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Mandisi Majavu

Uncommodified Blackness. The African Male Experience in Australia and New Zealand

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"It is OK to be white", a motion put by Pauline Hanson and the One Nation party claims in October 2018.[1] At the same time, 'The Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation' threatens to invade the critical academic discourse with its pro-'white' agenda,[2] and a senator blocks Australian Research Council grants for research into sociocultural and sociohistorical topics that were to examine, inter alia, issues of cultural and ethnic struggle.[3] While left-wing accounts criticize liberalism for this culmination of nationalist, outright racist instigations and propaganda, other groups see the cause for their day-to-day discriminatory experiences in an intensifying racist atmosphere in society. Amongst them are South-Sudanese Australians, who highlight the interweaving of "increased racialised crime reporting" and their immediate empirical knowledge of racist abuse.[4] Debates surrounding alleged African gang violence, in particular in Melbourne, and its media coverage are an ongoing debate in the outgoing year.[5] These occurrences make all the more evident the necessity of continuing the critical debate regarding the power and weight of 'whiteness' both in the discourse on Australian society and its everyday implementation in the lived experience of Australians.

A new perspective in this discourse is provided by Mandisi Majavu's *Uncommodified Blackness. The African Male Experience in Australia and New Zealand*. In eight chapters – with a "sensitivity to historical contest and political nuances" (12) – the author gives an account of the discrimination against Africans still prevalent 'down under'. He aims to defy the "theoretical silences in the works of white theorists", to oppose the repudiation of 'black scholarship' (23), and challenge assumptions reflecting "Eurocentric interpretations of African cultures as inherently sexist and oppressive" (25). Taking 'race' – "one of the central conceptual inventions of modernity" (11) – as a historical construct expressed in social action, Majavu applies David Theo Goldberg's definition of relational racisms to assess the ramifications of the colonial for the contemporary and to "show that racism still distributes advantages and privileges to whites, racism still pervades the exercise of political power, and in

1 Paul Karp: "'OK to be white'. Australian government senators condemn 'anti-white' racism", *The Guardian*, 15.10.2018.
2 Michael McGowan: "'Western tradition'. Ramsay Centre degree name change proposed in bid to win over academics", *The Guardian*, 16.10.2018.
3 Paul Karp: "'Knuckle-dragging philistines'. Labor targets Liberals for blocking arts grants", *The Guardian*, 26.10.2018.
4 Luke Henriques-Gomes: "South Sudanese-Australians report racial abuse intensified after 'African gangs' claims", *The Guardian*, 3.11.2018.
5 Sophie McNeill, Jeanavive McGregor, and Lucy Carter: "Media coverage of African offenders 'skewed', warns Melbourne chief judge", *ABC News*, 5.11.2018.

settler states like Australia and New Zealand, racism still shapes ideas about history, society and national identity" (11).

The *Introduction* lays out the background of the study, its methodological approach and theoretical goals by criticizing an "under-theorisation" (2) and narrowness in the discourse and the few studies available on the lived experience of Africans in the two countries. His relational analysis of 'whitening' commences with the British occupation. In the case of Australia, 'terra nullius' legitimated the expropriation of the Indigenous population; it also condoned genocidal actions involving colonial violence and the removal of Indigenous children – that is, biological and cultural 'whitening'. The ideology of 'White Australia' continues to inform the contemporary discourse because the "colonial objective to make Australia a white country and for white people still shapes the commonsense understanding of who belongs in Australia and who does not" (6). In New Zealand, where the Indigenous population was considered superior to the Indigenous Australians, disease and poor nutrition were outcomes of the British colonization and affected the decrease of Indigenous people. Here, too, an "unstated white immigrants only policy" (7) fostered immigration from European countries to 'whiten' society throughout the twentieth century.

In both countries a more (in Australia) or less (in New Zealand) explicit 'white only' immigration policy underlined the ideology of 'white supremacy' and aimed at creating a racially homogeneous society. 'Race' was firmly inscribed into everyday life, as part of personalities and institutions; 'whiteness' in the colonies enabled upward social mobility. Based on this ideology, for Majavu "all white people are complicit in larger social practices of racisms"; this was historically expressed "via a pseudo-scientific perspective" (9) and is perpetuated in the form of a 'white'-centred national self-image.

Following Goldberg, Majavu claims that there exists a "body of racist discourse that consists of evolving racist themes and changing racist presumptions, premises and representations", a "manifold of racisms" (9), and asserts that racism neither disappeared with the end of National Socialism or the termination of 'White Australia' nor is it a matter of 'overseas'. Referring to racism's origins in Enlightenment, "modern liberalism is inherently racist because liberalism and racism evolved together"; in other words, "whiteness is the unnamed socio-discursive order that has made the modern world as it is today" (11). Against the background of liberalism's historical association with 'white supremacy' and colonialism, its perpetuation of 'whiteness' functions as "ideals of colour-blindness, raceless world and culture" (39).

