whom Mathabane considers a good friend and his “unofficial tennis sponsor” (Mathabane, *Boy* 237) ironically argues that he could never live in South Africa because of its racism, yet he does live in South Africa comfortably. From time to time, Wilfred gives Mathabane money, tennis balls, and other small items. Mathabane writes that people like Wilfred reinforce

his belief that there are white people “who would bend over backward to help black people—not as servants, but as equals. Such white people are the only hope for South Africa; the more their numbers increase, the better the chances for peaceful change” (237). Yet if Wilfred and his friends are the yardstick for white liberals’ commitment to Black liberation, the situation is dire indeed.

Mathabane makes visible how white people collude across national, ethnic, and ideological differences in silencing white domination. Disavowing any complicity with apartheid, Wilfred tells Mathabane that he knows “absolutely nothing” (228) about the conditions that Black people endure: “You know, we whites have never heard about the atrocities you’ve just described” (272). Wilfred proclaims not only his own ignorance (and thus innocence), but the universal ignorance of white people in South Africa with regard to the atrocities of the white government. In a gesture of apparent benevolence, Wilfred invites Mathabane to come to his ranch to “educate us about the reality we whites don’t know but should know” (228). Mathabane embarks on this educational campaign on Wilfred’s personal ranch in a bar full of white people. Except for two servants, he is the only Black person in the building. Soon, the racist remarks and active disavowal of white supremacy begin. Hans, another German expatriate, asks Mathabane why Black people are destroying clinics and killing each other, insinuating that Black people’s problems are caused not by white people, but by other Black people.

Another white liberal from Germany, Ziegfried, analogously silences white supremacy and white privilege as he argues that middle-class Black people with beautiful homes have told him that things have improved in the townships. An unnamed character that Mathabane simply calls “an Afrikaner” meanwhile argues that white people have to defend themselves against Black people, whom they have civilized and converted “from pagan savages into Christ-loving human beings” (276). The argument that the Afrikaner advances ironically represents the stance of the English colonizers, whom Mathabane absolves for their racism. None of the white people present in the bar takes responsibility for racism. The interactions at the “tea party,” to again use Biko’s image, shows that Wilfred and his friends are not actually ignorant about racial injustice.

They are actively invested in silencing racism and using Mathabane to further their performance of white innocence.

The autobiography also shows how colorblindness is central to white liberal discourse. Mathabane's relationship with Helmut, another German expat that he meets at the ranch, is similarly fraught with racism even as Mathabane contends that "[o]nce more [he] had befriended a white man who didn't fit the stereotype" (277). When Mathabane tells Helmut that some Black people have threatened him for socializing with white people, Helmut responds: "If there is anything I can do to help you . . . please let me know. I am your friend. I'd even risk my life for you. . . . I don't see you as a black man but as another human being, with the same needs, feelings and dreams as any white man" (280). In resorting to colorblind discourse, Helmut performs an action that, on the surface, might seem egalitarian; he implies that ignoring race, in Toni Morrison's words, is "a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture" (79–80). But there is nothing graceful or uninterested in Helmut's deployment of colorblind rhetoric, which appears antiracist on the surface while it makes humanity the prerogative of whiteness and sustains white power. Notice how Helmut posits being a Black man as antithetical to humanity. Contingent on Helmut's announcement that he views Mathabane "as another human being" is Helmut's disavowal of Mathabane's Blackness.

Rather than risk his life for Mathabane, Helmut puts Mathabane's life in danger. Helmut insists on playing tennis with Mathabane in white-only parks and driving him around areas in which Black people are not allowed to go. When Mathabane objects, Helmut answers: "I do what I want to do. I don't believe in apartheid laws, I told you. You're my friend, just like any other white friend I have. Are you afraid?" (278). It is easy for Helmut to bask in bravado—white privilege allows him to ignore apartheid laws and roam freely around Johannesburg. That Mathabane does not enjoy the same luxury does not concern Helmut, who wants to feel the thrill of phony rebelliousness. In the process, he displaces his own racism onto white South Africans. Helmut asks Mathabane: "How can you blacks forgive them if this racism goes on much longer?" (279). Forgive *them*. But Helmut, he is not racist. Or so he wants Mathabane to believe.

