

## MAKING WHITE LIVES: NEGLECTED MEANINGS OF WHITENESS FROM APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

*Kopano Ratele*

*Institute of Social and Health Sciences*

*University of South Africa, Pretoria &*

*Medical Research Council - UNISA Safety and Peace Promotion Research Unit*

*Tygerberg, Cape Town*

[kopano.ratele@mrc.ac.za](mailto:kopano.ratele@mrc.ac.za)

*Leswin Laubscher*

*Department of Psychology, University of Stellenbosch*

*Stellenbosch, South Africa &*

*Department of Psychology, Duquesne University*

*Pittsburgh, USA*

### **Abstract.**

*In South Africa, as in other parts of the world, where race was positioned as the fulcrum on which power balances, whiteness seems to have maintained its defining weight. Even after dramatic political changes, whiteness in South Africa seems to continue to determine privilege and desirability. In this article, which analyses material from two archival sources, we consider some of the meanings of, and processes that went into, whiteness as a dominant category of identity and white life as desirable standard. The narratives and cases selected for analysis are not representative of the universe of meaning vis-à-vis whiteness, but are taken to be instructive as to how we might go about looking at whiteness as critical readers and psychologists sensitive to historical, economic and socio-political contexts. In an effort to complicate notions of privilege, dominance and whiteness – and to do so by means of an archive, with sensitivity to dynamics broader than the economic or the structural – the article focuses on the historical constitution and habitation of whiteness in South Africa to uncover and articulate some neglected meanings of whiteness, then and now. The stories of whiteness and white life under apartheid illustrate how these dynamics were fixed in place, insinuated into daily life, and defended against other forms of racial being. At the same time, the article shows how constructions of whiteness and being White were, and continue to be, driven by contradictions, ambiguities and paradoxes. From these stories we note the dynamics and tensions between essence and appearance. They reveal some of the thoughts and feelings that went into making and inhabiting a South African whiteness, and help us understand the complex and nuanced specificities of whiteness in this society.*

**Key words:** *Apartheid Archive Project, whiteness, privilege, power, race, South Africa*

## **INTRODUCTION.**

In South Africa, as in other parts of the world where race was positioned as the fulcrum on which power balances, whiteness seems to have maintained its defining weight. Even after dramatic changes, and total reversals of political power, whiteness in South Africa seems to possess almost magical powers, continuing to determine and mark privilege and, connectedly yet distinctively, desirability. What is the meaning of this lasting power and sway that whiteness wields, nearly two decades after the last white president of South Africa, three black presidents later – one of whom was a former political prisoner of that very white president's state – and the introduction of a number of laws and policies regarding redistributive justice?

The assertion of continuing white privilege and power, in fact, is a widely held, and common, one. Meyer and Finchilescu (2006: 77), for example, have reported that Africans, Coloureds and Whites still “saw White South Africans as being the dominant group in South Africa, followed by Coloured and African South Africans”. These researchers conclude that the racial stratification system inherited from colonial and apartheid regimes is rather stable. Green, Sonn & Matsebula (2007: 396) seem to agree, noting that “[p]ower remains with white people, and power relations [have] remained unchanged”, while Stevens (2007: 428) suggests that there is “ongoing privilege coupled with whiteness”.

Yet, agreement as to stratification notwithstanding, the question as to this pattern's persistence remains open. For Franchi and Swart (2003), a large part of the answer lies in a continuing, testamentary benefit as historically produced privileges are bequeathed, as it were, to the generations that follow. As a consequence, Franchi and Swart (2003) continue, Whites are also averse to talk and discussion about race identification. Stevens (2007: 428) similarly argues that whiteness is maintained through “a range of non-discursive and structural elements” and that white privilege still has to be “depowered”.

Even though the characterisation of the work of Meyer and Finchilescu (2006) as well as Green and associates (2007) isolates elements of their work and thus oversimplifies it, the major thrust of these assertions appears at first understandable, and makes intuitive sense. However, upon closer scrutiny it turns out there is much more that is either unanswered, or begs for further elucidation. For example, we need to know more about what it is to have power or privilege, especially given the assertion, for example, that Blacks as a group are as politically powerful as Whites, if not more so. Moreover and relatedly, what does it mean, then, to speak of white dominance? How is it that whiteness retains this magic-like quality by its presentation as seemingly permanent, unchanging, without history or social context? It may well be that the claim of pervasive white dominance largely refers to the power associated with, or arising from, employment, positions in the work place, and more generally, economic power and wealth. Whites may be seen by others and themselves, researchers and subjects of research, as powerful because as a group they have better prospects of employment, are in better paid and higher status occupations, and generally have more money than other social groups. Abundant support for the economic power of Whites can be found from different governmental reports and research studies. Hence Steyn (2001) simply observed that Whites remain a powerful economic presence in South Africa and their influence on its future is likely to persist, while Martin and Durrheim (2006) showed that despite the wide-ranging legislative and policy changes the country witnessed since

Nelson Mandela assumed the presidency, the bulk of senior positions in private companies in the country were still occupied by Whites. **The Quarterly Labour Force Survey** for the second quarter of 2010 shows that while the unemployment rate for Blacks or Africans stands at a high of 29.5%, for Coloureds at 22.5%, and for Indians/Asians at 10.1%, for Whites it is better than in many parts of the world at 6.4% (Statistics South Africa, 2010). Statistics South Africa (2008: 20) has reported that in the **2005/2006 Income and Expenditure Survey**, “white households (were) earning over seven times more than black African households”.

