

Blanc de Blanc: Whiteness Studies – A South African Connection?

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Summary

Proposing a version of whiteness studies for South Africa, this article lays some of the groundwork for a research project that is yet to be comprehensively tackled. Over the past 30 or so years in progressive scholarship in and about South Africa, whiteness has become so deligitimised by virtue of its complicity with apartheid that it has often been rendered “blank”, a taken-for-granted negative essence, a place less looked-into and a site of assumed uniformity. The essay suggests that if one were to reopen the category of South African whiteness and begin to de-essentialise it, in all likelihood what one might call the “difference within” would both contradict assumptions of uniformity and prove interesting. The article summarises and analyses trends in whiteness studies in the US and suggests ways in which such a project might be differently tackled for South African purposes.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel stel 'n variant van "whiteness studies" in die vooruitsig vir Suid-Afrika en lê gedeeltelik die fundamente vir so 'n studie, wat nog in sy volheid aangepak moet word. In progressiewe navorsing in en om Suid-Afrika oor die laaste sowat 30 jaar, is "whiteness" – of "blankskap" – tot so 'n mate gedeligitimeer a.g.v. sy hand-om-die-blaas verhouding met apartheid, dat dit dikwels as 'n leemte gerepresenteer word, 'n voor-die-hand-liggende negatiewe essensie, 'n plek waar kulturele navorsers dikwels liever nie wil kyk nie, en 'n ruimte waar uniformiteit dikwels veronderstel word. Die artikel stel voor dat, sou 'n mens die kategorie van "blankskap" weer oopmaak en dit begin ont-essensialiseer, hierdie veronderstelde uniformiteit weerlê sal word deur wat 'n mens miskien die "difference within" kan noem, en dat die onderwerp opnuut belangstelling sal wek. Die artikel bied 'n opsomming en 'n analise van neigings in "whiteness studies" in die VSA, en stel voor hoe die projek dalk anders aangepak sal moet word vir Suid-Afrikaanse doeleindes.

Some time ago, I was drawn to the idea of studying whiteness in South Africa from a post-apartheid point of view. My intuitive sense was that whiteness as a distinct category had become subsumed in what struck me as a kind of “blankness”. My initial sense was that, over the past thirty or so years in progressive scholarship in and about South Africa, whiteness had

become so deligitimised by virtue of its complicity with apartheid that it had often been rendered “blank”, a taken-for-granted negative essence, a place less looked-into, a site of unredeemed racism and assumed uniformity. My feeling was that if one were to reopen the category of South African whiteness and begin to de-essentialise it, in all likelihood what one might call the “difference within” would both contradict assumptions of uniformity and prove interesting. Just that. I had a working proposition in mind, namely that whiteness in this part of the world (I would not like to speak for other areas) had developed in a dialectical relationship with “wildness”, partly because whiteness had defined itself in opposition to wildness. For me, it was the aberrant eruptions of wildness *within whiteness* that I was primarily interested in. I felt that a sympathetic, non-judgmental investigation into examples of such wildness – that is, “deep” narrations of it rather than symptomatic stabs, driven not by a priori constructivist agendas about unmasking power relations but by a Keatsian “negative capability” or a Geertzian “thick description” or a Buddhist sense of Beginner’s Mind – would teach us more about who we are as South Africans and where we come from. It was really as simple as that, and still is.

However, it is never an entirely simple matter for a South African to write about race. That is the first level of complexity. The second is that I quickly realised that a whole subdiscipline had sprung up in the 1990s, mainly in the US, around what has variously become known as “critical white studies” and “whiteness studies”, and that I would have to navigate my way through this scholarship if I wanted to speak informatively and insightfully about the whiteness/wildness dialectic in South Africa, let alone in southern Africa, where I hoped my larger project was heading.

