

Critical Response

II

But, beyond . . .

(Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon)

Jacques Derrida

Translated by Peggy Kamuf

Dear Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon,

We have never met but, after reading your “response,” I have a sense of something familiar, as if our paths had often crossed at colloquia or in some other academic place. So I hope you will not mind my addressing you directly—in order to tell you without delay how grateful I am to you and to avoid speaking of you in the third person. Whenever I take part in a debate or, which is not often, in a polemic, I make it a point to quote extensively from the text I am discussing, even though this is not standard practice. Since I am going to be doing that here, by addressing you directly I will save the space (and I’m thinking also of *Critical Inquiry*’s hospitality) otherwise needed for lengthy formulas such as: “Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon go so far as to write . . . ,” “the authors of ‘No Names Apart’ claim that . . . ,” “my interlocutors have not understood that . . . ,” and so forth.

Yes, that’s right, I am grateful. You have brought useful details to the attention of ill-informed readers. Many who want to fight *apartheid* in South Africa still know little of the history of this state racism. No doubt you will agree with me on this point: the better informed, the more lucid, and, I dare say, the more competent the fight, the better it will be able to adjust its strategies. I am also grateful to the editors of *Critical Inquiry*. By publishing your article and inviting me to respond to it, they have chosen to continue the debate that I began here in a modest way. Despite the duly celebrated liberalism and pluralism which open

the pages of this excellent journal to the most diverse and opposed intellectual currents, it has in the main been devoted until now to theoretical research such as goes on for the most part in especially academic environments. Now, here is a case where this journal has organized and given free rein to a discussion on a violently political issue, one which has the appearance at least of being barely academic. I am very pleased with this development and even congratulate myself for having been the occasion for it. But I must add, to the credit of certain American colleagues and students, that *apartheid* is becoming a serious issue on several campuses [see "Postscript" below], and I regret that the same is not the case elsewhere, in other countries. Given this, academic journals have the obligation to speak about it; it is even in their best interest. Initially, my short text was not intended for *Critical Inquiry* (and in a moment I will come back to this criterion of "context" which your reading entirely neglects). Nevertheless, I agreed to its republication in *Critical Inquiry* with this in mind: to engage a reflection or provoke a discussion about *apartheid* in a very visible and justly renowned place—where, in general, people talk about other things.

Reading you, I very quickly realized that you had no serious objections to make to me, as I will try to demonstrate in a moment. So I began to have the following suspicion: what if you had only pretended to find something to reproach me with in order to prolong the experience over several issues of this distinguished journal? That way, the three of us could fill the space of another twenty or so pages. My suspicion arose since you obviously agree with me on this one point, at least: *apartheid*, the more it's talked about, the better.

But who will do the talking? And how? These are the questions.

Because talking about it is not enough. On such a grave subject, one must be serious and not say just anything. Well, you, alas, are not always as serious as the tone of your paper might lead one to think. In your impatient desire to dispense a history lesson, you sometimes say just anything. The effect you want to produce is quite determined, but in order to arrive at it, you are willing to put forward any kind of countertruth, especially when, in your haste to *object*, you *project* into my text whatever will make your job easier. This is a very familiar scenario, as I will try to demonstrate as briefly as possible.

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1

As you ought to have realized, I knew well before you did that an eight-page text accompanying an art exhibit couldn't be a historical or anthropological treatise. By reason of its context and its dimensions (which I was not free to choose), by reason also of its style, it could only be an *appeal*, an appeal to others and to other kinds of action. You're quite right when you say "such calls to action will remain of limited strategic worth" (p. 154). I had no illusions in this regard and I didn't need to be reminded of it by anyone. What I, on the other hand, must recall to your attention—and I will remind you of it more than once—is that the text of an *appeal* obeys certain rules; it has its grammar, its rhetoric, its pragmatics. I'll come back to this point in a moment, to wit: as you did not take these rules into account, you quite simply *did not read* my text, in the most elementary and quasi-grammatical sense of what is called *reading*.

