

Introduction to Steve Biko's *I Write What I Like*

by Lewis Gordon

Steve Bantu Biko was a courageous man. This is not to say that he was callously neglectful of the value of life, including his own, but rather he was a man for whom life was so valuable that the fear of death could be transcended. The consequence was that he found a way for word and deed to meet and thus to achieve the urgently political and the genuinely liberating. Brutalized to death in the flesh, he left his words to unfold through three decades in a continued challenge to every human being to carry on the fight for our humanity. Dust though his body has become, his ideas live on. You hold in your hand, dear reader, a classic work in black political thought and the liberation struggle for all humankind. I mention both to emphasize the paradox offered by blackness as the limit—as the periphery or the margin—in the modern, racist world where whites are treated as the carriers of universal humanity, although the world of color often admits the genuinely universal and often hidden aspects of the modern world: its dirty laundry or, in the formulation of the Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel, its “underside.”

An imbalance of power and perspective is the consequence of white privilege, and it has led to what I call a theodicy of the West. Theodicy is the effort to account for the compatibility of evil or injustice with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and good God. If God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, why doesn't God do something about injustice in the world? White supremacists rationalize modern racism as a consequence of God's favor of white people. Biko challenges such views of God in “Black Souls in White Skins?” in which he writes that the revolt of black youth is the most reasonable response: “The anachronism of a well-meaning God who allows people to suffer continually under an obviously immoral system is not lost to young blacks who continue to drop out of Church by the hundreds.” He calls for a liberating message: “[The Bible] must rather preach that it is a sin to allow oneself to be oppressed.”

God has been replaced in the modern world by an order or system that is to be maintained at all cost. In theological language, such rationalization of modern racism is a form of idolatry because it treats the system as God, although Biko does not put it this way. Racism can be described as a form of idolatry in that it holds one class of people above others as intrinsically superior. This means that it creates a double standard for human membership. On the one hand, if those who are “below” consider themselves human, then those who are “above” are suprahuman or demigods. And if those who are “above” consider themselves human, then those who are “below” are subhuman and closer to animals. This is the relational theory of racism. It enables us to see the problem of normativity that emerges in what Frantz Fanon and subsequently David Theo Goldberg call “racist culture.” Those who place all others beneath themselves create a situation in which the assertion of their humanity and their superiority becomes superfluous. They literally are the standpoint of nil reality. This means, then, that racism is fundamentally asymmetrical, and it is this pervasive asymmetry that marks many of the contradictions in efforts from within the racist system to liberate blacks. Biko's trenchant criticisms of unequal power relations bring this argument to the fore. Much of Biko's energy is devoted to criticizing the liberal in both the condescending white and the idiotic black forms. The black liberal is idiotic because black people lack power in a white-controlled system. The white liberal, on the other hand, operates from the vantage point of having something—perhaps a great deal—to lose in the event of progressive social change. The white liberal's offer to help has an air of condescension because it masks a profound existential investment in the continuation of the racist system. Thus, the white liberal always insists on offering the

theoretical or interpretive strategies against antiblack racism, but such strategies often act to preserve the need for white liberals as the most cherished members and overseers of values in their society. In Biko's words: "I am against the superior-inferior white-black stratification that makes the white a perpetual teacher and the black a perpetual pupil (and a poor one at that)."

Biko refuses to be told what to think and what to write. "I write what I like," he declares under the clever pseudonym Frank Talk. The clarity of Frank Talk is a demand for truth. He reveals here the unique, doubled relationship blacks have with European civilizations: blacks face a world of lies in which they are forced to pretend as true that which is false and pretend as false that which is true. This is the insight behind what is perhaps the most powerful trope of black theoretical reflection, introduced by W. E. B. Du Bois more than a century ago—double consciousness. Double consciousness is knowing the particularity of the while world in the face of its enforced claim to universality. Double consciousness is knowing that much of the history offered up to black people—its many interpretations and echoes of while superiority and black inferiority, of white heroism and black cowardice, and even the temporal and geographical location of history's beginning as a step off of the African continent—is a falsehood that blacks are forced to treat as truth in so many countless ways. Double consciousness, in other words, is knowing a lie while living its contradiction.