Again however, one should be careful not to equate dominance only with income and/or wealth. How, for example, is the privilege of wealth qualified alongside a loss of political power? And can we talk of Blacks as possessing privilege as it pertains to the political? In a country where most political offices are occupied by black people, it is crucial to be clearer in our talk of race and power, to consider the different manifestations of privilege with a little more sophistication, and to work against the easy and ready ascription of whiteness with fabulous and encompassing powers. A textured analysis of the power of whiteness will have to take into account much more than the economic and structural, and include, for instance, how racialised power produces desire and violence, and vice versa. As psychologists, we may also need to abandon an all too pervasive preference for ahistorical analyses in the assumption of a timeless psyche or psychological dynamics. Indeed, while the need to turn to the past to understand whiteness may be self-evident to historians, anthropologists and other social scientists, it is not always so for some in the discipline of psychology.

Hence, in an effort precisely to complicate notions of privilege, dominance, and whiteness, and to do so by means of an archive and a sensitivity to dynamics broader than the economic or the structural, this article focuses on the historical constitution and habitation of whiteness in South Africa, to uncover and articulate some neglected meanings of whiteness, then and now.

### **THE ARCHIVAL SOURCES AND MATERIALS.**

The material for this article is gleaned from two sources, the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) and the Apartheid Archives Project (AAP).

The SAIRR was established in 1929 “to work for peace, goodwill, and practical co-operation between the various sections and races of the population of South Africa” (South African Institute of Race Relations, 2010). It disseminates a range of writings in different forms connected to the question of race in South Africa. Of particular interest to this article is the material disseminated in what is now referred to as **South Africa Survey**, previously known as, **A survey of race relations survey in South Africa** and **Survey of race relations in South Africa**, which was started in 1947. The **Survey**, as the title back then suggested, reported on a range of topics believed to be associated with race relations. Whereas there were slight changes in emphasis or topics from year to year, and across the titling of the **Survey** from when it still carried the explicit race relations terms, the core of the material remained the same. Topics covered in the survey included, but were not limited to, political developments; organisations concerned with race relations; security measures, and terrorism; control of publications; control of persons; detentions and trials under security laws; employment; health; school education for white children; recreation; South West Africa/Namibia; Coloured and Asian affairs; group areas and housing; white politics; removals or resettlement;

universities; and others. For the purposes of this article, topics of special interest are those that appeared most often under the chapter “*The population of South Africa*”. Under this heading, the **Survey** usually covered size and distribution of the population, vital statistics such as birth- and death rates, population registration, persons classified and reclassified under the Population Registration Act, (re)classification rejections and appeals, “*illegitimacy*”, and prosecutions and convictions under the Immorality Act.

The AAP, on the other hand, is a more recent contributing archive, comprising an international research network collecting narratives and memories of *apartheid*, to serve as basis for examining “the nature of the experiences of racism of (particularly ‘ordinary’) South Africans under the old apartheid order and their continuing effects on individual and group functioning in contemporary South Africa. The project is fundamentally premised on the understanding that traumatic experiences from the past will constantly attempt to re-inscribe themselves (often in masked form) in the present, if they are not acknowledged, interrogated and addressed” (Apartheid Archive Project, 2010). The project seeks to foreground and create an archive of narratives of the everyday experiences of *ordinary* South Africans during the apartheid era, rather than simply focusing on the grand narratives of the past, or the privileged narratives of academic, political and social elites, effectively attempting to fill the *forgotten* gaps interspersed between the grand narratives recorded by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and other more formalised archiving projects. The AAP researchers state that: “Admittedly, the TRC has already made a critical contribution to this process. However, given its tendency to focus on the more ‘dramatic’ or salient narratives of apartheid atrocities and the fact that it thereby effectively (albeit, perhaps, unintentionally) foreclosed the possibility of an exploration of the more quotidian but pervasive, and no less significant, manifestations of apartheid abuse means that much of the details of apartheid racism had not been publicly acknowledged or assessed [...]. In effect, this study will attempt to fill the gaps interspersed between the ‘grand’ narratives recorded by the TRC” (Apartheid Archive Project, 2010).

There are interesting differences between the two archival sources, for example, the material from the **Survey** is collated by research staff of the SAIRR from stories carried in newspapers, other media, journals, magazines and reports, debates from parliament, and reports from other fora. The material from the AAP is, as the researchers state, unmediated; the stories are written or told by individuals who are central to the narratives. Another difference is that cases from the **Survey** were reported the year following their appearance/occurrence, for instance, in the newspapers, or once debated in parliament. Of course, some of the cases might have had a long prehistory, or may actually have happened years before they wound up in the public record. Even so, however, the narratives of the AAP are different in that they typically reference events and experiences that happened many years before. Do these differences make a difference? We suspect they do, and further analyses as to those differences are certainly warranted and encouraged. That analysis, however, cannot happen here for lack of space, on the one hand, but also, on the other, because it does not seem that such an analysis would make a fundamental difference to the question posed here, or facilitate a better or worse entry into the stories of apartheid.

The material selected for analysis is not intended to be representative of the universe of meaning *vis-à-vis* whiteness in South Africa. Rather, the stories have been selected