As for the original context of "Racism's Last Word,"¹ the catalog of an exhibit, I regret that you didn't read the careful note placed in introduction to Peggy Kamuf's excellent translation. It's true, of course, that if you *had* taken it into account, you would not have written anything, this debate would not have taken place and that would have been too bad. On "limited strategic worth," we're in total agreement, alas. Yet you know, these things are always more complicated, more difficult to evaluate, more overdetermined than people think. My very modest contribution is part of a complex ensemble which I have neither the time nor the space to reconstitute. And even if I could, its limits are by definition not fixed and are in the process of shifting at the very moment I am writing to you. These overdeterminations should be of interest to historians, politologists, or activists who are eager to go beyond abstraction and partial perspectives, who, like you, are concerned not to dissociate words and history. If I had done nothing more than provoke the present debate in a place of high academic visibility, induce the article which I am now about to discuss, and get the attention of a certain number of influential and competent readers, the interest of "such calls to action" "will remain of limited strategic worth," no doubt about that, but it would be far from nil. As for its limits, they are no more restricted than those of a "response," yours, which not only *supposes* the appeal to which it responds in its own fashion but also, without appealing to any action, is content to chronicle

1. Translator's note.—I might acknowledge receipt here of Anne McClintock's and Rob Nixon's suggested revision to this translated title. In fact, however, I had already considered and rejected "The Last Word in Racism" for reasons which may now have become ironic. To me, the cliché "the last word in . . ." suggested pop fashions or fads. What is more, it is often used ironically to undercut the very finality it seems to announce. I wanted to avoid these associations in order not to undermine, however subliminally, the sense and force of Jacques Derrida's appeal: that *apartheid* remain the final name of racism.

the word “apartheid,” while advising that, rather than making history, we all ought to become more like historians. I quote from your conclusion: “Instead,” you say, “one would have to regard with an historical eye the uneven traffic between political interests and an array of cultural discourses” (p. 154). By the way, that’s *also* what I did, as I will remind you in a moment, but without stopping there. In this domain, as in all domains, no one strategy is sufficient; there is, by definition, no ideal and absolute strategy. We have to multiply the approaches and conjugate efforts.

My “appeal” had to be launched according to a certain mode and in a determined context. You take no account of them. Isn’t this a serious mistake on the part of those who constantly invoke the relations between words and history? If you had paid attention to the context and the mode of my text, you would not have fallen into the enormous blunder that led you to take a *prescriptive* utterance for a *descriptive* (theoretical and constative) one. You write for example (and I warned you that I was going to cite you often): “Because he views *apartheid* as a ‘unique appellation,’ Derrida has little to say about the politically persuasive function that successive racist lexicons have served in South Africa” (p. 141). But I never considered (or “viewed”) *apartheid* as a “unique appellation.” I wrote something altogether different, and it is even the first sentence of my text: “*Apartheid*—que cela reste le nom désormais, l’unique appellation au monde pour le dernier des racismes. Qu’il le demeure mais que vienne un jour . . . ,” which Peggy Kamuf translates in the most rigorous fashion: “APARTHEID—may that remain . . . May it thus remain, but may a day come . . . ” (p. 291). This translation is faithful because it respects (something you either could not or would not do) the grammatical, rhetorical, and pragmatic specificity of the utterance. The latter is not an historian’s assertion concerning the lexicon of the South African racists or the past vicissitudes of the word *apartheid*. It is an appeal, a call to condemn, to stigmatize, to combat, to keep in memory; it is not a reasoned dictionary of the use of the word *apartheid* or its pseudonyms *in the discourse of the South African leaders*. One may think such an appeal is just too pathetic, one may judge its strategic force limited, but does one have the right to treat it as one would an historian’s observation? To do so would be proof either that one didn’t know how to read (by which I mean how to distinguish a subjunctive, with the value of an imperative, from an indicative) or else that one was ready to shortchange the ethics, to say nothing of the politics, of reading or discussion. What is more, although it is not limited by the form of descriptive observation, my “appeal” in no way contradicts the historian’s truth. Whatever may have been the vicissitudes of the word *apartheid* and especially of the desperate efforts of the Pretoria regime’s propagandists and officials to rid themselves of it (to rid themselves of the word, and not the thing, of *their* word and not *their* thing!), no one can deny that *apartheid* designates today in the eyes of the whole world, beyond all possible equivocation or pseudonymy, the last state

