“Race”[1], resentment and racism: transformation in South Africa

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Abstract:
Over centuries, a particular “racial” regime emerged in which “race” came to be bound up with class. While the meaning of “race” was fluid over time, once apartheid was firmly entrenched, officially prescribed “racial” categories divided the country’s society. After apartheid, “black” and “white” people continue to live together in a democratic society in which all have equal rights and duties, notwithstanding their “race”. However, the terms of reconciliation and what is required to live together is contested. From a qualitative perspective, this paper analyses how “black” people in South Africa strive to overcome and ressignify the marks of a history of repression and “racial” marginalization. We will follow the trajectory of Mpho, a “black” woman, with the objective to reflect on how the intersection of “race” and gender involves situations of negociation, cohersion, ressentment and refusal. In her narrative of the self, Mpho, explains how feelings of injustice about past discrimination, racism, and violence affect her co-habitation with “white” people. While there are points of entanglement, the legacy of past discrimination looms large and renders living together fraught with difficulties. The paper discusses how some individuals reorganize their network of sociability in post-apartheid South Africa with a focus on the “field of possibilities” available for different “racial” groups.

Key Words:.

Reconciliation, ressentment, race, racism, gender, Johannesburg, South Africa

Introduction

After World War II, the South African state and how it managed its diverse population resisted the global tide that was to concede more self-rule and ultimately independence to colonized

[1] A note on nomenclature: the usage of ‘‘white’’ and ‘‘black’’ in reference to “race” and ‘‘racial’’ characteristics is not an endorsement of such classification. It rather points to the continued relevance in everyday usage and legislation in South Africa. They are written in quotation marks to indicate that they are not conceived of as authentic group categories.

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people across the globe. When "white" South Africans elected in 1948 a National Party government, the people who rose to power were sympathetic to the Nazi cause and decided to entrench white supremacy, one of the features of Nazism. In the following decades, apartheid, a system of laws and policies to ensure white dominance and "racial" segregation, were consolidated and maintained only to be abolished in 1994 in the first truly democratic elections. It would nonetheless be a mistake to attribute the turn to apartheid uniquely to the individuals who led the victorious party without considering the historical precursors, the social relations, which rendered "white" rule and the enforcement of "racial" policies possible. Ever since "white" Europeans settled at the Southern tip of the African continent in the 16th century, the process of racial formation, confrontation, and exclusion began to take shape. It was not a linear process, one single movement that led the colonial intruders to take over the territory and subjugate its inhabitants. Rather, protracted struggles over land and power ensued, during which the meaning of "race" went through shifts and modifications. After the end of apartheid, this process of "racial" formation continues to create new meanings of "race".

The Emergence of the South African "Racial" Order

Historical debates about the role of the frontier in the 18th and 19th century, the moving border region between colonial settlers and the indigenous African people indicate how complex the various processes of "racial" formation were. While a dominant strand among 19th century historians solely attributed colonial racism and white supremacy to an attitude that developed among "white" farmers on the frontier, later research held that "racial" relationships were rather forged in the entire colonial society, not just at the frontier, and included an inheritance from Europe and responded to the exigencies of ever-changing situations in the territories (Legassick, 1980: 68). Trade and war, cooperation and conflict alternated, and while racism played a role in the process, "factors of comparative power" were at least as important (Legassick, 1980: 65).

According to Herman Giliomee, the meaning of "racial" and social identity was marked by fluidity on the frontier. Although he detects an increasing "racial" rigidity as the conflict between "white" settlers, African tribes, and other groups of various "racial" and social composition that lived on the frontier dragged on, "racial" stratification did not only depend on European "racial" and ethnic perception. Rather, there were status groups "with varying ranks on the social scale" (Giliomee, 1979: 457), but movement between racial groups was small in scale. Overall, conflict was pervasive which rendered negotiations and the finding of solutions more difficult because it had "race" and class dimensions (Giliomee, 1979: 461).