to be instructive as to how we might go about looking at whiteness as critical readers, and as psychologists sensitive to historical, economic and socio-political context, to texture, evasions and claims, to changes and consequences of whiteness in South Africa. In the sections that follow, the selected cases are sometimes presented followed by the analysis, and sometimes the analysis is woven into the unfolding case narrative. Each story is replete with themes about whiteness that can be interpreted from other perspectives, and at great length. A critical psychosocial analysis of discourse informed by social constructionist approaches (see for example, Duncan, 1993; Burr, 1995; Frankenberg 1995; Durrheim, 1997; Levett, Kottler, Burman & Parker, 1997) was employed to read the stories for accounts about the making and meanings of white lives in apartheid South Africa. In a nutshell, and somewhat simplistically, the texts (stories) were confronted with a particular question, namely *“how is whiteness made, and made to mean?”* This is the textuality of the text, and an important part of our analysis accrues from the manner in which the text responds to our interrogation thereof. However, the text is also read in con-text, and to the extent that we approached the stories as part of a historical economic, social and political context which produces them even as they speak of that context, the cases and narratives were examined to see how actors are positioned or position themselves in whiteness; how being white is written of; evasions about complicity accomplished; group domination and structural violence denied; and claims about race asserted in relation to individual life. The cases and narratives were read and re-read to understand what each of the stories was about, but more so to gain a fuller appreciation of the manner in which whiteness is glossed, constituted and performed in stories told about lives of subjects. The concern was with individual narratives as much as the sorts of discourses drawn upon in stories to make meaning of being White. Whereas space limits the analyses here, it is hoped that the article serves as an invitation for continuing research and conversation, such that these issues and perhaps even these stories may be wrestled with in greater depth. We elected to start with the cases reported in the **Survey** and move to the narratives collected by the AAP.

### **CASES REPORTED IN THE SURVEY.**

#### **The first case: Lize Venter**

Reporting and commenting on an incident carried in the now defunct newspaper, **Rand Daily Mail** of 26 July 1983, the researchers of the SAIRR wrote:

“In July 1983, there was controversy over racial classification when a 12-day old baby was found abandoned near Pretoria. In order to classify the infant, named Lize Venter by the hospital staff looking after her, tests were carried out on a strand of her hair in a Pretoria police laboratory. As a result the infant was classified as a coloured person. Although the police claimed that the baby’s racial classification was necessary in order to assist their investigations, there was widespread criticism, both in principle and on scientific grounds. A member of the international Institute of Trichology, for example, described the testing as invalid, since no hair classification existed for coloured people” (Cooper, Motala, Shindler, McCaul, Ratsomo with Horrell & Streek, 1984: 103).

12-day old infants do not have a clue about racial identity. To be able to identify herself as Coloured or White, a person has to enter the world of meaning and representation, of language and identification. That does not imply that because a 12 or 30 year-old can speak (about race) she therefore fully comprehends the meanings of her own identity or generally how racial ideology works. Knowledge of ourselves, as White or

Coloured, women or men, or any other identity, is always incomplete, even when we may have great facility in a language.

Besides the (il)logic of the case, at least in historical hindsight, what this incident conveys quite markedly is that being White or Coloured involves an other. The case suggests that the hospital staff may have believed the infant to be White, probably from her looks, and at least at first glance, at what presents to the other; they had given her a popular, *cute* Afrikaans name, from which we can infer who did the naming. Here we observe that an individual's identity is something that others have an interest in, something they have to support, help make, accept and reinforce. There is no identity without others. This point, that one has to be acceptable to others, to society, to live among and be seen by others as White to be White, is an important one to come to grips with. But even more pertinently, we note that where there is ambiguity – where there is a suspicion that all is not what it seems, there is recourse to a definitive essence outside of sight, a fundamental marker of where the person *belongs*.

The case also underlines that it is not only individuals who have an interest in other individuals' identities, but that social relations, within which the meaning of identities is produced, are replicated in structures and institutions of society, legal and para-legal structures perhaps being principal among them. In the case of the 12-day old infant we see how the police – as a particularly salient and powerful representative of the State – are very interested in identity, so much so that it will utilise its scientific resources, and argue a forensic motivation, even as a more *credible* science, that of Trichology, suggests that there is no definitive science *to* utilise. Perhaps there is another comment or conclusion to draw here – namely that whereas the *credible* science of Trichology cannot justify the scientific treatment of hair and its diseases as a scientific basis for racial classification, the State takes over that credibility function by setting up police labs, and, the police, as an enforcing arm of the State, produces its own science such that its policies are given *objective* stature and *credibility*.

One could also posit that this case is suffused with meaning as to racialised womanhood, families and childhood; that is, what the actors imagine women or families within different races think about childhood. This leads one to speculate that perhaps institutional approval was given for the infant to be tested because it was assumed that white women and parents do not abandon their infants. That is, the suspicion that what is apparent (a white baby) may not be all that it seems, is given by cultural value and behaviour – white mothers do not abandon their children, ergo, this child may not be White, appearances notwithstanding.

### **The second case: An elderly couple.**

Conveying a story that first appeared in the **Cape Times** newspaper, the **Survey** stated that: "In May (1966), [...] a judge ordered the (appeal) board (set up under the Population Registration Act) to reclassify an elderly couple as White. The board, he said, had found that by appearance they were apparently White (sic). There was proof that they had lived as Coloured people until about 1950, but all evidence after that pointed to the fact that they were presently accepted as Whites" (Horrell, 1967: 124).

A curious aspect in this case is that before they lived and were accepted as White by others, there was proof that the couple had in fact lived as Coloured, yet the judge decided to order that they be reclassified as White. A fault line in apartheid (il)logic is

highlighted very particularly here – although already intimated in the previous case – namely that of whiteness as appearance (and artifice or performance) or otherwise as essence (and naturally unchanging biology). It appears from this case that there must have been a recognition of a shifting meaning of whiteness, even among – perhaps especially among – those apartheid ideologues for whom categorisation and classification was important and at the heart of its order. How is it, then, that such an unsettledness of racial identity could be tolerated by a regime that laboured to fix people into unchanging categories, and not threaten the system at heart? Perhaps it was in representing such *ambiguous* cases as marginal ones, and as exceptions to the rule, removed from the historical where the apparent and the obvious proves the rule: that is, by presenting these as marginal and exceptional, one need not fear that one's neighbours or one's children's future spouses may really not be White, even when they look exactly like those *questionable* cases. Perhaps incorporating some level of changeability and allowing exceptions is a key element of essentialising race ideology apparatuses. So long as the racialised economic privileges of the white ruling class were protected, racial (re)classification was to be as practical as possible, that is, as Posel (2001) has observed, rather than elegant, or scientifically precise (if a science of race is ever possible), or on the basis of any precise criteria that apartheid leaders had mooted. The process of racial (re)classification was ultimately a politically driven practice that was made and remade, shall we say, in the field, by the State's foot-soldiers, individuals whose power to change the lives of others outside the ruling circles "was often inversely proportional to their social standing, education, or training" (Posel, 2001: 104).

