

12

BECOMING-MINORITARIAN

Constructions of coloured identities in creative writing projects at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa

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Bereft as they are of a prelapsarian (that is, precolonial) or European past, coloureds are completely grounded in South Africa. Unlike the autochthonous Africans, they belong only to the site of that first encounter between the colonizer and the colonized. . . . Unlike the European colonialists, they are rooted in this part of Africa, without connections to the metropole. . . . Paradoxical as it might seem, it is not surprising that these quintessential “South Africans” have not had their national identity endorsed either by whites or by blacks, nor have they themselves embraced it; marginality has been accepted, transformed into the dominant coloured subject position, as much as it has been imposed from without. Hybridity is a sign of difference, of racial, cultural, and ideological impurity; a marker of alienation, hybridity is not read as a measure of integration into (and centrality to) the nation. . . . Racial impurity does not so much disqualify as it signifies a perpetual symbolic disenfranchisement, a marginalization that cannot be transcended. No South African community is better versed in the vagaries and contradictions of the politics of the impure than coloureds.

(Farred, *G Midfielder's Moment* 8)

He was a milk and coffee man in a milk and coffee world.
He was both and neither, too mixed to be either.
He was too milk to live a coffee life.
Coffee knew only black bitterness.

. . .

He was too coffee to live a milk life.
Milk in tall white holders.
The milk coffee man lived a milk coffee life.
The cup was short with chips but had no holes.
And life was sweet as Canderel.

(Williams, S. “Milk and Coffee” 46)

The epigraphs to this chapter, the one taken from a scholarly work by Grant Farred, a University of the Western Cape (UWC) alumnus and now Professor of Africana Studies and English at Cornell University, and the second a poem by Shirwileta Williams, a recent creative writing student in the English Department at UWC, underscore the deep and proliferating paradoxes out of which coloured identity is conceived. “Coloured” in the context of South African apartheid racial classification and sociocultural lived experience means something different to the use of “coloured” internationally and in the United States in particular. “Coloured,” used as it is by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in *Colored People*, a memoir for his daughters whom he suspects in their lifetime will go from identifying as “African Americans, to ‘people of color,’ to being, once again ‘colored people’” (xvi), refers to any person of any degree of black African descent. In the South African context, a concise definition is hard, as we shall see, given the complexities of the historical, political, social and cultural constructions (and their constant transformation) that form the alembic out of which coloured identity comes into amorphous but persistent being.

A sociopolitical history of South African coloured identity

The salient features of this most shape-shifting of South African cultural identities as outlined by Mohamed Adhikari, doyen of the study of coloured history, politics and identity, include the following: First, coloured identity is culturally marginal in popular conceptions; second, it is an identity strongly associated with Western culture “in opposition to African equivalents”, but which, in a racist South Africa, was largely repudiated by white, European culture; and, third, it is an identity that, in racial terms, is intermediate, winning it advantages and disadvantages in relation to the black-white racial polarities between which it gets constituted. Racial intermediacy grants the bearers of coloured identity an affiliation with dominant white culture which, paradoxically, by the same racial thinking, is conceptualised as miscegenation where “racial mixture” is considered to be “pejorative” and will lead to “degeneration and weakness” (Adhikari, *Burdened by Race* viii). Adhikari adduces evidence of the racist belief in black communities also that coloured people are “mixed-breeds” without a cultural or national identity (Adhikari, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough* 24). Thus, coloured identity is constituted not as purity and “fullness” but as taint and “lack” between polarised black and white identities, which are conceived as racially and culturally unadulterated. Adhikari tracks the origins of the conception of coloured identity to the early period of Dutch rule of the Cape, with a clearer sense of cultural community arising in the period of British colonisation “after the emancipation of the Khoisan in 1828, and other slaves in 1838 . . . [where] various components of the heterogeneous black laboring class in the Cape Colony started integrating more rapidly and developing an incipient shared identity” (Adhikari, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough* 2). The Khoisan are an autochthonous Southern African ethnicity, a “first people” contrasted with other Bantu-speaking groups that historically migrated southward from central Africa.

Coloured identity is consolidated, however, in the period after large-scale mining of gold and diamonds transformed the South African economic landscape generally, resulting in large numbers of black African people moving to the Western Cape from the 1870s. As Adhikari observes, “[t]hese developments drove acculturated colonial blacks [in the Cape] to assert a separate identity as Coloured people, in order to claim a position of relative privilege in relation to [incoming] Africans on the basis of their closer assimilation to Western culture and being partly descended from European colonists” (*Not White Enough, Not Black Enough* 3). Thus coloured identity is an identity that in its origins and in various historical periods is claimed by its bearers.

Fluid constructions of identity from below, as it were, in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century became rigidly defined in the context of apartheid social