I would rather spare readers the “I-am-a-white-scholar” confession, followed by the predictable avowals of subjectivity, complicity and positionality that one sometimes encounters in critical scholarship around race and power relations. I would rather allow that complexity to speak for itself, implicitly and by implication, in what I have to say about the second level of complexity mentioned above, namely the body of work that has come to be known as “whiteness studies” and “critical white studies” (cf. Delgado & Stefancic 1997; Hill 1997; Nakayama & Martin 1999; Wiegmann 1999). Following that, I shall discuss a prominent South African contribution to the study of whiteness, and tentatively propose my own working theory of a South African connection – a way in which one might probe southern African whiteness, especially the English-speaking variant, such that it might speak for itself rather than be spoken for. While this article articulates the coordinates of whiteness studies as it currently exists and suggests a way in which South African whiteness studies may be

pursued, it does not launch that study itself. That is a far larger project, which should be tackled in phases and, quite possibly, via teamwork.¹

Identity may be fashioned in at least two ways: first, according to a sense of rebellion *against* the strictures of one's own cultural habitus, or, second, it may be "seamed" – held together in a strained relation to a perceived alterity,² a process in which one's own cultural ground is consolidated. I am more interested in the first case, in examples of difference within, or internal alterity, because it potentially gives the lie to the assumed discursive regularities around "whiteness", and to the danger of overdetermination that is so (ironically) evident in constructivist analysis based on supposedly

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1. The correlation between "whiteness" and "wildness", which I have proposed here, is for me a key topic in this further investigation. Without launching into that study now, two figures who immediately spring to mind, and who deserve study in these terms, are Dr Johannes van der Kemp, the inaugural London Missionary Society emissary to South Africa who "went bad", marrying a slave woman, and upon whom Sarah Gertrude Millin's racist novel, *God's Stepchildren*, is based (cf. Enklaar 1988; Coetzee 1980); and Coenraad de Buys, a wild white frontiersman of the nineteenth century who disregarded racial purity and whose progeny to this day are known as "Buysvolk". Authoritative sources on de Buys are hard to come by, while anecdotal stories are legion. The following, from the South African *Sunday Times*, is typical:

The Buys people are descendants of the adventurer, hunter and rebel Coenraad de Buys who married several African women and arrived in the Soutpansberg in 1821. Most of Buys' wives left him and when the last one died of fever, he left his children and followers and went wandering off in the Soutpansberg never to be seen again. His descendants lived among the Venda people and acted as interpreters for the various European hunters, traders and trekkers who arrived at the Soutpansberg. Today many of Buys' people have left their homes in Buysdorp to seek work in Johannesburg. (Accessed from <http://www.suntimes.co.za/explorer/10-02/today.asp>.)

See also Schoeman 1938 and Wagner et al. 1974.

2. See De Kock (2002, 2004) on the seam as a model for South African identities. See also Chantal Mouffe (1994: 109):
It is only when we acknowledge that any identity is always relational and that it is defined in terms of difference that we are able to ask the crucial question: how can we fight the tendency towards exclusion ... As the notion of a 'constitutive outside' [drawn from Derrida] itself implies, it is impossible to draw an absolute distinction between interior and exterior. Every identity is irremediably destabilized by its "exterior".
(Mouffe 1994: 109)

deconstructive practice.³ From this basis, I hope eventually to be able to make useful comments about how whiteness is connected with what I call wildness, or how wildness might be seen to amplify, or draw energy from, the perceived project of whiteness.

Whenever one has a research idea and follows it into established scholarship, one is compelled to widen the lens. My initial notions about blankness were concentrated upon my perception that in post-apartheid South Africa, whiteness had become “bleached” – largely delegitimised, held accountable, seen as, for the most part, uniformly complicit for the sins of racial discrimination, and in that process, to a very great extent homogenised. My interest was not in taking issue with questions of historical accountability, not in either defending or demonising whiteness.⁴ The reverse homogenisation of whites – if that is what it is – consequent upon white historical domination may justifiably be regarded as a kind of poetic justice or an inevitable, necessary consequence after centuries in which white people crudely essentialised black people within Manichean dichotomies, strictures which developed into segregation and later into full-blown apartheid. But historical reckoning is not my immediate interest – issues of blame and fault, shame, forgiveness and reconciliation have now been dealt with robustly, both in scholarship and in the publicly enacted Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), whose proceedings ran for several years in South Africa’s momentous final decade of the twentieth century. Public discourse in South Africa has become healthily obsessed with reckoning, with redistribution and with economic and other forms of empowerment. It was precisely in the lee of this overhang of public discourse that I felt there was space to rediscover whiteness as a site of difference and as a site of interest to scholarship, both in terms of its contemporary as well as its historical manifestations.

