

# Chapter 8

## On Biko and Sophie: Black Body Domestication in the Postcolony

### ABSTRACT

*Steve Biko and the character Sophie in Mary Sibande's art represent people who are made to be invisible and only serve others. Sophie's labor is seen as temporary and replaceable, meaning she can be hired or fired easily. Biko, who grew up with a domestic worker, is used to explore how being treated this way contributed to the rise of Black Consciousness. This form of consciousness challenges the way Black people were dehumanized and oppressed through colonialism. It's not just about home life but also about broader systems like the empire, police, and ghettos. The chapter looks at how Sophie and Biko, shaped by the same colonial system, are reduced to mere objects. It argues that Sophie's role as an object of subjection reveals how her Black Consciousness emerged from this system of oppression.*

### INTRODUCTION: BEING BORN INTO DOMESTICATION

Black body domestication cannot be overlooked, as one of its tasks might not seem so obvious, namely, to capture the black body under the colonial logic of the empire. For domestication to be effective requires demarcated spaces and an ideology of captivity that will keep what is domesticated inside. *What is domestication if it is to be understood from the position of the black body?* I pose this question because it is troubling to think about the meaning and impact of domestication over the black body inside the empire as the house of the sovereign subject – the white subject. This is because the negative effects of domestication seem to be noticed when it comes to the black body. For domestication to transpire, there must be a body. My point of departure here is that domestication can manifest in two categories: household or

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subjection. By nature, the human subject is a creature of comfort in domestication. It is a subject of home and safety, a place where the family exercises domestication as a household practice. For families to exist, they must domesticate themselves by building a home to the degree of even domesticating pets. In this sense, domestication means family, home, love, and safety inside a household. It is a socio-cultural arrangement that can be at the scene of domestication when it comes to the racial context of the world. The racial context has instilled domestication as subjection. The focus of this essay is the question: *What happens when domestication as subjection is explored?* At the scene of domestication, black people end up not being whom they are supposed to be. Their being and identity are altered and shaped by the space in which they are domesticated. Domestication involves being restrained in a way that denies the domesticated subject the ontological right and liberty to leave. Being domesticated is existing in a lie and under the conditions of subjection. Under the colonial system, life becomes a condition that builds on black bodies, the glasshouses of the colonial master. The black body has taken the position of mud and water to construct the walls of the same space that domesticates black bodies – the empire. Since the colonial administration was initiated and spread throughout the world, dividing the world like small “pieces of cake” to build the empire, black bodies have been captured, tamed, and used for cheap labour, with a small payment (if lucky) or without pay (if unlucky).

Black bodies only having to occupy jobs and work that does not need specialised education is a result of something naturalised by the racist/colonial system through forces of slavery and apartheid. The black condition is where the black body is tamed and where life is limited. It is from this condition that Biko’s thought is born, a condition of which the figure of Sophie is a representation – the black abyss. The black abyss is that which creates the domestication of the black body, where Biko’s thoughts and the figure of Sophie will help us understand something peculiar. Blackness from the perspective of decolonial aestheSis is a reflection from inside the black abyss and explores the unfolding forms of formlessness. Biko’s thoughts and the figure of Sophie will help us understand the structural continuity of captivity of the black body at the scene of domestication in the modern/colonial anti-black world. The captivity of the slave is the captivity of the master, who must obey the false racial/colonial system that he put in place. Thus, he becomes a master who is a slave to maintaining a system of deception. From this position, art history becomes a history of deception, told by the master of deception, from a Eurocentric sensibility. The politics of domestication in this history haunts Sophie in the post-colony as a figure who represents the burdens of white consciousness. The black body becomes a canvas on which domestication is captured in its dehumanising arrangements. Here, Biko’s thoughts and the figure of Sophie will be deployed to reflect on what it means for the black body to exist as domesticated flesh and to determine what

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