racism on the entire planet. I wanted therefore simply to formulate a wish: may this word *become* and *remain* (subjunctive! optative or jussive mode!) “the unique appellation” destined to maintain the memory of and stigmatize this state racism. It was not a thesis on the genealogy of a word but an appeal, a call to action, as you put it, and first of all an ethical appeal, as indicated by that which, in both ethics and politics, passes by way of memory and promising, and thus by way of language and denomination. Besides (and here I am speaking as a historian, that is, in the *indicative*), whatever efforts the ideologues and official representatives of South Africa may have made to efface this embarrassing word from *their* discourse, whatever efforts *you* may make to keep track of their efforts, the failure is not in doubt and historians can attest to it: the word *apartheid* remains and, as I hope or expect, it will remain the “unique appellation” of this monstrous, unique, and unambiguous thing. You say “Derrida is repelled by the word” (p. 141). No, what I find repulsive is the thing that history has now linked to the word, which is why I propose keeping the word so that the history will not be forgotten. Don’t separate word and history! That’s what you say to those who apparently have not learned this lesson. It is the South African racists, the National party, the Verwoerds and the Vorsters who ended up being afraid of the word (*their* word!), to whom it began to appear too repulsive because it had become so overseas. It’s you, and not me, who also seem to be frightened by this word because you propose that we take seriously all the substitutes and pseudonyms, the periphrases and metonymies that the official discourse in Pretoria keeps coming up with: the tireless ruse of propaganda, the indefatigable but vain rhetoric of dissimulation. To counter it, I think the best strategy is to keep the word, the “unique appellation” that the South African racists and certain of their allies would like to make people forget. No doubt one should also pay attention to the rhetorical contortions of the ideologues and official politicians of *apartheid*. But should we, because they wish it, abandon the word *apartheid* and no longer consider it to be the most accurate word with which to designate this political reality, yesterday’s and today’s?

I could limit myself to this remark about grammar or pragmatics. In your haste, you took or pretended to take a subjunctive to be an indicative, a jussive or optative utterance to be an assertion, an appeal to be a thesis. At the same time, you took no account of what was nevertheless *realistic* in my appeal, you missed the way, even in my syntax, the performative was articulated with the constative (forgive me for using this language). In sum, I asked for a promise: let this “unique appellation” “remain,” which means that it *already is* this unique appellation. Who can deny it? The official ideologues of South Africa can denigrate it, but they cannot deny that they are now *alone* in no longer using this word. And if I ask that we keep the word, it is only for the future, for memory, in men’s and women’s memory, for when the thing will have disappeared.

Thus, my appeal is indeed an appeal because it calls for something which is not yet, but it is still strategically realistic because it refers to a massively present reality, one which no historian could seriously put in question. It is a call to struggle but also to memory. I never separate promising from memory.

Here, then, is a first point. I could stop at this: you confused two verbal modes. Whether or not they are fighting against *apartheid*, whether or not they are activists, historians must be attentive to rhetoric, to the type and status of utterances, at the very least to their grammar. No good strategy otherwise. Yet, I don't regret your reading error, however elementary it might be. As everything in your paper follows from this misreading which begins with the first sentence—what am I saying? with the first two words (“APARTHEID—may . . .”)—just a moment's lucidity would have prevented your bringing out these documents on South African policy, *Critical Inquiry* would not have opened its pages to this debate, and that would have been too bad.

So I could stop there, but to prolong the conversation, I will point out still some other mistakes, just the most serious and spectacular ones.

2

Another question of reading, still just as elementary and directly linked to the preceding one. You write: “The essay's opening analysis of the word *apartheid* is, then, symptomatic of a severance of word from history. When Derrida asks, ‘hasn't *apartheid* always been the archival record of the unnameable?’, the answer is a straightforward no. Despite its notoriety and currency overseas, the term *apartheid* has not always been the ‘watchword’ of the Nationalist regime” (p. 141). Once again you mistake the most evident meaning of my question. It did not concern the use of the word *by* the Nationalist regime but its *use value* in the world, “its notoriety and currency overseas,” as you so rightly put it. The word “always” in my text referred to this notoriety and there is little matter here for disagreement. But I never said that *apartheid* had “always” been the *literal* “watchword” *within* the Nationalist regime. And I find the way you manage to slip the “always” out of *my* sentence (“but hasn't *apartheid* always been the archival record of the unnameable?”) and into *yours* (“the term *apartheid* has not always been the ‘watchword’ of the Nationalist regime”) to be less than honest. To be honest, you would have had to quote the whole sentence in which I myself speak of the “watchword” as such. I do so precisely in order to say that this “watchword” has a complex history, with its dates and places of emergence and disappearance. I knew this before reading you and I emphasized it despite the brevity of my text. Here, then, is *my* sentence—if you don't mind, I

will quote myself whenever you have not done so or whenever you manipulate the quotations:

For one must not forget that, although racial segregation didn't wait for the name *apartheid* to come along, the name became order's *watchword* and won its title in the political code of South Africa only at the end of the Second World War. At a time when *all* racisms on the face of the earth were condemned, it was in the world's face that the National party dared to campaign "*for the separate development of each race in the geographic zone assigned to it.*" [Pp. 291–92]

This sentence, among others, gives a clear enough indication, I hope, of the historical concern with which I approached the question in general, and the question of the name *apartheid* in particular.