engineering after 1948, when a raft of racist legislation effected an imposition of racial identities from above. Most significant was the Population Registration Act of 1950 (and its various subsequent and very complicated and confusing amendments) that sought to classify all South Africans according to apartheid categorisations of race, namely (in order of hierarchy) White, Coloured and Black, to which other subcategories were later added as needed, including, in racist desperation, Chinese South Africans as coloured. This period saw phenotypically white coloured people abandoning their darker-skinned kin to be legally classified white – with the attendant privileges – and a small minority of black African people seeking to be classified coloured. People of Indian descent also, mainly in the Cape, tried to be classified coloured in order to continue to live and trade in mixed areas. The former move, where coloured people “played white”, is the popularly more familiar one and the one that is fictionally explored in Zoë Wicomb’s novel, *Playing in the Light*, and in Rayda Jacobs’s short story collection, *The Middle Children*. “Coloured” thus, in the apartheid period, was a “catch-all” categorisation into which anyone who did not fit one of the other more clearly defined groups was slotted. People from the same family, connected by blood, could thus end up being differently classified by phenotype and cultural association. Coloured identity was also significantly impacted by the Group Areas Act, also of 1950, which attempted geographically to separate a racially classified population (Trotter, Field). The romantic idealisation of District 6, a poor, crime-ridden slum near central Cape Town (Adhikari *Not White Enough* 118) but an area which was also vibrant, multicultural and open, both in the popular imagination and in literature, has been central to the constitution of coloured identity (Soudien). Fiction which has celebrated District 6 and has memorialised the displacement of its residents to various coloured townships on the Cape Flats includes Richard Rive’s “*Buckingham Palace*”, *District Six*, Alex la Guma’s *A Walk in the Night and Other Stories* and Rozena Maart’s *Rosa’s District 6*.

Viscerally responding to crude apartheid racism and capitalism, the concept of “coloured” became contentious in the twentieth century. From the mid-1930s, many coloured people and coloured political organisations consciously identified with a universal humanism, which, in the later 1970s context of heightened anti-apartheid resistance, was subsumed into the identification “black” that forged political unity across racially divided groups. Intellectual, educationist and one-time political prisoner on Robben Island, the late Neville Alexander was one of the most significant rejectionists of all racial classifications, especially the label “Coloured” applied to him based on his appearance, as he anecdotally recounts in the collection of essays, *Thoughts on the New South Africa* (159). He suggests that redress in the post-Apartheid “rainbow nation” has paradoxically entrenched racial thinking and that the “rainbow metaphor[s] . . . emphasis on coexisting colour groups . . . reinforces beliefs in racial categories” (130). Alexander’s conviction that class identity is more significant than cultural identity is a position that was, and continues to be, widely held pre- and after the end of formal apartheid.

But coloured identity has been contested from non-Marxist positions also, related centrally to the question of (and questioning of) shame. Professor of sociology Zimitri Erasmus confirms the social position of coloured identity determined by hierarchical racial architecture: “For me, growing up coloured meant knowing that I was *not only* not white, but *less than white*; *not only* not black, but *better than black*” (13). Coloured identity is riven, furthermore, by two consequences of “miscegenation” to which racial conceptualisations lead. The one is the idea of “lack” in relation to “pure” races, referred to earlier; the other is the gendered notion of (sexual) shame attached to coloured identity. Erasmus recalls the expressions she often heard growing up: “*Hou jou linne binne* (Keep your linen hidden). *Hou jou koek in jou broek* (Keep your fanny in your panties). *Vroeg ryp, Vroeg vrot* (Early to ripen, early to rot)”, which “stipulate[d] the bounds of sexual behaviour for young coloured women” (13). The South African language, Afrikaans,

to whose vivid expressions Erasmus refers, with sources in Dutch, Khoisan and Melayu (Da Costa and Davids 67–68) languages, is equally linked with coloured identity as it is with white Afrikaner identity. Debunking the myth of Afrikaner cultural purity, Achmat Davids, scholar of Muslim history at the Cape, has fully studied in *The Afrikaans of the Cape Muslims* the earliest Afrikaans written in the Arabic script of East Indian slaves, identified as “Arabic-Afrikaans” by Adrianus van Selms, scholar of Semitic languages and theology. The Afrikaans expressions referred to by Erasmus originate in the idea of shame attached to coloured identity as a consequence of sexual relations between colonising men and indigenous and enslaved women. These unequal and exploitative sexual relations are captured in a well-known joke that the coloured race was born nine months after Jan Van Riebeeck, the first Dutch governor, arrived at the Cape in 1652. The context, nuances and consequences of the assumptions of this crude joke are analysed by Adhikari in *Not White Enough*, 19–32. It is this conception of coloured shame, gendered female, that lies at the heart of Wicomb’s essay, “Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa”. Wicomb constructs her essay around the figure of Saartje Baartman, the “Khoi/coloured woman”, also known as the “Hottentot Venus, who was exhibited [near naked] in London and Paris from 1810 to her death in 1815” (91). (Khoi/Hottentot, San/Bushman, Griquas, Namas and Basters are all groups who have been regarded, and regarded themselves, at one time or another, as coloured.) Wicomb suggests that she adopts Baartman as “icon precisely because of the nasty, unspoken question of concupiscence that haunts coloured identity” (93). The ghosts of this haunting wander the pages of much of the relevant fiction that engages this identity.

“Shame” means something slightly different, however, for South African former Oxford philosophy scholar and well-known media personality Eusebius McKaiser. Interestingly reversing the historical trend for coloured people to “play white”, iterated in much of the relevant published literature, McKaiser is open about his stronger identification with black culture (“Racial Baggage” 31–32). McKaiser admits to feeling shame about being coloured for all of the stereotypes and realities created from the particular conjunction of oppressions suffered by this group. These include alcoholism, foetal alcohol syndrome and gangsterism (“Cape Town’s Dirty, Coloured Secrets” 41–47 and “For Coloured People Only” 172). He suggests: “My grappling with being coloured and my emotional reaction . . . is, – sadly – not mere embarrassment. Embarrassment is not strong enough to capture the depth of my anxiety, my grappling, my guilt – and more. *Shame* feels like the label that just about gets it right” (emphasis in original, “Cape Town’s Dirty, Coloured Secrets” 45). In a flagellating self-reflexive move, McKaiser also confesses to feeling ashamed of his conflicted neglect of the interests of his community because of the shame of identification with them. McKaiser writes: “I do not find coloured people interesting. I do not know how to write about coloured people. I do not know what to say about coloured people. And I feel bad about feeling this way” (“For Coloured People Only” 165). In this way, McKaiser signals a paradoxical disconnect borne out of the deepest sense of connection.