After military conquest, settler farmers and the South African state, by introducing capitalist farming, displaced systematically indigenous populations (Beinart and Delius, 1986: 33). Subjugation and incorporation into the capitalist economy went together. Independent African groups were dispossessed and forced into labour (Keegan, 1986: 247). Particular labour regimes emerged in which specific "racial" and ethnic groups were encountered in specific occupations. In the late 19th century emerging urban centre of Johannesburg, for instances, cab driver organisations were formed by European Jews and collaboration with other ethnicities and "races" who occupied the same trade was strenuous (Van Onselen, 1982). Segregation, territorial and political, became a policy that was entrenched in the 1920s and 1930s. The exclusion of "black" people also meant support for "white" farmers, the protection of "white" urban workers and the support of poor "white" people (Giliomee, 203: 312). Territorial boundaries between "black" and "white", however, were not definite. Africans moved to the cities to seek a living. Over the course of the 20th century, this movement would swell and was eventually an important contributing factor that brought apartheid separation to heel. Economic and social conditions created a common society that no political interference could undo in the long run. Apartheid laws were not enforceable and those who were subjected to them resisted

with different strategies.

Apartheid and its Aftermath

With the implementation of the 1950 Population Registration Act, which divided the population into four "racial" groups, namely European, Asian, coloured and native[7], the government set up the foundations of a system based on "racial" division. This particular Act facilitated the construction of a separate society, governed by different and multiple rules giving different rights and obligations according to the colour of one's skin. From 1952 onwards, "the state was legally entitled to exercise vast powers over African movement, residence and employment" (Posel, 1991: 116). The pass laws were extended to include any African individual over the age of 16. Moreover, the creation of resettlement boards, which could remove Africans from zones where they were undesirable, and the implementation of the 1950 Group Areas Act, which carefully delimited the areas in which each "racial" group was allowed to live, led to a further protection of the "white" - only spaces and a more powerful control of the populations' movements. As Steyn explains, "people were socialized into what was regarded as the appropriate social space for them and material and resources were articulated accordingly" (Steyn, 2001b: 88).

Only "white" people could occupy city centres as well as some of the suburbs. Indians and Coloureds were allocated specific spaces around the cities while Africans inhabited further locations called townships.[8] Many African people who left their homes to go to work in the cities were accommodated in single-sex hostels in the townships (Guillaume, 2001), having to

[7] The term 'natives' referred to African people in general, with no socio-cultural distinctions. It is now considered a derogatory word.

[8] This classification of population groups into white, Indian, coloured, and African originates in apartheid legislation.

leave their families behind. Family separations also existed among farm workers in the rural areas.

Since the first democratic elections in 1994, it was as if South Africa was suddenly a multicultural society, a mixed society with people of a myriad of origins, all endowed with equal rights, freedom of association and freedom of movement. People who were taught through political, social, and economic structures that they should live apart were now “willingly or unwillingly, successfully or unsuccessfully,... engaged in one of the most profound collective psychological adjustments happening in the contemporary world” (Steyn, 2001a: p.xxi). The abolition of the apartheid regime allowed the possibility of access to spaces notwithstanding “racial’ origin and to challenge established boundaries of reified notions of identities.

In spite of the early abolition of the Immorality Act and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriage Act, “the frequency of interracial contact and cooperation has increased slowly” (Amatoeng *et al.*, 2004: 444). The study conducted by Amatoeng *et al* underlines that, as opposed to the belief that the smaller the group is the more chance there is for the group members to find partners outside of their group, “white” people or Indians extremely rarely go to find partners outside of their groups. In fact, South Africans’ relationships are mainly based on social constraints (Amatoeng *et al,* 2004: 455). The same applies to education which does not seem to have any impact on the way South Africans’ relationships are built (Amatoeng *et al,* 2005:456). The study showed that exogamy rate is higher among linguistic groups, especially among “black” people. They further analyze this statement through the observation that “some of the linguistic groups are more closely related than racial groups” (Amatoeng *et al,* 2004: 456).