However, the overwhelming drift of Northern Hemisphere studies into,

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3. Compare, in this regard, the arguments of Carusi (1991). The danger I am referring to here is that constructivist readings can become so caught up in establishing the critical metatext – in Foucaultian terms, the discursive regularities, or in Derridean terms, the absences in a text – that it fails to read the matter at hand with any real conscientious attention to detail, and to the possibility that the writer/subject may have had intentions and avowed subject positions that differ markedly from the often glib superimpositions of the cultural critic.
 4. My book, *Civilising Barbarians: Missionary Narrative and African Textual Response in Nineteenth-Century South Africa* (1996), had already dealt comprehensively with the outrages, and the devastating effects, of white cultural imposition in South Africa.

and critiques of, whiteness is towards a very different manifestation of “blankness” to the one described above. When critical scholars in the US write about whiteness vis-à-vis *invisibility* – a major trope in the field – they usually marshal their comments towards a critique of the pervasive but “invisible” (that is, naturalised) *hegemony* of whiteness in a society that is seemingly democratic and egalitarian but in truth riven with class disparities, which in turn are tied up with and power differentials related to race. This critique is most often directed at contemporary American society. In the wake of Nobel laureate Toni Morrison’s influential argument in her book, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, that whiteness as a discrete concept remains largely unexamined in American culture (Morrison 1992: 9), a large amount of what might be called rendering whiteness visible began to occur in American scholarship, driven by considerable animus around the perceived duplicity of a white supremacy that is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Such critical writing is often energised by autobiographically invested scholarship in which personal experience and strongly rendered impressions thereof are blended with academic argument to create (in the best examples) engaging acts of narrative scholarship (for examples, see Delgado & Stefancic 1997; Hill 1997; Nakayama & Martin 1999).

The impact of whiteness studies over the past decade or so is clear from the fact that it has been picked up by the American media as a matter of controversy (cf. “Scholars Unearth New Field: Whiteness Studies”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 14, 2001; “Hue and Cry on ‘Whiteness Studies’”, *Washington Post*, June 20, 2003). Both the articles mentioned lead into their stories with the silence/invisibility theme. When America confronts race, *The Christian Science Monitor* (CSM) writes, “it casts a keen eye on blacks, Latinos, native Americans, Asians – everyone, it seems, except whites”.⁵ The CSM continues: “Whites have historically dominated the United States, and their ideas and values have largely shaped the culture. But only supremacists talk about ‘white culture’. Everyone else keeps mum.” Now the silence is being broken by “white studies” scholars, the newspaper writes, who argue that if the academy can host black studies, women’s studies, Latino studies, and the like, then white culture also needs to be discussed in depth. The *Washington Post*, in its turn, says that advocates of whiteness studies, “most of whom are white liberals hoping to dismantle notions of race”, believe that “white Americans are so accustomed to being part of a privileged majority that they do not see themselves as part of a race”.⁶ The *Washington Post* report, dated June

5 . Accessed from: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2001/-0814/p2s1-ussc.html> .

2003, notes that at least 30 tertiary institutions, from Princeton to the University of California at Los Angeles, teach courses in whiteness studies, and that these courses are emerging at a pivotal time: scientists, it writes, have determined that there is scant genetic distinction between races.

The implication evident in these reports – and in the research on which they are based – is that race is largely a social and cultural construction serving the interests of (generally, white) power. This is certainly the drift of certain key texts in the genealogy of American whiteness studies, which includes David R. Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991) and *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (1994), Theodore W. Allen’s *The Invention of the White Race* (1994) and Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White* (1995).⁷ In these texts, writes Robyn Wiegman (1999) in a wide-ranging survey of whiteness studies for the theory journal *boundary 2*, social historians chart the effects of industrialisation, and with it wage labour, on the racialisation of ethnic immigrants in the nineteenth century. “In doing so,” writes Wiegman (1999: 135), “[the texts] locate whiteness not in the epidermal ‘reality’ of white skin but in complex economic and political processes and practices”. The core story in American whiteness studies, taken up in great depth by Roediger in particular, but also by Allen as well as Ignatiev, is about how the “black Irish” fought ferociously to gain acceptance as “white”. The Irish, like certain other European labourers in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, gained “whiteness” as compensation for being members of the working class. In the famous formulation of W.E.B. du Bois in his *Black Reconstruction in America* ([1935]1955: 700), this “public and psychological wage” was their reward for receiving a low real wage. And to be “white” in America – a class from which the Irish and other less-than-Anglo-Saxon ethnic groups such as Italians and middle-Europeans were excluded in nineteenth-century America – was a considerable reward indeed. It was to render rich rewards for the generations to come (du Bois 1935: 700-701).

