RACE AND REPRESENTATION

Biko's Ghost: The Iconography of Black Consciousness.
By Shannen L. Hill.
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2015 was a year of protest in South Africa's universities. Organized through social media, students across the country developed a new language of dissent, couched in the ubiquitous twenty-first-century idiom of the hashtag: #rhodesmustfall, #feesmustfall. Yet even as they gathered under the sign of the present, so too did the so-called 'born frees' gesture to the political struggles and symbols of their parents' generation. One widely seen picture showed a line of female students, arms linked, all wearing red t-shirts emblazoned with the face of Steve Biko, perhaps the anti-apartheid struggle's most resonant personage *cum* symbol.

This moment would have served as a fitting epilogue to Shannen Hill's study, *Biko's Ghost: The Iconography of Black Consciousness,* which explores the visual culture of Biko and Black Consciousness during his lifetime, but especially after his murder by the apartheid police in 1977. Hers is an ambitious study, in which Hill proposes to follow the thread of Biko's afterlife, while also strongly arguing in favor of visual culture's utility for history. In this she is admirably successful. Yet Hill is more ambitious than that; the 'ghost' of her title is not only Biko, but also Black Consciousness, which is for her the 'power of voice, also called self-agency', something that took on a racial form in the 1970s, but which she argues later transcended race. To that end, she seeks voice in the artistic production of both black and white artists and rejects 'racial interpretations of Black Consciousness [as] the least productive since they are short-sighted'. So doing, Hill treads into dangerous territory. To adapt Steve Biko, she writes as she likes, and comes perilously close to writing Biko out of his own historical context, rather than attending to the very real and necessary focus on race that animated both his thought and, critically, that of later generations of activists for whom blackness remains of fundamental concern.

Hill's attention to visual culture can roughly be divided into two channels. First, she sensitively reads the symbolic language Black Consciousness organizations developed in Biko's own time: raised, clenched fists, newly broken chains, and unapologetic miens. Her first chapters detail the development and articulation of symbolic voice; there is interesting and rich material here, although the text occasionally replays the conventional narrative of Black Consciousness from SASO's founding until Biko's murder.

The book really finds its footing in the chapters that follow, 'Contemplating Death: Artists and Abjection' and 'Creating a Culture of Resistance', in which Hill demonstrates how visual artists, both black and white, responded to Biko's killing. The artist Paul Stopforth, for example, was preparing an installation on deaths in police detention when news of Biko's death broke in September 1977. His work suddenly took on a new urgency and over the next many years he would return again and again to a brutal visual

language developed in the wake of Biko's murder: raw skin, tendons, shadows, and stark pain. So too did Ezrom Legae respond to the details of Biko's death with his well-known 'Chicken Series' (1977–9). Hill reads these works beautifully; indeed, throughout the book she demonstrates an attention to detail and visual analysis on par with the best art historians working anywhere.

In subsequent chapters Hill develops a theory about Biko's less embodied 'ghost', in the spirit of defiant Black Consciousness, that which she repeatedly claims was the 'voice' of black South Africans who demanded representation, not merely to be represented. Here her agenda is twofold. First, she locates that voice in sites as disparate as Gaborone, Botswana, where the exiled ANC developed its visual language, and short-lived 'people's parks' and monuments within South Africa, where township residents remembered lost icons and taunted government bulldozers. Even as artists developed a language of confidence and confrontation from Black Consciousness, so too did they continue to engage the legacy of trauma, a rubric that allows Hill to connect Stopforth and Legae with later artists, including David Koloane, Sam Nhlengethwa, and Colin Richards, whose haunting works relate the battered bodies of detainees to his own traumatic service in the Border War.

It is in these chapters, however, that Hill's book assumes a somewhat polemical tone. She is frustrated at the ways in which activists and scholars who favored the non-racialism of the 1980s and the rhetorical embrace of the Rainbow Nation in the 1990s rendered Black Consciousness, with its overt racialism, anachronistic and backwards. Her own work ably demonstrates that Black Consciousness was in fact essential to the symbolic language and political gains of the 1980s – voiced black opposition was, in her words, 'the essential ingredient to the nonracial stew, the one that gave it substance, made it hearty'. Rather than fixate on race, Hill insists that Black Consciousness must be understood to be voice and self-articulation above all else, a move that allows her to occlude the troubling post-Biko existence of Black Consciousness organizations that insisted that race remain a central concern. It allows her to wind her long narrative to its end in the figure of Brett Murray, the white artist-provocateur whose repeated defiance of norms has recently returned art to the eyes of political storms.

But is Murray truly possessed by Biko's ghost? Hill does not write about the many social movements that have invoked Biko as an ancestor and taken what we knew were his concerns as their concerns, still unresolved. In the voices of organizations ranging from the Landless People's Movement to *Abahlali baseMondjolo* to Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters to the students who today demand the decolonization of their universities, black South Africans and their allies are talking once more about race – as did Biko, inescapably. Black Consciousness was not about voice, it was about black voices, and one cannot and ought not try to separate the two. This is not to diminish Hill's argument about how Black Consciousness was essential in the new visual language that nonracialists used to bring down apartheid. Rather, it is to build on her achievements by insisting that in the contemporary language of hashtags, t-shirts, slogans, fires, defiance, and confrontation, Biko's ghost still haunts an untransformed South Africa.

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