And while we're on the subject of this word, I would like to understand the meaning of a certain "but" in a passage I am going to cite at length. Its logic totally escapes me. You write:

The word *apartheid* was coined by General Jan Smuts at the Savoy Hotel, London on 27 May 1917 [I knew it was in London, but I thought it was at the Lord Russell Hotel. Are you sure about the Savoy? Check it. This is one point of history on which you would have taught me something.] but had barely any currency until it rose to prominence as the rallying cry of the Nationalist party's victorious electoral campaign of 1948. [This is exactly² what I was recalling, incorrigible historian that I am, in the sentence I just cited above. You might have mentioned that.] Derrida has reflected on the word's "sinister renown," *but* [my emphasis, J. D.] as far back as the mid-fifties the South Africans themselves began to recognize that the term *apartheid* had become sufficiently stigmatized to be ostentatiously retired. [P. 141]

So what? [In English in the text.] Why this "but"? Has the word *apartheid* effaced its "sinister renown" because the South Africans wanted to retire it from circulation and precisely because of its "sinister renown"? It so happens that in spite of their efforts to "retire" this "sufficiently stigmatized" term, the renown has not been effaced: it has gotten more and more sinister. This is history, this is the relation between words and history. It's the thing and the concept they should have retired, and not just the word, if they had wanted to put an end to the "sinister renown." So why this "but"? What objection is it making? Should I have said nothing about

2. Translator's note.—The exactness is still more striking when one recalls that Derrida's term *mot d'ordre*, translated as "watchword," could also have been rendered by McClintock's and Nixon's term: "rallying cry."

the “sinister renown” because the South African Nationalists deemed it advisable to clean up their lexicon?

The unfortunate thing is that your entire text is organized around the incredible “logic,” if one can call it that, of this “but”; it is even oriented by the stupefying politics of this “but.” You are asking that we regulate our vocabulary by the lexical strategies of the South African regime! For, immediately after the passage just cited, you go on to write:

The developing history of South African racial policy and propaganda highlights the inaccuracy of Derrida’s claim that South African racism is “the only one on the scene that dares to say its name and present itself for what it is.” For in striving both to win greater legitimacy for itself and to justify ideologically the Nationalist bantustan policy, South African racism has long since ceased to pronounce its own name: *apartheid*, the term Derrida misleadingly calls “the order’s watchword” (*mot d’ordre*), was dismissed many years back from the lexical ranks of the regime. [Pp. 141–42]

What do you want? That everyone stop *considering* that *apartheid* is—and remains, as far as I know, still today—the watchword, the rallying cry, the concept, and the reality of the South African regime? And even that everyone stop *saying* it, on the pretext that the South African racists deem it more prudent to utter it no more, this word which you yourselves recognize to be the “proper name” of this racism, the word it has given itself, “its own name” (“South African racism” you clearly say, “has long since ceased to pronounce its own name: *apartheid* . . .” [p. 142])? Come on, you’re not being very serious, either as historians or as political strategists. Where would we be, where would all those struggling against *apartheid* be if they had considered that *apartheid* ceased to be the watchword of the South African regime on the day that, as you put it so well, “the Nationalist party . . . radically rephrased its ideology”! (p. 142). Because that happened in 1950, it would have been necessary to stop talking about *apartheid* from then on! Thanks all the same for your strategic advice and your reminder of historical reality! You speak of a “quarantine from the historical process” but it’s you, coming on the heels of the Nationalist regime, who want to put the word *apartheid* in quarantine! I, on the other hand, insist that we continue to use the word, so that we may remember it, in spite of all the verbal denegations and lexical stratagems of the South African racists. I, on the contrary, insist that we remember this: whether or not the term is pronounced by South African officials, *apartheid* remains the *effective* watchword of power in South Africa. Still today. If *you* think, on the other hand, that it’s necessary to take account of the diplomatic prudence or the lexical ruses of this power to the point of no longer speaking of *apartheid* as a watchword, well, then you’re going to have to ask the whole world to go along with you and

