NEW SHADES OF "WHITENESS": WHITE IDENTITY IN A MULTICULTURAL, DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

"Whiteness", an extremely successful ideological construction of modernist colonisation, is by definition a construction of power: Whites as the privileged group take their identity as the norm and the standard by which other groups are measured. As the new South Africa moves towards a more equitable multicultural society, Whites are experiencing a sudden loss of privilege. Different narratives are currently being constructed within the society about what it means to be White in the new dispensation. These narratives position Whites differently in relation to the past, and to Africa and Africans, and have varying potential for building a multicultural future. From the perspective of comparative social analysis, the current South African experience of "whiteness" problematises the way in which "whiteness" is currently theorised in Euro-America. An awareness of the need to address "whiteness" within the South African context, however, is still embryonic.

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa is forging a path away from Apartheid towards a more equitable multicultural society. This realignment of relationships between groups of people within the country entails one of the most profound collective psychological processes occurring in the contemporary world.

In Post-Apartheid South Africa, Whites are experiencing a sudden loss of privilege. Different narratives are being constructed within the society about what it means to be White in the new dispensation. Some of these narratives seek to retain as many of the trappings of "whiteness" as possible, and are therefore inherently subversive of the ideal of multicultural equity, whereas others tend towards deconstructing the bipolarity on which "whiteness" was originally constructed. All of these narratives have obvious bearing on the future of multicultural citizenship within the new South Africa, as they are both explanatory and productive of ways in which White identity will come to be articulated in the evolving society.

From the perspective of comparative social analysis, the South African diasporic experience of "whiteness", both historically but also and most particularly under present decentered circumstances within the new society, problematises the way in which "whiteness" is currently theorised for example in the Metropolitan centres of Euro-America. After all, we need to examine historically situated examples of differently positioned "whitenesses", in order to achieve a fuller, more complex and nuanced understanding of the ways in which "whiteness" functions.

This article briefly delineates the way in which the problem of "whiteness" is posed in the literature and why it is considered important for our understanding of race, and then briefly indicates why this theorisation is problematical for understanding the South African context. It then looks at some elements in the construction of the narrative of "whiteness", and what the collapse of Apartheid means for this construction. Some different roles that "whiteness" is playing in the contemporary South Africa through new attempts to reframe or deconstruct the original narrative are identified, and some of the implications for this are spelt out.

However, before moving into an analysis of these issues, two brief caveats are called for. The first has to do with the question of whether it is useful, at this point in South Africa's history, to be opening up old wounds by explicitly addressing issues of race. The second navigates the theoretical context as regards debates around multiculturalism.

On the face of it, it may seem retrogressive to draw attention to race at a time when the country is painfully trying to move away from a past in which South African society was notoriously stratified according to racial categories. Some may argue that this strains against both the political ethos, where the tone is set by the government's official policy of non-racialism, as well as academic practice, where scholars are cautious not to entrench racial categories in social analysis (Seekings 1997; Thornton 1996). Critical race theory, however, argues in favour of race cognisance (Omi & Winant 1994; Delgado 1995). Such an approach eschews essentialising racist attributions, but takes the realities of unequal life opportunities in racist societies as needing to be explained and addressed. After a few years of democratic government, South Africa still has a long way to go in dealing with its racist heritage. The ideal of a non-racist society is unquestionably what we strive for, but moving towards this goal requires sustained and rigorous attention to how the construction of race has, and continues to, influence social positionalities.

While it may be broadly accepted that overcoming this heritage requires some form of multiculturalism, what this actually means is far from uncontested. The situation is not eased by the fact that the concept of multiculturalism covers a continuum of ways of dealing with difference, ranging from what has been called corporate, or conservative multiculturalism, to critical multiculturalism (McClaren 1994).At base, though, all multiculturalisms are inherently political and subversive of dominant monoculturalist ideologies (Goldberg 1994:7). "Weaker" multiculturalisms lend themselves to appropriation by dominant power structures.

