

# Introduction

## Reading Post-Apartheid Whiteness

**Andy Carolin, Minesh Dass and Bridget Grogan**

Post-apartheid whiteness is a set of complex discursive positionings, tied to apartheid's white supremacist ideologies yet refracted through the diffuse ideological, political and cultural forces that characterise the present. Although the distribution of formal political power strongly suggests a shift towards a non-racial national context, the legacy of the country's racialisation is imbricated into all aspects of social and cultural life. Whiteness remains enmeshed in normative practices of power and rooted in material conditions of inequality and ongoing relations of social injustice. That being said, any attempts to fix notions of whiteness ultimately fails, as whiteness "can be at the same time a taken-for-granted entitlement, a desired social status, a perceived source of victimization and a tenuous situational identity" (Twine & Gallagher 2008: 7).

This special issue of the *Journal of Literary Studies* (hereafter *JLS*) explores how whiteness is represented in and theorised by a selection of post-apartheid literary and cultural texts. It considers texts that span almost three decades and brings these into dialogue with contemporary debates about post-apartheid whiteness. Whiteness studies in South Africa is deeply indebted to some of the foundational work done by scholars in the 1990s and 2000s, whose work continues to have an important impact on interdisciplinary scholarship today. Notable amongst these early theoretical interventions is the influential work done by Melissa Steyn and Deborah Posel.

But this early research has given rise to a vast body of scholarship that has seen important theoretical work being done in (re)conceptualising and (re)positioning whiteness in South Africa. This interdisciplinary research has coalesced around several conceptual nodes, including whiteness as an intersectional axis of identity and privilege;<sup>1</sup> South African whiteness as a local iteration of a broader transnational race politics;<sup>2</sup> theoretical and historical

---

1. See, for example, Carolin (2019), Horrell (2004), Salusbury (2003), West (2009), Van der Westhuizen (2017), and Wale and Foster (2007).

2. See, for example, Andrucki (2010), Ansell (2006), De Kock (2006), Leonard (2013), and Willoughby-Herard (2015).

reflections on the apartheid past;<sup>3</sup> the ethics of whiteness in relation to political and socio-economic power;<sup>4</sup> the tropic figure of the Afrikaner;<sup>5</sup> and questions about authorship and visibility in constituting contemporary public cultures.<sup>6</sup> This scholarship has provided a range of conceptual and analytical tools with which to think about the nature of whiteness, and the disciplinary malleability of whiteness as a conceptual, contextual and thematic lens with which to think about the apartheid past and the post-apartheid present.

While there can be no questioning the heuristic value of this wide range of scholarly material, it should go without saying that Critical Whiteness Studies (hereafter CWS) must always negotiate the ever-present danger of recentering whiteness even as it attempts to deconstruct it. Moreover, the particular historical, discursive, epistemological and socio-cultural conditions of South Africa determine that the study of whiteness in this country can draw on international scholarship but cannot apply it unproblematically. In other words, CWS in South Africa faces both the challenges common to all such study, and particular to its unique context and history. Indeed, this is one of the reasons this special issue of articles on representations of whiteness has been compiled for *JLS*: it is our intention to collect new research that points both to the limits and the possibilities inherent in studies of post-apartheid whiteness.

Furthermore, it is important to the editors of this special issue that the research focus on post-apartheid literature and culture. For, it is precisely in the field of representation that whiteness is established, which suggests that this field is ideally suited to varied interrogations of whiteness in the post-apartheid era. This is not to say that the material conditions that enable contemporary forms of whiteness in South Africa do not require study. Rather, as the articles herein collected show, the material environment is represented, refracted, interrogated and critiqued precisely through the literary and the cultural.