Despite political challenges to the concept of coloured identity, the period after the advent of parliamentary democracy in South Africa has seen a resurgence of what Adhikari terms a “newfound creativity in the manifestation of coloured identities” (*Burdened by Race* xv). The exploration of post-apartheid fashioning of coloured identity is most cogently presented by Zimitri Erasmus’s edited volume, referred to earlier. Erasmus acknowledges the specificities of coloured identity and compellingly reinvents coloured identity out of “hybridised” presence rather than “lack”, forcing the need to “move beyond the notion that coloured identities are ‘mixed race’ identities” (21). Erasmus identifies, in particular, some of the dangers of the complete subsumption of coloured identity into black identity, a move justified in the context of the ideal of unity of the oppressed in anti-apartheid resistance but which post-1994 may bolster

the “emergent discourse of African essentialism” (20) and hides historical coloured collusion in racialised injustice:

For me it is a “truth” which defies the safe prison of the dominant ideology: that I ought to identify only as black and not coloured; that coloured identity is an illusion from which I need to be saved by my black sisters who promise to put me on the right road and confer my “true” blackness upon me; that the former aspect of my identity is best discarded as a relic of the past. I refuse the safety of identifying only as “black” because . . . identifying only as “black” denies the “better than black” element of coloured identity formation. It denies complicity. . . . Identifying only as black further expresses a desire for political authenticity . . . [where] black political identities are themselves constructions, they too are multiple and marked by internal contradictions. There is no “pure” black politics. There are no “pure” black identities. There is no authentic black self.

(25)

Based on the previous contentions, Erasmus, much like Farred quoted in the epigraph, proposes a conception of coloured identity theorised as hybrid or “creolized”, the term she prefers given its theoretical origins in studies of slavery. The implication is that coloured identity as creole identity may illuminate a South African political discourse in which a complex minority identity may signpost the path to a more productive, less divisive national majority politics. But Erasmus’s position is not the only one, as made clear by Adhikari’s analysis of post-1994 resurgences of coloured identity politics. Adhikari suggests that: “The new democratic dispensation has brought with it a degree of freedom of association and possibilities for ethnic mobilization that were inconceivable under white domination” (*Not White Enough* 175). Even as some of the most basic racialised assumptions of coloured identity were undermined, for example, the value of its proximity to whiteness, nevertheless “varied and creative responses to the nature of Coloured identity and its role in South African society” (Adhikari *Not White Enough* 175) have sprung forth. Among these is a politically astute reinterpretation of interstitiality, summed up in the idea that “first we were not white enough and now we are not black enough” (Adhikari *Not White Enough* 176). Other positions include the “mobilization of coloured opinion primarily through identification with a slave past, [while] others trace or invent a Khoisan ethnic identity, and yet others retreat into a laager of Coloured exclusivism” (Adhikari *Not White Enough* 176). Adhikari sums up that “[s]ince 1994, a motley marketplace with distinctly idiosyncratic elements has developed for ideas and movements related to Coloured identity” (Adhikari *Not White Enough* 176). The term coloured would appear to have more valence post-1994 than pre-1994, when the terms “brown people” and “first nation” are also claimed.

Bush College: the “coloured” university and its transformations

The institutional history of the University of the Western Cape in some ways mirrors the paradoxes, ambiguities, absurdities, contradictions and possibilities – in short, the complexities – of the concept “coloured”. The university was created by fiat of the apartheid state in 1960 as a constituent college for “Coloureds” of the University of South Africa (UNISA). The University College of the Western Cape was granted the status of a university ten years later. In one of many apartheid ironies, the college exclusively for “Coloureds”, racially defined, was legally constituted by the Extension of Universities Act of 1959. Premesh Lalu, director of the UWC Centre for Humanities Research and one of the editors of *Becoming UWC*, a volume reflecting

on fifty years of the university's history, notes the observation of prominent black writer and intellectual A.C. Jordan that "[w]hile [the Extension of Universities Act] claimed to be extending higher education, making it presumably more accessible, it in fact foreclosed access by indicating racial and ethnic identification as the basis for entrance" (Lalu "Campus: A Discourse on the Grounds of an Apartheid University" 39).

