

# SHIFTING WHITE IDENTITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA: WHITE AFRICANNESS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

**Sally Matthews**

*Department of Political and International Studies, Rhodes University*

s.matthews@ru.ac.za

## KEY CONCEPTS

Racial eliminativism; white Africans; post-apartheid; whiteness; African identity; Africanness

## ABSTRACT

The end of apartheid predictably caused something of an identity crisis for white South Africans. The sense of uncertainty about what it means to be white has led to much public debate about whiteness in South Africa, as well as a growing body of literature on whites in post-apartheid South Africa. One of the many responses to this need to rethink white identity has been the claim by some that white South Africans can be considered to be African or ought to begin to think of themselves as being African. This paper argues that whites' assertion of an African identity does not necessarily assist in the achievement of racial justice, but that some kind of shift in white identity is required in order for whites to be able to contribute to the achievement of a racially just South Africa. In making this argument, the paper brings contemporary discussions on race and whiteness, and in particular discussions about racial eliminativism, to bear on the question of whether or not white South Africans may rightly claim an African identity.



Phronimon  
Volume 16 | Number 2 | 2015  
pp. 112–129

Print ISSN 1561-4018  
© Unisa Press

...white South Africans cannot move forward unless they confront the extent to which their identities and personal expectations have been shaped through asymmetrical power relations, both internally within South Africa, and globally through enmeshment within Western historical processes and ideologies. (Steyn 2001: xxxii)

One of the many consequences of the dismantling of apartheid is the need for a re-evaluation of the way in which white South Africans fit into South Africa. A non-racist South Africa is only possible if white South Africans no longer consider themselves superior to other South Africans and no longer expect to occupy a central and dominant position within South African society. While much has changed in the two decades since the official end of apartheid, the question of how white South Africans fit into the broader South African landscape has certainly not been resolved. Most importantly, while the post-apartheid era has seen some erosion of racial divisions and racial inequality, racial cleavages in South Africa continue to be stark. For example, recent studies report that more than half of South Africans say that they “never” or “rarely” socialise with people of other races (Wale 2013: 33) and that white South African household incomes are on average more than five times higher than those of black South African households (Statistics South Africa 2012: 4). If we accept that such divisions and inequalities need to be broken down in order to build a racially just society, then one question we need to ask is: “Would racial justice be furthered if whites rejected identification as whites?” A question that seems to follow from this is the question of whether or not such whites could and should then identify as Africans.

This paper explores these two questions by relating them to the work of critical race theorists who have written on whiteness in other contexts. In particular, I will engage with arguments in favour and against racial eliminativism, which is the view that the elimination of racial categories is necessary for the achievement of racial justice. As I will discuss below, some scholars argue that in an ideal non-racist future, no one would identify as “white” or “black” or any other such category. Rather, such categories would cease to exist entirely. Contrary to such scholars, others argue that we need to retain racial categories (at least for a time) in order to achieve racial justice, with some going further to argue that racial categories themselves are not problematic and that they could play a valuable role even in an ideal non-racist world. These questions are not particular to South Africa, but they are relevant and useful in thinking about whether or not white South Africans ought to stop thinking of themselves as white and self-identify as something else, perhaps as African.

The paper begins by introducing three striking illustrations of claims to African identity on the part of white people. These illustrations introduce some of the key issues related to the question of post-apartheid white identity and will be picked up on in various ways throughout the rest of the paper. After introducing these three white claims to African identity, the second section of the paper surveys some of the literature on whiteness in other contexts in order to answer the question of what

whiteness is and whether a person can stop being white. The third section of the paper brings this literature to bear on the South African context, asking what the effects of white claims to African identity are and arguing that rather than encouraging white South Africans to proclaim themselves either white or African, what matters is not so much *which* identity they choose, but *how* they enact these identities.<sup>1</sup> The paper closes with some tentative answers to the question of how white South Africans who are committed to struggles against racial injustice, should identify.

### THREE WHITE CLAIMS TO AFRICANNESS

The end of apartheid and the revelations made as part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission about atrocities committed by the apartheid regime, created something of an identity crisis for many white South Africans. Being white seemed to carry with it significant taint and some white South Africans responded to this by declaring themselves to be African (see for example Du Preez 2005; Kemp Spies 2007; Morris 2005; Steyn 2001: 115-147; Van Zyl Slabbert 1999). Claims by white South Africans that they were African, were varied in intent and content, however. In order to explain and illustrate the claims I will make later on in this paper, I want to introduce three rather different examples of white people with some claim to be called African. The three very different claims to Africanness described in this section illustrate some of the ambiguities and complexities related to the question of white Africanness.

The first claim was made by Ernst Roets, the current deputy CEO of the organisation AfriForum, which claims to protect the rights of minorities in South Africa, although it is widely seen as being a group which defends the interests of white South Africans. Back in 2006 when he was still a student, Roets was one of a group of white University of Pretoria students who organised a small protest march in which they painted themselves black and took a memorandum to the President's office, arguing that they should be allowed to identify themselves as "African" and declaring their opposition to the requirement that they identify as "white" in line with South Africa's employment equity legislation. Such legislation requires South Africans to select between the identities "white", "coloured", "African" and "Indian". Roets insisted that: "We will not allow racial classification to deprive us of our African identity" (cited in Govender 2006).