The above describes a general overview of how “race” relations had developed across South Africa. However, regional differences however, particularly between rural areas and urban centres are considerable. In rural areas, “racial” segregation has often survived in spite of the advent of democracy. Moreover, over decades, town planners, acting on behalf of the (“white”) urban elites, have designed cities according to their needs and geographies. In the “white” city centres across South Africa, with its modern buildings and shopping facilities, and its opulent neighbourhood suburbs, sprinkled with large villas with gardens, people lived “an extremely ethnocentric existence largely unaware of the lives of others” (Steyn, 2001b: 90). On the periphery of the “white” city, in order to ensure segregation, apartheid designers placed the township with its hostels, its vast numbers of small houses (matchboxes[9]), and its endless apparent homogeneity similar to a prison. This links adequately to Foucault’s understanding of urbanization, developed in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), as a structure creating and sustaining a hierarchy of power. Discipline is enforced through the imposition of concise forms of dehumanization in a closed space separated from the town with minimal norms of urbanism and social life, aiming at maintaining just enough possibilities to reproduce the work force. Guillaume analyses how the landscape was designed to exclude people from their urban and human status and how it served as “a tool for the domination and exclusion of the African population” (2001: 37). Private space is confined to the house. Most of the small yard around the house is occupied by backyard shacks (*zozo*) where a family, related or not to the one living in the main house, lives. This hardship finds its climax in the hostel life which is described in Ramphele’s *A Bed Called Home*. In hostels, the bed is the element structuring the life and the identity of the workers. Thousands of men share few toilets and showers, sometimes without doors. Due to inadequate transport as well as its cost, the lack of public spaces, the lack of services and general deprivation, the township also created poverty and forms of violence. In

[9] African people called matchbox houses the one-bedroom houses built for them by the apartheid regime.

these spaces, not conceived for people to develop individual expression and life, township social identities and culture developed.

The mid 1970s registered the first loosening of the Group Areas Act leading to the settlement of Coloured and Indian families in the "white" city (Morris.1999)[10]. By the early 1990s, after the abolition of the Group Areas Act, the occupation of the centre of the city changed. Large numbers of African people moved from surrounding townships to the city. Corporate and institutional buildings and shops were abandoned by its "white" occupants in the areas of Braamfontein, Hillbrow and the Central Business District, previously occupied by "whites". By 1993, apartment dwellers in Hillbrow were mainly African (62%) with a minority of 'coloured' (22%) and 'white' (16%) modifying leisure ambiance and socio-cultural composition with the appearance of mixed premises (Morris, 1999). According to Mbembe (2004: 391) this influx expressed an attempt to acquire urban citizenship and to climb the social ladder. By the end of the 1990s, Hillbrow was a cosmopolitan neighbourhood, with many inhabitants originating from the entire African continent and Yeoville turned into an 'interracial' leisure and nightlife area.

Today, Johannesburg is a young city with 42% of the population under the age of 24. However, a high number of youth is excluded from access to education, health and work. Youth life is framed in a context of one of the most unequal income distributions in the world, aggravated by "racial" inequities. Thus, urban youth culture developed as the result of a continuous process of discontinuity and tensions, that of poverty, unemployment, structural violence, socio-economical and cultural instability. The lack of formal alternatives throws youth into all sorts of informal subsistence strategies. Family ties, although extremely important, do not always manage to guarantee a secure life and do not give an adequate cultural and social reference to a

[10] While in the first six months of 1979 criminal charge against about 600 individuals were brought to court for transgressing the segregation policies, in 1981 only three cases occurred (Morris. 1999).

youth in search of its own identity while negotiating with conflicting values and behaviours. In Johannesburg, most of the households (66%) are headed by one person only indicating the absence of support of both parents for most young people.

In the face of the inequalities that are still running to a large extent along “racial” lines, even though the gap amongst poor and rich “black” people is widening, reconciliation and peaceful co-existence between “white” and “black” has been elevated to state-doctrine. Dumisa Ntsebeza, who was head of the investigations unit of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, argues that its work failed to promote reconciliation not only between perpetrator and victim, but also between mostly “white” beneficiaries and mostly “black” victims (Bell, 2003: 349). Financial reparations eventually granted by the state for those who were deemed victims were minimal, while those who had committed and were guilty of terrible crimes received amnesty. In addition, “white” business that thrived during apartheid was never held to account. For Ntsebeza then, “the impression has been created that the TRC process was actually lenient towards perpetrators and has been disrespectful and unkind to victims and survivors” (Bell, 2003: 348). This is a grievance that is being raised more often and more vocal over the past years. In contrast, during the Mandela years, a conscious effort was made to conciliate and not to the question the principle of reconciliation and peaceful co-existence. The observation made here, that the living together of “black” and “white” people is based on an injustice, is a dominant thread in the narrative of Mpho, a young woman, which is analyzed below. While “black” people have forgiven, “white” people benefited from apartheid and continue to do so without remorse. While this view, based on a past that separates “black” and “white” people, changes in social and economic conditions create new identities that are also bound up, or entangled, as Sarah Nuttall suggests, with “white” or European ways of being.