The white liberals that Mathabane describes actively refuse to challenge the racist status quo. With the hope to meet white players who may help him achieve his dream of living in the United States, Mathabane decides to play in the white-only South African Breweries (SAB) Open tennis tournament, thereby opting to follow his ambition over supporting the collective interests of Black people. In any case, Black tennis has no resources to offer Mathabane, who finds himself between the proverbial rock and a hard place. When Mathabane is banned from Black tennis for legitimizing apartheid and realizes that white organizers are using him, he confides in Owen Williams, another white liberal acquaintance and fellow tennis player:

“I am being used, am I not?” I said.

“Yes, in a way,” Owen Williams said bluntly. “But, before you make up your mind, let me tell you this: the future of black tennis lies in the hands of whites, any way you choose to see it. The attitudes of whites have to change. . . . But instead of helping, what is the Black Tennis Association doing? Using tennis as a political tool. It won’t work. . . . Things have to be done slowly. Real change is gradual and often painful. Putting pressure on the white man, trying to blackmail him, won’t work. You know these Afrikaners, pressure only makes them more stubborn, more fearful of change. . . . And this pressure by the Black Tennis Association and the rest of the world is counterproductive. I see the point, but I don’t agree with it. All it can do is make whites less committed to change. . . . This is not the time for your tennis leaders to turn their back on us. You’ve got to help us change.” (303)

Owen, like Paton, is unwilling to let Black people set the terms of their own liberation. He brands the actions of the Black Tennis Association as counterproductive and believes that change is occurring *too fast*. In this way, he displays a commitment to what Biko terms “[c]omfortable politics in the sense that we must move at a pace that doesn’t rock the boat” (“Interview” 29). Owen embodies the white liberal who sustains the status quo—who is, as Martin Luther King Jr. writes, “more

devoted to 'order' than to justice, who prefers tranquillity to equality" (93). Owen does not want his peace and privileges to be disrupted by boycotts. Though he does not say this directly, he argues that he opposes the actions of the Black Tennis Association because they will make white people even less willing to change. According to this logic, the only white people who need to change are Afrikaners, and Black people need to help them by being patient and doing nothing.

With white friends like these, Mathabane's "beggar tactics" (Biko, *I Write* 91) reveal themselves to be indeed necessarily fallacious. At this point in the narrative, Mathabane's Black friends, who remain unnamed unlike his white "friends," have almost all been arrested or killed for protesting during the 1976 uprising. In the meantime, Mathabane compromises himself by playing in the SAB Open. His role model is Arthur Ashe, whom Mathabane believes has achieved the greatest feat that a Black man can attain by earning the respect of white people. Mathabane wonders: "What if I too were some day to attain the same fame and fortune as Arthur Ashe? Would whites respect me as they did him? Would I be as free as he is?" (*Boy* 210). There is one place in the world, Mathabane believes, where Black people have already achieved freedom, an environment of "miracles" (234) that enables Black people to flourish into athletes of the caliber of Ashe and Muhammad Ali: the United States of America. By the time he writes *K\*ffir Boy* Mathabane knows from experience that the United States is no Canaan for Black people, yet in the book he represents the country as an earthly paradise—nothing less than "the Promised Land" (292, 342, 345)—in which he "can breathe freedom" (301). The message is that South Africa needs the same regime as the United States, the alleged locus of racial enlightenment. No wonder, then, that white US reviewers have reveled in Mathabane's idealization of the United States.<sup>17</sup> But while Mathabane imagines Ashe as a cosmopolitan subject who has transcended race, neither of them can leave race behind. Regardless of their achieved or imminent prominence as successful athletes, as Black men they continue to be systematically subjected to discrimination and dehumanization. Mathabane wants to be an individual, yet as individuation is a white privilege his attempt to sidestep race and be



recognized by white people is tragically bound to perpetuate the racist system that he aims to escape.