In these studies, whiteness is seen as historically constructed under

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6. Accessed from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A143862003Jun-19>. In this piece, writer Darryl Fears attributes the rise of whiteness studies to black intellectuals such as W.E.B. du Bois and James Baldwin, but says the field “did not coalesce until liberal white scholars embraced it about eight years ago” – that is, in the mid-1990s.
 7. The genealogy of whiteness studies stretches further back, though, to African-American writers W.E.B. du Bois, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and others. In addition to these writers, Roediger (1991: 6) recalls the influence of activist scholars and artists such as Hazel Carby, bell hooks and Coco Fusco.

particular circumstances. The early Irish settlers, for example, “became white” by affiliating themselves with white interests and by dissociating themselves from black interests (cf. Roediger 1991: 133-163). Wiegman (1999: 136) makes the observation that Roediger jump-started the critical project of “imagining an antiracist white subject in the present, for if whiteness is historically produced, and if its production requires something more than the physical characteristic of skin color, then whiteness as a form of political identification, if not racial identity, can be abolished”. Roediger (1994: 184), drawing on work by US scholar of nativism John Higham, recalls the fact that for a certain period in nineteenth-century America, people for whom the term “Not-Yet-White-Ethnics” has been coined – including the Irish, Jews, Italians, Hungarians, Czechs, Poles and Slavs – were regarded as non-white or of debatable racial heritage. Roediger recalls James Baldwin’s argument that Europeans arrived in the US and became white – “by deciding that they were white” (Baldwin, “On Being ‘White’ ... and Other Lies”, in Roediger 1994: 185). They called themselves “white men”, writes Higham (1955: 173), “to distinguish themselves from the southern Europeans whom they worked beside”. In other words, they asserted their identity as “white”, rather than assert their ethnic particularity as, say, Italian or Irish, the moment they were drawn into a dualism of white and black.

In progressive American scholarship, therefore, “whiteness” is historically and theoretically unmasked: it is less a natural or biogenetic category than a political affiliation. It is a position and a body of rhetoric upholding political, economic and cultural hegemony. Taking one essay as an example (Parker C. Johnson’s “Reflections on Critical White(ness) Studies”, 1999), the phrases to which one’s attention is most drawn include “decentering and interrogation of whiteness” (Johnson 1999: 1), “understanding the dynamics of whiteness and white supremacy in contemporary society” (p. 2), “whiteness as an unreflected norm” (p. 3), “understanding and challenging whiteness as an identity, an ideology, and a curriculum” (p. 3), “power and privilege of whiteness and white identity” (p. 4), and the like. “How will this new discipline transform our lives and create a more just, ethical, and moral society”, asks Johnson (p. 4), adding the rider: “What will whites think, be, and do when they are no longer white?” (p. 5).

This is certainly a utopian, long-term agenda. In the meantime, what scholars in the US have been doing is to bring whiteness out of its pretensions of universality by carefully pencilling in its lines of particularity. In the words of two especially lucid writers, Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek (1999: 88), “white” is a “relatively uncharted territory that has remained invisible as it continues to influence the identity of those both within and without its domain”. Although what

Nakayama and Krizek call “the discursive space of white” affects the “everyday fabric of our lives”, it resists, “sometimes violently, any extensive characterization that would allow for the mapping of its contours”. This is because it “wields power yet endures as a largely unarticulated position” (p. 88). For the writers, the time has come to “detritorialize the territory of ‘white’” and to “expose, examine, and disrupt ... by naming whiteness, [one] displace[s] its centrality and reveal[s] its invisible position” (pp. 89-90), thus beginning the process of *particularising* white experience (p. 91). Taken perhaps to its most logical political implication, critical white studies leads to the position aptly described by the title of Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey’s journal, *Race Traitor: A Journal of the New Abolitionism*, and their edited collection of the same title, whose motto is: Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity.