How “Race” is Lived: One “Black” Woman Relates Her Experience

After having established the background of historical “race” making in South Africa, this essay is now looking how perceptions of “race” and identity have developed in the post-apartheid period. This analysis of the narrative of the self of Mpho does not claim to be a representation of all views of “black” South Africans. Rather, as is the case with testimony in general, her narrative offer insights into how “race” is lived by the individual.

Mpho is the pseudonym given to a 20 years old, “black” woman who grew up in Sebokeng township, by Vereeniging, in the south-west of Johannesburg. At the time of the interview in 2007, she was a 2nd year media student at the University of the Witwatersrand. She was born in 1987 - two years after grand apartheid had been abolished. Her father died soon after her birth and she grew up and still lives today with her mother, a teacher in Sebokeng. Also staying with them is her five years older sister who is in the final year studying towards a law degree at the University of Potchefstroom.

Speaking about the place where she grew up, Mpho says:

> I’m from Vereeniging,.. a small town, very racist, very Afrikaans… I think one thing that really stands out about Vereeniging [is that it is] .. very racist, very backward, and a very primitive town..

In the face of the racism that she encounters in her place of birth, Mpho refers to the sense of community among “black” people that helped them to overcome hardship and find solace and entertainment in their company.

> You know how black people are all about community and being together.. and having fun and laughing all the time, or maybe not laughing, but just having fun.. helping out, I mean the worse situation would be turned into the best times, I mean there would be times when the electricity would be turned off you know, so the whole location is in complete darkness, and we the kids would be like “YEEEEEEEE! Let’s go out in the streets.

This overcoming of hardship also contributed to forging what it meant to be "black" as opposed to "white". Today, this common experience of oppression also serves to distinguish "black" South Africans from other "black" Africans. "Black" identity is in this sense tied to a specific place and history. However, class differences intersected with a common, "black" identity. Relatively small material privileges, such as a healthy lunch-box, would be noticed and would have consequences for friendship among children.

> So if for lunch at school my mom would give me a packet of sweets, a packet of chips and a juice and an apple, the kids at school, like if I opened my lunch box at lunch, the kids at school wouldn't play with me just because they didn't have the same thing. So, I would go through periods of not having friends just because the kids would think that I was better than the others.

Another indicator of class differences is how well one speaks English. The mastery of good English language skills distinguishes "black" children in school. With her good English language skills, Mpho could fit in very well with "white" children, but she would loose friendship with other "black" children who felt that she no longer belonged to them.

> Another thing was that my English was actually quite good, it was a lot more advanced than many of the other black kids that had come into the school, so again because of that I was ostracised and I was alienated from all the other black kids, 'cause I thought I was better, because I could speak English better, I was passing very well. So I didn't have a lot of friends.

Also, her reference to "passing" is important. "Passing" usually refers to "black" people who have a light skin tone and how they can "pass" as "white" people. Here, it is perhaps better to think of it as fitting in with a "white" environment and "white" people. For some, to speak English well then means to desert one's "black" identity, to fit in with "white" people and belonging to the middle and upper class.

What Mpho did learn in school about the history of the country did not match the political situation of the build-up towards the first democratic election in 1994, and how she and her

community's experience of relations between "black" and "white" people.

> [A]t grade 4 or 5 you start getting geography, history or whatever so that's when the social situation or the social context comes into play you know.. And, I think thinking about it in retrospect, the school that I went to was actually quite racist. This history in Primary School was very washed and it was very brain washed, and it made white people seem like they were OK, and as a black person, or a black child, I think I could recognise that there were issues with white people but at the time, it seems like "ah no, white people are not that bad. There were issues because of their forefathers.. this and this and that". But, so.. that's when I realised the social situation. So I kind of kept my distance from white people slightly, but I mean I had one or two white friends still.