In the context of the new South Africa, it is clear that many vested interests will be served by adopting "weak" or corporate multicultural positions. Such versions of multiculturalism can be used to justify, and mystify, the perpetuation of appropriately trimmed "whiteness" under the banner of "difference."

In opposition to these conceptions of multicultural citizenship that advocate little more than a bit of tinkering around the edges of intercultural relations, this paper aligns itself with a more stringent critical multiculturalism that looks to the deconstruction of privileged subject positions in striving towards the unapologetically Utopian ideal of fully equitable citizenship (McClaren 1994:55).

This article strives to go even further than this, however, and assert that for such a multicultural citizenship to evolve within South Africa, the issue of "whiteness" needs to be opened up and addressed. This assertion is in accordance with other post-colonial criticism that conceives of multiculturalism as necessarily involving an understanding of global and historical contexts, in order to relativise Europe's historically central position. So, for example, Robert Stam and Ella Shohat (1994: 296) maintain:

> An awareness of the intellectually debilitating effects of the Eurocentric legacy forms an indispensable backdrop for understanding the contemporary debates about multiculturalism . . . multiculturalism is actually an assault not on Europe or Europeans but on Eurocentrism — on the Procrustean forcing of cultural heterogeneity into a single paradigmatic perspective in which Europe is seen as the unique source of meaning, as the world's centre of gravity, as the ontological "reality" to the rest of the world's shadow.

It is argued here that "whiteness" is the social positionality occupied by people of European descent as a consequence of the racial ideologies of European colonialism and imperialism. To insist that "whiteness" needs to be deconstructed for multicultural citizenship to be realised in South Africa is therefore not an assault on individual White people, but on "whiteness" as this discursively and historically constructed, ideologically naturalised, position of social advantage as well as the knowledge and self-understandings constructed from that position.

"WHITENESS" THEORISED

Since the early 1990s there has been a burgeoning of studies dealing with "whiteness". Fishkin (1995:428) notes that this has been "a defining moment in the study of American culture, for in the early 1990s our ideas of 'whiteness' were interrogated, our ideas of 'blackness' were complicated, and the terrain we call 'American culture' began to be remapped". The critical move was to shift the academic gaze from racialised "others" to the centre from which the notion of "race" has been constructed. Dyer (1988:44) in his influential article, *White,* writes:

> Looking with such passion and single-mindedness at non-dominant groups has had the effect of reproducing the sense of the oddness, differentness, exceptionality of these groups, the feeling that they are departures from the norm. Meanwhile the norm has carried on as if it is the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being human.

In other words, White people "colonise" the definition of normal, and "whiteness" becomes "everything and nothing" (Dyer 1988:45), while its power goes undetected. Hyde (1995:88) comments on the relative lack of awareness that Whites have of how their lives are racialised: "The failure to recognise whiteness explicitly allows white individuals to ignore how race shapes their lives and by extension how race privileges are accrued". Martin *et al.* (1996:5) further point out the effect of this normative status on White identity:

> Whites as the privileged group take their identity as the norm and the standard by which other groups are measured, and this identity is therefore invisible, even to the extent that many whites do not consciously think about the profound effect being white has on their everyday lives.

The critical objective of the current interest in "whiteness" as an academic endeavour is to expose "whiteness"; to render it irreversibly visible. For this reason, scholars call for "whiteness" to be particularised (Nakayama & Krizek 1995: 292) and to be historicised so as to lose its giddy sense of being the universal norm, and to be recognised as a subject position that has come about as the result of the confluence of determinable historical and political events.

Frankenberg (1993:231) draws attention to the role discourse plays in structuring the experience of whiteness. She sums up the issue aptly:

> Whiteness *does* have content inasmuch as it generates norms, ways of understanding history, ways of thinking about self and other, and even ways of thinking about the notion of culture itself. Thus whiteness needs to be examined and historicized. We need to look more closely at the content of the normative and attempt to analyze both its history and its consequences. Whiteness needs to be delimited and "localized".