not just me. Historical reality, dear comrades, is that in spite of all the lexicological contortions you point out, those in power in South Africa have not managed to convince the world, and first of all because, still today, they have refused to change the real, effective, fundamental meaning of their watchword: *apartheid*. A watchword is not just a name. This too history teaches us, as you should know since you're so concerned with history. A watchword is also a concept and a reality. The relation among the reality, the concept, and the word is always more complex than you seem to suppose. The South Africans in power wanted to keep the concept and the reality while effacing the word, an evil word, *their* word. They have managed to do so in *their* official discourse, that's all. Everywhere else in the world, and first of all among black South Africans, people have continued to think that the word was indissolubly—and legitimately—welded to the concept and to the reality. And if you're going to struggle against this *historical* concept and this *historical* reality, well, then you've got to call a thing by its name. What would have happened if throughout the world—in Europe, in Africa, in Asia, or in the Americas—people had sworn off speaking of racism, anti-Semitism, or slavery on the pretext that the offenders never spoke of these things or did *not* use those words, better yet *no longer* used those words? In the best hypothesis and assuming one didn't want to accuse it of simple complicity with the adversary, such a strategy would have been both childish and disastrous.

So I stand by what I said. One must be attentive, and I was, to the word, to the watchword, and to their history. One must be attentive to what links words to concepts and to realities but also to what can dissociate them. Now if even as it kept the concept and the reality, the power in South Africa has tried to get rid of the word, nobody has been fooled. The concept and the reality persist, under other names, and South African racism, I repeat, "is the only one on the scene that dares to say its name and present itself for what it is," which is to say a state racism, the only one in the world today which does not hide its face. When I wrote that it "dares to say its name," I wanted to recall simply this: *apartheid* may have disappeared since 1950 from official speech or from the dispensaries of propaganda as if by magic, but this changes nothing in the fact ("facts are stubborn," you know) that the system of *apartheid* is not only practiced but *inscribed in the constitution* and in an impressive judicial apparatus. In other words, it is *declared, assumed, publicly approved*. To speak one's name, in politics (as history has shown over and over), is not simply to make use of a substantive but to present oneself as such, for what one is, in complex discourses, the texts of the law or of socioeconomic, even police and "physical" practices. In politics, as history should have taught you, a "watchword" is not limited to a lexicon. You confuse words and history. Or rather, you make poor distinctions between them.

What would have happened if I had followed your "strategic" advice? I would not have called for a fight against the state racism named *apartheid*

(so named at the outset by its inventors!); instead I would have cautiously murmured as you do: “Careful, don’t say *apartheid* anymore, you no longer have the right to use this word in order to name the watchword of South African racism because those who instituted the word, the concept, and the thing have not ‘pronounced’ the word since 1950”! Or maybe this: “Don’t say *apartheid* anymore, but know that since 1948 there have been ‘three phases’ of racial policy in South Africa. Only the first of these (1948–58) would have been an ‘ideological, doctrinaire, and negative’ phase; the second (1958–66) is the one that ‘mellowed into the homeland phase of separate development,’ ‘internal decolonisation’; the third, since 1966, would correspond to ‘the unobtrusive dismantling of *apartheid*,’ ‘the movement away from discrimination,’ ‘the elimination of color as a determinant’ and the introduction of ‘democratic pluralism.’” Should I have said all that each time in place of the word *apartheid*? All that, which is to say what? Well, what you say by citing F. A. van Jaarsveld, “an apologist for the Nationalist regime,” for the “periodizing changes in the *official discourse*” and for “the regime’s justificatory ideology” (p. 142). Should I have been content to reproduce this official discourse? It is, in fact, the only one you cite at any length—the point of view of blacks being less represented in your text than that of *apartheid*’s partisans, even if you must admit that their “ruse has failed politically” (p. 147).

I’m still trying to imagine what I should have written if I had been carefully following your “strategic” advice. Perhaps I should have said: You know, *apartheid* is no longer the right word, even *racism* is no longer the right word because ever since “the development of the bantustan policy,” “the problem in South Africa is basically not one of race, but of nationalism, which is a world-wide problem. There is White nationalism, and there are several Black nationalisms” (p. 144). Unfortunately, if I had done that, I would have been quoting you quoting Verwoerd or Vorster, or else at best I would have written a paper on the ideological strategies of state racism in South Africa. But I would not have said the essential thing, to wit: *apartheid*, as a state racism and under the name initially chosen by the Nationalist party, then in control in South Africa, has been and remains the effective and official practice, still today, in spite of all the denegations and certain softening touches to the facade (which, by the way, I also mentioned). And *apartheid* must be fought as such. Once again, it’s a question of context and of “pragmatics”: I wrote a brief text for an exhibit entitled “Art against Apartheid” and not a paper on Verwoerd’s and Vorster’s rhetoric, whatever interest there may be in knowing the resources of this discourse. And despite the constraints on the length of my text, I also spoke of the secondary transformations of *apartheid* (p. 295), of the discourse, the culture, what I call the “official lie,” the “judicial simulacrum,” and the “political theater” (p. 294) that organize the racist and nationalist ideology in South Africa (see in particular parts 3 and 4). If you think *apartheid* has effectively given way to one

nationalism among others, then you ought to have said so. If you don't think that's the case, well, then I don't see what objection you can have with me.