The above passage indicates that she felt resentment when the school teachers presented a history of apartheid that was at odds with her own experience and that of her family and community. It made her pause and take even a distance from her "white" fellow pupils. In primary school, Mpho had a best friend, an Irish girl, at whose home she used to spend the night at times for sleep-overs. However, the Irish girl never came to sleep at her home, in Sebokeng. Mpho reasons that this was probably due to the manipulations by her friend's mother, making sure her daughter did not go on a sleep-over to the "black" township.

> I]t was never a question of like coming to my house. We just didn't bother about it. I think because we were kids, but probably there was some manipulation on her parents' side also you know.. Concern and things like that. Ah… I'm sure we must have talked about it, but for some reason it just never materialised.. So.. that was primary school.

A few years later, in High School, she had "black" friends in school and she became more aware of "race" and racism. When competing for a job, she was told that she could not be hired because she was "black".

> "Then at High School I kind of found my footing, I had the black friends. Everything kind of came into play, I mean not everything came into play, but I learnt more about myself, and I learnt about the black person that I am. That's when I became more aware of the social situation around me and that's when you start feeling discrimination, and the racism and prejudices that are going on. Like when I was 16 I tried to get my first job, but I

> couldn't get it because I was black. I was trying to waitress and my boss said to me "No I can't let you waitress 'cause my customers are predominantly white and don't want to be served food by a black person" you know.. Things like that .. Walking in a shopping mall and a white person would just push the trolley into you just because they don't like you, 'cause you're black.. things like that.. And.. ja, that was the kind of social situation around Vereeniging. And then we moved to town, to a very white area.."

Moving into a "white" neighbourhood meant increased status for her, her sister, and her mother. At the same time, it was also deemed safer for the three women household to live in the "white" neighbourhood than in the "black" location where anyone could jump over the fence of their property. As they were living among "white' people, she took on characteristics that were not "black".

> My mom has always tried to make things better for us you know. And in a small town like Vereeniging, life being better in about accumulating capital and, moving to town and having the cars, and just getting status basically. And status means that you move into town and showing everyone else that you can afford to do this and afford to do that, and afford to live there, and afford to drive that, sort of thing. It was just something that my mom had always wanted to do and, another reason was safety.. Sebokeng was not the safest area to live in, considering the fact that we were three females living in a house, and our house was – we had a fence, but it was a fence that people could jump over easily. So that's why we left."

Mpho does not relate well to her "white" neighbors. She deems them hypocritical in that they feign to be friendly but in fact disdain her and her family.

> Or if they're standing with their family, their other white family, they won't wave at us.. if it's just them alone then they'll wave.. "no no no, we don't know black people" sort of thing.. So I think.. I don't know, I hate it, I think it's so hypocritical, so superficial. If you're going to wave, wave, if not leave it. So I just generally kind of reserve myself to not waving either way – and my mom is just like "Wena – say hello", "No, I'm not going to greet those people. I must greet them when they feel like greeting", I just leave them like that.

She experienced racism more directly when she was working at a restaurant in Vereeinigeng. She was working as a hostess at a diner when she was asked to work as a waitress. However, her

boss explained to her why she could not continue in that position.

> But I have to just say one thing: when that man complained, I could understand why he was complaining, 'cause he is one of my regular costumers and he's very Afrikaans and he's very conservative or whatever and he's one of the costumer that say that don't want to be served by black people because of whatever reason they've made up in their head.

Reflecting on the time of the transition, she remembers that things changed only slowly at her school. Despite the democratic elections of 1994, the ceremonial practices of her formerly "white" only school changed slowly.

> But throughout all seven years of my primary school we would still sing the Afrikaans National Anthem. Can you imagine? We would still sing the Afrikaans National Anthem, which was like.. hum?! 'Cause that stuff should have been completely demolished, but it was still around for some odd reason. Ya! Very small, very quaint, very primitive, very backward school. Afrikaans to quite a large extent. Afrikaans was the second language that we had to learn.