The second potential white person seeking to identify as African whom I would like to introduce is the well-known Afrikaans writer Antjie Krog. One of the key themes in her recent books has been the question of her own belonging in Africa, of her own Africanness. Krog's position is a complex and nuanced one which cannot be easily summarised, but these two quotes give some indication of how she grapples with the question of white Africanhood:

It is mine. I belong to that continent. My gaze, my eyes are one with the thousands of others that have looked back over the centuries toward Africa. Ours. Mine. Yes, I would die for this. (Krog 1998: 277)

Enchanted by colour and language, the smell of sand, the taste of tea, she knows that she wants to be nowhere else but here, wants to be from nowhere else but here, this continent that fills her so with anguish and love...she feels light-footed and loose-limbed, sorted out and rooted. She has no soul other than the one breathing in the enormous shade of this continent. (Krog 2003: 333-334)

The final potential white candidate for Africanhood is a little less known than the other two and is not, in fact, a South African citizen. She is Katrien Odendaal, a Tanzanian who is a descendent of the small group of Afrikaners who settled in Tanzania early in the 1900s. In 1994, journalist Rian Malan came across her living as a subsistence farmer in northern Tanzania (see Malan 2009). By the time he met her she was already fairly elderly. He learns about how she had faced rejection from the small Afrikaner community in Tanzania when she had a child with a black Tanzanian. Eventually all the other Tanzanian Afrikaners left Tanzania or died and she continued to live with her Tanzanian partner with whom she had several children, who themselves subsequently married local Tanzanians and had children of their own. Malan reports that she lived in harmony with her neighbours who live in similar material conditions to her. He comments that “she wasn’t at all afraid of her African neighbours, perhaps because she owned no more than they did, which was almost nothing”, adding: “She was the only white [he’d] ever met of whom that was true, anywhere in Africa” (Malan 2009: 165). Malan makes it clear that Katrien Odendaal does not herself identify as African. Nevertheless, he uses the term “African peasant” to describe her (Malan 2009: 167).

These three examples are very different in nature, but juxtaposed here they help reveal many of the complexities related to white and African identity in post-apartheid South Africa. What exactly is it to be “white” in South Africa (and more generally Africa)? What, exactly, is an African and when, if ever, could a white person be an African? Why would a white person want to claim an African identity? Why might a white person living in Africa reject such an identity? These and many other questions are raised by these three examples, and not all of them can be addressed in one paper. For the moment, let us leave behind these three illustrations – we will return to them later – and think about a question that needs resolving before we can decide whether these so-called “white” people can be African, and that is the question of what it actually means to be white.

## BEING RACED, BEING WHITE

What is a white person? Perhaps to many this might seem a rather ridiculous question with a very straightforward answer, but for those who have spent time exploring

the global history of racial identity, this question is not so easy to answer. Among scholars, there is more or less consensus today that there are no clear biological markers which neatly separate human beings into different racial groups.<sup>2</sup> This rejection of the idea that natural races exist is reflected, for example, in the American Anthropological Association's 1998 statement on race where they declare that with "the vast expansion of scientific knowledge in this century...it has become clear that human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups". The rejection of the idea that races are natural categories has led to much debate about what race is – is race "real" and in what sense can it be real if it does not reference the biological markers it was previously thought to reference? Race is commonly described as being "socially constructed" in that "human interaction rather than natural differentiation must be seen as the source and continued basis for racial categorisation" (Haney Lopez 2000: 196). However, the exact nature and implications of such a view continue to be the subject of much debate. As Michael Monahan (2011: 20) puts it: "If race is not biological, does it follow that it cannot be real? If it can be real, what kind of reality does it have?"

Perhaps the best way to begin to explore this question is to look at the history of contemporary racial categories. While human societies have always found ways to differentiate between those who belong to a community and those considered "other", and while such attempts to differentiate have often made reference to physical characteristics such as skin colour, the contemporary understanding of race is a product of European colonialist expansion and oppression and emerged as part of attempts to justify the domination of some over others. The racial categories that have played an important role in dividing and oppressing people in the last few centuries are not natural, pre-existing categories around which structures of domination later coalesced, but rather should be understood as categories that came into being as part of the process of European imperialist expansion. As MacMullan (2009: 54) argues, rather than being "a real, received, and antecedent racial group", the white race was "slowly created through violence, legislation, and other practices of exclusion and privilege". This is certainly not to say that nothing like the contemporary concept of race existed prior to European colonial expansion,<sup>3</sup> but it is to argue that the particular form of racial categorisation which has so influenced contemporary societal organisation was constituted as part of a process of colonialist conquest and assisted in the justification and perpetuation of imperialist domination. Thus James Baldwin (1998 [1984]) declares that there is no such thing as a "white community" or "white people": the idea of there being "white people" is, he says, a fiction created and maintained as part of conquest and domination. Speaking from the North American context, he argues that people only became white or black through the process of the creation of America. As he puts it:

White men – from Norway, for example, where they were Norwegians – became white: by slaughtering the cattle, poisoning the wells, torching the houses, massacring Native Americans, raping Black women. (Baldwin, 1998 [1984]: 178-179)

Baldwin suggests that contemporary forms of racism do not reflect some kind of natural and inevitable dislike between two distinct sets of people, but rather arise in a particular historical context in order to justify a specific set of political relations. Baldwin's depiction of whiteness also emphasises that whiteness is not rightly understood as an ethnic or cultural category either – as Joel Olson (2004: 113) argues that “it is more useful to understand whiteness as a form of power rather than as a culture”. There is not, he suggests, a set of cultural features which white people have in common, rather what white people have in common is their common position within the hierarchies set up by European colonialist expansion and conquest.

Commentators on whiteness and immigration to the US (see for example Allen 1994: 27-51; Ignatiev 1995; and Roediger 2005) show how the boundaries of whiteness shifted over time with some immigrants (such as the Irish, the Hungarians, the Italians and the Jews) initially being excluded from the category “white”, but later being incorporated within it. Studies of the history of race reveal how flexible and arbitrary the classification “white” was. For example, Tim Allen (1994: 27) points out that in some parts of Hispanic America whiteness could be obtained through the purchase of a certificate and that at certain points in history a Portuguese immigrant arriving in one part of the Americas would have been classified white, while his or her sibling arriving in another part would have been denied the status of being “white”.

What such discussions show is not only that the category “white”, and other racial categories, are arbitrary and continually shifting, but also that the category “white” describes a particular social and political *position* in a divided and oppressive society, rather than a cultural or ethnic identity or a biological or natural category. Whites are those who occupied (and for the most part still do occupy) a dominant position in the very unequal and divided societies and the broader global order created by European expansion and conquest. This is why it still makes sense to talk about white supremacy in a post-segregationist era, if white supremacy is understood as “a particular power structure of formal *or informal* rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties” (Mills 1997: 3, emphasis added).

Of course, it is not simply the case that anyone who came to occupy a dominant societal position came to be defined as white. Theories about race attempted to tie race to certain physical features (colour of the skin and curliness of hair, for example) which were supposedly the outward manifestations of some kind of biological racial essence. However, as Charles Mills (1998: 47-48) points out, there is a “continuous spectrum of varying morphological traits” and “the lines of demarcation, the categorical boundaries” have been drawn in accordance with political motivations

and with the intention to “establish and maintain the privileges of particular groups”. This is why Italians or Greeks or Irish were sometimes excluded from the category “white” in the USA (see Allen 1994; Ignatiev 1995) and why the Afrikaners were at times not regarded by the English colonialists as “properly” white (see Steyn 2001: 26). It also explains how the Rwandan Tutsis came to be described in some colonial theories as “Caucasians” who were “black in colour without being Negroid in race” (Mamdani 2002: 79), thus justifying their colonialist-assisted domination over the supposedly “Negro” others in central Africa. The boundaries of the white race do not mark out clear pre-existing categories, but rather emerge through political machinations related to the justification of the domination of some people over others. That said, similarity in appearance obviously assisted certain categories of people (the Irish, Jews, Eastern Europeans and Afrikaners, for example) to overcome their ambiguous racial status, while dissimilarity in physical appearance surely contributed to closing off the possibility of “ascension” to whiteness for other categories of people (black Africans and native Americans, for example).

In summary, a consideration of the history of race shows that whiteness does not describe membership of some clearly defined “sub-species” of humanity, nor does it refer simply to the possession of a particular set of physical characteristics (light skin, straight hair, or the like). Rather, it refers most saliently to the occupation of a *particular societal position*: whites are those who occupy a dominant position as a consequence of colonialist expansion and who are advantaged by the societal hierarchies that were established as part of European expansion over the last few centuries. On the flip side, black people are those who are disadvantaged and oppressed by these same societal hierarchies. As W.E.B. Du Bois puts it: “...the black man is a person who must ride ‘Jim Crow’ in Georgia” (Du Bois 1923: 60). To be white or black or coloured or Asian or another of the many terms that designate race is not about biology, nor is it principally about appearance or identity – rather, it is most saliently a term that points to the position one occupies within a stratified society.

## RACIAL ELIMINATIVISM: CEASING TO BE WHITE

If, as most scholars accept today, race is not some kind of biological essence, but is rather a way of distinguishing between people that came about as part of colonialist expansion and domination, then, perhaps, what we need to do is to get rid of race. We need, it may be argued, not only to get rid of racism – understood as the practice of unjustly favouring one race above another – but also to get rid of race altogether. This would mean that whites in South Africa should stop identifying as whites and that others should stop urging whites to tick boxes labelled “white” when filling in forms. Whites would stop being white (or, more correctly, would stop falsely



believing themselves to be white) and would then, presumably simply identify as South African citizens or as Africans in line with the continent of their birth.