It is worth to note one worthwhile critique of this position, and of all positions within critical white studies which seek to undo or “abolish” whiteness as a category in its entirety. Writing in a special issue of the *Journal Transition on Whiteness*, Walter Benn Michaels (1997: 135) cannily argues as follows:

If ... it is only the antiessentialist conception of race that makes the project of crossover [switching from “white” to “black”] possible (because only an antiessentialist conception makes it possible for you to stop being white by giving up white behavior, it is only an essentialist conception of race that makes it desirable (because only an essentialist conception of race makes your behavior white and thus makes it something you can give up).

(Michaels 1997: 135-136)

Discussing the phenomenon of “passing” for white, Michaels (pp. 135-136) writes that “although the goal of the ex-white man (crossing over) is fundamentally opposed to the goal of the ex-colored man (passing), the fact that people *want* to cross over, like the fact that people *can* pass, turns out to be a tribute to essentialism”. For Michaels, the matter of race and its putative “abolition” is clearly more complex, involving perhaps less essentialist dogma masquerading as non-essentialism and more subtlety in understanding the performative and determinative *effects* of concepts related to race on people’s sense of who and what they are (Michaels 1997: 133).

I would like to return to Nakayama and Krizek, because their emphasis on “marking the territory of whiteness” (1999: 95) strikes me as less overdetermined and more in keeping with an understanding of whiteness in performative terms. For these two writers, the risk facing scholars, whether in ethnography or cultural studies, is to essentialise whiteness (p. 90). “There is no ‘true essence’ to ‘whiteness,’” they write, “there is only the historically contingent constructions of that social location” (p. 91).

Drawing on Foucault, the writers emphasise the rhetorical character rather than the essential nature of discursive events. They view whiteness as a rhetorical construction which “makes itself visible and invisible, eluding analysis yet exerting influence over our everyday life” (p. 91). Similarly, Ignatiev and Garvey, in an Editorial to the volume *Race Traitor* entitled “Abolish the White Race by Any Means Necessary”, see “the white race” as a “historically constructed social formation” (1996: 9). Nakayama and Krizek draw from Deleuze and Guattari the notion that power relations can be viewed spatially, and that the technique of deterritorialisation can be employed to rearticulate the space in which power is assembled. “Prior to rewriting this space, however, we must first identify the assemblage and see how it functions,” write Nakayama and Krizek (1999: 92), adding that “[t]he everyday-ness of whiteness makes it a difficult territory to map” (p. 94). Citing Henri Lefebvre’s work on the everyday and the difficulty of mapping it by conventional intellectual methods (cf. Lefebvre 1984; Blanchot 1987), the authors argue for Deleuze and Guattari’s *nomad science* to explore the everyday-ness of whiteness, driven not by methodology but by perspective (p. 94). Nakayama and Krizek propose “[taking] everyday discourse as a starting point in the process of marking the territory of whiteness and the power relations it generates” (p. 95), the purpose being to expose the rhetoric of whiteness. Further, they use ethnographic interviewing rather than participant observation (or, one assumes, a study restricted to the examination of existing textual expressions), because “discourses on whiteness are relatively hidden in everyday interaction, but when whites are confronted, when they are asked directly about whiteness, a multiplicity of discourses become visible” (p. 96). In Nakayama and Krizek’s project, they “map a strategic rhetoric of whiteness” by assembling a “multiplicity of discourses into a discursive formation” (p. 96).

For my own purposes, I take some lessons from the work described above. First, it is clear that the dominant trend in critical white studies is to unmask and expose. As we shall see in a short while, this is also the case in the one major incarnation of the subdiscipline in South Africa. Second, the more acute scholars in the field quickly recognise that for every gesture of naming whiteness, there should be a countergesture of remaining open to its variability or “difference within”. Third, it is difficult to locate and particularise whiteness in a way that is non-essentialist because the practices of this group are webbed in the quotidian ubiquity of the everyday. Exploring such everyday-ness requires a perspectival, nomad “science” (following Deleuze & Guattari), a form of ethnographic interviewing in which direct interaction and observation is preferred to the making of assumptions based only or mainly on existing (and possibly reified) textual effects.

