

White/Left: the discursive cartoons of Stacey Stent

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by Keely Shinnars

Aristocrats' potbellies swell out of their suits. Politicians' heads balloon as one defamatory statement after another pours out of their overgrown mouths. This is the language of the political cartoon. It's satirical and hyperbolic, cutthroat and to the point. It's the language through which cartoonists are able to talk about power. The cartoonist draws attention to all that is criminal, atrocious and corrupt about those in power, while, at the same time, upends their authority, making them out for fools. South African political cartoons, for the most part, follow these same tropes, both visually and thematically. See, for instance, the work of Zapiro, Derek Bauer, Anton Kannemeyer, Conrad Botes, and Mogorosi Motshumi, to name a few. [1]

Stacey Stent, however, emerged in the 1980s as a cartoonist of a different kind. Her series *Who's Left?* saw a run in the *Weekly Mail*, an anti-apartheid newspaper which later became the *Mail & Guardian*, from 1987 to 1990. The characters in *Who's Left?* were not politicians nor military leaders, not business moguls nor European royalty, but white political leftists. Her aesthetic tended not to hyperbolise but to represent realistic conversations, everyday moments.

This is not to say that Stent's works were apolitical. In fact, cartooning seemed to provide Stent with the opportunity to delve into a politics more specific and complicated than that of her contemporaries. If the cartoon sets the stage for political theatre, Stent eschewed the leaders, architects, and buttresses of apartheid (i.e., those who could be easily blamed), and casted instead white artists, intellectuals, activists, and radicals. In doing so, Stent was able to consider seriously the ways in which the white left was not as revolutionary as they purported to be. *Who's Left?* is a way of asking, who is the face of the left? What does the white left fail to admit about themselves? Are leftists really leftists if they fail to extricate themselves from white privilege? Stent was interested in the left's relationship to whiteness, whiteness not only as a racial category, but a political project and "logic," as Christina Sharpe would say, "a calculus, a way of sorting oneself and others into categories of those who must be protected and those who are, or soon will be, expendable."

[2] Whiteness as a system, meaning that it is defended both explicitly and implicitly, politically and personally; it plays out socially and psychologically, in major events and quotidian advances. It's these complicated systems, not historical characters or events, Stent used her comics to examine. [3]

Reading the archive *Who's Left*, certain characters pop up again and again. These can be divided into distinct, but interlocking, tropes: the Escapee, the White Saviour, the Intellectual and the Appropriator. These parodied subjects are fun to make fun of. But, they also offer readers an opportunity to consider the subtle ways in which the white left, carried out systems of privilege and oppression in 1980s South Africa. And, if the characters seem at all familiar today, the conversations recurrent,

perhaps *Who's Left?* can be read as a critical engagement with the contemporary moment as well.

The Escapee

In the late 1980s, against the backdrop of state-sanctioned incarceration, surveillance and murder, many white people—who might not have supported the NP, but neither did they engage in resistance movements—decided to flee. Not necessarily because they were rendered vulnerable by the state of emergency—although many who publicly opposed the apartheid regime were forced into exile—but because “things were starting to get to them,” or so it says in this comic by Stent from 1987:

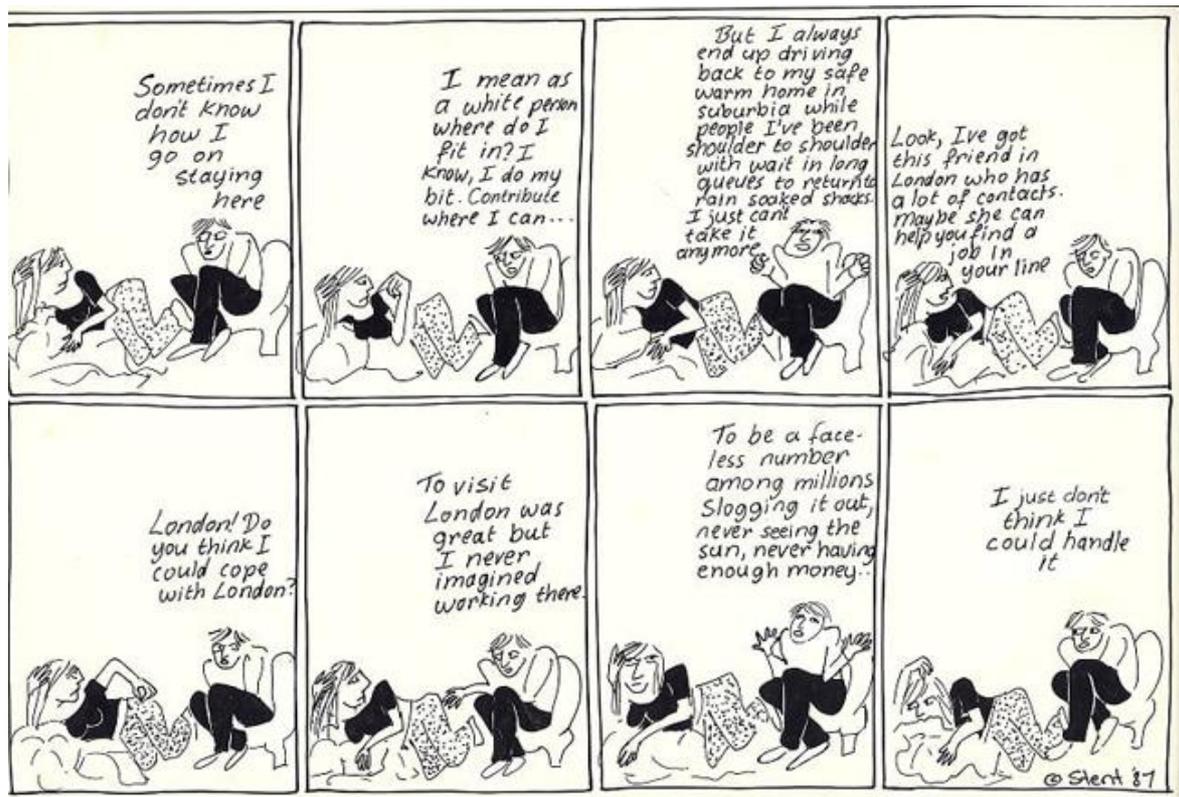


Reagan, 1987. Courtesy: ASAI

For this couple, the question of escape is not a matter of freedom, or of safety, but of comfort, as simple and flippant as painting one's nails. They want to escape because they can. Not only are they wealthy—Stent ornaments them in heels and lipstick, black pants and tie—but because of colonialism and its afterlives, their whiteness affords them mobility. There is a wealth of English-speaking countries for them to choose from, from England to Nigeria, Australia to Zimbabwe. These escapees see a world primed to accommodate them, and yet, as they run through a Goldilocks-esque inventory of excuses, not accommodating enough. Specifically, there is an anxiety around the passport against the backdrop of sanctions that made it difficult for South Africans to travel and immigrate. The escapees feel slighted that their whiteness does not afford them the same privileges it does white people in the so-called First World, with America at its zenith. Specifically, they idolise Reagan's

America, where conservative policies allowed white capitalism to flourish. Here, the escapee is someone who refuses to cope with a political situation in which whiteness and white power is called into question. To maintain their privileged status, the escapee moves—or at least fantasizes about moving—to a place where they will benefit structurally from their whiteness, choosing to remain ignorant [4] and unengaged in resistance and, if their escape is successful, avoid it altogether.

The desire for escape is found not only amongst conservatives, but white people who consider themselves anti-racist as well. Stent critiques the liberal escapee in this cartoon, also from 1987:



Coping with London, 1987. Courtesy: ASAI

Here, a white man laments the fact of his living in a country marked by inequality and injustice. Liberal enough to dissent against the apartheid state, but not so liberal that he puts his house, car, or job on the line. He is anxious that he doesn't "fit in." He considers himself the victim of a history which has granted him a "warm home in suburbia" while others are trapped in "rain soaked shacks." His politics deem that he align himself with those fighting for freedom, but his whiteness nevertheless allows his body "to move with comfort through space." [5] Unable to assuage his guilt by "doing his bit" and "contributing where he can," he considers his friend's suggestion to escape to London. But, he is not privileged in London. He is worried about becoming "faceless," being made invisible. He is worried about inaccessibility to leisure. He is worried about not having money. In short, he is worried that, if he escapes, those obstacles which make it difficult for those with whom he stands "shoulder to shoulder" to live in the world will befall him. He prefers to live in a country where his privileges are maintained, even as he claims to support the resistance networks that are calling those privileges into question. He is not an

escapee the way his Reagan-loving counterparts are escapees, but he is an escapee in the sense that he is an escapist, as in, afraid to accept reality, and the reality is this: it is because of histories of displacement and exploitation of those very people with whom he stands “shoulder to shoulder” that he is afforded the luxury of his house, his job, his car. Perhaps this is why he feels so guilty. Perhaps this is why this escapee knows that escape will not absolve him, because it would remind him too much of the ways in which he remains tethered to apartheid, whether he likes it or not, as a beneficiary of its historical, geographic, economic and psychological implications. His friend, who rolls her eyes and slowly dissolves into her pillows, has probably heard lamentations of this kind before. Although she does not debate him openly, Stent nevertheless imbues discomfort in her body language, taking a break, for a moment, from a stereotype, and allowing space for a character to be conscious and critical of the problematic.