### **The third case: A Johannesburg family of eight.**

Around 1962, officials of the population registration office – a government structure responsible for the determination of race membership – had queries about a Johannesburg family of eight, comprised of two parents and six children (Horrell, 1963). The family is said to have argued that it had always "lived as White" (Horrell, 1963: 66) and to that end declared that they were known by others to be White and were classified as such in the 1951 census. At the hearing of the case of the family by the race classification appeal board in Pretoria, the chairman of the board, a former judge, found that all in the family, with the exception of the father, were White. But this finding was contested by the two members sitting with him, who found that the father and four of the children were not White, and in any event the family, they said, were accepted as Coloured. The family were declared Coloured by majority vote.

Whereas the Population Registration Act of 1950 defined a White person as one who "in appearance obviously is, or who is generally accepted as a white person, but does not include a person who, although in appearance obviously a white person, is generally accepted as a coloured person" (Union of South Africa, 1950: 277), it is striking that the very people who were to enforce this law not only differ in their adjudication of such "*appearance*", but resolve their differences by a majority vote! It is on this question of appearance, seemingly the bedrock of the lawful definition, that this case is appealed to the Supreme Court in Pretoria, where the judge is reported to have said that as far as he knew no court had attempted to define the appearance of a white person. He noted that when the law employed the word "*obviously*" it apparently wished to indicate the extent to which the whiteness of the person in question was obvious in the eye of an observing other. However, we find from all the cases listed so far, whether the observing hospital staff that noted baby Lize Venter as White, the elderly

couple that were by all appearances White, or the family of eight who *lived as White*, that it did matter who was the observing other, and that – in the final instance – it was the State and its forces which had the last words.

Mr Justice Snyman, the Supreme Court judge who presided over this case, after observing the whole family, opined that the mother and two of the children thought to be White first by the two members of the appeal board in Pretoria were of the White group – “of the type of white person normally seen in South Africa” (Horrell, 1963: 67). As for the rest of the remaining members of the family, the four children and the father, Snyman said they might have had some foreign, White Southern European blood which, we have to surmise, made them look swarthier than a South African White “normally seen in South Africa”. Ultimately, since it had not been established beyond doubt that any of the family members were not accepted as White, the judge declared the family were thus all White. We are reminded here of Dyer’s (1997) argument that Southern and Eastern Europeans generally may be less secure in their whiteness as opposed to Northern Europeans generally, and thus that some technically white South Africans could have been made to feel at risk as regarded their racial identification.

One thing this case brings forth is how the meaning of “*obviously*” White is anything but; what is obvious to one person may not be obvious to another. Policing the borders, then, to root out suspicious whiteness, indications of abnormal White-types, forgeries, borderline cases, and the like, may well mean or imply usage of a criterion or decision rule beyond that of the legal and intuitive sense of the obvious, especially when natural appearance and the fundamental scientific tools are unavailable or itself suspect in rendering a definitive verdict.

Hence, now, we are introduced to the notion of “*living as White*”. In these questionable cases, where appearance cannot be trusted, to be regarded as White, one must also have *lived as White* in order to be accepted as White. The question then arises: what is a White life? Out of this notion of “*living as White*” it seems more and more that the self is less and less to be thought of in terms of an entirely original production, outside of politics and societal structures. It appears that the very everyday workings of our arteries and body posture, of sitting in our kitchens and the food families cook and eat, of the conversations and company we have in our living rooms, sex we have in our bedrooms, and the quality of toilet paper we have in our toilets, are all implicated in a matrix of representation and meaning, of ideology, and the political.

#### **The fourth case: Susara Kirk from Brakpan.**

As in other cases, the role of the State in how individuals and families become White, or are excluded from a white identity group, is also evident in the case of Susara Kirk. What is remarkable about this case, firstly, is that for most people, Susara Kirk would be *mistaken* for a White person. As the story was told at the time, Miss Kirk is: “... a blonde with blue eyes, who lives in Brakpan. She and her parents and grandmother have always lived as whites, and have white identity cards. Miss Kirk mislaid her card, however, and applied for another. Meanwhile, she married a white man. But the new identity card stated that she was Coloured, and officials confirmed that she been reclassified. Her husband then applied successfully for their marriage to be annulled in accordance with the Mixed Marriages Act. Miss Kirk lost her job” (Horrell, 1970: 25).



Continuing the theme of appearance and the obvious, the case of Susara Kirk underlines the contestation around how whiteness looks, how obviousness is not the be-all and end-all of racial identity; being White, like being Black, is not a self-evident fact. Being White rather recuperates political and economic processes at the level above individuals and families. The case shows that in spite of one's blue eyes and blonde hair, white parents and white grandmother, one may be something other than White. There is of course the question to any social power that arrogates to itself the definition of group identity, why parents would naturally belong in a different race group from their children, a question whose very asking perpetuates the (il)logic of apartheid racial ideology. Nevertheless, the case of Ms Kirk reinforces the fact that white identity is to be found in the relation between the State and subjects, not only on an individual's skin or between individuals. However it also becomes clear here that there are psychosocial processes that track the structural processes that define whiteness. These processes include motivations that propel a person to want to be White (or to refuse to be White), perceptions regarding whiteness, cognitions and emotions about oneself and others, and relationships one develops or evades with others. Therefore, depending on whether one actively supported or went along with the State's view of whiteness, or challenged this view, these social-psychological processes could and did propagate racist structures.