The May 2010 issue of *English in Africa*, guest edited by Mary West and Jennifer Schmidt, similarly focuses on representations of whiteness in post-apartheid literature. According to them, “the focus of whiteness studies on

- 
3. See, for example, Carolin (2017), Conway (2017), Falkof (2015), Hyslop (2000), Ratele (2009), Rauwerda (2007), and Shefer (2012).
  4. See, for example, Dass (2017), McEwan and Steyn (2013), Matthews (2015), McKaiser (2011), Seekings (2008), Soudien (2010), and Vice (2010).
  5. See, for example, Blaser (2012), Laubscher (2005), Marx and Milton (2011), Strauss (2006), Van Heerden (2009), Verwey and Quayle (2012) and Wicomb (1998).
  6. See, for example, Grogan (2015), Mbao (2010), Nuttall (2001), Scott (2018), Steyn and Foster (2008), and Titlestad (2009, 2015).

## INTRODUCTION

making visible and challenging discursive lacunae renders it particularly useful to the study of literature". They further assert that "whiteness studies offer the possibility of revealing the largely invisible ways in which white identity continues to suggest normativity, even as this identity is undermined by contesting positions or critiqued from within its own self-regulating discourse" (West & Schmidt 2010: 10). We are indebted to West and Schmidt for editing this collection of essays in which literature and culture are foregrounded. The excellent and varied research collected in their special issue of *English in Africa* has also been an invaluable resource. But, the ten years since its publication have been important (if turbulent) in South African history. The articles collected herein are a product of this recent history. In other words, this special issue builds on the work begun by West, Schmidt and their collaborators more than a decade ago, and bring together the voices of both established and emerging South African scholars.

The first article in this issue, by Wamuwi Mbao, is ostensibly an analysis of Ivan Vladislavić's *The Folly*, which was published a year before the end of apartheid. But Mbao's perceptive reading of the tensions and ambiguities that undergird the suburb depicted in this understudied novel points to "the post-apartheid evolution of such suburbs into lifestyle clusters, security estates and other configurations of life that are arranged around the alleviation of white middle-class anxieties". This article draws on theories derived from architecture, city planning, as well as a wide range of cultural and literary theories regarding whiteness. For this reason, it is a rich resource on Vladislavić's work specifically, and the broader study of the suburb in relation to whiteness.

Like Mbao's article, Antoinette Pretorius focuses on the representation of a material resource, in this case food, in Marlene van Niekerk's much-admired *Triomf*. Much has already been written on Van Niekerk's novel, particularly in terms of what it implies about the construction of poor or working-class white identity by the apartheid state. Pretorius, however, employs food discourse to provide an original and nuanced reading of the ways in which the Benade family suggests the heterogeneous, often ambiguous nature of whiteness. For Pretorius, "this ambiguous position manifests in the inter-section of food and space in the novel".

While Van Niekerk's novel is a sophisticated interrogation of the "boer" (or white farmer) trope, Hannelie Marx Knoetze's article suggests that aesthetic and conceptual aspects of this identity are being rehabilitated and redeployed in certain sectors of white post-apartheid society. According to Knoetze, the nostalgic return to the farm and farmer is connected to emerging narratives of "white victimhood", particularly the so-called "genocide" of white farmers. Yet, as this article shows, attempts to make this form of "white victimhood" visible allows one to reconsider and undo the invisibility or normative position which whiteness often occupies.

Landi Raubenheimer also turns to the subject of nostalgia in her article. In her analysis of the popular film *District 9*, she contends that it depicts

Johannesburg mainly through an informal settlement, inhabited by aliens, which suggests a broken city. Yet, this dystopia has aspects of the nostalgic about it which, for Raubenheimer, are a product of “how whiteness is inscribed into the landscape as a state of non-belonging and ruin”. Drawing on J.M. Coetzee’s *White Writing*, this article provides a thoughtful study of whiteness in relation to the post-apartheid landscape, and the contradictory impulses such a relation may induce.

Deidre Byrne also focuses on *District 9* in her article, alongside a contemporary play by Andrew Buckland and a novel by Henrietta Rose-Innes. All of these texts depict insects as unmanageable creatures who constantly cross physical and conceptual borders. Her rich reading of the texts shows that such border crossing reflects many anxieties characteristic of post-apartheid whiteness.