There is much debate in the USA about the question of whether or not people should stop identifying along the lines of race. Some scholars, like Naomi Zack (1993) and Kwame Appiah (1985), argue that racial categories are illegitimate and that we should do away with them. For example Naomi Zack (1993) argues that “since racial designations are racist, then people ought not to be identified in the third person as members of races” and, not only should others not identify people as being raced, but, she goes further to say that individuals ought also not to identify themselves as being members of particular races. Similarly, Kwame Appiah (1985: 35) concludes that: “The truth is that there are no races: there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask of ‘race’ to do for us.” While both Appiah and Zack’s arguments are more complex and sophisticated than simply being arguments in favour of the instant erasure of all usages of racial categories, and while their views have shifted over time, both are considered key advocates of the view that ultimately racial categories are not useful and should be abolished. MacMullan (2005: 270) describes those who hold this position as “racial eliminativists” – they are those who “want to remove the *entire* taxonomy of race”.

MacMullan points to another group of thinkers – he calls them “white eliminativists” (2005: 270) – who do not necessarily seek to get rid of all racial categories, but who do want to “abolish the white race” (Ignatiev 1997). A small group of thinkers associated with the now defunct journal *Race Traitor* make the argument that:

...so-called whites must cease to exist as whites in order to realize themselves as something else; to put it another way: white people must commit suicide as whites in order to come alive as workers, or youth, or women, or whatever other identity can induce them to change from the miserable, petulant, subordinated creatures they now are into freely associated, fully developed human subjects. (Ignatiev 1997)

The argument here is that the white race in particular is illegitimate and that the best way for white people of good conscience to contribute to struggles against racism is for them to renounce their whiteness and cease to identify as white.

Both these positions have been much criticised by those who argue that the elimination of racism need not mean the elimination of racial categories. Such commentators argue that we can – and should – continue to refer to ourselves and others using racial terminology, even while we recognise that these terms do not point to natural, essential differences in people and even while we ought to work to dismantle racism and racial inequality.

The arguments that can be put forward for maintaining racial categories are various and I will try to summarise some of them briefly here. Firstly, if one accepts the kind of approach to race adopted by scholars like Shannon Sullivan (2001; 2006) and MacMullan (2005; 2009) – a view that sees racism today as operating principally



through unconscious action rather than conscious intent – then eschewing conscious identification with a particular race is not going to do very much for eroding actual racist behaviour. As John Shuford (2001: 308) points out, eliminating racial categories may do very little in terms of actually addressing the “social realities and injuries of racialization for those who cannot become ‘raceless’ within their material conditions”. White people stopping to identify as white is unlikely to result in actual changes in the behaviour of white people towards black people and may also not do much to address racial inequalities – indeed, it would make the identification of racial inequalities more difficult. If so, it is hard to see how ceasing to identify as white can actually help bring about a world without racism and racial inequality. As MacMullan (2009: 155) points out “If our primary problem now was that white folk, by and large, *intentionally and consciously* perpetuated and participated in whiteness” then refusing to identify as white could have power. However, in contemporary post-segregationist societies whites do not typically explicitly try to claim privileges because they are white, rather the problem today is that “most white folk *do not* recognise how they benefit from whiteness” (MacMullan 2009: 155).

A second issue is that the history of black racial mobilisation shows that racial mobilisation can be used in liberatory ways – think of black consciousness movements, for example. Organisation along racial lines has not always been used in order to advance racism. For sure, one could then argue that racial mobilisation is acceptable except for white people, but the category “white” cannot fall away if related categories such as “black” do not also cease to exist, and eliminating all forms of racial consciousness and mobilisation is not obviously in the interests of long-term racial justice. Thirdly, and relatedly, racial redress is impossible without racial categories. We cannot have programmes of affirmative action, for example, if we abolish racial categories. Thus it seems that there are several reasons why we need at least to be hesitant about the prospect of eliminating racial categories, as there are good reasons to think that racial inequalities and racial discrimination may best be confronted by strategies that recognise rather than seek to eliminate racial categories.

## BEING AFRICAN

If we are not only to ask if white South Africans should stop identifying as white, but also whether they ought to identify as African, then we need to address the question of what it means to be African. This question is no less fraught than the question of what it means to be white. As Ali Mazrui (1986) and V.Y. Mudimbe (1994) both emphasise, although in very different ways, the idea that there is a continent called “Africa” and people are called “Africans” is very much due to the decisions of European imperialists and cartographers who decided to label the continent and its people in this way. Furthermore, as Mazrui (1986: 25) notes, the usage of the term

“African” was, from the outset, “bewilderingly ambivalent and ambiguous” in that it was not clear whether to be African was taken to mean to come from the continent called Africa or whether it was a racial term designating only those with dark skin.