The story of Ms Kirk becomes important precisely because there is a suggestion that, not unlike most people with her somatic characteristics, she was motivated to be identified with whiteness, she perceived herself to be White (whether with full belief in her whiteness or anxiously so). The annulment of her marriage and her possible heartache also follow from the fact her husband, like other individual Whites, formed their identities and their inner lives in relation to the legal-political processes set down in law about what is/what is not White. These legal-political processes of course dictated White-Other relations. Hence now, and in response to the question, *what is it to live a White life?*, we find from the example of Ms Kirk's husband, that it is to subordinate and sacrifice even desire and intimacy, need and relation, to the processes of whiteness.

## **NARRATIVES COLLECTED BY THE AAP.**

### **The first narrative: Portal N 23.**

**N 23:** *"I am a 74 year old senior citizen born and bred in this country. My family and myself were classified white and we lived in a white community. I did my active citizen service between 1954 and 1957 and throughout my entire life never heard of or experienced any of the alleged torturing, illegal arrests, detention and the like which now appears to be the topic of a great discussion and the possibility of a great architectural project."*

*"Prior to 1994 all cities and town throughout South Africa were kept neat, clean, safe and sound. One could walk around anywhere in any big city at any time day or night without being accosted by some criminal element. Murders were so few and far between that when a murder did occur, it would remain a topic of discussion in every household for the duration of the court proceedings right up until the murderer is sentenced. At the present rate of 50 plus murders committed in any one day, one cannot really select which one to make a topic of discussion and would rather focus on the government's incapability in combating an eliminating this pandemic."*

*“The public views are called upon to compile this Apartheid Architecture project, which I personally feel should be laid to rest and a serious attempt being made to encourage the population to look to the future in order to build a better and stronger country and bond between races.”*

*“For how long more are we to keep up this racial tension which was eliminated after 1994, but promptly re-introduced by the ANC immediately thereafter. Are the compilers of the Apartheid Archive project actually trying to establish some sort of a foundation on which they can pile a list of stories for the purpose of generating a history for the indigenous South Africans, or do they just want to keep the past wounds opening and bleeding?”*

*“Like my late father who passed away 31 years ago, I can say with honesty that I kept living up to his attitude that a person other than white is a second class person and should be treated as such, but this has changed my way of belief several years ago. Prior to that when walking into a supermarket, or any other store for that matter, I was greeted by lily-white faces of the same kind and culture that I am.”*

*“It was hard for me to accept the fact that after 1994 all white receptionists in business places, tellers in banks and ladies at supermarket till-points were replaced with people of other colour.”*

*“At the beginning of the new democracy women were employed at random, whether they had the knowledge or expertise or not. This, it would appear, has slowly been phased out over the past few years and one has the feeling that a better calibre service and a very friendly environment has now being established in many business places. The above are my views on the proposed Apartheid Archive project, which I think should be swept under the carpet whilst still in it’s infancy state. Young people born during the early nineties and who have just matriculated, need to be told about the past suffering of their parents, but the way it is being presented makes one believe that every ‘struggler’ that passes away nowadays are considered a martyr.”*

*“I personally feel that the ANC is doing many things to cover up their non-service delivery and this could be one of the main reasons of this proposed project. In other words, for them to keep the hatred burning will make the people forget about the present issues and keep concentrating on the hateful past.”*

*“Cut it out before it is too late.”*

This narrative from the AAP is flooded with themes about whiteness, such that it deserves far more extensive and in-depth analysis than is possible here. The changing positioning of the narrator, the grain of the story, the prevarication and denials, the assertions and retractions, defences and vulnerabilities, all illustrate and suggest both how that whiteness informs this person’s view of himself as well as how that whiteness is being deeply troubled.

One of the organising themes of this narrative is its criticism of the AAP (which the narrator misnames as “a great architectural project” and an “Apartheid Architecture project”) as a project of the African National Congress (ANC) to deflect attention from

its governing failure to deliver services to the people and to keep them safe and prosperous. The AAP is decidedly not a project of the ANC, even as it is acknowledged that the existence of the archive is always political. One could even argue that inasmuch as this archive could only exist in this form in a post-apartheid South Africa that it is, in a roundabout way, a project of a post-apartheid space, and by extension, at least to some measure, of the ANC. Of course, though, this is not the manner in which the author understands the AAP as a *“project”* of the ANC, and it is perhaps more fruitful to read this link at the level of the author’s sense of memory. On the one hand, if this is a project of the ANC, its memory is erroneous and at fault because that is not how the author remembers it, and ergo, that is not how it was. *“Alleged torturing”*, and arrests and detentions which he had *“never heard of”* suggests that it never was, or perhaps even that if it was, it may have been an exception or is overblown in the present where *“every ‘struggler’ that passes away nowadays are considered a martyr”*. However, even if there is some truth to such memory, the author’s narrative logic maintains that there is no sense in fuelling such a past in the face of more pressing challenges and concerns of a (Black) present, to wit murders and governing incompetence? In fact, if there is any sense at all, it is to fuel hatred and deflect responsibility. In either scenario, it is by the decree of whiteness that memory is ruled true, appropriate, or otherwise relevant, and in all cases, whiteness as memory and present manoeuvres itself out of culpability, responsibility, accountability, or answerability in general.