The methodology chapter *Conceptual Issues* expands on the utilization of the Africana Studies tradition to "disrupt[ ] the prevailing academic refugee discourse" and the continued association of Africans to a refugee background (15). "[I]nspired by Negritude" and its belief in a shared experience of "black people in the West" regarding racist discrimination (15), Majavu emphasizes the recognition of a common set of experiences in the 'black' diaspora "irrespective of nationality, class and gender" (16). It is based on the socio-historical construction of 'blackness' in Western cultures and the notion of 'white supremacy' as the implicit, underlying principle that resulted in modern race relations.

Majavu introduces his own theoretical concept: the 'uncommodified blackness image'. This targets the deconstruction of 'whiteness' imagining of a diasporic African and interrogates Western stereotypes that associate Africans with disease, pov-

erty and violent masculinity. 'Uncommodified blackness' is therefore the antithesis to 'blackness'. It was made "commodifiable in Western mainstream media and popular culture" through the aspiration for a 'white' ideal by "technologies of whiteness" (18) – expressed in bodily modifications, not least whitening creams, or in a 'destigmatising' of cultural elements, for instance hip-hop and basketball.

The theory chapter *The Genealogy and the Discursive Themes of the Uncommodified Blackness Image* further expands on the concept of 'uncommodified blackness' and its historical origins. Deconstructing the 'white' depiction of "African identity as the embodiment of warfare and the 'heart of darkness'" (29), it seeks to unveil the "racist infrahumanisation and the blatant racist dehumanization that Africans are subjected to in the West" (30). In Majavu's view, this dehumanization morally frames and allows a disrespectful, if not discriminating treatment of the concerned persons. The 'uncommodified blackness image' is based on, inter alia, Western traditions of simianization, racist defamation of African masculinity accompanied by a defeminization of African women, allegations of African backwardness with suspicions of 'black magic'.

From the earliest occurrences in the eighteenth century to contemporary reports about incidents during soccer games or costume parties, the trope of simianization continues to feed into the reception of 'the African' in Western societies. Added to this is the denigrating portrayal of African male sexuality; it, firstly, marks African men as deviant and, secondly, ascertains control over white women. The overemphasis on African men as "deviant, criminogenic, dangerous and fearsome" (34) informs a discourse of a threatening African male presence which, in turn, underlines the necessity of discipline and punishment in the case of (predominantly adolescent) African men. Moreover, the infrahumanization implicit in these discourses legitimises the dismissal of African viewpoints and necessities.

While African refugees as the "embodiment of poverty" (37) are considered the "worst social burden" (36) for European countries, their degrading portrayal fuels notions of European paternalism by perpetuating the trope of the 'white saviour'. Hence, in continuing the 'Othering' of Africans, the "category 'refugee' becomes a label of exclusion" (37) – marking the person as an outsider, an anomaly by emphasizing their 'not-belonging'. The discursive 'integration challenge' then serves as a euphemism for an ostensibly African cultural incompatibility and their pathologisation contributes to the discourse of contamination by declaring Africans carriers of disease.

The four core chapters apply the theoretical background to practice. The data analysis comprises interviews with eleven male participants aged 25 to 75 from Auckland and Melbourne (the cities with the largest number of Africans) who arrived from several African countries more than three years prior to the interviews via refugee programmes. *The Wizardry of Whiteness in White Australia* and *The Whiteness Regimes of Multiculturalism in Australia* discuss Majavu's project data for Australia. By means of four discussion strands in each chapter, the topics covered are 'being a refugee', 'personal encounters with racism and vicarious experience of racism', 'racist bullying', 'denial of racism', 'African masculinity', 'neighbourhood life', 'employment and workplace issues', and 'being Australian' (43, 59). These eight discursive topics are subsequently produced for the New Zealand context in *Technologies of the 'Kiwi' Selves* and *Africans on an 'English Farm in the Pacific'* (75, 93). In a comparative anal-

ysis, the *Conclusion: New Racism in Settler States* draws together the findings from Melbourne and Auckland and deduces general findings for the African experience down under.

As "Settler States of Whiteness" Australia and New Zealand entertain a discourse that "openly condemns discrimination" but subtly reproduces structures that sustain 'white normativity' (108) and, in more or less explicit ways, marginalise Africans. At the same time, 'race' continues to serve "as invisible borderline, demarcating who legitimately belongs or does not belong" (108). Discourses of multiculturalism and diversity deny "the existence of racism" (117); they serve as smokescreens to conceal that "racist infrahumanisation of Africans occurs within a discursive climate of multiculturalism" (111) and cover up the persistent strands of racist infrahumanisation. In a revision of causality, they furthermore serve as legitimations to hold Africans accountable for their socioeconomic status by transferring the blame for the failure of integration to their alleged lack of will and effort to integrate.