Mpho remembers that "racial" confrontations at her dominantly "white" school was, besides corporal punishment, the worst experience of her school days.

> There was a lot of racism, but I didn't personally experience it from school mates or class mates, that I was around you know. There were stories of a white boy beating up a black boy because he said this and this and this and that; a black guy went and beat-up a white boy, because of whatever reasons you know. I think there were also a lot of issues even between the other cultures, like the Indian and the coloured people, because derogative terms such as Kaffir[11], calling each other Kaffir; like the Indian people would call us Kaffir, we would call them Coolie[12], which is also derogative. And the coloured people would call us Kaffir and we would call them bush monkey, you know!

When it comes to dealing with the past, she feels that the notion of the rainbow nation, that unites "black" and "white", is too idealistic and does not reflect the true nature of how people relate to each other.

> I took History – I think that's one thing that shaped me about my mind set in terms of race and what not, or specially race. We were learning about South African History; there was the one forum where we actually got to discuss our issues and history and we got in-depth

[11] 'Kaffir' is a derogatory term for "black" people roughly equivalent to the North American 'nigger'.
[12] 'Coolie' is a derogatory term for people of Indian descent.

> about how all of this started and who was actually first in Africa and how black people were treated, and how black people took part in the civil wars and this is what they got, the Pass Laws and all of that and.. that's kind of where you are given the broad spectrum of what is happening, and you can see it in your life as well as in the place that you're living in. But once you get out of that sphere of the class room then, it's forgotten. Like you only share it with the people that you study History with, or the people that you have debates with. But once you get out of the classroom it gets blown away, it just completely disappears, 'cause you just look past each other, and everyone acts like.. not challenging, we're still conforming, and no one is arguing with anyone else, 'cause "there is no such thing – We're a happy Rainbow Nation! And all of that bullshit!!" you know.

That there is unfinished business when it comes to relations between "black" and "white", Mpho illustrates this with an example of her mother and how her attitude changed when she was addressing "white" people. She remembers how her mother interacted with a "white" bank teller.

> But if I'm going with mom – I don't know I think it's something that is intrinsically inside her just to be respectful and humble, because she [the teller] is white, even her body changes, and her shoulders – you know, my mom has got a gorgeous figure, she walks proud and whatever – but the minute she talks to someone white, she just becomes this little, like the shoulders go down.

She explains why she finds the living together of "black" and "white" people difficult.

> It's not that it plays a big role, but it's just the mindset that I have. I don't think that I would ever date someone of another colour to me, or someone of another race to me, because I think as much as I can make friends with people of other races and we can communicate on any level, and we're just on top of the world or whatever, I don't think that in a relationship where things get so interconnected and so entangled – that you can, on every single level connect with someone of another race. I think it's just something that is very hard to pass.

For Mpho then, what separates "black" and "white" people is so profound that it cannot be mended, not even in an intimate relationship. What seems to stand in the way of such a close relationship to "white" people is the experience of racism, discrimination, violence, and suffering that Mpho is telling above. The official story of reconciliation has imposed a silence against articulating misgivings and discomfort about this official story and reflects the past, repressive apartheid society (Hamber, [?]) whose legacy is not being addressed, or only

incompletely and hesitantly, as Mpho explains. Clearly, Mpho has not overcome “race” when talking about her life; rather, “race” and racism take centre stage when recounting specific, confrontational events in her life (Kgometsi, 2008: 119). A confrontation in school, which she remembers as a “racial” confrontation, is one of the worst experiences of her days in school.

Conclusion

In South Africa, over centuries, a particular “racial” regime emerged in which “race” came to be bound up with class. While the meaning of “race” was fluid over time, once apartheid was firmly entrenched, officially prescribed “racial” categories divided the country’s society. After apartheid, “black” and “white” people continue to live together in a democratic society in which all have equal rights and duties, notwithstanding their “race”. However, the terms of reconciliation and what is required to live together is contested. In her narrative of the self, Mpho, a “black” South African woman, explains how feelings of injustice about past discrimination, racism, and violence affect her co-habitation with “white” people. While there are points of entanglement, the legacy of past discrimination looms large and renders living together fraught with difficulties.

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