Consequently, and frustratingly, in some sense then, the idea of Africa is “invented” (Mudimbe 1988) and we could even say that Africa “exists only on the basis of the text that constructs it as the Other’s fiction” (Mbembe 2002: 257). This makes it enormously difficult for Africans to remake their identities in ways that reject the content injected into the term “African” by European imperialists, while also holding on to the term as being meaningful in some way. There have been a range of attempts to remake the term “African” and to invest it with positive meaning – from the *négritude* movement, to Pan-Africanism, to calls for an African Renaissance or insistence upon Afrocentricity or Africanness. These attempts to invest the term “African” with positive meaning differ in terms of whether they focus on race as the basis for defining Africanness, as do many US-based advocates of Afrocentricity, or whether, like Archie Mafeje (2000), they are wary about “importing” Afrocentricity from the US to Africa and emphasise that Africanness must be nurtured on the continent. There are also important differences in terms of whether scholars understand “Africanness” or “Africanness” as a kind of essence which needs to be retrieved and revived after years of suppression or whether Africanness is something less tangible that is in need of constant reworking. The former conception of Africanness is suggested by Molefi Asante (2007: 1-2) when he talks about Africanness using the metaphor of an eagle who has been raised to think of itself as a chicken, but has to discover its true identity in order to flourish. But this conception of Africanness can be contrasted with that of scholars like Mbembe who aim, in Diagne’s (2002: 622) words, to “reformulate Africanness as an open question”.

Given this ongoing debate, it is at least possible that the term “African” could be used to refer to white South Africans. Some key contributors to discussions on African identity are clearly open to this possibility – for example, Mbeki’s (1996) much-quoted “I am an African” speech insists that we must “refuse to accept that our Africanness shall be defined by our race, colour, gender of historical origins”, while prominent scholar Achille Mbembe (2002: 264) talks of “Africans of European origin”. However, it is also clear that others consider the term to be exclusive of whites – think for example of the South African government’s decision to use the categories African, coloured, white, Indian and Chinese in employment equity legislation, which clearly implies that to belong to the category white is not to be African.

Debates about the meaning of Africanness – both in terms of who it includes and also, and more importantly, of what it means beyond referring to a racial category or to geographical origin, continue. The question of whiteness and Africanness is only one small component of this broad and important debate, but it is a debate of relevance in thinking through how to create a non-racist future in South Africa.

## BACK TO THE WHITE AFRICANS

The above discussion of the history of race and the question of racial eliminativism can help us in thinking through the question of whether or not it is fruitful for white South Africans to eschew identifying as white and to rather identify as African. To begin with, the above set of writing shows that whiteness is properly understood not as a biological essence nor simply as a fictitious identity, but rather as a particular societal *position* and as a particular set of *practices*. White people are those people who have come to occupy a position of dominance as a consequence of European imperialist expansion and who have maintained that position of dominance through practices such as discrimination against black people, an assumption of authority and a dismissal of others' experiences.

If we understand whiteness this way, what do we make of attempts by white people to distance themselves from their whiteness and to take on an African identity? Will eschewing one's identity as a white person assist in struggles against racism and racial inequality in South Africa?

Let us return to the first case discussed earlier – that of the white student who paints himself black and rejects attempts by the South African government to record people's race as part of employment equity legislation. The white student in black face continues to occupy the position of a white person in society and is quite evidently committed to shoring up his position of privilege. In so far as a white person is a person who has come to dominate as a consequence of European expansion and conquest, the white student in black face remains white, regardless of his disavowal of his whiteness and his claiming of an African identity. Furthermore, he denies his whiteness in what Marilyn Frye (1992) would term a very "whitely" way, asserting that "We will not allow racial classification to deprive us of our African identity" – a claim that displays an evident sense of authority and entitlement. If we understand being white as designating a social position in society built upon conquest and domination, then the student's claim to be African does little to dislodge his whiteness; indeed, it functions overall as a way in which to obscure and perpetuate white domination rather than to undermine it, as he wants whites to refuse to identify as white for the purposes of employment equity, which will make it harder to implement employment equity and thus hinder attempts at redress in post-apartheid South Africa.

But then consider our third example, Katrien Odendaal: she makes no claims to be African, yet she is called this by Rian Malan (2009) and his choice to describe her this way seems to rest at least partly on the fact that she does not occupy a position of dominance or privilege in relation to those around her. She is described as having no more than her neighbours and as living a comparable existence to them. The only social groups she belongs to are those of her family and community – she has no close ties to any people who identify or are identified by others as white. Arguably, her social position is not that of a white person in so far as it is pretty much identical

to those around her. It could be argued that she occupies the social position of an African, whatever her own self-conception. Let me clarify at this point that I am not suggesting that what makes her African is her poverty or the fact that she is a subsistence farmer. Rather, the reason I think she may have a better claim to be considered to be African than does Ernst Roets, is that she has apparently ceased to occupy the position of a white person in the society to which she belongs and thus, in so far as she is part of an African community, she is arguably correctly described as African. She does not occupy, it seems, a position of dominance in a societal hierarchy established as part of colonialist expansion, even though her presence in Africa is a result of that expansion. Of course, the very fact that her existence is of interest to outsiders like Malan sets her apart from those with whom she lives and potentially opens up opportunities for her that are not available to those around her, but still it seems fair to say that at least until the arrival of the curious Rian Malan, she did not occupy the social position of a white person.