The major challenge of such work strikes me as keeping what I describe above as the “countergesture” in play. Even in the most sensitive research which is aware of the dangers of essentialising the very subjects of enquiry that the writer is purportedly particularising, it becomes necessary at some point to summarise, to conclude and to categorise. Nakayama and Krizek (1999: 96-103), for example, “uncover” the following six strategies in the discourse of whiteness: 1) *tying whiteness to power in a crude, naked manner* (white is the “majority”); 2) *using negative definitions of white as opposed to a positive definition* (“not being black, Hispanic, or the like”); 3) *naturalising the definition of “white” as a scientific one* (“white means nothing except the colour that I am”, that is, a reference to superficial racial characteristics); 4) *confusing whiteness with nationality* (“white American”); 5) *refusing to label oneself* (“I don’t agree with ethnic terms – I’m American and that’s all”); and 6) *seeing whiteness in relation to European ancestry* (also known as “symbolic ethnicity” – “I am White, of European descent”). Melissa Steyn (2001: 3-147), in her book on South African whiteness (and the only book I was able to find dedicated wholly to a study of whiteness in South Africa),⁸ entitled *Whiteness Just Isn’t What It Used to Be: White Identity in a Changing South Africa*, first identifies and characterises what she calls “A Master Narrative of Whiteness” (pp. 3-22) and then describes, under the rubric “Shades of Whitenesses”, five “narratives of whiteness”, which she calls “Still Colonial After All These Years” (maintaining an ethnocentric, paternalistic view of white people “uplifting” black people; pp. 59-67); “This Shouldn’t Happen to a White” (seeing post-apartheid practice as “reverse discrimination” against whites; pp. 69-81); “Don’t Think White, It’s All Right” (accepting the changes of a democratic order, but not without griping and complaining; pp. 83-100); “A Whiter Shade of White” (a construction of whiteness that frankly disclaims any implication in whiteness; pp. 101-114); and “Under African Skies (or White, but Not Quite)” (seeing whiteness as defined in the past as just that: belonging to the past; looking to create and define new subjectivities to

8. Another work bearing Steyn’s imprint, entitled *Under Construction: “Race” and Identity in South Africa Today* (2004), says it “takes for granted that ‘race’ is a social and not a biological category. The concept of ‘race’ is therefore open to construction, deconstruction, reconstruction, resistance, subversion and challenge” (2004: blurb). The book features the genres of cartoon, performance art, photography, poetry, short story, dialogue, discourse analysis and academic essay “to answer questions about lived experiences in contemporary South Africa and the challenge and hopes which these experiences embody”. *Under Construction* eschews a sustained focus on “whiteness” or “whiteness studies” as such in favour of the subsuming category of “race” and its construction – a fairly typical gesture in South African cultural studies.

supplement or replace previous white identity; pp. 115-147).

Steyn as well as Nakayama and Krizek pointedly discusses the danger of discursive overdetermination, and yet in the very act of drawing together general lines of discursive confluence, based on valid and fairly extensive fieldwork, the conditions are necessarily created for exclusion. The analytical move is from a general theory of the origins of whiteness (in the case of Steyn especially), to particular and variable examples of whiteness, and then back to a more general mapping of the terrain based on groupings of the particular. My problem with this procedure, rich and revealing as it is, remains that such general mapping tends to become a function of its own supra-narrativity, perhaps to some extent at the expense of the more variable narrativity of the particular in its own domain before and beyond the capture and rewriting of particular narratives in the larger act of mapping.

This is always a question of balance: how much weight one accords one's primary research data, and how much one's own conclusions. In post-Foucaultian scholarship in which the constructedness of discourse is thought to be revealed, the weight has increasingly begun to fall on the conclusions of the cultural analyst. In literary scholarship it is fair to say that critics have over the past 30 years or so claimed an ever-greater share of discursive power vis-à-vis authors – for some, too much and often unwarranted power (cf. Carusi 1997: 303-316). My feeling is that in more general cultural analysis, too, a study of the particularities of everyday practice would be better served by a more perspectival form of nomad thought, one which foregrounds the immediate testimonies and evidence of the everyday, and which devotes relatively less space to overarching critical reinterpretations of them. In Brian Massumi's words (1992: 5-6), nomad thought "does not repose on identity; it rides difference ... it replaces restrictive analogy with conductivity that knows no bounds ... [i]t synthesizes a multiplicity of elements without effacing their heterogeneity or hindering their potential for future rearranging". (In fact, I feel there is justification for a purely narrative-reportage mode, or a testimonial-narrative mode which eschews explicit metacommentary completely.) Implicit in such "narrative scholarship" would be a thicker description of the subjects and a deep form of listening to their stories, their self-characterisation and their self-fashioned senses of identity. Critically, the "writing up" of the subjects and their stories would require a high degree of observational diligence, a keen sense of negative capability and less of the critical hubris that, in my view, is sometimes a characteristic of cultural analysis in the constructivist mould. Simply put, the overinterpretation that has become the signature of such criticism in its more glib manifestations, yields results that can easily become reductive and foreclose difference.