Indeed, one of the key structural elements in the story is that the narrator remarks, right at the beginning of his tale, that he and his family *“were classified white and [...] lived in a white community”*. It seems that this statement marks his story, perhaps more so than he may be aware of. Indeed, having his racial identity re/remarked thus, the narrator continues to relate how good life was under apartheid and how threatening it is now in post-apartheid South Africa. Under white rule, South African cities and towns were *“neat, clean, safe and sound”*. Here the narrative betrays a denial or ignorance about the violence that kept the cities and towns neat and clean, inclusive of curfews, cheap black labour, and restrictive laws governing the free movement of peoples. This denial allows, now, for a statement of chaos, dirt, danger, and disorganisation of those neat and orderly places, brought about by black rule, or misrule, as the narrative would have it. To the extent that ideologies of whiteness hold hegemonic sway, there is a difference to be noted here in the manner of its sovereignty. During apartheid, there is little need to question the logic of whiteness, but now, in the aftermath of apartheid, and against the characterisation thereof as failed, morally unjustifiable, or otherwise heinous, for whiteness to maintain some sense of coherence it may well resort to defence, the magic of the sleight of hand, or the reframing memory, even to the extent demonstrated here, where the narrator is blind to the violence against others in the name of whiteness (Frankenberg, 1993; Dyer, 1997), and the untenable contradictions and paradoxes of his story.

The narrative continues to present and contrast a past that was happy and orderly versus the disorderliness and racial hatred of the present. The narrator bemoans the fact that whereas one could walk the big city any time of the night or day, after 1994 this was no longer possible given criminal elements bound to accost one sooner or later. Furthermore, the narrator notes the exceptional nature of murder under apartheid, against the commonality of murder in the post-apartheid society. Yet, even if one concedes and grants that the narrator had no knowledge of the specifics of life in

segregated townships, perhaps never having needed to go there, his ignorance of violence at the level of the personal or direct cannot quite explain his inability to acknowledge how structural violence was always part of black life, forcibly removed to the reserves or their *own countries* such as Ciskei, or crowded into townships away from cities or towns.

**The second narrative: Portal N 13.**

If the previous narrative demonstrates whiteness erasing violence by refusing to see it, acknowledge it, or downright denying it, the following narrative provides an example of just the opposite – of whiteness noticing racial violence, both direct and structural.

**N 13:** *“His Song opened my heart.”*

*“I grew up in Pretoria in the seventies with Police ‘vangwaens’ raiding our suburb on Sunday afternoons and bundling dignified ‘mamas’ into the back of the van because they dared to embroider white cloths in colourful threads with their friends on the grass without their pass books. These scenes made a huge impact on me at the time but none so much as the gardener who worked next door ...”*

*“I grew up next to the leader of a white, rightwing party. He was a loving man to his family and us because we were white. His cruelty to people of colour was something that I could never fathom or understand.”*

We are told that what happened to the gardener *“made a huge impact”* on the narrator, as did what happened to *“dignified ‘mamas’”* bundled into *“vangwaens”*. There is a clear suggestion that the narrator is at least somewhat aware of the structural violence of passbooks, *“vangwaens”*, segregated education, and neighbourhoods. She (N 13) mentions coming from a household,

*“... where my mother worked in education of former Bantu education teachers who only needed Standard 6-8 to qualify to teach. My mother spent her weekdays working for an establishment that tried to further the education of these teachers and weekends were spent at a centre for extra lessons for said teachers. It is therefore remarkable that she allowed me into this environment of utmost racism next door.”*

But whereas she is aware of structural inequity, it is the direct, personal violence of the neighbour that really strikes her, and even prompts her story in the first place.

**N 13:** *“The gardener was a young man of around 19 years that came from the rural areas to seek employment in the big city, probably with dreams of reaching his potential in some way. I say this because he not only had a beautiful singing voice but also carved the most beautiful animals from wood. I remember at age six asking my mother why black people always sing while they’re working and my mother’s answer was, ‘Because it makes them happy. I recall that my thoughts at the time were that white people probably don’t sing because they are ‘happy enough’! His work was by no means easy or light, in fact it was hard and without appreciation, but he always brought forth the most beautiful melodies as he performed the thankless tasks. He was spoken to in a voice that cut like a knife and the K-word was often used when he was insulted for not doing something in a fast enough manner.”*

*"I was around 7 when I heard shouting in the cruellest manner possible. On closer inspection, the leader of the party was standing close to N and was punching him in the face while insulting him verbally. I will never forget the pain that my heart experienced at that precise moment. My seven-year old mind wanted to shout out 'This is wrong!!'. I did not tell my mother at the time, because I was too traumatised at the cruelty I had seen. He left with all his belongings in the middle of the night, probably to avoid further humiliation. The reason for his treatment, I found out later, was because he left a tap running."*

The narrative does not spell out the idea that Whites had tacit support from the system to insult, ill-treat, exploit, punch, whip, humiliate, and generally be aggressive towards Blacks. But one senses that the narrator just about discerns that the system itself was a daily affront against the dignity of Blacks. The story of the gardener and the right-winger is an instantiation of the story of the whiteness regime, not merely interpersonal. Yet, at the same time, it is this direct instantiation of violence, the witness to direct violence, to a singular instance, that nonetheless leaves the most traumatising mark. It is striking that the narrator remarks *"I was too traumatized at the cruelty I had seen"* to *"tell my mother"*. She was silenced. As much as she wanted to speak and strike out, and shout, *"This is wrong"*, she does not – the pain, she tells us, is so overwhelming that it silences her.