Transferring the gaze from the margins to the centre in the study of race is logically analogous to the feminist strategy of reframing the conventional wisdom that it is the position of women in society that is problematic, to posing the "the man problem" (Ferguson 1993) and to Wittig's (1992) move to challenge heterosexuality as the "problem" rather than marginalised homosexuality. In each case, the self-construction of the centre, which had previously kept attention diverted from itself, is exposed.

The shift is also away from examining individual racism, conceived of as unfortunate and deviant prejudice, while ignoring the fundamental power structures which underpin self-understandings. Instead, the constructedness of the social positioning occupied by people of European descent who have been systematically advantaged is revealed, as well as the collective strategies, conscious and unconscious, through which such advantage is attained and sustained. For example, David Roediger (1991; 1994) has done important work in showing how working class ethnic immigrants in the United States established their whiteness through rejecting alliances with working class black people, negotiating their way into "mainstream" Americanness by engaging in racist behaviour and adopting a capitalist work ethic.

"WHITENESS" IN SOUTH AFRICA

An awareness of the need to address "whiteness" within the South African context is still embryonic. Schutte's (1995) analysis of White attitudes on the eve of the general election, *What racists believe,* for example, follows a conventional analysis of racist attitudes.

In recent times, though, rumblings are beginning to surface calling for White academics to recognise the ways in which their work has been informed by their "whiteness". Dubow (1995:5), for example, comments that is it time for "white historians to become curious about their own collective pasts".

The ideological underpinnings and many of the consequences of "whiteness" were fundamentally the same in all the contexts where people from Europe settled in the course of global expansion. It is to be expected, therefore, that there should be many similarities between "whiteness" in Euro-America and in South Africa.

Differences between the two contexts, however, have shaped "whiteness" differently. The particularities of the South African context have had an impact on the contours of "whiteness" here. Examples are: The demographic composition of the country, in which Whites have been a small minority of the total population; the fact that two rival ethnic groups from Europe (English and Afrikaans) both defined themselves primarily as White in contradistinction to the "other," the indigenous population, but also distinguished themselves from each other through adopting a different standpoint to the "other"; as well as the psychological impact of the construction of Africa and Africans as the most extreme of Europe's "others" (See Blaut 1993; Brantlinger 1985; Nederveen Pieterse 1992; McLaren 1994; Steyn 1999).

Factors such as these have woven the particular texture of "whiteness" within South Africa. In contrast to the American experience of "whiteness", which dominates securely from the position of the invisible norm, buoyed up by demographic, economic and political advantage, the more threatened Whites in South Africa have always been highly conscious of their "whiteness". They knew that this entailed privilege, and that their "whiteness" was indeed the most salient factor in influencing all aspects of their lives (Steyn 2001). As in the United States, "whiteness" was certainly seen to define the desired way to be human, but here it was seen as appropriate that groups of people should be differently racialised. What was unconsciously imbibed as part of the taken-for-granted White reality was the fittingness that theirs should be the advantaged position (Steyn 2001).

Whereas academics may quibble about the exact nature of the post-colonial, and how South Africa fits or doesn't fit into the various definitions mooted, the points made above indicate that many White South Africans had remained close to the original assumptions which informed the Master Narrative of "whiteness", the colonial narrative which had come to dominate other possible explanations for the differences between Europe and its Others (Steyn 2001).

TROUBLING THE WHITE CENTRE

"Whiteness", as an extremely successful ideological construction of modernist colonisation, is by definition (quite literally: through having the power to define self and other) a construction of power. In his significant essay, *Multiculturalism,* Taylor (1994) argues that identity is constructed in dialogue with other people's understandings of who one is. Identity is certainly constructed relationally, largely through a process of contradistinction. Yet, in the case of an identity constructed from a position of domination, the point is exactly that the mutuality implied by the word "dialogue" is absent.

Europeans became "White" as they expanded and conquered, developing a common identity using Africans as the main foil against which they developed this common identity (Lipsitz 1995; Segrest 1994). The notion of race, an outcome of certain social relations, not their cause (Guillaumin 1995), interlocked Black and White psyches into interdependence (Bhabha 1990, 1994; Fanon 1990, 1994; Memmi 1990; Morrison 1992). The unequal nature of the relationship allowed Whites to fix the meaning of self and other through projections, exclusions, denials and repression (Hooks 1990; JanMohammed 1985; Memmi 1990). People from Europe were able to establish a supernational identity that ensured that the emerging social formations brought about by European expansion were articulated to their greatest self-interest.