## II. Conclusion

Arguably the most popular literary work by a South African author published in the United States, *K\*ffir Boy* cannot be understood outside the politics of white liberal tutelage that shape it. The autobiography presents a puzzle for literary interpretation. How can a text that aims to call attention to the atrocious realities of apartheid and shake white people's "conscience racked with guilt" (3) not only absolve white people for racism but also soothe that guilt? Reading Mathabane's autobiography in light of Biko's Black Consciousness philosophy shows that the answer lies in its liberal politics, which are inevitably in conflict with the goal of abolishing white supremacy.

A fundamental contradiction animates the work. Mathabane argues that he writes "with the hope that the rest of the world will finally understand why apartheid cannot be reformed: it must be abolished" (*Boy* ix). Yet, as the autobiography espouses a liberal agenda that calls for the reform of Black individuals rather than the dismantlement of the racist infrastructure, places the hope for Black liberation in the hands of white people, puts individual success above collective empowerment, and portrays the United States as a racial paradise, it colludes with the white power structure that it aims to disrupt. In doing so, the book demonstrates that the attempt to fold Black people into the logics of liberalism upholds the racism that liberalism depends upon. It makes sense, then, that liberal Black authors like Mathabane are heralded by the white establishment and that *K\*ffir Boy* continues to be taught in US high schools and universities, while Biko's work is marginalized in South African and US curricula alike.

The ongoing popularity of Mathabane's autobiography has important implications in our time, in which the discourse of white injury and the swart gevaar propaganda have gained renewed traction across national borders. In South Africa, this is visible in the popularity of crime novels by white authors that portray white people as subjects under siege. Noticeably, the novels of Afrikaner author Deon Meyer, South Africa's

most famous crime fiction writer, systematically silence white economic power, relieve white characters of responsibility for racism, and reproduce the ideology of white injury, which portrays white people as oppressed in the current racial order.<sup>18</sup> In reference to Afrikaner detective and serial protagonist Benny Griessel, for example, Meyer writes without irony in *Icarus* (2016) that “he was white in a world of affirmative action. Basically fucked” (66). In a more recent novel, *The Woman in the Blue Cloak* (2017), the character Vaughn Cupido, who, significantly, is a person of color, says to Benny: “Colour only applies to whites who have never suffered. You don’t have colour, Benna” (46). Meyer’s novels are consistently committed to disavowing the socio-economic power that white people hold in post-1994 South Africa and representing white people as victims. Meyer is thus far from having, as Sam Naidu argues, “downgraded his detectives’ narrative of white injury” (115), illustrating the complicity of critics in silencing the workings of racism in white post-apartheid literature.

The discourse of white injury is confined neither to fiction nor to South Africa. The myth of the “assailed white race” is evident in propaganda videos by US white supremacist David Duke falsely claiming that “white genocide” is rampant in South Africa, Australian home affairs minister Peter Dutton’s 2018 outlandish statement that white South African farmers are being “persecuted,” or Donald Trump’s equally concerning 2018 tweet proclaiming the alleged “large scale killing of farmers” in South Africa.<sup>19</sup> In reality, white South African farmers are “*far less likely* to be the targets of violent crime than the general population. That’s true both for murders and for other ‘contact crimes’ such as burglary, sexual assault and attempted murder” (Holmes; emphasis added). The white discourse about farm murders thus reveals itself as a racist tactic. These present-day reverberations of the swart gevaar propaganda seek to turn white people—the perpetrators of anti-Black violence and dispossession—into victims. They do so to deliberately mystify the ongoing realities of white supremacy and Black suffering in South Africa, where the life expectancy for Black people is among the lowest in the world and where white people, who represent merely 8.9 percent of the population, continue to own the vast majority of the land

and wealth.<sup>20</sup> Nowhere near being oppressed, white South Africans are actually wealthier now than during apartheid, while Black poverty in the country has worsened since 1994 (Legassick 506). These are realities that white people, actively and globally, seek to conceal.