The point that the above two illustrations bring out is that perhaps when we think of whether or not one can eschew whiteness and become African and more generally, when we think about how to build racially just social orders, we need to think less about how people identify and more about what social position they occupy. When we consider how the identity “white” emerged, we realise that to be white is not so much about having particular biological features or identifying with a particular community or culture, but about occupying a particular social position – a dominant one, an exploitative one, one that assumes the centrality of its own concerns, one that easily assumes authority. Thus, eschewing whiteness and claiming another identity (such as an African identity) while enjoying and defending privileges obtained through racist conquest and domination, is disingenuous. Indeed, the claiming of an African identity can be a strategy to maintain white privilege and domination rather than part of the process of dismantling and opposing racism.

This is very obvious in the crude protest strategy of Ernst Roets and his friends, but more sensitive, nuanced and thoughtful claims to Africanness by white people can also function to shore up white privilege or to comfort and protect white people while doing little to dismantle the oppressive structures which created whites and blacks. For example, although Antjie Krog’s engagements with the question of white Africanhood are, I would argue, for the most part helpful and thoughtful, her attempts to claim Africanhood have been criticised for serving to “rescue” whiteness in South Africa and to reassure whites that they belong here. For example, commenting on the conclusion of *A change of tongue*, Helene Strauss (2006: 190) is concerned that in many ways what is presented here serves “the primary aim of enabling ‘Antjie’s’ ultimately individualistic search for personal fulfilment and belonging, as opposed to setting in motion an ongoing process of questioning and debate about the historical contexts and power structures that shape South African processes of identification and racial hierarchisation”. By seeking to redefine herself and other white South

Africans as African, Krog helps resolve a sense of uncertainty and lack of belonging on the part of some white South Africans, but she arguably does this by giving undue importance to white people's need to belong and to feel rooted and reassured.

My point here is not that any and all white claims to African identity are actually strategies to maintain white privilege and domination or, at the very least, are problematic in that they prioritise and give too much attention to white needs, but only that the *claim* to repudiate whiteness or to take on an African identity is insufficient and perhaps not even very helpful for the *actual* dismantling of white domination and privilege.<sup>4</sup> As racism, particularly in post-segregationist settings, seems to operate in largely unconscious ways, a white person's disavowal of their whiteness will not necessarily work to undo racism and racial inequality. Addressing continuing racism is not so much a matter of changing the ways in which people *identify*, but rather about changing the way in which society is structured and the way in which people behave towards each other.

## MOVING FORWARD

If, as I've argued above, white South Africans can't simply stop being white through ceasing to identify as white and embracing instead another identity, then does it really matter at all how white people identify? Or, more particularly, will the identity white people choose to embrace in any way affect the achievement of racial justice and, if so, what kind of identity ought white South Africans to embrace in order to contribute to struggles for racial justice?

One of the insights raised by some of the above literature is that race is not something that we *are*, but rather something that we *do*. This means that we are not innately and inevitably members of a particular race. Nevertheless, given the way in which race operates and the deeply unconscious habits through which racism manifests itself, race is not something we can simply stop doing. As Monahan (2011: 204) stresses, race "is neither a property that we simply possess, nor is it a strictly contingent activity that we can choose to abandon... [Rather, it is] a sort of location or context, and it is in this way, as inevitably conditioning one's subjectivity, that racial reality must be understood". We cannot simply, from one day to the next, stop being white, or black or any other race both because our deep-seated habits have been formed in ways that relate to race and racism, and also because, except in the case where one's appearance is racially ambiguous, others are likely to continue to assign us the roles they see as being related to our perceived belonging to a particular race. What this means is that white South Africans have to find a way of continuing to live as white people rather than trying to escape the guilt or shame that they or others attach to whiteness by trying to deny their whiteness and take on an alternative identity.

Some commentators argue that what whites need to do is to develop a positive and yet anti-racist white identity. In other words, that white people cannot and should not simply try to pretend they are not white, but that they ought to develop a white identity about which they can feel proud, but which is not a white supremacist identity. This kind of position is reflected, for example, in Lucius Outlaw's (2004) argument in favour of "rehabilitat[ing] racial whiteness" and in Henry Giroux's (1998: 44) call for a space to be provided whereby white people are able "to imagine how Whiteness as an ideology and social location can be progressively appropriated as part of a broader politics of social reform". However, while such discussions are important for thinking about how we can get white people to commit to struggles for racial justice, it is difficult to see just how whiteness can be injected with positive content in a way that is sufficiently cautious of the dangers of white supremacy. If being white is principally about unjustly occupying a dominant position in a hierarchically structured and oppressive society, rather than about having a particular culture or essence, then it is difficult to see how one can remake whiteness in a way that refuses to accept the tenets of white supremacy, but still leaves white people feeling good about being white. This is not to say that white people should never feel good about themselves. It is rather to say that white people should not feel good *about being white*. The completely normal human desire to feel positively about oneself can be tied to other identities, as none of us ought to be reduced to our racial identity.