3

In spite of the brevity of my text, I never made do with what you call "such favored monoliths of post-structuralism as 'logocentrism' and 'Western metaphysics,' not to mention bulky homogeneities such as 'the occidental essence of the historical process' and a 'European "discourse" on the concept of race'" (p. 154). To be sure, I said, and I'll say it again, that the history of *apartheid* (its "discourse" and its "reality," the totality of its *text*) would have been impossible, unthinkable without the European concept and the European history of the state, without the European discourse on race—its scientific pseudoconcept and its religious roots, its modernity and its archaisms—without Judeo-Christian ideology, and so forth. Do you think the contrary? If so, I'd like to see the demonstration. That said, you would have shown a little more honesty if you had noted that, far from relying on "monoliths" or "bulky homogeneities," I constantly emphasized heterogeneity, contradictions, tensions, and uneven development. "Contradiction" is the most frequently occurring word in my text. You force me to quote myself again. I spoke of "a contradiction internal to the West and to the assertion of its rights" (p. 294). I even wrote that one is right to insist on these contradictions ("and it bears repeating" [p. 294]) and that one must never simplify ("but let us never simplify matters" [p. 297]). Is that what you call monolithism? In spite of the brevity of my text, I multiplied the examples of "contradiction" in the theologico-political discourse, of the strategic "contradiction" of the West, of economic contradiction (see pp. 296, 295). Is that a sign of monolithic thinking and a preference for homogeneity? This will surely have been the first time I have met with such a reproach, and I fear you deserve it more than I do.

4

To what level of bad faith must one stoop in order to palm off on me the credo of unbridled capitalism by implying that, in my view, it would suffice to let the law of the marketplace work to put an end to *apartheid*? You have the nerve, for example, to write the following: "The revisionists argue, against Derrida [!!!], that far from hurting the market economy, 'racial policy is an historical product . . . designed primarily to facilitate rapid capital accumulation, and has historically been used thus by all classes with access to state power in South Africa'" (p. 148). *On*

the contrary, I have always thought that there was some truth—it's stating the obvious—in this "revisionist" view. If, however, I *also* said that, despite the apparent contradiction, "*apartheid* also increases nonproductive expenditures (for example, each 'homeland' must have its own policing and administrative machinery); segregation hurts the market economy, limits free enterprise by limiting domestic consumption and the mobility and training of labor" (p. 295), I did so because it's true and *especially* as a reminder that, if *apartheid* is abolished one day, it will not be for purely moral reasons. You force me to quote myself again, the passage immediately following the sentence you have just read:

In a time of unprecedented economic crisis, South Africa has to reckon, both internally and externally, with the forces of a liberal current according to which "*apartheid* is notoriously inefficient from the point of view of economic rationality" [I'm not speaking here, this is a quote]. This too will have to remain in memory: if one day *apartheid* is abolished, its demise will not be credited only to the account of moral standards—because moral standards should not count or keep accounts, to be sure, but also because, on the scale which is that of a worldwide computer, the law of the marketplace will have imposed another standard of calculation. [Pp. 295–96]

After you had read that, it is quite simply indecent to make me out to be pleading *for* capitalism or suggesting that laws of the marketplace ought to be allowed free rein because *all by themselves* they would take care of *apartheid*. You have the nerve nonetheless to do just that. Your argument at this point reaches such a degree of bad faith that I even wondered whether I ought to continue our dialogue in these conditions and respond to *Critical Inquiry's* generous invitation. You actually go so far as to speak of "Derrida's optimistic vision of *apartheid* brought to its knees by a liberalizing capitalism . . ." and you continue: "Indeed, if Derrida takes to its logical conclusion his argument that *apartheid* may be abolished by the imposition of the 'law of the market,' he will find himself in the position of advocating accelerated international investment in order to hasten the collapse of the regime"! (p. 153). To be sure, I defy you to find the least hint in my text of such an "optimistic vision" (even supposing that it is optimistic!). Had I such a "vision," I would not have written anything "against *apartheid*." I would have thought: *laissons faire le capital!* That said, here again things are complex, heterogeneous, and contradictory, whether you like it or not. *Apartheid* can *at the same time* serve the interests of capitalist accumulation *and* get in the way of capitalist development. One has to distinguish here among different phases and *various* capitalisms or different, even contradictory sectors of capitalism. No more than logocentrism and the West, capitalism is not

a monolith or a "bulky homogeneity." Have you ever heard of the contradictions of capitalism? Is it really that difficult for you to imagine how *apartheid* might serve capitalism in certain conditions and impede free enterprise at some other moment, in other conditions? You see, I fear you have a simple, homogeneistic, and mechanistic vision of history and politics.