Double consciousness signals the most famous, and in some circles infamous, concept in Biko's thought: Black Consciousness. The roots of Black Consciousness go back almost two centuries to the thought of Martin Delaney. A proud, African-born black man living in the United States in the nineteenth century, Delaney advanced the view that black people's appreciation of blackness was a key dimension of their eventual liberation.' His argument addresses the force of the signs and symbols through which people are seen and understood in their society. Seeking value in blackness was a message that influenced generations of black intellectuals in the nineteenth century straight through to Du Bois and his nationalist rival Marcus Garvey. The importance of this move, which we may call symbolic resistance, continued through reflections by the philosopher and critic Alain Locke during the Harlem renaissance and into the salon of the Nardal sisters in Paris from which the Negritude movement emerged in Aime Cesaire's coinage and Leopold Senghor's existential ruminations. Writing on Cesaire's return to Martinique in 1939, Fanon described, in his "West Indians and Africans," included in his collection of essays *Toward the African Revolution*, the shock, the disrupting force, of seeking the good and beautiful in things black: "for the first time a lycee teacher – a man, therefore, who was apparently worthy of respect, was seen to announce quite simply to West Indian society 'that it is fine and good to be a Negro.' To be sure, this created a scandal. It was said all the time that he was a little mad and his colleagues went out of their way to give details as to his supposed ailment."

In the 1960s, New World blacks such as Malcolm X, Charles Hamilton, and Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) took another turn in reconstructing everyone's altitude toward things black through the conjunction of "black" with "power" to allay the costs of associating blackness with impotence. The resulting Black Power movement was a point at which white liberals began their flight from black liberation struggles, a departure which revealed much about the racism that simmered beneath their allegiance: the price of their coalition was continued black impotence and dependence.

Biko's Black Consciousness (in which the term "black" includes all people of color) stands on the shoulders of this history. It is grounded in recognition of the high costs of truth. Biko wants the people, all people, to see what was going on in South Africa and all over the world. He wants us to see the connections between South African black townships, the black ghettos in England, the United States, and Brazil, and the many similar communities in South Asia and the Middle East. Many of us share his insight today when we seek those whom we call "the blacks" of their society, even if they may not be people of African descent.

Why does Biko focus his criticisms on liberals? He does so because liberals pose as allies of blacks for the sake of securing a liberal future. But is a liberal future best for blacks? Although a "right-wing" future is patently anti-Black one has to offer black people more options from liberalism than simply its being better than the right-wing position. Yet liberalism offers a double-edged sword. On the one hand, there is "conservative" liberalism, where the goal is to be colorblind. The problem with this kind of liberalism is that it changes no structures. Thus, this liberalism expects us to be colorblind in a world of white normativity, a world where whites hold most of the key cards in the deck. Another kind of liberalism focuses on bringing blacks "up" to whites. The problem with this strategy is that it makes whites the standard. Blacks would thus fail here on two counts. First, they would fail simply by not being white. Second, why must it be the case that what whites have achieved constitute the highest standards that humanity can achieve? One luxury of modern racism is that it has enabled many white people to compete only with each other while either eliminating competition from other groups or placing unfair burdens on them. Could many whites survive the many obstacles faced by blacks on a daily basis? Could, with the absence of those tests, they be assured that they are the "better" at what they do than their black competitors?

White supremacy has afforded many whites the luxury of mediocrity — as many blacks discover when they trespass on white, privileged places. Equality with such whites would be a very low human standard indeed. Related to this branch of liberalism is the very popular economic "class" argument, which evades responsibility for antiblack racism by focusing energy on poor whites who also need to be brought "up" to the standard of the white liberal. Here we see the presumption of the white liberal as a middle- or upper-class individual, which entails the rejection of whiteness as an economic commodity. The problem is that the white liberal ultimately doesn't care about the white poor because of the contradiction of wanting to maintain a system that will have poor people and also wanting those who are not poor as their cohorts. In effect, the poor could never be their consorts. Even more, the black poor, if able to escape their poverty, still stand in a white world as a liability. Biko appeals to Black Consciousness as a way of going beyond all this.