If these overt resuscitations of the swart gevaar propaganda are worrisome, even more concerning are the more covert strategies deployed by many liberals, especially white liberals, who continue to devote their scholarship to disavowing the power that white people hold in South African society and globally. These tactics, as James Baldwin writes, are “really much worse” and consist of a “system of lies, evasions, and naked oppression designed to pretend that it isn’t so” (84). Self-identified liberal or leftist South African scholars routinely silence racism by shifting the conversation from race to class. Devan Pillay’s introduction in the special issue of *New South African Review* on inequality (2018) is a case in point. Despite the fact that the vast majority of Black people in South Africa continue to be poor and the so-called Black middle class holds no accumulated wealth, Pillay argues that “a rising black elite since 1994 reveals that a fundamental level inequality is based on class conflict” (1). Even as white people continue to control the South African economy, many white academics in particular argue that, in post-1994 South Africa, there has been a “shift from race to class,” as Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass write in *Class, Race, and Inequality in South Africa* (2005). This claim is not new. During apartheid, Biko already contended with white liberals who insisted that “the situation is a class struggle rather than a racial one” (Biko, *I Write* 89). Still, the publication of race denialist scholarship in South Africa has reached epidemic proportions since the 1994 democratic dispensation and shows no sign of slowing down.<sup>21</sup>

Carefully interrogating the racial politics of *K\*ffir Boy*, then, is more important today than ever. Equally crucial is reading the work against the grain to make visible how Mathabane provides important counter-knowledge about the workings of anti-Blackness and white supremacy. Relieving white people from collective responsibility for upholding the racist status quo, Mathabane argues that white liberals “are fighting for what we are fighting for—an end to apartheid” (*Boy* 283). Yet

Mathabane reveals the exact opposite, namely that white liberals are key agents of white supremacy. So central to the functioning of the racist infrastructure is white liberal racism that, despite Mathabane's active repression, it forcibly pushes its way into the text. In this way, *K\*ffir Boy* unwittingly supports Biko's argument about the totality of white power and shows how white liberals collude with white nationalists to ensure the maintenance of the racist status quo. Mathabane's autobiography, then, reveals not only the fallacies of liberalism and the impossibility of white antiracism, but also the vital importance of Black Consciousness in the ongoing Black struggle for freedom, in South Africa and beyond.

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### Notes

- 1 In a note included in the autobiography, Mathabane writes: "The word *K[\*]ffir* is of Arabic origin. It means 'infidel.' In South Africa it is used disparagingly by most whites to refer to blacks." Given that it is a disparaging racial epithet, I have chosen to censor the word *k\*ffir* in this essay. In the Works Cited, I have found it necessary to keep the integrity of the spelling in order to assist students and scholars trying to locate sources on Mathabane's book.
- 2 While *K\*ffir Boy* sold thousands of copies, especially after Mathabane's appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, the sequel *K\*ffir Boy in America* (1989) did not reach the popularity of Mathabane's debut autobiography. On the sequel, see Boelhower's "Shifting Forms of Sovereignty: Immigrant Parents and Ethnic Autobiographers."
- 3 Mathabane addresses these critiques in "The Blight of Black Racism," which problematically argues that Black people can be racist. For an essay that challenges the argument that Black people can be racist, see Mngxitama's "Blacks Can't Be Racist."
- 4 The first US edition of Modisane's *Blame Me on History* appeared in 1986. Not surprisingly, Mathabane wrote the foreword to this edition.
- 5 For example, Nancy Robinson presents *K\*ffir Boy* as an ideal text for fostering "multicultural awareness" (68) in US high school curricula. Similarly, Brown advocates teaching the book in high school English classes, arguing that it can "raise student's (*sic*) consciousness about racism and oppression" (281).