The White Saviour

Whether because of guilt or compassion, politics or pressure, many white people who did not seek escape from social unrest sought instead to do something. Of course, before and after the late 80s, many white people invested their lives in liberation movements and fought alongside resistance organisations. But Stent was interested in critiquing a particular brand of white do-gooder, someone Jordan Flaherty would describe as “a person who has been raised in privilege and taught implicitly or explicitly (or both) that they possess the answers and skills needed to rescue others, no matter the situation.” [6] In other words, a white saviour.



Building Bridges, 1988. Courtesy: ASAI

This cartoon from 1988 sees a white woman, Sybil, attempting to “help” a nameless domestic worker. But, the encounter ends up revealing more about Sybil’s investments in power than her potentially good intentions. In the same breath as, “I’m an old friend of your madam,” a condescending reminder of who controls whom in this exchange, Sybil asks, “Do you need some help?” She does not wait for a response, eliminating the possibility for the domestic worker to speak. Sybil talks about how she and her husband “managed so well without a maid” while living overseas. Her aim in saying this might be, at best, an effort at solidarity. But, it’s worth noting that the character in question is a white woman, and, as bell hooks writes in *Ain’t I a Woman*, white feminism has long suffered from “a narcissism so blinding that [it] will not admit two obvious facts: one, that in a capitalist, racist, imperialist state there is no one social status women share as a collective group and second, that the social status of white women has never been like that of black women and men.” [7] Because of the power dynamics at play, Sybil’s comment serves primarily as a gaslighting tactic, a way to diminish the value of the domestic worker’s labour. Sybil knows this, and, so she backtracks. Trying to protect herself, she adds, “Not that I’m saying your kind of work isn’t appreciated...I think we appreciate you and your people even more.” What she means by “you and your people” is unclear. You and the domestic workers who work alongside you, who worked before you, who will work after you? You and the community of, primarily, women of colour who keep white homes, white offices, white institutions, and white businesses intact, despite having the fewest rights? From this panel on, Stent portrays the domestic worker faceless, from behind, while Sybil takes centre stage. She goes on to equate a year’s worth of cooking and cleaning up after herself with the oppressive and often violent history of domestic labour in South Africa, extricating herself from that history in order to congratulate herself. She leaves the kitchen without giving tangible help of any kind, and without giving the domestic worker a chance to speak. She returns to the party (for which the domestic worker cooked the food, served the drinks, washed the dishes), and toasts her valiant efforts at “building bridges,” as if endeavors at inclusivity were a party game. Once again, the white woman has sought the fulfillment of her needs through someone she others. In this case, that need is one for emotional validation. That’s the modus operandi of the white saviour. It is “not about justice,” as Teju Cole has written. “It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.” [8]

Perhaps readers who don’t find this comic funny or elucidating could claim that the character is particular to a community of elites who don’t know any better, who would act differently if they were educated in histories of oppression. Stent counters this in another cartoon, also from 1988:

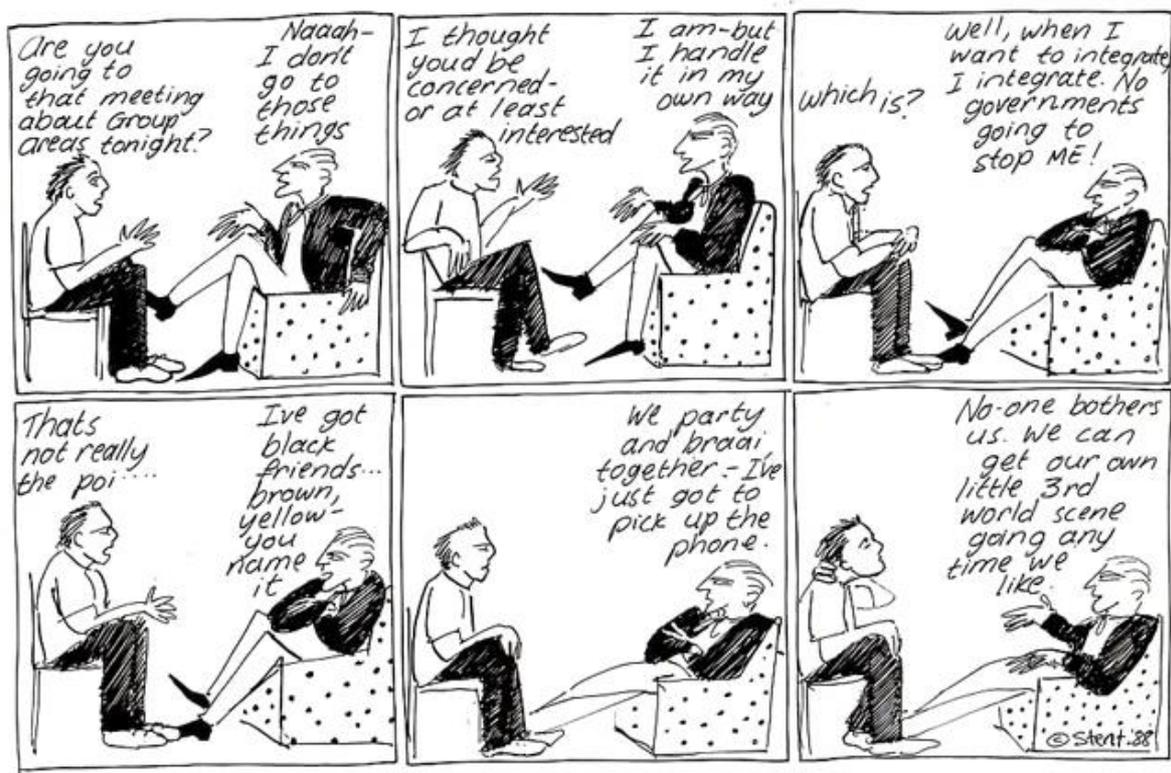


Theatre Group, 1988. Courtesy: ASAI

These actors want to create a “theatre of relevance.” They want to include the voices of “real live domestic workers” in their conversation. As Flaherty writes, “They are taught that saving others is the burden they must bear.” [9] They want to uplift their domestic workers by offering them the opportunity to participate in their world. They want to be clever and compassionate enough to deconstruct the “tools of domestic oppression.” In essence, they want to be heroes. And yet, they are reluctant to admit that they are its contributors. One of the actors stumbles uncomfortably over the words, “our own... um... domestic workers,” as if embarrassed of the fact that they are an employer, not a revolutionary. When it’s revealed that these domestic workers are bemused, if not the least bit offended, that their employers are trying to get them to participate in a play they’ve written about “the tools of domestic oppression,” the actors are “astonished.” Rather than take this as an opportunity to engage meaningfully with the women they employ—as in, to listen, to reflect, and to enact change in their homes—the actors become defensive: “We’ll show the oppressed we don’t need their help.” Stent’s pun on help/the help is both funny and piercing. These workers, likely black women, no longer serve the white actors’ needs, and are thus rendered expendable. The actors do not want to do the hard work of disentangling themselves from whiteness, so that they might actually create a free, participatory space. They want to be saviours. They want to be saviours when, where, and with whom it is convenient for them. They search for ways to claim solidarity with women of colour, only to opt for performative symbols. In order to preserve their whiteness and the privilege it comes with, they avoid, at all costs, admitting their implication in the very systems of race and class they meant to critique.

The Intellectual

Like the white saviour, the intellectual sees themselves as exceptional. The intellectual is educated, liberal, radical even. They are informed; that means they couldn't *possibly* be racist. They might go as far as to consider themselves experts on racism, experts on diversity, experts on the struggles of the marginalised. They may claim to know more, in fact, than the marginalised themselves, as if lived experience or personal testimony paled in comparison to what they may have learned at their elite universities. And yet, the intellectual obfuscates the fact that they continue to benefit from whiteness. Consider this character from a 1988 Stent cartoon:



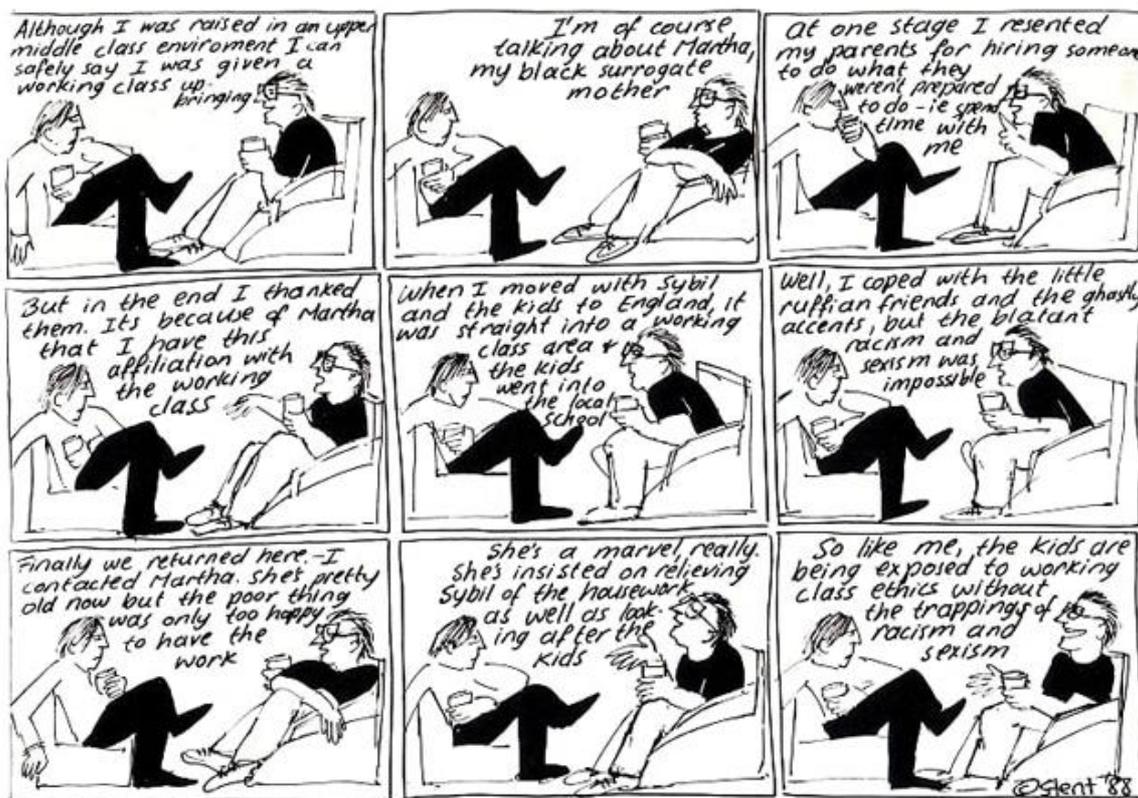
3rd World, 1988. Courtesy: ASAI

When asked if the intellectual is politically involved, he responds “Naaah—I don’t go to those things.” The intellectual, for starters, has the luxury to choose whether or not to become involved in politics. In this case, “politics” means the Group Areas Act—the apartheid government’s way of systematically displacing black and brown people from their homes and moving them into poorer areas, farther away and with less resources than areas in and around the city centre. When his friend guilt-trips him for being neither involved nor informed, the intellectual becomes defensive. “I handle it in my own way,” he says, addressing a problem of image rather than a problem of character. When challenged again, he answers ambiguously, “When I want to integrate, I integrate!” The intellectual makes a social problem an individual problem, and claims to solve the problem individually, thus proving his innocence.

“Conversations about racism are very hard to have when white people become defensive about racism,” as Ahmed would say. “Those conversations end up being about those defences rather than about racism.” [10] The intellectual goes on to

posture his supposedly diverse group of friends. But, the way he talks about them—nameless, racialised—leads the reader to conclude that his aim in having “black friends, brown, yellow... [over to] party and braai together” is not to create a safe, temporarily liberatory space for marginalised folks. Rather, he justifies his whiteness and lack of activism by surrounding himself with tokens, through which he can congratulate himself. The intellectual ends his argument with a flippant comment about how he and his friends “can get our own little 3rd world scene going any time we like,” proving that the intellectual sees diverse communities and inclusive connections as more of a fetish than a radical act.

Interestingly, another encounter with the intellectual in Stent’s work follows the same format and assumes the same visual cues. In a conversation between two white men, one decides to dominate the conversation on race, and uses it as an excuse to show off how progressive he is:



Raised by Working Class, 1988. Courtesy: ASAI

This intellectual speaks the language of resistance—he understands “the trappings of racism and sexism,” identifies the value of working class solidarity—but fails, miserably so, to account for his own privilege. For instance, he sees the fact that his parents hired a “black surrogate mother” to raise him not as a reflection of his elite status, but as a ticket to understanding the “working class.” Furthermore, he manages to call out racism and sexism in England while failing to identify how racism and sexism were perpetuated by his own upbringing, and how he continues to perpetuate racism and sexism in his own home. Martha is a woman objectified in his eyes, who serves whatever function he needs: first, mother; then, peer; then, employee. Although this conversation takes place in a different industry from the art