The construction of a social identity based on the notion that Europeans were a natural grouping of people essentially united by endogenously produced, inherently superior attributes acted as a form of social control in the settled countries (Allen 1994). Whites were naturally suited to govern; resources and economic advantage gravitated towards them through just desert; their culture was obviously what needed to diffuse to others (in the best interest of those who were conquered) as there was little Whites could learn from the natives (Blaut 1993). The White imagination was structured around ideological assumptions about their appropriate social positioning relative to darker-skinned people, especially Africans, who, supposedly naturally and endogenously, were well suited to labour (Brantlinger 1985; Guillaumin 1995).

Apartheid can be seen as logically consistent with, and one of the fullest expressions of, these White assumptions. It was a fundamentalist attempt, thoroughly modernist in impulse, to institutionalise the Master Narrative of "whiteness" through state mechanisms. (See Anderson 1990 for an analysis of fundamentalism in the context of post-modernism.)

It is unquestionably true that not all Whites were interpellated into the Master Narrative isomorphically, and many were able to position themselves differently to the Master Narrative through identification with subjugated discourses that did circulate within the country, despite censorship and repression in the years of Apartheid. Nevertheless, the general contours of the narrative have influenced the identities of all South African Whites, even if it is through adopting an oppositional stand, and Whites benefited through the pervasive advantages structured into the system. The positionality of "poor whites" in South Africa is not being discussed in detail here, though they have been among those to benefit most from the ideology of "whiteness" in the South African context.

The present circumstances in South Africa, where Whites still command economic advantage but not political power or demographic dominance, deeply trouble the construction of social reality from the position of "whiteness". The moorings have been loosened that held social identities in South Africa in place. However reprehensible these moorings may have been, they were certain, and whites on all sides of the political spectrum had a fair measure of clarity regarding their role in the social fabric.

Whites now have to renegotiate social identities from a different position within the society, from an altered relationship to state mechanisms, and to material and symbolic resources. (This of course is true, in different ways, for all population groups within the country.) Yet, as Appiah (1997) comments, "A new identity is always post-some-old-identity (in the familiar sense of 'post' in which 'post-modernism' is enabled by the very modernism it challenges)".

In the process of making sense of what it means to be White in these new circumstances, Whites are recycling aspects of the Master Narrative, drawing on various other discourses available to them, and some are attempting to create new syncretic identities. The discussion which follows seeks to draw out some main themes and issues that inform the changes taking place in narratives of "whiteness". It will not draw distinctions between different positions adopted to these issues by different groups of White South Africans.

NEW SOUTH AFRICAN NARRATIVES OF "WHITENESS"

With the Master Narrative still the main resource for their identity construction, most South African Whites are at least to some extent in dissonance with both their future and their past, in varying degrees and combinations. The objective fact of losing the position of total control of the society (however unstable this may have been) tends to be subjectively experienced as complete disempowerment.

Current narratives of "whiteness" in the new South Africa are replete with feelings of having been rendered irrelevant, of losing influence. A similar dynamic operates, for example, when men are confronted with a realignment of power in relation to women. The objective fact of being relativised is subjectively experienced as having been marginalised.

Such distortions are more a function of the degree of power previously held, than a real assessment of current power balances. Whiteness still yields considerable power through economic advantage, the cumulative benefits of historical access to resources and a good measure of cultural hegemony through the prestigious international status of European culture, particularly in business.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that "whiteness", and in tandem with it, its racial "other," can no longer be defined unilaterally from a position of power. This is the crucial distinction between "whiteness" in this context, and in Euro-America and other deep settler countries, where "whiteness" is still much more entrenched, although less and less so as global dynamics change in the post-colonial era.