Paul Mason’s analysis is unusual within this collection, as its primary object of study is not literary or cultural, per se, but a series of recent interviews that he conducted with white men who resisted conscription to the army in the 1980s. Through recourse to a range of theoretical ideas, derived from Antjie Krog, Ivan Vladislavić, Breyten Breytenbach, and Donald McRae, Mason elucidates the styles of whiteness that these interviewees articulate. The use of terms and ideas derived from literature and literary analysis is well suited to this interdisciplinary article. One of Mason’s most important conclusions is that “the interviewees’ testimony presents a range of subject positions comprising symptoms and styles of being manifesting as an often confused, slippery and debilitated navigation of obstacles to the exercise of will instead of following a logic of cause, action and effect.”

Our issue ends with Silindiwe Sibanda’s fine research on Young Adult fiction from South Africa written by white authors. With particular focus on two such novels, which depict the struggle against apartheid, Sibanda shows that these texts often rely on stereotypes of blackness, make historical and factual errors in their representation of the struggle, and tend to over-emphasise the role of white activists rather than consider white complicity with the apartheid state. Given that such literature is aimed at young people whose knowledge of the struggle might be limited, such representations are clearly problematic.

We are grateful to all the scholars who have contributed to this special issue. It is our sincere belief that this work will be important in many fields, and will contribute in their own way to theorisations of whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa. We also wish to thank Ilse Muller and Alan Northover for their guidance throughout the process of compiling this issue.

## INTRODUCTION

### References

- Andrucki, Max  
2010 The Visa Whiteness Machine: Transnational Motility in Post-Apartheid South Africa. *Ethnicities* 10(3): 358-370.
- Ansell, Amy  
2006 Casting a Blind Eye: The Ironic Consequences of Color-Blindness in South Africa and the United States. *Critical Sociology* 32(2/3): 333-356.
- Blaser, Thomas  
2012 "I Don't Know What I Am": The End of Afrikaner Nationalism in Post-Apartheid South Africa. *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa* 80: 1-21.
- Carolin, Andy  
2017 Apartheid's Immorality Act and the Fiction of Heteronormative Whiteness. *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 54(1): 111-128.  
2019 South African *Gay Pages* and the Politics of Whiteness. *Social Dynamics* 45(2): 234-249.
- Conway, Daniel  
2017 *Masculinities, Militarisation and the End Conscription Campaign: War Resistance in Apartheid South Africa*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Dass, Minesh  
2017 "Wishy-Washy Liberalism" and "The Art of Getting Lost" in Ivan Vladislavic's *Double Negative*. *English in Africa* 44(3): 9-30.
- De Kock, Leon  
2006 Blanc de Blanc: Whiteness Studies – A South African Connection? *Journal of Literary Studies* 22(1/2): 175-189.
- Falkof, Nicky  
2015 *Satanism and Family Murder in Late Apartheid South Africa: Imagining the End of Whiteness*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grogan, Bridget  
2015 Whiteness Visible: The Representation of Race in Daphne Rooke's *Mittee*. *Current Writing* 27(1): 1-12.
- Horrell, Georgina  
2004 A Whiter Shade of Pale: White Femininity as Guilty Masquerade in "New" (White) South African Women's Writing. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30(4): 765-776.
- Hyslop, Jonathan  
2000 Why Did Apartheid's Supporters Capitulate? "Whiteness", Class and Consumption in Urban South Africa, 1985-1995. *Society in Transition* 31(1): 36-44.
- Laubscher, Leswin  
2005 Afrikaner Identity and the Music of Johannes Kerkorrel. *South African Journal of Psychology* 35(2): 308-330.
- Leonard, Pauline  
2013 Making Whiteness Work in South Africa: A Translabour Approach. *Women's Studies International Forum* 36: 75-83.