An objection that could be raised here is that it is not only white racial identity that came about principally as a marker of one's position within a social hierarchy brought about by colonial expansion – blackness, and several other racial identities ("coloured", "mestizo", etc.) also came about in this way. However, black people can and have appropriated the category "black" and injected it with new and different meanings to the meanings assigned to it by white supremacy. Think, for example, of movements promoting black pride and black consciousness. Therefore, it could be argued, white people too could imbue their racial identities with new meaning and that new meaning could provide them with positive identities that, unlike positive white supremacist identities, do not denigrate or seek to oppress others. While I certainly agree that the meanings associated with racial identities can and should be shifted and eroded in all kinds of ways, I think that there is something very different about black people asserting a positive black identity and white people trying to do the same. Shannon Sullivan (2001: 167) articulates this difference precisely:

For black people to affirm their race is generally for them to fight against the deprecation of blackness; it is for them to attempt to reject the hierarchy of white over black that has long existed and continues to exist. In contrast, for white people to affirm their race is generally for them to affirm that very hierarchy. It is for them to attempt to keep intact their position of superiority over nonwhite people.

White people's quest to feel good about themselves *as white people*, thus seems to be a strategy that is not easily conducive to the erosion of existing racial hierarchies.



As I have said previously, this does not mean that white people need to feel nothing but guilt and shame. No one can or should be reduced to their racial identity and white people, like all others, can rightfully feel positively about themselves in relation to other aspects of their identity. However, this still leaves us with the question of what kind of racial identity white South Africans who are committed to struggles against racial injustice ought to adopt, as well as with the related question of whether or not such white people can rightfully think of themselves as African.

In response to this question, I would like to offer two very brief pointers. Firstly, the discussion above stresses not only the difficulty of escaping race, but also the constantly mutating nature of race. Our racial identities are not natural and ahistorical and, consequently, they do shift and erode with time. This means that while white South Africans cannot abruptly stop being white and acquire a different racial identity, or simply live unencumbered by any racial identity, they can also, slowly, become something other than white. Michael Monahan's (2011) proposal that we respond to the imposition of racial identities by adopting a "creolising subjectivity" is a helpful idea here. He suggests that while white people need to recognise that they are white in that "the situation from and through which [they] enter into the ongoing contestation of the meaning and significance of whiteness is one that has been and continues to be constituted as white", but also that this whiteness is "ambiguous and unstable" (Monahan 2011: 212). A creolising subject is someone who does not attempt to stop being one thing (such as "white") and become another (perhaps "African"), but rather one who recognises the power, but also the ambiguity and contestedness, of race and racial identity. Thus white people can be understood to be creolising subjects when they are working towards becoming something else (perhaps Africans) and working to undo whiteness as a way of being in the world, but doing so in a way that recognises that they inevitably come at this process from a particular place and interact with others "within a shared communicative field that is inescapably conditioned by race" (Monahan 2011: 203). To put it more simply, a white South African who embraced the attitude Monahan proposes would recognise that they have been and are shaped by their identity as white people, but also that they can and should contribute to shifting and eroding whiteness in South Africa and that, in so doing, they can slowly become something other than white.

And what about the possibility of white Africanness? It could be argued that as part of this process of shifting, creolising and changing the nature of white identity, white South Africans could (and perhaps should) regard themselves as people who are becoming African. Not as people who *are* African (and whose whiteness should be politely left uncommented upon), but rather as people who are white in terms of where they are coming from and what position in society they occupy, but who are also *becoming* African through the processes through which white racial identities are shifting and being eroded and through their identification with fellow Africans and their participation in life on this continent.



However, and importantly, the question of whether or not whites can (and should) identify as Africans cannot be separated from the bigger question of how we define Africanness. This question obviously has significance outside of South Africa's boundaries, but it has particular resonance in South Africa as post-apartheid South Africa continues to grapple with its own relationship with the rest of the continent. The question of what it means to be African is an enormously complicated one that, as far as I can see, we are very far from resolving and one that is inevitably tied up with questions related to race, oppression and self-determination in all kinds of complex ways. I cannot even begin to explore these complexities here and so I must conclude by saying that while it seems clear to me that white South Africans cannot and should not try to seize and insist upon an African identity in a way that obscures continuing white privilege and racial inequality, white people might appropriately begin to move towards *becoming* African, but they can only do so as part of larger, more general exploration of the idea of Africanness. Africans throughout the continent and around the world continue to engage with the question of what it means to be African, and white South Africans need to be attentive to such conversations as they work out their own shifting identities.