In addition, cultural criticism is hardly free of the meta-influence of

guiding attitudes or a context of feeling through which conclusions are formed. In his study, *Predicaments of Culture in South Africa* (2005), South African critic Ashraf Jamal takes issue with Nobel laureate J.M. Coetzee because Coetzee's influential utterances tend to enforce a view of South African culture – predominantly “white writing” – as a locus of shame and despair. Such a paradigmatic view is the key to a study of South African whiteness, and therefore deserves attention here. In particular, Jamal (2005: 23) seizes on Coetzee's statement that South Africa is as “irresistible as it is unlovable”, which Jamal typifies as “a constitutive paradox that defines the seductive and perverse logic that moves cultural inquiry and expression [about South Africa]” (p. 37). Jamal (p. 37) continues: “To desire in the name of South Africa, it seems, is to be party to this perverse embrace, an embrace that one does not will, but which wills one. If I have challenged this perverse embrace it is because I believe in the psychic and epistemic *possibility* of thinking (dreaming, feeling) South Africa as *resistable* and *lovable*” (p. 37). This possibility, for Jamal, is part of a process that works against what he sees as a “pathological dualism of despair and hope” defining a country “still caught in absolute contests” (p. 37). Citing Coetzee's avowal that “our inner lives [as South Africans] remain deformed and stunted” (p. 38), and typifying Coetzee's attitude as “fatalism” (p. 39), Jamal (p.162) unabashedly calls for a “psychic and epistemic rupture ... a place within rupture called love”, along with an avowed commitment to a “mobile selfhood” reminiscent of Chantal Mouffe's “nomadic identity”. For Jamal, in his reading of the “poetics of the seam” (de Kock 2002, 2004), cultural inquiry should “return us to the interstitial, ceaselessly compromised, and unresolvedly heterogeneous condition which continues to define South African culture”, a culture defined by what I have called a “dangerous fluidity of categories” comprising its “secret life” (de Kock quoted in Jamal 2005: 149).

In South Africa's many histories of oppression, the most frequent agents of foreclosure have been the metatropes of representation, as much of my earlier work has sought to demonstrate (de Kock 1997, 2004). I believe, along with Jamal, that if mobility of identity is to be held dear within an ethical embrace which Jamal typifies straightforwardly as “love”, then we must continue to “ride difference” with openness and a negative capability which refuses to enforce sovereign subjectivities and absolute contests. This must apply to characterisations of whiteness as much as to any other manifestation of South African identity, for if we “ride difference” in certain areas, but reserve others for the ironclad metatropes, where everything is already decided, then we will have returned to our inglorious and unlovely colonial traditions of representational tyranny.

A final word on “wildness”. Since this article is meant as the launching

pad for a more extended research project, I must speak speculatively. It is my hunch, which I will be testing in this project, that, just as white orthodoxy in its many forms (for example, the Christian missionary ethos and the civilising mission in nineteenth-century South Africa, the “white man’s burden”, Protestant and other forms of Christian morality, apartheid ideology, and so on) was constituted in an explicit binary relation to what was perceived as the dangers of *wildness* (“barbarism”, “savagery”, “uncivilized behaviour”), so “wildness” has acted as a lure to whites of a disestablishmentarian inclination. That is, the dialectical antagonism between whiteness and wildness, I believe, has produced forms of subjectivity that I would like to typify as “nomad” – rebellious, wayward, inventive, and, if you like, rhizomatic. This is a wholly under-studied area with great interest, and I think researchers should go there to see how it moves, and to listen if its inner secrets will speak with voices that we are still able to hear.

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