The University College of the Western Cape was quite literally built in a clearing in the *fynbos*, the heathland vegetation unique to the region, a small endangered section of which now is cautiously conserved in the Cape Flats Nature Reserve, which forms part of the campus. The bush out of which the university arose generates a range of unintended connotations, all of which have been played upon by generations of students. Zoë Wicomb, one of the most well-known alumnae of the university, graduating with a BA degree in the late 1960s, alludes to the racial origins of the institution in her short story "A Clearing in the Bush" (Wicomb *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* 37–62). The story uses the occasion of the commemoration at the university of the assassination of Hendrik Verwoerd, notorious architect of apartheid, to reflect on the contained South African racial, but also gender and class, tensions for which the institution was a microcosm. Wicomb's "A Clearing in the Bush" is not the only work by a notable alumnus of the university where the university itself comes under scrutiny. The poet Arthur Nortje is described by Grant Farred, whose work on coloured literature has been cited as an epigraph to this chapter, as a writer who "accepts, in the most contorted and even disabling sense of the term, colouredness as an identity" (16). Where Wicomb is able to clear the ground and address the contradictions of the university directly, Nortje, by contrast, in the three poems about UWC collected by English Lecturer Mark Espin for the volume *Becoming UWC*, literally lingers about the university – on its threshold. The first poem, "Thumbing a Lift", describes the angst-filled attempt to reach the college; the second, "Scene Near an Ethnic College", suggests zones of alienation, culminating in the alienation of the campus itself; and the third poem, "Operation Clean-up", intimates the disillusionments at the end of a UWC academic year when "old poetry drafts and examination notes" are destroyed (Nortje *Becoming UWC* 134–136). The bush, referred to in the title of Wicomb's short story, and the angst of the coloured student at the university expressed in the poems by Nortje, are presently being reimagined. "Bush" in the short story title "A Clearing in the Bush" alludes also to the contested identity of the Bushman (or San), on whose social genocide and "disposability" the formation of the South African nation, in part, depended (Baderoon "Surplus, Excess, Dirt" 257–272). The term "Bushman" has a history of complexity that comes close to the complexities of the term "coloured", being historically both rejected and accepted. The term "Bushman" and its variations, "*Bushy*" or "*Boesie*", has been used as a racial slur (Adhikari, *Not White Enough* 28), but the identifier "Bushman" has also been claimed. Coloured identity as Bushman identity in the evolving self-reflection of UWC, or "Bush College", as it was known, currently is playfully and ironically re-inscribed on campus lifestyle merchandise: "Back your Bushie" proclaim the supporters' club t-shirts worn by coloured students and students of all other cultural backgrounds to whom the university now is open.

Transcending its origins in apartheid racial segregation, the university has, in succeeding decades, actively and consciously transformed itself and has been continuously made, un-made and re-made by buffeting forces of politics, (globalised) economics and history. Moving out of its origins in apartheid racist social categories, and ignited by the student protests of 1976, UWC made the political shift under the "unifying force of Black Consciousness that would shake the foundations of the racial logic of a university created to function as an instrument of apartheid" (Lalu "Constituting Community at the Intellectual Home of the Left" 111). The university increasingly came to be regarded as a black university as a consequence of its alignment through

student struggle and protest with broader regional and national communities and resistances, as this extract from a pamphlet issued by UWC students after the 1976 Soweto uprising shows:

We as students at the University of the Western Cape . . . find a type of education that forces us to believe that we are Coloureds and hereby making us believe that we do not have anything in common with the rest of the country and specifically those who are suffering with us . . . We maintain that Black people all over the country **suffer** in the same manner and feel the **pains of oppression** in a common way . . . **BLACK PEOPLE [SHOULD] STAND TOGETHER.**

(emphasis in original, in Thomas ed. Finding Freedom in the Bush of Books 87–88)

The early 1980s saw the university challenging apartheid segregation “by opening its doors to all South Africans” regardless of colour, with “[l]arge numbers of black students from the north flock[ing] to the institution” (O’Connell x). The vice-chancellorship of former UWC student and lecturer Jakes Gerwel, who hailed the university as the intellectual home of the left, marked further the shift of the university, where the mutual imbrication of academic and political projects became clearer. The university thus had moved full circle from what Marxist writer Alex la Guma had disparagingly referred to as its position at the centre of a “Colouredstan” created by the Nationalist Party (Lalu “Campus: A Discourse on the Grounds of an Apartheid University” 42). In the post-1994 era, UWC has fallen “into the category of the historically black university . . . caught in a conundrum . . . of seeking access to claims of universality while increasingly being interpellated into a predetermined structure of hierarchy” (Lalu “Constituting Community at the Intellectual Home of the Left” 118). The coloured university thus, in the contemporary period of high-velocity internationalisation and globalisation, is required to contest equally, eliding the historically specific constraints attendant on its origins and development. In this sense also, institutional tensions reflect the tensions of historical impacts on coloured social identity as it negotiates contemporary national and postnational forces.

Of minorities and the marginal

Coloured as a sociocultural and political concept in South African discourse, as channelled through the institutional history of UWC, established as a coloured university, furthermore, is a discourse of marginality of a group that throughout the twentieth century “never formed more than about 9 percent of the South African population” (Adhikari *Not White Enough* 17). Throughout its history, discourses of coloured identity have sought to overcome marginality through racial identification with a dominant majority. In the apartheid period, these discourses pursued identification with a dominant white political and cultural majority, a tendency Erasmus terms “complicity” (24). Discourses of coloured identity have also sought political affiliation with a dominant politically black majority as part of anti-apartheid resistance. Post-1994, discourses of coloured identity have generally eschewed political and cultural affiliation with a now dominant black political, but not cultural, majority. Black identities are “major” in the sense that they enjoy political dominance and since they can lay claim to an authenticity denied coloured identity. However, cultural and epistemological “majority” belong to varying white identities both pre- and post-1994. New sociopolitical constructions of coloured identity, paradoxically, have found a voice through connections with even more marginal historical and ethnic subgroups than the marginality represented by catch-all coloured identity. These identity discourses claim origin from and connection with slavery and Khoisan cultures. Thus the one

feature that remains constant in coloured identity constructions is the conception of marginality, a marginality which primes it for consideration through the lens of theoretical articulations of minority discourses generally and minority literature in particular when one considers the fiction-writing by and about coloured communities.¹

Theorisation of minority discourses may be tracked back to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's reflections in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* on the work of Franz Kafka, as a member of a Jewish minority in Prague, writing in the majority language of German. In the chapter, "What Is a Minor Literature?", three key features are identified. These are, first, the idea that a "minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs in a major language" (16). The second characteristic of minor literatures is that "everything in them is political" (17). What is meant is that while major literatures foreground the individual through the Oedipal "intrigues" of the family, with the social milieu as a backdrop, minor literature, by contrast, foregrounds the socioeconomic and political contexts of individual concerns and experiences. The third, and somewhat critically contentious, point is that "in [minority literatures] everything takes on a collective value" (17). The authors go on to suggest that:

Indeed, precisely because talent isn't abundant in a minor literature, there are no possibilities for an individual enunciation that would belong to this or that "master" and that could be separated from a collective enunciation. Indeed, scarcity of talent is in fact beneficial and allows the conception of something other than a literature of masters; what each author says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she says or does is necessarily political, even if others aren't in agreement.