This means that any narrative that Whites may tell to explain, or explain away, "whiteness" has to occur in an environment in which account has to be taken of the realities of those previously dismissed, of African expectations, and most particularly, of *their* constructions of what "whiteness" means in the new context. Unlike contexts in which "whiteness" has not been as profoundly relativised, and where the dependence of "whiteness" on its "others" remains largely invisible (Morrison 1992), the interdependence of Whites and Blacks in all aspects of the emerging new South African society is "in the face" of all its citizens.

In such circumstances, those who cleave strongly to the ideological underpinnings of "whiteness" are cast into a state of profound dissonance with their new environment and its future. In the new South Africa, Whites who retain a fundamentalist belief in the Master Narrative must believe that under African rule the country is doomed at best to ail, and in all probability to fail. In this case, they would have been justified all along in holding their beliefs, but their future safety and prosperity within the new dispensation are in severe jeopardy. If they choose to stay in the country in spite of such beliefs, they are forced either to adopt attitudes and behaviours that are subversive of the new alignments (perhaps even contributing to negative self-fulfilling prophesies) or to explain successes away through rationalising narratives (such as how it is Whites behind the scenes who are "really" doing the strategic work).

It is characteristic of the racist imagination that it "turns the world upside down" (Cohen 1992:90) through inversions. It follows, therefore, that in a suddenly more normalised world, fundamentalist Whites subjectively experience the world as having turned topsy-turvy. Social reality is still explained in terms of racial binaries, but these have been suddenly, and illogically, reversed along with the switch in power. The recurring refrain in their narratives is that their present circumstances are the mirror image of that of Blacks under the previous regime. These narratives focus on the perceived victimisation, even persecution, of Whites, particularly through such policies as affirmative action.

On the other hand, however, as the ideological underpinnings of "whiteness" are undermined by the new social order, Whites are cast into dissonance with their past — their heritage, their history, their parental teachings, their own complicity with the system. Many scapegoating narratives are emerging to deal with this conflict.

At this stage, the system of Apartheid and prominent role-players in its architecture and implementation carry the major responsibility. This is a partially true projection that shields "ordinary" Whites from engaging too much discomfort, and acts as yet another strategy through which "whiteness" can protect itself from exposure. One of the characteristics of "whiteness" (like other identities constructed from positions of power) is its lack of insight into the experience of those who are oppressed by the system (Frye 1983; Memmi 1990; Mudimbe 1988; Trinh 1989).

Frye (1983) provides an insightful comment into this aspect of "whiteness" when she points out the embeddedness of "ignore" within the word "ignorance." The overwhelming refrain coming from the general white population is "We didn't know."

One of the effects that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has had within the restructuring society is that it confronted Whites with the extent and depth of the layers of more or less unconscious ignore-ance that permeated the old social fabric: ignore-ance of indignities, injustices and atrocities that were perpetrated in the name of defending their "whiteness".

While the human psyche seems amazingly adept at providing defense against unpleasant realities, and there are of course those Whites who chose to ignore the proceedings, it is very difficult to hold onto old assumptions in the face of the evidence presented. More than in the other settler countries where "whiteness" has not been resoundingly decentered in the same way, "whiteness" here is being confronted with its dark side.

At least two of the "purities" that have been kernel to the narrative of "whiteness" are becoming "muddied." Memmi (1990:123) has commented on how, while yet claiming the advantages of being master, the oppressor needs to emerge innocent. This is because "deep within himself, the colonialist pleads guilty". The mechanisms of denial, repression and projection, whereby the most unattractive aspects of the oppressor end up being attributed to the oppressed, enabled the construction of innocent "whiteness" in the first place. Yet the mechanism of blaming the victim is rendered impotent when the victim becomes empowered to speak and past culpabilities become more apparent. Nevertheless, appeals to innocence form a major thrust of White narratives being constructed in contemporary South Africa, reflecting the desire to be exonerated from guilt.

In a similar vein, the notion of a "pure", homogenous White race could only be achieved through a binary construction in which the antithesis of everything that was desired as attributes for the self was projected onto the "other," onto "blackness", in particular the blackness of Africa (JanMohammed 1985; Martin & Mohanty 1986.)