- Marx, Hannelie & Milton, Viola  
 2011 Bastardised Whiteness: “Zef”-Culture, *Die Antwoord* and the Reconfiguration of Contemporary Afrikaans Identities. *Social Identities* 17(6): 723-745.
- Matthews, Sally  
 2015 Shifting White Identities in South Africa: White Africanness and the Struggle for Racial Justice. *Phronimon* 16(2): 112-129.
- Mbao, Wamuwi  
 2010 Inscribing Whiteness and Staging Belonging in Contemporary Auto-biographies and Life-Writing Forms. *English in Africa* 37(1): 63-75.
- McEwan, Haley & Steyn, Melissa  
 2013 Hegemonic Epistemologies in the Context of Transformation: Race, Space, and Power in One Post-Apartheid South African Town. *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies* 9(1): 1-18.
- McKaiser, Eusebius  
 2011 How Whites Should Live in This Strange Place. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 30(4): 452-461.
- Nuttall, Sarah  
 2001 Subjectivities of Whiteness. *African Studies Review* 44(2): 115-140.
- Ratele, Kopano  
 2009 Sexuality as Constitutive of Whiteness in South Africa. *NORA: Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 17(3): 158-174.
- Rauwerda, Antje  
 2007 Whitewashing *Drum* Magazine (1951-1959): Advertising Race and Gender. *Continuum* 21(3): 393-404.
- Salisbury, Theresa  
 2003 Discourses of Whiteness Informing the Identity of White English-Speaking South Africans. Unpublished Masters Dissertation. Cape Town: University of Cape Town.
- Scott, Claire  
 2018 *At the Faultline: Writing White in South African Literary Journalism*. Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press.
- Seeking, Jeremy  
 2008 The Continuing Salience of Race: Discrimination and Diversity in South Africa. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 26(1): 1-25.
- Shefer, Tamara  
 2012 Fraught Tenderness: Narratives on Domestic Workers in Memories of Apartheid. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 18(3): 307-317.
- Soudien, Crain  
 2010 The Reconstitution of Privilege: Integration in Former White Schools in South Africa. *Journal of Social Issues* 66(2): 352-366.
- Steyn, Melissa & Foster, Don  
 2008 Repertoires for Talking White: Resistant Whiteness in Post-Apartheid South Africa. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31(1): 25-51.
- 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.

## INTRODUCTION

- Titlestad, Michael  
2015 Future Tense: The Problem of South African Apocalyptic Fiction. *English Studies in Africa* 58(1): 30-41.  
2017 Apartheid's Immorality Act and the Fiction of Heteronormative Whiteness. *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 54(1): 111-128.  
2009 Allegories of White Masculinity in Damon Galgut's *The Good Doctor*. *Social Dynamics* 35(1): 111-122.
- Twine, France & Gallagher, Charles  
2008 The Future of Whiteness: A Map of the "Third Wave". *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31(1): 4-24.
- Van der Westhuizen, Christi  
2017 *Sitting Pretty: White Afrikaans Women in Postapartheid South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press.
- Van Heerden, Esther  
2009 Liminality, Transformation and Communitas: Afrikaans Identities as Viewed Through the Lens of South African Arts Festivals: 1995-2006. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University.
- Verwey, Cornel & Quayle, Michael  
2012 Whiteness, Racism, and Afrikaner Identity in Post-Apartheid South Africa. *African Affairs* 111(445): 551-575.
- Vice, Samantha  
2010 How Do I Live in This Strange Place? *Journal of Social Philosophy* 41(3): 323-342.
- Wale, Kim & Foster, Don  
2007 Investing in Discourses of Poverty and Development: How White Wealthy South Africans Mobilise Meaning to Maintain Privilege. *South African Review of Sociology* 38(1): 45-69.
- West, Mary & Schmidt, Jennifer  
2010 Preface: Whiteness Studies in South Africa: A South African Perspective. *English in Africa* 37(1): 9-13.
- West, Mary  
2009 *White Women Writing White: Identity and Representation in (Post-) Apartheid Literatures of South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Wicomb, Zoé  
1998 Five Afrikaner Texts and the Rehabilitation of Whiteness. *Social Identities* 4(3): 363-383.
- Willoughby-Herard, Tiffany  
2015 *Waste of a White Skin: The Carnegie Corporation and the Racial Logic of White Vulnerability*. Oakland: University of California University Press.

*JLS/TLW*

**Andy Carolin**

University of Johannesburg  
andyc@uj.ac.za

**Minesh Dass**

University of Johannesburg  
mdass@uj.ac.za

**Bridget Grogan**

University of Johannesburg  
bmgrogan@uj.ac.za