5

One last point with which perhaps I should have begun. It's about your first paragraph, that little word "beyond" which you underline ("*beyond* the text") and what you call my "method." Once again, it's best that I quote you: "If, then, Derrida seeks not merely to prize open certain covert metaphysical assumptions but also to point to something *beyond* the text, in this case the abolition of a regime, then the strategic value of his method has to be considered seriously" (p. 140).

I am not sure I clearly understand the extent of what you mean by my "method." If you mean my "method" in this text against *apartheid*, in the appeal that I launch and in my treatment of the word *apartheid*, I have just answered you and told you what I think of *your* methods. But if you are suggesting that my "method" in this specific case reveals all that my "method" in general and elsewhere could learn from your lessons, well in that case, there are one or two more things I will have to add. I am led to think that you mean to contest, beyond the precise context of *apartheid*, the "strategic value" of my "method" *in general* by the allusions or insinuations tied to the word "text" ("*beyond* the text" is no doubt, and I'll come back to this in a moment, a clever, oh so clever nod in the direction of something I once said: there is nothing beyond the text), by the use of the word "post-structuralism" (which I myself have never used but which is commonly applied to me), or by words such as "logocentrism," "Western metaphysics," and so forth.

A serious response here would take hundreds and hundreds of pages, and we mustn't abuse *Critical Inquiry's* hospitality. Know, however, that these pages are already written. If you wish to continue our correspondence privately, I will give you some exact references.

But one thing at least I can tell you now: an hour's reading, beginning on any page of any one of the texts I have published over the last twenty years, should suffice for you to realize that *text*, as I use the word, is not the book. No more than writing or trace, it is not limited to the *paper* which you cover with your graphism. It is precisely for strategic reasons (set forth at length elsewhere) that I found it necessary to recast the concept of text by generalizing it almost without limit, in any case without present or perceptible limit, without any limit that *is*. That's why there is nothing "*beyond* the text." That's why South Africa and *apartheid* are,

like you and me, part of this general text, which is not to say that it can be read the way one reads a book. That's why the text is always a field of forces: heterogeneous, differential, open, and so on. That's why deconstructive readings and writings are concerned not only with library books, with discourses, with conceptual and semantic contents. They are not simply analyses of discourse such as, for example, the one you propose. They are also effective or active (as one says) interventions, in particular political and institutional interventions that transform contexts without limiting themselves to theoretical or constative utterances even though they must also produce such utterances. That's why I do not go "beyond the text," in this *new* sense of the word text, by fighting and calling for a fight against *apartheid*, for example. I say "for example" because it also happens that I become involved with institutional and academic politics or get myself imprisoned in Czechoslovakia for giving seminars prohibited by the authorities. Too bad if all this strikes you as strange or intolerable behavior on the part of someone whom you, like others, would like to believe remains enclosed in some "prison-house of language." Not only, then, do I not go "beyond the text," in this new sense of the word text (no more than anyone else can go beyond it, not even the most easy-to-recognize activists), but the strategic reevaluation of the concept of text allows me to bring together in a more consistent fashion, in the most consistent fashion possible, theoretico-philosophical necessities with the "practical," political, and other necessities of what is called deconstruction. The latter, by the way, has never presented itself as a method, for essential reasons that I explain elsewhere (once again, if you care to write to me, I'll send you the references).