This bipolar lens increasingly blurs out of focus as Africans start to come into their own under a system that redresses the prior unequal access to opportunity. Many Whites are only now starting to recognise Africans as fully rounded people, rather than one-dimensional projections. The "aha" experience of recognising value and potential within Africa and Africans increasingly enters into narratives that are starting to deconstruct the earlier oppositional binaries. For these Whites, there is a revisioning of the colonial heritage of unmitigatingly negative beliefs about Africa.

So, for example, much is being written in popular discourse, and particularly in business discourse, about *ubuntu,* the African concept of personhood. The concept honours the fact that an individual is only fully realised within community, through the bond of kindness that unites people – see Mbigi (1997) and Mbigi and Maree (1995). It is apparent that for Whites who wish to remain in the country, a concept such as this offers a reassuring counter to still-prevalent, recycled, colonial constructions of Africa as inherently dangerous, and inimical to the interests of those who are "civilized."

The discourse around ubuntu ties in with other discourses that generate notions of future potential in, and for, Africa such as the current notion of the African Renaissance that President Thabo Mbeki has introduced into the currency of national discourse.

Versions of these off-White narratives introduce concepts of hybridity, synergy, and intersectionality which run directly counter to notions of culturally and racially-pure "whiteness". (See, for example, Steyn and Motshabi (1996)). Self-identification as "White Africans," which quite explicitly gives a hue to the original construction, is heard more frequently. Of course, the self-label is contested, and appropriated by different groups with differing interests. Amongst some Whites, for example, the self-label is more likely to indicate a claim to the right to exist, and own land, on the continent. This is in effect recycling the original significance of the self-label "Afrikaner," using the going discourse of our time.

In other cases, though, the appellation signals a new relationship to the continent and the indigenous people; a relationship which is more dialogic, allowing those who hail from Europe to be influenced by, and learn from, Africa. This mindset augurs considerably better for the prospects of equitable multiculturalism within the new South Africa.

For many Whites, however, the fragmented "whiteness" with which they now negotiate the future lends itself to a more ad hoc and circumscribed redefinition; strains of the old story and newer options are intertwined, and applied to different aspects of their lives. The tendency seems to be to try to find ways of remaining White, but in more modest ways. Withdrawal, in different forms, is evident in many such accounts of what it means to be White now: withdrawal from the Africanness of the new situation into a reawakened sense of the value of European heritage (as in "standards"); withdrawal into holding on to private enterprise in the face of the loss of other power; withdrawal into anomie and lack of emotional engagement with the undertaking of social restructuring.

For some, complete withdrawal through emigration to contexts that support "whiteness" less problematically is preferable to dealing with the uncertainty of decentered "whiteness". Withdrawal is balanced by other narrative strains that are rearticulating "whiteness" in terms of power that is exercised "from below," or "from alongside." In these, "whiteness" emerges as a social positionality with the role of subversion, or of resistance, or more positively, as a supportive resource, accumulated as a consequence of historical privilege, now to be shared towards a fairer, more sustainable social future.

"Whiteness" has become post-modern; the Master Narrative no longer dominates over other versions of what it means to be White; and no single narrative quite seems to know, either. The irony is that this fragmentation should be occurring in the country in which White supremacy once achieved its apotheosis.

The above discussion shows how "whiteness" in the New South Africa is being constellated within fundamentally different dynamics, and the question arises to what extent the constructions that are going to emerge will resemble what is currently theorised as "whiteness". As with other instances of marginalised "whiteness" within the Metropolitan areas, such as "poor whites" the margins have much to say to the centre.

Certainly, the emerging constructions have interest for other societies where White power is beginning to lose its grip. Nevertheless, given the post-modern nature of the "whiteness" that is emerging, an adequate understanding of how White identity is developing here will probably need to draw on insights from the theorisation of diasporic, and even creolised identities. And in like manner to which Whites in the new South Africa are currently experiencing their identities, the resultant theorisations will no doubt involve complex and shifting intersections of insights drawn from the Metropolitan centres and homespun, emerging understanding within the country itself.

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