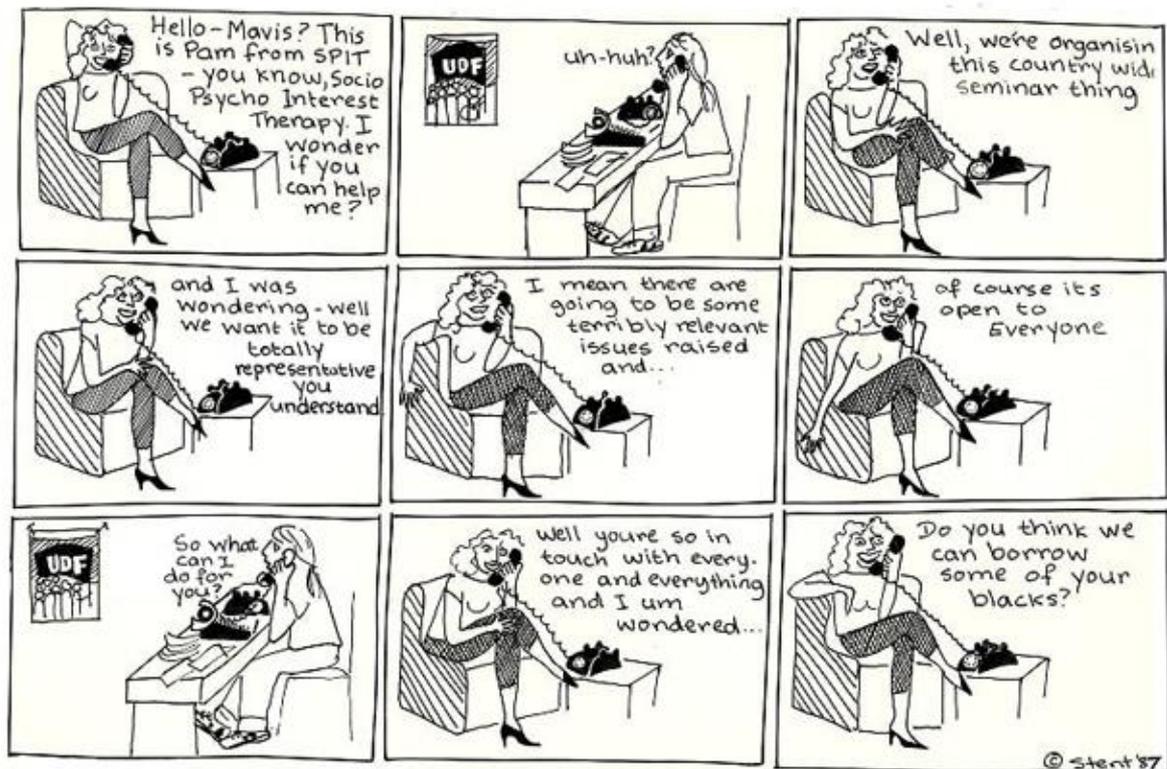
world, and a different corner of the world from New York, the intellectual is reminiscent of this critique on “White Aesthetics” from “The Whitney Biennial for Angry Women” by Eunsong Kim and Maya Isabella Mackrandilal:

critical language—which is meant to articulate everything that is not said, to reveal the threads of systemic inequality—is co-opted by an inane buzzword pastiche... The titillation of a brush with the radical—a safari of political rebellion—without the nuisance of actually addressing systems of power or challenging the status quo. All the trappings, none of the substance. [11]

The intellectual has co-opted radical, critical language to make himself look good. In reality, he upholds the very “trappings” of classism, racism and sexism he so vehemently claims to avoid. A quote by James Baldwin comes to mind: “[White people] are in effect still trapped in a history which they do not understand, and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it.” [12] No matter the amount of intellectualising he achieves, his decision is such that his children will replicate the same systems of oppression under which we was raised. Until the history of whiteness is brought seriously into consideration, their generation and the generation after them will inherit all the trappings, and none of the substance.

The Appropriator

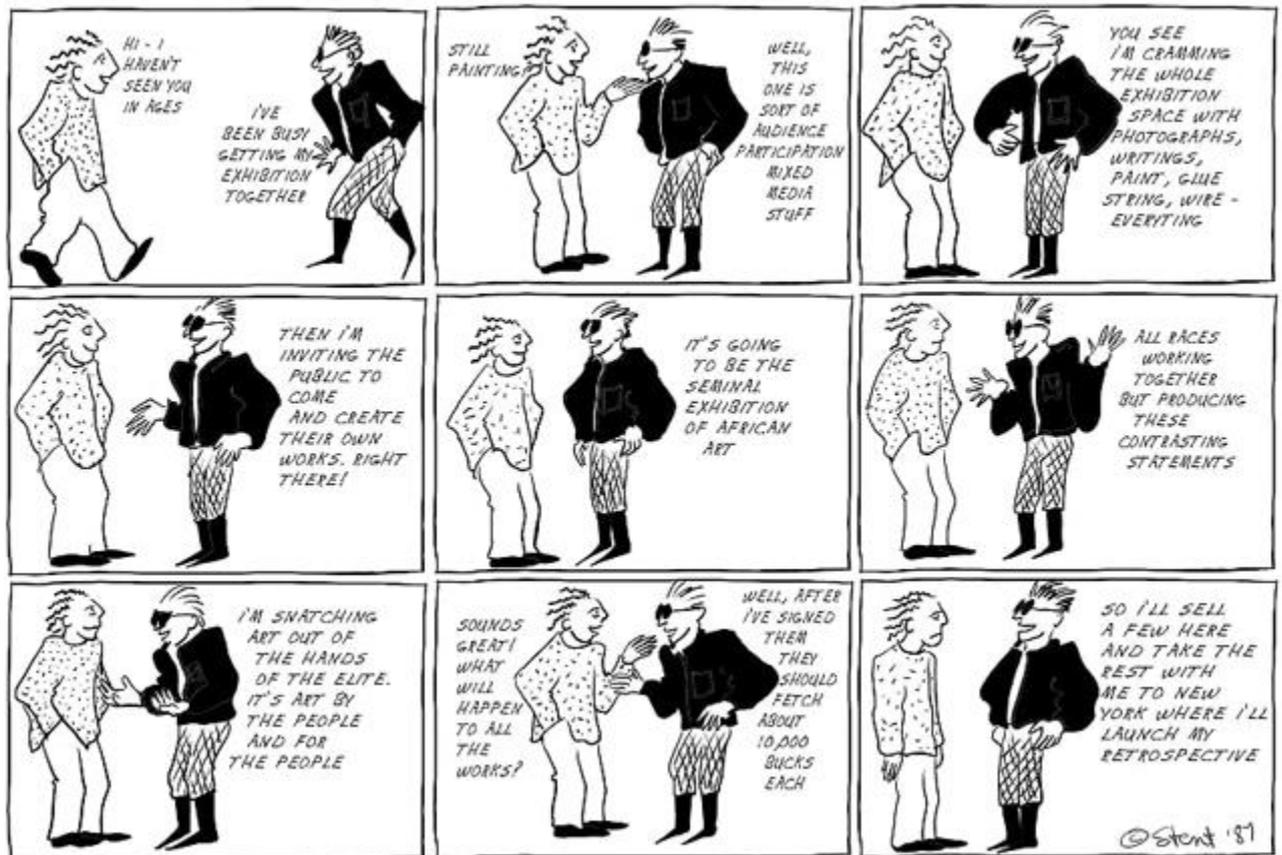
The escapee sees resistance movements as a threat. The white saviour sees resistance movements as opportunities to anoint themselves. The intellectual sees resistance movements as objects for study and debate. The appropriator, on the other hand, sees resistance movements as commodities. This 1987 Stent cartoon illustrates how white individuals and institutions try to co-opt diversity efforts for their own social gain:



Pam from SPIT, 1987. Courtesy: ASAI

In this cartoon, Pam seems to be concerned about the lack of diversity in a seminar she and her organisation are planning. She calls her friend, who is presumably an activist with the UDF, for help in amending her diversity problem. But as much as Pam tries to sell her event as “terribly relevant” and “open to everyone,” it is clear that she is only interested in including black people to make her organisation look good, or what Sara Ahmed would call “diversity as *institutional polishing*: a way of polishing the furniture so it can reflect back a good shiny version of the organisation.” [13] For starters, Pam has to ask one of her “in touch” white friends if she knows any black people who might be interested, revealing the probability that black people do not figure into Pam’s own life whatsoever. She says, “We want it to be totally representative,” evidence that “SPIT” is made up—if not exclusively, then majorly—by other white people. She ends the conversation by asking, “Do you think we can borrow some of your blacks?” The punchline is meant to be funny, if not a bit discomfoting. A deeper reading, however, reveals the subtle ways in which white organisations preserve their whiteness, even as they claim to be diversifying. Pam uses the word “borrow,” signalling the fact that her organisation is invested more in images and statistics than ongoing, institutional change. She invokes the “we,” again, and refers to “your blacks,” indicating both that she objectifies black people and assumes a sort of archaic ownership that Mavis has over her colleagues/comrades. This is how the appropriator operates. They want to “borrow” black faces to preserve their image, while keeping their institutions and organisations under white leadership and control.

Often, the appropriator is interested in more than cachet. Sometimes, the appropriator actually makes money off the labour and activism of marginalised others, as this artist does in a Stent cartoon from 1987:



Art Exhibition, 1987. Courtesy: ASAI

This artist talks a big game about an art practice that is proletarian—“by the people for the people”—and inclusive—“all races working together” art exhibition. He plans to “snatch art out of the hands of the elite,” and in the art world, “elite” is usually synonymous with white-dominated. The artist knows how important a participatory, collaborative exhibition like this would be, calling it “the seminal exhibition of African art.” But, in the end, it’s the white artist who will reap its rewards. Appropriating the “people’s” work as his own, he expects to make money off the labour of others, and take credit for pioneering this new age of African art at his “retrospective” in New York, reproducing an already-whitewashed art world. This appropriator not only makes the voices, names, bodies, and labour of those who actually created the artwork disappear, he feels entitled to doing so. That’s because, in the words of Zoe Samudzi, “whiteness demands control over defining non-whiteness, cultural productions circulate at the expense of the peoples to whom they belong.” [14] In other words, the appropriator maintains the authority of whiteness by claiming ownership over what marginalised others produce.

Why the political cartoon?