This letter is too long. In order to hasten its conclusion, I will give you my opinion in two words:

1. Your "response" is typical. It reflects an incomprehension or "misreading" that is widespread, and spread about, moreover, for very determined ends, on the "Left" and the "Right," among those who think they represent militancy and a progressivist commitment as well as among neoconservatives. It is in the interest of one side and the other to represent deconstruction as a turning inward and an enclosure by the limits of language, whereas in fact deconstruction *begins by* deconstructing logocentrism, the linguistics of the word, and this very enclosure itself. On one side and the other, people get impatient when they see that deconstructive practices are also and first of all political and institutional practices. They get impatient when they see that these practices are perhaps more radical and certainly less stereotyped than others, less easy to decipher, less in keeping with well-used models whose wear and tear ends up by letting one see the abstraction, the conventionalism, the academism, and everything that separates, as you would say, words and history. In a word, verbalism. On one side and the other, on one hand and on the other hand (but you see now how the two hands join and

maintain each other [comme les deux mains se tiennent, maintenant]), there is an interest in believing, in pretending to believe, or simply in making others believe that the "text" which concerns "deconstructionists" (this is the first time I use this word and I do so, as others have done, to go quickly) can be found neatly in its place on some library shelves. That being the case, in order to act (!) in the area of *real* politics, in history (!), these poor "deconstructionists" should go "*beyond* the text," into the field, to the front! As you do, I suppose.

Well, it so happens that the text which various deconstructions are speaking of today is not at all the *paper* or the *paperback* with which you would like to identify it. If there is nothing "*beyond* the text," in this new sense, then that leaves room for the most open kinds of political (but not just political) practice and pragmatics. It even makes them more necessary than ever. But that is no reason—on the contrary—to give up reading the books and writings still to be found in libraries. It is no reason to read quickly or badly or to stop learning how to read otherwise other texts—especially if one wants to better adjust one's political strategies. It is thus no reason to continue to spread the most uneducated interpretations and the crudest prejudices about "deconstruction," the "text," or "logocentrism." It is no reason to go on manipulating them as you do, to keep rolling them along in a primitive fashion, after having erected them into monolithic menhirs.

2. So, you share the impatience of those who would like texts to remain in the libraries, who would like text to signify "book." And you want this order maintained: let all those who concern themselves with texts understood in this latter sense (the "deconstructionists"!) remain in their compartments, better yet in their departments! Let no "deconstructionists" concern themselves with politics since, as we all know, don't we, deconstruction, differance, writing, and all that are (in the best of cases) politically neutral, ahistorical! Those people are not to concern themselves with politics because we always believed that they never did, that they left such things to the qualified, conscious, and organized activists whom we clearly are according to that *good old tradition* [in English in the text] which anyone can easily recognize. Otherwise, you seem to be saying, what would be left for *us* to do? Let the theoreticians of literature concern themselves with literature, philosophers with philosophy, historians with history, Africanists with Africa, and we, the activists, with politics! There, that's the best strategy! When a "deconstructionist," as one says, concerns himself with *apartheid*, even if he is on the "good" side, his strategy is all wrong, he's getting mixed up with things that are none of his business because he's going "*beyond* the text"! He exceeds the limits of his competence, leaves his own territory! "The strategic value of his method has to be considered seriously"!

In short, you are for the division of labor and the disciplined respect of disciplines. Each must stick to his role and stay within the field of his

competence, none may transgress the limits of his territory. Oh, you wouldn't go so far as to wish that some sort of *apartheid* remain or become the law of the land in the academy. Besides, you obviously don't like this word. You are among those who don't like this word and do not want it to remain the "unique appellation." No, in the homelands of academic culture or of "political action," you would favor instead reserved domains, the separate development of each community in the zone assigned to it.

Not me.

Cordially,

Jacques Derrida
6 February 1986

Postscript (April 1986): I am rereading the translation of this letter while in the United States, at several universities (Yale, Harvard, Columbia) which have seen an intensification of demonstrations against *apartheid*: the divestiture movement, "shantytowns," student arrests, and so on. I want to reiterate my admiration and solidarity. Such courageous demonstrations on campuses are also signs of strategic lucidity because the problem of *apartheid* is surely an *American problem*, as are so many others. *In a first sense*, this means that its evolution will depend from now on in large measure on American pressure. These signs of lucidity are carried by an energy and perseverance which cannot be explained *simply* by the economy of necessarily ambiguous motivations. Some might be tempted in effect to seek there the mechanism and dynamic of bad conscience. The latter is always quicker to arise among intellectuals and at the university, especially in universities obliged to manage their capital. For here again, and *in a second sense*, *apartheid* would be an *American problem*. According to this insufficient but necessary hypothesis, *apartheid* might have to be put at some remove, expelled, objectified, held at a distance, prevented from returning (as a ghost returns), parted with, treated, and cured *over there*, in South Africa. *Apartheid* might bear too great a resemblance to a segregation whose image continues at the very least to haunt American society. No doubt, this segregation has become more urban, industrial, socioeconomic (the frightening percentage of young black unemployed, for example), less immediately racial in its phenomenon. But this might recall much more, by some of its features, the South African hell.