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Undoing whiteness: post-colonial identity and the unfinished

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Abstract

In this article, I engage in a discursive analysis of whiteness to examine how it influences postcolonial modes of self-styling. Critical whiteness studies often focuses on representations of whiteness in the West as well as on whiteness as physical—as white bodies and white people. I focus on representations and functions of whiteness outside of the West, particularly in relation to issues of belonging and modes of postcolonial identification. I examine Anglophone African literary representations of whiteness from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to query how whiteness both enables and undermines anticolonial consciousness. A central question I examine is, How does whiteness as a symbolic manifestation function to constitute postcolonial African identification? Scholarship on the topic of subjectivity and liberation needs to explicitly examine how whiteness intersects with key notions of modernity, such as race, class, progress, and self-determination.

Keywords

Anti-colonial, consciousness, whiteness, post-colonial.

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1. Introduction

Whiteness is a central inheritance of modernity—a dynamic, living watershed where beliefs, symbols, aspirations, and self-constituting and affiliated practices that reaffirm hierarchical systems of difference collect. In "Whiteness: An Introduction," Steve Garner explains that though "whiteness has been conceptualized over the century or so since it was first used as terror, systemic supremacy, absence/invisibility, norms, cultural capital, and contingent hierarchies," it has no consensual meaning (2). From a social sciences perspective, whiteness has emerged as a "problematic, or analytical perspective: that is, a way of formulating questions about social relations" (Garner 3). Recent interest in whiteness studies has focused on whiteness as a radicalized identification invested in white bodies, white communities, and white culture as a way to understand larger contemporary racial systems, typically in the United States and the European Union (Jensen 21).

This work also relates whiteness to the "hierarchical distribution of power and wealth" that occurs on a global scale (Jensen 23). A key question of this kind of work becomes "Why do white people hold onto themselves as white" (Jensen 25)? These investigations frame whiteness variably as a norm and a mode of superiority or supremacy. In "The Reproduction of Whiteness: Race and the Regulation of the Gendered Body," Alison Bailey and Jacquelyn Zita write, "A small number of philosophers, critical race theorists, postcolonial theorists, social historians, and cultural studies scholars have revisited and reexamined questions of race and identity with an analysis that now focuses on historical studies of racial formation and the deconstruction of whiteness as an unmarked privilege-granting category and system of dominance" (vii). The authors define whiteness as a cultural disposition and ideology held in place by specific political, social, moral, aesthetic, epistemic, metaphysical, economic, legal, and historical conditions, crafted to preserve white identity and relations of white supremacy (Mills 2003). In this way, whiteness studies is a conscious attempt to think critically about how white

supremacy continues to operate systemically, and sometimes unconsciously, as a global colonizing force.

2. Whiteness decolonization, and early cultural nationalist identification

In the1916 satire "The Blinkards A Comedy" Kobina Sekvi presents the tensions. inherent, in early. twentieth, century. Cape Coast elite identification Sekvi is considered the first, Anglophone playwright of the Gold Coast, region of West, Africa which. becomes part of the independent nation of Ghana in 1957, one vear after Sekvi's death The play presents two camps of characters those who eschew all things. African and try to imitate English practices in dress food speaking and courtship and those who live in accordance with African traditions

The characters in the play represent a sampling of working-class , middle-class and elite members of Cape Coast. society including a merchant a lawyer: a doctor: a cocoa magnate a policeman: fishermen main plot. revolves, around the relationships between. non-traveled aspiring local. elites. (Mr and Miss. Tsiba, and Mr Okadu) who go to the Western- educated elites. (Mr Onvimdze, and Mr and Mrs Borofosem) to learn to be. English, European, of white- terms used interchangeably to articulate what they want to learn from the insider-traveled elites each of which. has. his of her own analysis of and relationship. with English practices but. all. of whom are intimately interpolated by whiteness. For example Mr Tsiba brings his daughter Miss. Tsiba to visit Mrs Borofosem. so that she might "make. [Miss. Tsiba] behave like a white lady" (Sekvi "The Blinkards" 21). Mr Tsiba, implores. Mrs Borofosem to "teach her all the things you learm at London. I haye many cocoa land" he says " " want you to make her. English Then she will eat nice European things" (Sekvi "The Blinkards" 21). In its figurative conflation of (dignity access, progress), whiteness. refers to the representational strategies used to simultaneously, articulate the affiliative and economic. structures. that underpin. key ideological aims of modernity. (liberty human dignity and progress) as well as the crisis. of identification engendered by internalizing, a symbolic, system. that positions. one's. cultural traditions as inferior.