When considered seriously, Stacey Stent's political cartoons draw attention to the complex networks of power in which we are all entangled. This ethos was unique amongst other political cartoonists of the era, but not necessarily within the fine arts, in which Stent had studied and worked. (Artists who engaged self-critically with whiteness in the late 80s, like Jane Alexander, Marlene Dumas, William Kentridge, Penny Siopis, and Sue Williamson are just a fraction that come to mind.) Why did Stent choose cartooning, then? For starters, the form of the comic strip allows for a different kind of engagement with the viewer than a still image or sculpture. Multiple panels give Stent a chance to comb through a problem or flesh out a character. The comic strip leaves a lot of space, literally, for text. Much of Stent's work hinges on text. She chooses, again and again, to keep the drawings simple, so that the text, albeit with a joky tone, explores the complexities of power, relationships, and discourse. Stent's minimalist figures and mise-en-scènes also imbue the work with a certain amount of relatability. Many viewers might recognise these characters from their own life; many viewers might recognise these characters in aspects of themselves. The accessibility and reproducibility of a comic strip in a newspaper—rather than, say, a painting in a gallery—further characterises the importance of relatability in Stent's work, and allows her to capture a wider audience. A political cartoon is also easier to read, easier to understand, and easier to disseminate than academic texts on racial consciousness.

On the other hand, a political cartoon, unless it sparks an inordinate amount of controversy, is an ephemeral thing, something a reader chuckles at once and then forgets about. It's also important to remember that *Who's Left?* was published in the *Weekly Mail* in the late 80s, meaning, the majority of its readers were English-speaking, liberal, educated, and white. Is self-criticality fostered amongst this readership, or do viewers begin to regard Stent's work from an ironic distance? "Irony regarding racial supremacist politics requires the distance from the scene that race affords," Chris Taylor says. "[I]t requires, in other words, being properly white." [15]

Still, I think, Stent's cartoons offer viewers valuable opportunities to pause, to self-reflect, to self-criticise. It's possible that Stent's cartoons might make their viewers feel guilty, and guilt often causes people to scapegoat and shut down. Others, however, may take that anxious feeling as a jumping off point towards restorative and reparative practices. Many viewers might still connect to Stent's cartoons, even twenty years later after they were created. Their relevance goes to show that major political shifts and social upheavals do not necessarily fix historical, systemic problems and long-held cultural attitudes. At this stage, Baldwin comes back to mind: "[White people] are in effect still trapped in a history which they do not understand, and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it." [16]

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Notes

- [1] This is a small selection of political cartoonists working in late 80s, early 90s South Africa, and by far an incomprehensive list. For more information on South African cartoonists, the author recommends the scholarship of Peter Vale, Andy Mason, and Su Opperman.
- [2] Sharpe, Christina. "Lose Your Kin." *The New Inquiry*. Accessed July 30, 2019. <https://thenewinquiry.com/lose-your-kin/>
- [3] I do not mean to suggest that South African history has operated under a strict system where white and black were terms understood homogenously, nor that they were the only racial classifications present before, during or after apartheid. But, for the purposes of this essay, I invoke "white people" both in relation to the apartheid classification system and a longer, broader history of public policy and private prejudice which has led to an unequal distribution of power and capital where white people have benefited. I invoke "black people" in the Steve Biko sense, "as those who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realization of their aspirations." See Biko, Stephen. "The Definition Of Black Consciousness." *South African History Online*. Original text published for a SASO Leadership Training Course December 1971. Accessed July 30, 2019. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/definition-black-consciousness-bantu-stephen-biko-december-1971-south-africa>
- [4] Mills, Charles. "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007): 13.
- [5] Ahmed, "A phenomenology of whiteness," 159.
- [6] Flaherty, Jordan. *No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality* (Chicago: AK Press, 2016).
- [7] hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Routledge, 2014).
- [8] Cole, Teju. "The White-Savior Industrial Complex." *The Atlantic*. Accessed 30 July 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>
- [9] Flaherty, *No More Heroes*.
- [10] Ahmed, Sara. "Against Students." *The New Inquiry*. Accessed July 30, 2019. <https://thenewinquiry.com/against-students/>
- [11] Kim, Eunsong and Maya Isabella Mackrandilal. "The Whitney Biennial for Angry Women." *The New Inquiry*. Accessed July 30, 2019. <https://thenewinquiry.com/the-whitney-biennial-for-angry-women/>
- [12] Baldwin, James. "Letter from a Region in my Mind," in *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963).
- [13] Ahmed, Sara. "Damage Limitation." *Feminist Killjoys*. Accessed July 30, 2019. <https://feministkilljoys.com/2019/02/15/damage-limitation/>
- [14] Samudzi, Zoe. "Who Are You and What Do You Really Know? Gaslighting and Dolezalean logic." *The New Inquiry*. Accessed July 30, 2019. <https://thenewinquiry.com/who-are-you-and-what-you-really-know/>
- [15] Taylor, Chris. "Whiteness Supreme: Towson University and Liberal Ironists." *Of C.L.R. James*. Accessed July 30, 2019.

<http://clrjames.blogspot.com/2013/03/whiteness-supreme-towson-university-and.html>
[16] Baldwin, "Letter from a Region in my Mind."