Black Consciousness calls for black realization of the humanity of black folk. It is a transcendence of racial self-hatred. It is also the realization that freedom is a standard much higher than equality, although equality is more just than inequality. He is in concert with William R. Jones, the famed black liberationist and author of *Is God a White Racist?*, who argued in his retirement speech that the rightful aim of black liberation is, simply put, "freedom, freedom, freedom ..."

Black liberation, the project that emerges as a consequence of Black Consciousness, calls for changing both the material conditions of poverty and the concepts by which such poverty is structured. Four decades ago, Frantz Fanon made the same point thus: liberation requires setting afoot a new humanity, which amounts to saying it requires, literally, changing the world.

A quarter of a century has passed since Biko's murder in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. What has since transpired is a series of events that bring to the fore his words of admonition. Many white liberals in the United States have moved to the right and many white progressives have since become neo-liberal or neo-conservative when it comes to black emancipation projects.

In South Africa, there has been much progress since the days when Biko's prescient and provocative reflections first emerged. Yes, there have been elections, and yes, there is a new constitution for the Republic of South Africa, a constitution with language that is the envy of nearly every progressive community throughout the globe. But it is also true that the route of a liberal solution has been taken, and with it a rejection of the Bikoian thesis—with roots that go all the way back to Toussaint L'Ouverture in Haiti and Frederick Douglass in the United States that freedom is something that can only be taken, not given. With this liberalism came the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), where many South African citizens were encouraged to relate their victimization and others were encouraged to confess, without fear of reprisals from the new state, their roles in the atrocities that occurred during formal apartheid South Africa. Needless to say, most of the people who spoke out were of color (black, colored, or Asian).

Remarkably Christian though this may have been in its obvious theme of confession and forgiveness as conditions of redemption, one sees the devastating spiritual impact of the TRC proceedings all over South Africa. One sees it in the streets, in the parks, in the stores, in the schools, in the offices. One sees it particularly in whites. There are many moral rationalizations that can be made of those proceedings, but in the end, the lived reality is painful and bitter. They reveal how desperately South Africa wanted to prevent white flight; they reveal that the global market is heavily racially inflected; lurking beneath the undercurrents of transition in South Africa is the fear that the economy is the baby that could be lost with the white bath water. Whites thus walk the streets of South Africa as a precious commodity. There are, of course, whites who do not want this to be the case, and there are those who prefer it this way. In either case, whites protect the nation from international abandonment, for precedence shows that whereas a black nation is often simply abandoned by the North American and European powers, a white one—even one that was their former enemy as in the case of Russia—will be given many economic and political safeguards. This reality has a devastating impact on the consciousness of black South Africans. How can the conclusion that black South Africans are expendable be avoided?

Black South Africans have been, as South African philosopher Mabogo P. More has argued, humiliated by the TRC. The rancor of that humiliation permeates the air. Yes, some truth made its way to the public spaces. But public spaces cannot become genuine political spaces without a meeting of human beings on both human and humane terms. Denigration and expendability are poor grounds on which to build a polity and a praxis of freedom.

Like many generations before us, we now face the question of where to go from here. What is our generation's mission? In the United States and South Africa, and all across the globe, the people have been promised much—short of freedom. The world has changed much since the fall of the Soviet Union and the collapse of many Third World governments after periods of decolonization. New conflicts have emerged in which communities are paradoxically more alienated from each other as they are compelled to live closer together. By way of technological development and restructuring of economies worldwide, our planet has become a very small place with a lot of very angry people. It is in times like these that we need to engage our past sages. I am sure that if he were alive today, Steve Bantu Biko would be disappointed but not deterred. Deep down, every liberationist is an optimist. We should learn from the struggles of this young man of a few decades past. Read his thoughts and participate in their continued cry to the present and the future as they call for a consciousness committed to truth in the continued struggle for freedom, freedom, freedom