(Deleuze and Guattari 17)

Implying a "paucity of talent" among minor writers has been the object of critique (Rosaldo 124), which may be disputed by Deleuze and Guattari's general anti-hierarchical bent, privileging the "becoming-minoritarian" of all discourses, in particular discourses seeking fascist mastery. Thus, the delineation of a "standard" and the canonisation of masters of this standard would constitute precisely the majoritarianism of which Deleuze and Guattari are critical. Minority, therefore, is not a claim to an authentic identity, nor a status linked to an empirically adduced numerical minority. Instead, philosophical minority may be read as a condition or a constant potentiality (often held by numerical minorities) whose discourse allows it "to take flight along creative lines of escape" (Deleuze and Guattari 26), "deterritorialising" majority discourses.

Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical observations regarding minor literatures were given broader application to minorities, popularly construed, through a conference and its proceedings published as *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, edited by Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd. Here, the concept is linked more practically to minority groups, identifying "the political and cultural structures that connect different minority cultures in their subjugation and opposition to the dominant culture" (JanMohamed and Lloyd ix). The project was, furthermore, conceived as a way to marginalise the centre through articulations of minority discourses that did not have to pass through hegemonic culture. Despite this more practical approach, the tension in Deleuze and Guattari between an outright deterritorialisation of minority identity and the need for strategic articulations of identity is maintained – as JanMohamed and Lloyd express it, "the physical survival of minority groups depends on the recognition of its culture as viable" (6). Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minority discourse also refracts unitary notions of nationhood in many of the essays in the well-known volume *Nation and Narration* but perhaps is most clearly articulated in Homi Bhabha's "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation". For Bhabha,

[m]inority discourse sets the act of emergence in the antagonistic in-between of image and sign, the accumulative and the adjunct, presence and proxy. It contests genealogies of “origin” that leads to claims of cultural supremacy and historical priority. Minority discourse acknowledges the status of national culture – and the people – as a contentious, performative space of the perplexity of living in the pedagogical representations of the fullness of life.

(307)

In its theoretical genesis and development, thus, the idea of minority discourse is precariously balanced between its representation of both identity and non-identity. To latch onto Bhabha’s striking expression, let us turn now to the performative space of (possible) perplexity in the figuring of the following minoritarian “concepts”: first, coloured identity as a national minority discourse in, second, creative writing, which may be construed a minority “discipline”, third, at UWC as a “minority”, historically disadvantaged institution. (In the Western Cape, UWC may be contrasted with formerly white institutions which include the University of Cape Town, the historically English university, and Stellenbosch University, the historically Afrikaans university.)

In the landscape of writing in the public domain, creative writing produced in an academic setting occupies an interstitial place, almost as interesting as the interstitiality of coloured identity. As Tim Mayers’s “manifesto” on the establishment of the *Journal of Creative Writing* suggests, creative writing courses may better be regarded as constituting a field of “issues, texts, theorists, and practitioners on a plane of immanence – on a flat, non-hierarchical surface” (Mayers quoting Byron Hawk 2). The discomfort with the institutionalisation, or the “becoming-major”, of creative writing is echoed by Antjie Krog, supervisor and facilitator of UWC Creates workshops who, on the cusp of a conundrum, suggests that “I don’t believe it is possible to teach somebody to write literature” (interview with author). Mayers suggests further that while creative writing studies has arrived in “force” since 2005 (2), its roots stretch further back in institutions of higher learning (mainly in the global north). As a “non-discipline”, where disciplines are hierarchical and prescriptive, creative writing, as the marginal “outsider” study that in numerous ways challenges the majoritarian norms and conventions of academia, may inherently constitute a minority discourse pursuing the “lines of escape” described by Deleuze and Guattari. The fact, furthermore, that creative writing, by and large, exists in the marginal media of the thesis and the small self-publications of university departments and minor funded projects makes creative writing a minority form in the regional and national publishing landscape.

Creative constructions of coloured identity at UWC

Almost inescapably, questions of identity have been central to the writing produced by participants in the creative writing programmes at UWC. There are good reasons for this, and the focus on social identities does not preclude literary quality and aesthetic concerns, as rigorous examination standards and often-successful publication in print and online journals and collections confirm. The origins of creative writing at UWC may be tracked back to both extra-curricular projects and credit-bearing courses, which prioritised access to participants who otherwise would be excluded. UWC Creates is a multilingual project established in 2009 (Brown and Vandermerwe, Preface to *This is My Land* 5), outside of formal study programmes, which provides a supportive context through workshops and other opportunities for the creativity of mainly marginalised participants, who, in most cases, do not have formal literary training and lack the cultural capital and access to networks of influence that open doors to publication. The credit-bearing courses, started in 2010 (Moolman Introduction to *Cutting*