## LIST OF REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S. 2004. "Declarations of whiteness: The non-performativity of anti-racism." *Borderlands* 3(2).
- Allen, T. 1994. *The invention of the white race*. London: Verso.
- Appiah, A. 1985. "The uncompleted argument: Du Bois and the illusion of race." *Critical Inquiry* 12(1): 21-37.
- Asante, M. 2007. *An Afrocentric manifesto*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Baldwin, J. 1998 [1984]. On being white...and other lies. In *Black on white: Black writers on what it means to be white*, edited by D.R. Roediger. New York: Schocken Books.
- Diagne, S.B. 2002. "Keeping Africanity open." *Public Culture* 14(3): 621-623.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. 1923. "The superior race (an essay)." *The Smart Set: A Magazine of Cleverness* 70(4) (April): 55-60, available online at <http://www.webdubois.org/dbSuperiorRace.html>.
- Du Preez, M. 2005. "Proud to be African." *Daily News*, 4 November, p. 14.
- Giroux, H. 1998. White noise: Towards a pedagogy of whiteness. In *Race-ing representation: Voice, history and sexuality*, edited by K. Myrsiades and L. Myrsiades. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Govender, S. 2006. "White students change skin colour in equity protest". *Pretoria News*, 6 October, p. 3.
- Haney Lopez, I.F. 2000. The social construction of race. In *Critical race theory: The cutting edge*, edited by R. Delgado and J. Stefancic. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Ignatiev, N. 1995. *How the Irish became white*. New York: Routledge.

- Ignatiev, N. 1997. "The point is not to interpret whiteness, but to abolish it." Talk given at the Conference on the Making and Unmaking of Whiteness. Berkeley, California, April 11-13, 1997. Available online at <http://racetraitor.org/abolishthepoint.html>.
- Kemp Spies, Y. 2007. "I am white and an African and nobody has the right to take away this birthright." *Cape Times*, 31 May, p. 11
- Krog, A. 1998. *Country of my skull*. Johannesburg: Random House.
- Krog, A. 2003. *A change of tongue*. Johannesburg: Random House.
- MacMullan, T. 2005. "Beyond the pale: A pragmatist approach to whiteness studies." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 31(3): 267-292.
- MacMullan, T. 2009. *Habits of whiteness: A pragmatist reconstruction*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Mafeje, A. 2000. "Africanity: A combative ontology." *CODESRIA Bulletin* No. 1: 66-71.
- Malan, R. 2009. "The last Afrikaner." In *Resident alien*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball.
- Mamdani, M. 2002. *When victims become killers*. Princeton University Press.
- Mazrui, A. 1986. *The Africans: A triple heritage*. Little Brown and Co.
- Mbembe, A. 2002. "African modes of self-writing" (translated by S. Rendall). *Public Culture* 14(1): 239-273.
- Mills, C. 1997. *The racial contract*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Mills, C. 1998. *Blackness visible: Essays on philosophy and race*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Monahan, M.J. 2011. *The creolizing subject: Race, reason and the politics of purity*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Morris, M. 2005. "It's my country and I'll whinge if I want to." *Mail and Guardian*, 14 April, p. 25.
- Mudimbe, V.Y. 1988. *The invention of Africa: Gnosis, philosophy and the order of knowledge*. London: James Currey.
- Mudimbe, V.Y. 1994. *The idea of Africa*. London: James Currey.
- Olson, J. 2004. *The abolition of white democracy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Outlaw, L. 2004. Rehabilitate racial whiteness? In *What white looks like: African-American philosophers on the whiteness question*, edited by G. Yancy. New York: Routledge.
- Roediger, D.R. 2005. *Working towards whiteness: How America's immigrants became white*. New York: Basic Books.
- Shuford, J. 2001. "Four Du Boisian contributions to critical race theory." *Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society* XXXVII(3): 301-337.
- Statistics South Africa. 2012. Income and expenditure of households 2010/2011. *Statistical release P0100*, Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.
- Steyn, M.E. 2001. *Whiteness just isn't what it used to be: White identity in a changing South Africa*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Strauss, H. 2006. From Afrikaner to African: Whiteness and the politics of translation in Antjie Krog's *A change of tongue*. *African identities*, 4(2): 179-194.

- Sullivan, S. 2001. *Living across and through skins: Transactional bodies, pragmatism, and feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Sullivan, S. 2006. *Revealing whiteness: The unconscious habits of racial privilege*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Van Zyl Slabbert, F. 1999. *Afrikaner Afrikaan: Anekdoties en analise* [Afrikaner Afrikaan: Anecdotes and analysis]. Cape Town: Tafelberg.
- Wale, K. 2013. Confronting exclusion: Time for radical reconciliation. *SA Reconciliation Barometer Survey: 2013 Report*, Cape Town: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation.
- Zack, N. 1993. *Race and mixed race*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

## ENDNOTES

1. Here and elsewhere I use the term “they” to refer to white South Africans. As I am myself a white South African, it may seem more appropriate to use the term “we”, but I choose not to as that might create the impression that the paper is intended as a discussion among whites – “us whites talking about our identity” – which is not my intention here.
2. See for example Livingstone (1962) or more recently Nei and Roychoudhury (1983) or Templeton (1999). Note, however, that there is some recent discussion on the topic that nuances some of the earlier claims – see Monahan (2011: 89-105) for an overview of this discussion.
3. Monahan (2011), for example, argues that thinking that the white race was “invented” during colonialist expansion oversimplifies the concept of race and argues that “the ways people talked about human variation in the premodern world were different than in the modern world, but they were also importantly similar” (p. 66).
4. For an excellent discussion of the way in which claims to repudiate racism do little to actually dismantle racist structures, see Ahmed (2004).