Here then, is another clue as to those neglected dynamics of whiteness. It is not, we propose, just that the violence silenced because it was overwhelming and unfair, from the perspective of the victim, so to speak, but *also* because of the perpetrator, of who wields violence – one's kin, one's kind, *"... a loving man to his family and us"*. Not unlike the incest victim who is silenced, who carries the secret not just or even primarily by some external threat, but because the one who hurts her is also one she loves, a paradox that tears her apart, and that she cannot fathom or understand. Perhaps the trauma of whiteness that sees, that is witness to violence, is not only because it sees the victim, but also because it sees the perpetrator, and the perpetrator looks like *me*.

Hence, it is true that we need reminding of subjective, direct violence because we need to notice the different forms of violence: the social, indirect form and the symbolic, besides the interpersonal, subjective kind; and because it is true that there is more to that violence, as there is to whiteness, than the evident. One form of violence reinforces and extends the effects of the other; one form of *"White life"* fortifies and elaborates racial structures. Systems need scapegoats, bad, blameworthy individuals whose acts allow systems to perpetuate their quotidian power and to not appear as comparatively unreasonable. Racist individuals do great day-to-day work of (non-racist) structures and ideologies of whiteness, because the violence of the structures can be displaced onto them: they are the violent ones, not the system. In turn though, racist individuals need structures to normalise or minimise their violence. Although the narrator saw the man as loving to his family and neighbours, the leader of the white rightwing party was also a violent man; the system may have been discouraging of White-on-White violence, but it was not enthusiastic to punish White-on-Black violence.

### **The third narrative: Portal N 17.**

**N 17:** *"I have to add an addendum to my story submitted a few hours ago ... I don't know how to retrieve the story to 'edit it' so I'll just write something extra ... As I said*

*before, I grew up in a small town in the Cape, in a sheltered 'white', community. My earliest recollection of something being terribly wrong (but not knowing what) happened when I was about 4 and a half years old. Our helper 'Janey', a woman in about her late 20s, early 30s, had worked for my parents as a 'servant' from when I could remember."*

*"As an 'only' child, of course she was a significant part of my immediate family environment and I knew her as a warm, protective person (I remember her bathing me and standing between my mother and I when I was about to be smacked). I also remember being in her 'room' in an outbuilding at the back of the house, painted in an enamel green paint, with dim candlelight and the warm smell of Vaseline and a paraffin stove ... She would accompany my parents and I on holidays (or business trips) to for example a beachfront hotel in Sea Point in Cape Town and she and I would eat together and play together - I think she stayed in designated worker accommodation in a smelly alley behind the hotel, away from view of the luxurious rooms of white guests."*

*"My world changed one early evening when I came into the kitchen and was picked up to stand on the small red kitchen table. I was told that Janey was leaving that night. I tried to cling to her and kiss her goodbye but was told that I was not allowed to kiss her because 'one' did not kiss black people!! She left for Burgersdorp. I was told in later years that there had been a pass law offence and she had been given 72 hours to leave the town. I knew and still know nothing about her, about her family or about her children if she had any. As a young teenager the taboo was finally lifted and I was told that her leaving had actually been the result of an incident relating to a sexual 'encounter' between her and my grandfather (in retrospect, possibly rape?). The pass law had been invoked to save the family public embarrassment and I assume the wrath of the 'immorality act'. Race, shame, dangerous family secrets, injustice, loss and enormously skewed power relations became part of the complicated entanglement that was the context of growing up in Apartheid South Africa."*

There are again many themes about whiteness to be found in this narrative, and here, too, we find a link with violence. What distinguishes this story, and the violence that accrues to a certain possessive whiteness, is that it involves the sexual, the intimate, desire, and the familiarity of closeness that may even be called love. On the one hand, whiteness constructs – and apartheid depends on – the black body as one that serves, as nanny, *maid*, or sexual object; bodies which had to be constantly available, but fundamentally unseen, *"in designated worker accommodation in a smelly alley behind the hotel"*.

By this construction, *"One did not kiss black people!!"*, but this injunction fails all over and everywhere in this story. Domestic workers were often not only employed to clean the house but to raise white babies. It is very likely that women such as *"Janey"*, if they looked after a white baby, would have been moved by something the baby did to kiss the baby; they would change nappies; they would carry the baby on their back; they would be, according to the author, *"... a significant part of my immediate family environment ... I remember her bathing me and standing between my mother and I when I was about to be smacked"*. And of course grandpa did kiss black people, but for the transgression, it is not grandpa that is punished (at least not as far as we know, or the story recounts – and at least not in any manner pertaining to his livelihood), but the

victim that is, in effect, punished twice.

What it is to be White, then, is to be presented with a wholly ambiguous and untenable instruction: no intimacy between the races, and the most fundamental of intimacy between the races. It seems, by this instruction, that there is another kind of violence – a violence visited by whiteness upon white children themselves, such that they “... *tried to cling ... and kiss her goodbye*”, and in effect love her, but “*was not allowed to*”, and remained standing on a kitchen table, her “*world changed*” by the very system that defined her world.

## **CONCLUSION: UNDERSTANDING THE SPECIFICITIES OF WHITENESS IN SOUTH AFRICA.**

These stories of white life under apartheid underline a number of things. Among the many things they point to and illustrate, are structures and processes that went into the construction and embellishment of the powers and privileges of whiteness in South Africa. They show how being White got spelt out, fixed in place, supported, insinuated into daily life, and defended against other forms of racial being. At the same time, they show how such constructions are rife with contradictions, ambiguities, paradoxes, and the untenability of its artifice. They reveal some of the thoughts and feelings that went into making and inhabiting a South African whiteness, and help us understand the complex and nuanced specificities of whiteness in this society.