Carrots 9), include undergraduate semester options, courses at Honour's level, a structured Master's in Creative Writing, the full-thesis master's and a newly offered full-thesis PhD. Although all of the writing produced through UWC may potentially be multilingual, given institutional flexibility that encourages multi- and trans-linguality, it is mainly writing in English, which often incorporates Afrikaans, that has been focused on here. Meg Vandermerwe, a significant actor in the establishment of the programmes, suggests that the UWC projects give voice to writers who are unlikely, for financial or academic reasons, to be able to access creative writing courses at universities of privilege in the region. She suggests further that while questions of social identity are not explicitly foregrounded, the encouragement to "identify story roots", where participants creatively reinterpret a story told to them by the oldest member of their family or community, has the consequence of foregrounding sociohistorical impacts and local culture on identity (Interview). This methodology is clearly visible in the anthology of ghost stories, *Constant Companions*, whose artistic reinterpretations of informant interviews nevertheless bear strong imprints of local culture and language and where apartheid trauma experienced in coloured communities remains a ghostly presence. Antjie Krog, referred to previously, as facilitator of UWC Creates workshops and projects and thesis supervisor, observes that programme participants are often fairly new to writing and that, in practice, "first efforts are usually autobiographical", where "avoidance of cultural identity is not easily possible". Krog adds: "One's culture, the one in which one has functioned as a child and young adult is what one knows best, is what one could write an authentic voice for . . . so there is immediately a confidence in the writing that would not necessarily be there when a UWC student imagines herself a Viking". She stresses, however, that "[t]he story comes first. Only later one can see, oh yes, there is also a specific identity. But if the identity is very specific and very typical, then the story or poem usually suffers – it becomes a kind of propaganda, instead of a sensitively lived-through text . . . nobody, absolutely nobody came with a wish to talk about identity . . . everyone had a story to tell" (Interview with author).

More recently appointed creative writing lecturer Kobus Moolman confirms Krog's observations when he says that "[i]ssues of cultural identity thus form a natural and seamless part of the material selected" but continues "[h]owever, I am also serious on moving students from what they know (their own cultural and historical milieu) to that which is outside them – particularly because as writers I feel that they owe it to themselves to explore work as widely as possible" (Interview with author). It is thus clear that in creative writing programmes at UWC, coloured identity gets foregrounded as a consequence of the social and cultural backgrounds of participants, the fact that they are novice writers for whom a certain amount of autobiographical ground-clearing is necessary and because the methodologies employed focus on artistically reworking compelling stories from people who would not otherwise have a voice in broader national discourses.

Conversations with a significant number of programme participants² suggest that these methods have been positively taken up and often have had successful outcomes in producing well-received publications that have launched careers in arts and culture spheres. But it has also generated tension that reinforces the tensions in the conception of coloured identity. In a few cases among students, coloured identity is acknowledged without conflict. Former master's student Saaligh Gabier, whose family was part of the South African diaspora escaping apartheid by emigrating to Canada, identifies himself as a "Muslim Coloured/Cape Malay South African living in a majority Christian White Canadian city" (Interview with author). It is fascinating that even though Gabier's novella, *The Wedding Interviews*, explores intra-Muslim cultural differences in Canada, it nevertheless incorporates a pre-history in which many of the motifs identifiable in fiction representing coloured identity are discernible. For Gabier in the post-9/11 North

American context, the more contentious identity is Muslim identity. Another former master's student, Janine Lange, also uses the term comfortably in acknowledgement of what, for her, is its cultural reality. As the mother of a daughter with a white father, she makes clear that her daughter is not coloured but mixed-race since she is an outsider to the culture in which Lange herself grew up. Lange feels it is important, even post-1994, to highlight coloured experience through the possibilities presented by fiction since racist stereotypes of coloured people and communities persist post-apartheid. She qualifies this observation by saying that in writing her thesis, she had to re-learn the coloured culture of her community since hegemonic white culture had forced an alienation on her from her roots. Lange's PhD continues this exploration since it involves the collection of the oral traditions of coloured communities of the Northern Cape, which, apart from the Western Cape, is most strongly associated with coloured culture and identity. Similarly, current master's student Lisa Julie, in acknowledgement of the almost abyssal hybridity of her background and affiliations, accepts coloured as the only term that encompasses the complexity of her experience.

However, engagement of the work of and exchanges with the greater number of students suggests a complex use of the term "coloured", with transformations in attitudes to the use over time. Creative writing theses at UWC consist of a creative component and a reflective essay, which in some ways undermines New Critical orthodoxies regarding the absolute self-containment of the work of art, where authorial intention plays no role. Asked to reflect on their creative work and their artistic journeys, most students quite unproblematically use the term coloured, often included in the keywords of the thesis. In many cases, however, this use is explained or rejected in subsequent interviews in favour of a more general black political identity. In the case of master's student Hayley Rodkin, who was deeply involved in the anti-apartheid resistance movement, there is a self-critique implied in all her references to the term "coloured", even as the social realities of such communities and their political struggles are represented. Rodkin rhetorically asks the question of identity in the post-1994 period, in particular: "When did I become coloured?" The double bind is lucidly articulated by Llewellyn Jegels, whose degree was made possible by UWC's special admissions policy designed to give access to people whom apartheid disadvantaged directly and indirectly: "Initially . . . I avoided dealing with racial/cultural themes because of the 'burden' and obligation that writers of colour feel of writing the (often unspeakable) truths of their pasts. However as a multi-ethnic writer, I could not ignore the weight of my context as a writer. It began to feel as if the voices of the past, both the silent and silenced voices clamored for expression" (interview with author).

These are not, however, the only responses to the question of identity as it emerges in UWC creative writing projects. Former student Chad Brevis is critical of the ways in which the story-root methodology of creative writing teaching encourages stereotypical representations of the "Cape Coloured community". He feels that his own voice, as a "modern, information aged, secularised and globalised youth" was "colonis[ed]" to reinforce a stereotype. Brevis's contention is a new one that is not encountered elsewhere in the sociology of coloured identity, where rejection of the term most often is associated with enlightenment universal humanist affiliations or conceptions of political blackness.