3. Unfinished whiteness: identification and performance in decolonizing literatures

As central literary trope and perhaps centrally defining human aspiration liberation-freedom-is. complex incorporating the fundamental dramatic tensions and pleasures of an engaging quest: the righteous projecten the eyil. oppressor the setbacks and fulfillment through the attainment of one's desire But what san literature have to tell us about how one can actually achieve this state? How do writers. represent liberatory consciousness? In the material world the twentieth century saw the attainment of national liberation in the British African empire from Egyptian independence in 1922 to the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1999, and the twenty-first century thus far has been rife with liberation struggles on the African continent most notably in the aftermath of continued Arab-Spring-influenced uprisings in places such as Algeria and Morocco.

In the guotes in the epigraph the authors. represent freedom somewhat abstractly as attainment of humanity: human dignity" of the internal aspirational space of self- reflection one can escape to within one's mind In this chapter *I*, will examine two kev novels of one of the great authors of contemporary African fiction Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o- his third novel A Grain of Wheat (1967) and his most recent novel Wizard of the Crown (2006)- to interrogate how representations of race and specifically whiteness function in the body of his fiction Is whiteness as a figurative complex with economic an aporia that both enables. and undermines the attainment of liberation not only on a national level. but also on the existential level. of personal transformation from oppressed to liberated?

Ngugis literary figure of white-ache provides key insights into how whiteness and the entangled logics. of domination and desire structure forms of postcolonial African subiectivity Through white-ache a fictional disease that investments. that structure practices. of postcolonial identification and suggests what is at stake in the unfinished project of decolonization-take for example the postcolonial setting of Wizard on the Crow in which black man appear to be in power and vet are subject to exigencies and inequities of the global market economy

4. Siphiwo mahala's white encounters

In his second published work African Delights published in 2011 , South African writer. Siphiwe. Mahala grapples with the "conundrums. presented by our particular historical moment" through four short stoty trilogies written from diverse points of view ("African Delights"). Many of the stories, are set, in and reflect upon the past, directly relating the author's aim to grapple with South Africa's. post-apartheid present, to the necessity. of contemplating the apartheid past. and its legacies . This move emphasizes the significance of memory and the centrality of the production of narratives about apartheid South Africa in the making and understanding of the new South Africa's post-apartheid present As such Mahala's invocation of the present tense presents. a. complex. entanglement of temporalities, in which the contemporary, historical moment itself indexes. both South Africa's apartheid past. and the new South Africa's emergent future Part two of African Delights White. Encounters contains three short, stories: "White. Encounters." "Bhontsi's. Toe" and "Hunger." The settings. of the stories, also. echo. this temporal entanglement as an element of the author's method that suggests, the radical force of the present moment to constitute the future by working on the past.

The first two stories in White Encounters grapple with the social and political contexts. and power relations of South Africa in the eighties a time in which. the methods of enforc-

ing. and resisting apartheid became increasingly violent The final. story moves forward in time to the nineties looking at intimate cross-racial relations two years. after. the implementation of democratic. rule in South Africa The stories present, the anxieties and challenges presented by. difference. and posit the affective possibilities of a politics. of entanglement to confront, and distupt, the legacies of apartheid's ideological use of white supremacy.

5. Memory and entanglement in post-apartheid literature

As a condition of the psycho-social self entanglement also. serves, as a meditation on the broader processes of belonging affiliation inclusion and exclusion After the soccer. game when the narrator's group of boys. emerge. from their rain. shelters, the narrator sees a flock of swallows flving overhead and thinks, They all. look, black I wonder, if the swallows. can, distinguish, their. friends, and relatives when they, all look the same If I were a swallow I would hate to mistake someone like Bhongo for my relative There must be good swallows and bad swallows (Mahala 88)

The narrator's thoughts here foreground an anxiety about the ability to apprehend. difference specifically with a larger concern for concentions of belonging and affiliation The narrator worries that one might not recognize an encounter with difference of danger because of a sense of identification This theme connects to a larger anxiety about color: its, ambivalence, as a signifier of difference belonging and affiliation: and perhaps its. ultimate inadequacy, as a way of classifying people represented in the child narrator's. suspicion that swallows must use-or at the very least, should use-a different indicator. The child's seemingly simplistic view allows for a deeper reflection on color and practices of identification Another example of the narrator grappling with the color caste system. and its. social meanings. comes at the beginning of the story when the narrator. notes,

6. Conclusion

Analysis of postcolonial African literatures leads to an understanding of what Steve Garner calls "the asymmetrical choices and relationships"—the power relations—that undergird processes of identification ("Whiteness: An Introduction" 9). The salience of racial identification— the powerful call for the I to be a we are perhaps an essential collective experience. As Richard Dyer argues in White, racial representation is central to the organization of the contemporary world. If the concept is productive is there a way to transform the epistemic domination of race as a hierarchical concept? Is there a way create modes of identification that honor our multiple inheritances, allow us to be together ethically, and also critically attend to modes of privilege and asymmetrical systems of power? The self as a relational concept that exists within specific locations and is structured through wider systems of oppression may not (should not?) go away.

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