- 6 Liberalism as a political philosophy refers to the ideology heralding individualism, equal rights, freedom of choice, and moral egalitarianism developed in Western Europe in the seventeenth century in opposition to the feudal values inherited from the medieval order (Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, 11–12).
- 7 On liberalism in South Africa, see Maloka's *Friends of the Natives*.
- 8 Biko defines racism as "discrimination by a group against another for the purposes of subjugation and maintaining subjugation. In other words, one cannot be a racist unless he has the power to subjugate" (*I Write* 25). See also Ture and Hamilton's chapter "White Power: The Colonial Situation" in *Black Power* for a definition of racism and for the distinction between institutional and individual racism.
- 9 On the Black Radical Tradition, see Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism*.
- 10 I am using the term Black not to describe everyone who was considered a person of color in apartheid South Africa, but only to indicate the people whom the apartheid government described as Africans, Bantus or Natives. This recognizes that Black people were placed at the bottom of the racial hierarchy and deliberately treated differently from people who were classified as Coloured or Indian.
- 11 Biko's work reveals how the apartheid government strategically treated various racialized groups differently as a divide-and-conquer tactic aimed at stifling collective organizing. In Biko's words, "[t]hat we are oppressed by varying degrees is a deliberate design to stratify us not only socially but also in terms of aspirations" (*I Write* 52). The policy of divide and rule, as Farred has shown, is certainly not an invention of the apartheid government, but one that colonizers have deployed since their arrival in 1652, leaving a racialized system that the National Party could easily codify into law (Farred 224).
- 12 Biko writes that "[t]he Nationalist party has perhaps many more English votes than one imagines. All whites collectively recognise in it a strong bastion against the highly played-up *swart gevaar*. One must not underestimate the deeply embedded fear of the black man so embedded in white society" (*I Write* 77).
- 13 I borrow the term "white ignorance" from Mills, who in *The Racial Contract* argues that, with regard to questions relative to race and racism, white people display an "inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance" (18). Mills considers this epistemology a ubiquitous kind of ignorance produced through racial domination. Citing sociologist Woody Doane, Mills argues that white people "exhibit a general inability to perceive the persistence of discrimination and the effects of the more subtle forms of institutional discrimination" (Mills, "White Ignorance" 28). This is problematic, however, as it assumes that white people are generally ignorant about racial domination and, therefore, innocent. As it turns out, Mathabane makes the same assumption in his autobiography, which reproduces the myth of white ignorance. For an extended critique of white ignorance, which is beyond the scope of this essay, see my article "On

- White Ignorance, White Shame, and Other Pitfalls in Critical Philosophy of Race.”
- 14 Mathabane repeats this argument in a 1989 *New York Times* interview. He is asked: “Is it possible that South African whites know as little about what is happening to South African blacks as you suggest in your first book?” Mathabane responds: “The average Westerner who follows the stories about South Africa knows more about black life than the average white South African. More than 90 percent of South Africans go through a lifetime without entering the ghetto” (“Long Island”).
- 15 The architect of apartheid Hendrick Verwoerd made clear that he viewed separate development as a central means through which white people could maintain power: “We want to keep South Africa White . . . [and] ‘keeping it White’ can only mean one thing, namely White domination, not ‘leadership,’ not ‘guidance,’ but ‘control,’ ‘supremacy.’ If we are agreed that it is the desire of the people that the White man should be able to protect himself by retaining White domination, we say that it can be achieved by separate development” (qtd. in More, “Biko” 51).
- 16 On colonial discourses of Black contagion, see Lund’s “‘Healing the Nation.’”
- 17 Grossman, for example, writes in a 1989 review that “for all its faults, America remains a land of miracles. . . . This reader, for one, eagerly awaits Mathabane’s further adventures in the Promised Land” (3).
- 18 On white injury see, for example, Carroll’s *Affirmative Reaction*, Gutiérrez-Jones’ *Critical Race Narratives*, and Wiegman’s *Object Lessons*.
- 19 See Duke, “White Genocide in South Africa” (video) and “US President Donald Trump’s Tweet on Land Seizures, ‘Killing of Farmers’ Angers South Africa.”
- 20 On racial inequality in South Africa, see, for example, Mngxitama’s “Blacks Can’t be Racist,” Ntsebeza’s “The Land Question,” and the South African Human Rights Commission’s *Research Brief on Race and Inequality in South Africa, 2013–2017*.
- 21 I examine the silencing of racism in post-1994 South African scholarship on race in “The Rhetorics of Racial Power: Enforcing Colorblindness in Post-Apartheid Scholarship on Race” and “On the Transportability, Malleability, and Longevity of Colorblindness: Reproducing White Supremacy in Brazil and South Africa.”

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