If published writers of coloured identity are a minority in the South African literature landscape, as a glance at the lists of most South African publishers suggests, where the literary conversation is mainly between white and black, the creative writing student is an interesting minority within that minority. Jolyn Phillips, part of the first cohort to graduate from the UWC creative writing programmes, has had her work published and nationally distributed. Like Tiresias, she has experience of both worlds. Her work has also garnered a number of major South African literary awards. Her success has made her a frequent guest on the South African literary

festival and book fair circuit, where she acknowledges a pigeonholing based on social identity. Phillips deftly deflects anthropological appreciation of her work by contesting that coloured identities are “characters” in her art. With experience in both camps, she confirms the ways in which marginal cultural identity is made to pass through, and thus be moulded by, hegemonic culture generally in the publication process and in the circuits where books are marketed, sold and celebrated. This idea is iterated by Maxine Case, author of two novels and a biography, who suggests: “I think that the politics of cultural representation definitely does influence the politics of publication, specifically in terms of the gatekeepers – who are the readers and key decision makers and how integrated the general publishing industry is” (interview with author). Similarly, Kobus Moolman, creative writing lecturer mentioned earlier and well-published author, wryly responds to a question about the role of identity in the South African publishing industry by saying, “[c]ynically I feel that the publishing world often encourages and actively searches out [such] work” (interview with author). Phillips, however, goes on cannily and realistically to note that these are constraints imposed on publishers in a capitalist marketplace, which she, as author, necessarily is also forced to negotiate and where she sometimes also has to make strategic compromises. Phillips’s first book, *Tjieng Tjang Tjerries*, a collection of short stories, was published by feminist press Modjaji Books. Managing Editor Colleen Higgs clarifies Modjaji’s niche interest in opening up new “places” in the South African literary landscape. Place, Higgs suggests, is an important consideration in the context of a manuscript that tells a good story well (interview with author). Phillips, whose stories are set in the fishing village of Gansbaai, opens up a voice that is not the voice of urban coloured identities. Based on Phillips’s experience of the publishing industry after her first publication and the networks into which she has subsequently been drawn, it becomes apparent that creative writing students as a minority, contrasted with published authors, may have a latitude in the representation or non-representation of social identities that dependence on publishing and its circuits curtails. In theory, a UWC student could write about life as “a Viking”, but this is a possibility no UWC student has to date considered in the context of the continued urgency of the experience and expression of sociohistorically shaped identities.

Almost without exception, creative writing at UWC³ explores the margins of the margin. The following short story collections, Jolyn Phillips’s *Let’s Go Home*, Bronwyn Douman’s *The Marginal Grey*, Hilda Andrews’ *Visklippie*, Janine Lange’s *We Dare Not Say*, Hayley Rodkin’s *Of Flowers and Tears* and the novel *The Girl with the Red Flower* by Waghied Misbach each foreground the experience of marginal groups within coloured communities in highly distinctive ways (see endnote 3 for full bibliographic details of the theses). Many of the stories zero in on female characters that stay afloat in challenging circumstances at the confluence of racial and gender discrimination, fictionally represented in unique ways. Many of the stories also are focalised through children whose literal minority and vulnerabilities are impacted by forms of patriarchal authority and violence, often constituted by the historically specific ways in which communities have been shaped by apartheid. The concept of intergenerational trauma comes up again and again in the stories and glosses on stories in reflective essays. Abuse, neglect, molestation, incest, femicide and dysfunctional families are themes that are treated in striking, often highly experimental ways. In this respect, creative writing at UWC reflects the interest in the margin of many published works also, where focalisation occurs through female characters. It is interesting that while the older generation of relevant writers were mainly male, for example, Alex la Guma, Richard Rive and the poet James Matthews, the newer generation is mainly female, reflected also in UWC creative writing, where most of the student-writers of coloured identity are female. But UWC creative writing goes further in its exploration of marginality or interprets marginality in different ways to much of the relevant published prose. The stories by

Hilda Andrews, for example, intersect coloured identity with marginal black identity and marginal white identities, namely the white elderly and white socially deviant, in a different take on the “rainbow” nation, as post-1994 South Africa has memorably been named by Desmond Tutu. One of the short stories by Hayley Rodkin considers the “majoritarianism” of heteronormativity in the anti-apartheid resistance movement through a complex homosexual male character who does not encourage sympathy. Inverting the norm, Bronwyn Douman’s entire collection, *The Marginal Grey*, is about inserting the experience of the coloured middle class into a literary canvas which has foregrounded working class, especially “skollie” or gangster stories. Here Douman plays on “grey” as the interstitial shade between white and black and also plays on the distinction between grey and “brown” as coloured people are more conventionally referred to in the South African context. The Afrikaans, “*bruinmens*”, literally, “brown person” is often translated into English as “coloured”. Interpreting “minor” in an unexpected literary sense, Waghied Misbach’s novel, *The Girl with the Red Flower*, is a bracing exercise in “minor character elaboration”, which takes the incidental character, Soraya, the prostitute in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, and constructs a compelling life which overturns all of the assumptions of submission and victimhood expected of the Muslim/Cape Malay/coloured woman, constituted in this case around violent “perpetrating agency”.