This, in turn, leads to the allegations that Africans are uneducated and apathetic and need to be led out of their 'misery' by white paternalism. The label 'refugee', which perpetually sticks to Africans from diverse migratory backgrounds, further emphasizes the derogatory image of Africans as poor, helpless and in need of guidance. They are fixed at an intermediate state: they are at the same time discredited as infantile and uneducated but also as overly physical and threatening. While the child stereotype devalues the African adult, the denial of youth and innocence to African youngsters and adolescents emphasizes their ascribed capabilities to hurt societal structures as criminal and subversive deviants. The 'African male experience' is furthermore shaped by shifting power relations within the private sphere: African men see their masculinity challenged by governmental stipulations and, against the background of idealised white masculinity, blame their anxiety on their women. In contrast to 'white' patriarchy – in Western societies commonly expressed in the public sphere – African men experience difficulties to assert themselves publicly; this is due to an inaccessible job market and the disparaging power of the "dehumanising image of uncommodified blackness" (121). 'Whiteness' asserts itself as the norm: prepared in school and perpetuated in everyday media representation, the image of the Africans is shaped by long-standing stereotypes that associate Africans with "violence, nescience, philistinism", poverty and lack of education (113). In this, "whites enjoy a deep, albeit largely unconscious sense of belonging" (115) that finds expression in questions regarding the 'real' origins of individuals.

The ostracizing of Africans constitutes a prolongation of the historical efforts to maintain Australia and New Zealand as racially homogeneous societies. While their "societal structures operate to exclude, inferiorise and Other Africans" (120) on a daily basis, the "twenty-first-century version of racism is invisible" (48) and, in a rather subtle manner, finds expression in "the celebration of whiteness" (54). In a society shaped by 'whiteness' as the norm, Africans are marked as "visible migrants" (71) and thus became the eternal epitome of the 'Other', the unsteadily, the newly arrived, the stereotyped and marginalised.

Mandisi Majavu's study provides a crucial and relevant insight into a lesser discussed facet of Australian racisms. However, the meticulous reader might be vexed by the overly redundant adduction of Kevin Andrews' denial of the African's immigration ability in at least four almost identical instances (35, 44, 53, and 58). Moreover,

the critical historian finds some weaknesses in the study's colonialistic derivation. While Majavu rightfully bases his theoretical analysis on the history of Western stereotypes, the assumption of an unbroken line of discrimination would have been challenged had the author considered some pertinent sources in his otherwise extensive literature corpus. For the Australian context, most of all the absence of Cassandra Pybus' *Black Founders* is unfortunate. Its findings are evidence of the blurriness of 'colour racism' in Botany Bay and could have forestalled that Majavu's initially presented recognition of a "manifold of racisms" (9) ultimately blur into a mere 'white'-versus-'black' juxtaposition. One of the participants of the interview claimed his Australianness on the fact that "the real Australians are black" (73) – regrettably, this assertion is not taken as an occasion to collapse the European-African antagonism in favour of a more complex dissection of 'blackness' in the Australian colonies.

Certainly, the racism of mainstream Australia has its origins in the sociocultural baggage of the first settlers, and, undoubtedly, 'whiteness' was formalized as a crucial characteristic of Australianness in the Commonwealth of Australia. Nevertheless, the boundaries of 'whiteness' even in the ranks of Europeans were far from clear-cut. Considering the experience of Southern Europeans until far into the twentieth century, the claim that "all Europeans were viewed as white in colonial settings" (8) is simplistic and inaccurate (not only) for the Australian context. It was moreover, the racialization of the English working class that led to a purging of its criminal elements to the penal colony New Holland. Looking at the history of the working class in Australia, it becomes obvious, that crucial efforts had to be made by the European workers to establish their 'whiteness'. During the formative period of the labour movement, the working class had to enforce the 'racist symbolic capital' (granted to their convict ancestors, inter alia, in the punitive expeditions and other attacks on Indigenous Australians) against their capitalistic bosses who preferred to recruit Asian immigrants at lower wages and were deemed 'race traitors' by the increasingly nationalist labour movement of the late nineteenth century.

However, these points of critique are rather meant to emphasize the malleability of 'whiteness' and its delimitations throughout the history of 'White Australia'. They should not diminish Majavu's findings concerning the lived experience of Africans in Australia and New Zealand nor should they discourage the reader from the perusal of an important insight into the historical origins and contemporary implications of the continued discriminatory processes in Australia (and New Zealand).[6]

6 A mayor annoyance – besides the prohibitive pricing of 40 Euro cents per page – not to be blamed on the author is the layout of the book. The abstract and the keywords at the beginning of each chapter make the book seem discerped, like a collection of essays. This is undoubtedly owed to the advance of online publication and eBooks that cater to the asinine idea that one could virtually root out an isolated chapter from any elaborate, consecutive, self-contained study.