These complexities are often neglected, and it behoves us to pay closer attention. Hence, we have noted from the cases, the dynamics and tensions between essence and appearance, between the obvious and the secret, the natural and the cultural, and we have learned that it is not an easy and linear binary. Indeed, we find that even from within, whiteness is contested and ambiguous. In South Africa, like other colonies and other places, where to be White means power of one sort or another, there were some persons and families who may have experienced White life to be hard psychosocial work. It has been argued that this may be one place where the violence of some Whites against Blacks erupted from. But then the violence of apartheid can also be seen as attesting to the same; that having declared it a white country, but being so far away from the home of whiteness in Europe, and coupled with the origin of white South African nationhood in violent appropriation of black lands, the white colonial and apartheid leaders were often more uneasy with the troubling contingency of their identity claims (see Schech & Haggis, 2001). As has been said, great labour went into naming whiteness, segregating it from non-whiteness, purifying it, and making it *visibly* powerful and attractive (Ratele, 2009). But yet, these stories – especially the first set from the **Survey** – demonstrate clearly how this naming, which is to define the inside from the outside, and to patrol the borders of that naming against threat, falls apart from the beginning and is threatened as much from within as from without. By all the markers of that definition – essence, appearance, or even to “*live like a White*” – the border cannot sustain an absolute defence.

Some of the stories we have considered suggest that many Whites had to not only look White but to continually perform whiteness, to denigrate Blacks, to avoid kissing, befriending, or desiring them in order to secure their racial identities. The hard work of being White in Africa meant that the apartheid State, and technically white subjects, had to constantly “*talk White*”, as Steyn and Foster (2008) have parsed it. However, we must be clear that the performance of whiteness, of white racial identity more

specifically, entailed tortuous, agonising psychosocial processes that went towards authenticating and reaffirming one's identity. In truth, the stories – especially the second set from the AAP – reveal that the performance of whiteness involves violence. At one level this is clear as the violence against the black other, both interpersonally and structurally. But this is not only a violence of commission, but also of erasure and omission, of denial and refusal. Furthermore, the performance of whiteness suggests a violence that turns on itself, a woundedness from within whiteness, an *autoimmune disease* of sorts. The violence of whiteness is also to traumatise the witnessing White, by its complete demand that silences dissent and prevents desire and love. Maybe the telling of these stories in the AAP is one way for whiteness to *open its heart*, and find a new song in doing so, a sharing song, even.

## REFERENCES.

Apartheid Archive Project (2010) **About**. Accessed 21 October 2010. [http://www.apartheidarchive.org/site/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=4&Itemid=4](http://www.apartheidarchive.org/site/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4&Itemid=4)

Burr, V (1995) **An introduction to social constructionism**. London: Routledge.

Cooper, C, Motala, S, Shindler, J, McCaul, C, Ratsomo, T with contributions by Horrell, M & Streek, B (1984) **Survey of race relations survey in South Africa, 1983**. Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations.

Duncan, N (1993) **Discourses of racism**. Unpublished doctoral dissertation: University of the Western Cape, Bellville.

Durrheim, K (1997) Social constructionism, discourse, and psychology. **South African Journal of Psychology** 27(3), 175-182.

Dyer, R (1997) **White**. New York: Routledge.

Franchi, V & Swart, T M (2003) From apartheid to affirmative action: The use of "racial" markers in past, present and future articulations of identity among South African students. **International Journal of Intercultural Relations**, 27, 209-236.

Frankenberg, R (1993) **White women, race matters: The social construction of whiteness**. Minneapolis, MN: Jonathan Ball.

Green, M, Sonn C & Matsebula, J (2007) Reviewing whiteness: Theory, research and possibilities. **South African Journal of Psychology**, 37(3), 389-419.

Horrell, M (1963) **A survey of race relations survey in South Africa, 1962**. Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations.

Horrell, M (1967) **A survey of race relations survey in South Africa, 1966**. Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations.

Horrell, M (1970) **A survey of race relations survey in South Africa, 1969**. Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations.



Levett, A, Kottler, A, Burman, E & Parker, I (eds) (1997) **Culture, power and difference: Discourse analysis in South Africa**. London: Zed Books.

Martin, G & Durrheim, K (2006) Racial recruitment in post-apartheid South Africa: Dilemmas of private recruitment in recruitment agencies. **PINS (Psychology in Society)**, **33**, 1-15.

Meyer, I & Finchilescu, G (2006) The social dominance theory perspective on discrimination and prejudice, in Ratele, K (ed) (2006) **Inter-group relations. South African perspectives**. Cape Town: Juta.

Posel, D (2001) Race as common sense: Racial classification in twentieth-century South Africa. **African Studies Review**, **44(2)**, 81-113.

Ratele, K (2009) Sexuality as constitutive of whiteness in South Africa. **NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research**, **17(3)**, 158-174.

Schech, S & Haggis, J (2001) Migrancy, multiculturalism and whiteness: Re-charting core identities in Australia. **Communal/Plural**, **9(2)**, 143-159.

South African Institute of Race Relations (2010) **History of the Institute**. Accessed 21 October 2010. <http://www.sairr.org.za/profile/history>

Statistics South Africa (2008) **Income and expenditure of households 2005/2006: Analysis of results**. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.

Statistics South Africa (2010) **Quarterly Labour Force Survey Quarter 2, 2010**. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.

Stevens, G (2007) Tactical reversal or re-centring whiteness? A response to Green, Sonn, and Matsebula. **South African Journal of Psychology**, **37(3)**, 425-430.

Steyn, M (2001) **Whiteness just isn't what it used to be: White identity in the new South Africa**. Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press.

Steyn, M & Foster, D (2007) Repertoires for talking white: Resistant whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa. **Ethnic and Racial Studies**, **31(1)**, 25-51.

Union of South Africa (1950) **Population Registration Act (No 30 of 1950)**. Pretoria: Union of South Africa.