Fiction representing coloured experience has generally highlighted the proximity of coloured identity to white identity. This comes across strongly in the “play white” or white-aspirational motif that is iterated across the greater majority of the texts considered, even where it may not be the central focus. Where the intersection of white and black subjectivity is explored, it is done mainly through the figure of the black domestic worker, whose position in the coloured household is charged with ironies. In this context, Jerome Cornelius’s novella, *What Lies* (see endnote 3 for full bibliographic details), is path breaking in its acknowledgement of possibilities of relationships between coloured and black people beyond the domestic worker scenario encouraged by economic and social histories of apartheid. Here, a central middle-aged, married coloured male character is presented as marginal in terms of pre- and post-1994 racial hierarchies and the victim of the emasculation of his wife, whose cloistered, conservative and traumatic past makes her treat him in a demeaning and cruel way. Conflict in the novella is created by his overwhelming love for a young, black UWC student, who is obliged to engage in sex work to support herself as a student. Cornelius’s novella, written in 2011–2013, is one of the first works of fiction to explore crossing racial borders in the opposite direction, so to speak. In published work, the engagement of coloured identity with black identity is considered in the debut 2018 novel by Kharnita Mohamed, titled *Called to Song*. This novel of development narrates the self-realisation of a Muslim female protagonist from Mitchell’s Plain, one of the largest coloured townships in which the residents of District 6 were resettled, who discovers that her husband has a fulfilling relationship and a stable family with a black woman, denied to her in her own troubled relationship with him. Rehana Rossouw, journalist and author of *What Will People Say* and *New Times*, identifies the need “in a country like South Africa [for] writers [to] grapple with changes in identity rather than retaining apartheid’s twisted racial categorisations” (interview with author). It is possible that the freedom of exploration permitted the creative writing student, curtailed in writing for the trade, may give creative writing an avant-gardist position on questions of the transformations of social identity.

Perhaps what is most unique about the UWC creative writing programmes is the way in which they have fostered a “becoming-minoritarian” in respect of language, through the multi- and trans-linguality encouraged by cross-faculty collaborations, bringing in disciplinary expertise from Afrikaans, English and Xhosa, the Nguni language most commonly spoken in the Western Cape. The Xhosa-English component of the programmes also makes for interesting study, but

this would be outside of the focus of this chapter. Most of the creative writing that articulates questions of coloured identity necessarily needs elaborate Afrikaans in the dialogue. Afrikaans in this context is linked in the South African cultural hierarchy with low-class expression, where English is the language of status. These forms of Afrikaans have been linked predominantly with the Western Cape, giving this dialect the identifier “Kaaps”, which is the Afrikaans word for “Cape.” So ubiquitous a language of communication is Kaaps in the Cape Town communities represented that even Douman, whose short stories were referred to previously, needs to include Kaaps in stories representing aspirational middle-class characters.

The student in whose work language is most foregrounded, however, is Jolyn Phillips, mentioned earlier. Kafka’s dilemma (or possibility) is Phillips’ dilemma (or possibility). In writing the stories of the Blompark fishing community of Gansbaai, the natural language of expression is the minority language of Afrikaans, specifically the even more minority Overberg variety of Afrikaans. Kaaps and the Overberg variety are two of seventy-six varieties of Afrikaans. However, strategically recognising the dominance of the majority language of English, Phillips felt she would “defy the purpose of introducing Blompark to a diverse reading audience” (Reflective Essay 83) if she wrote in Afrikaans. In writing what she understands to be a “bilingual” text, Phillips, in fact, does much more. Phillips writes in Afrikaans and then translates her own text into English, retaining distinctive expressions in Afrikaans. But through this method, Phillips also ends up doing violence to English at the level of syntax and expression. As the author describes her style, it is one of “fighting with” English. A close reading, which is not possible in the survey nature of this chapter, would reveal the “lines of escape” which may be traced in the linguistic forms of these stories.

To conclude, what does a “middle distance reading” of creative writing at UWC suggest about coloured identity as a minority discourse? Most significantly, creative writing suggests the continued overwhelming need to reflect on questions of coloured identity even more than two decades after the dismantling of formal apartheid. It is mainly the ways in which historicopolitical trauma shapes individual and domestic trauma that are teased out in narratives of uniquely distinctive style. Nowhere in the narratives is coloured identity approached through racial discourse or the biological essentialisms implied in miscegenation. The creative writing narratives stress instead the construction and continuous reconstruction of coloured identity as an experienced matrix of social and cultural reality – or, as Wicomb pithily expresses the idea, “[identity] simply exists, whether we like it or not, so no need to fetishise it” (interview with author). These fictional discourses of coloured identity also suggest that there is not one coloured identity, rather that there are multiple coloured identities that are constantly shape-shifting. The dynamic driving the narratives is the recognition of the discourses of the marginal or the minorities even within coloured identity as a minority discourse. These minorities include women, children, homosexual characters, the coloured middle class and male characters who transgress social norms. The foregrounding of South African coloured identity as possibly the most identifiably constructed, hybrid, fluid, flexible, incorporative, creolised and encompassing of all identities, both claimed and imposed, makes it a fragmented mirror which could productively be used to refract and disturb the self-reflexive certainties of identity politics generally. In this sense, coloured may be the new black – but with a built-in self-reflexivity. This is the insight articulated in the work of Farred, Erasmus and Wicomb. However, what theoretical articulations of minority discourse alerts one to are the possibilities contained also in the position of coloured identity in the South African national sociopolitical landscape. Forever borderline, and on the margins of power, interstitial coloured identity has the inherent structural potential always to track new lines of escape from majoritarian political identity discourses. Constructed

on the knife-edge of complexity and contradiction, when it comes to conundrums of identity, coloured identity may be, to roughly quote Claude Lévi-Strauss, “good to think with”.

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Notes

- 1 Questions of coloured identity in prose fiction in English frequently come up in relation to the work of the following established authors, even though among earlier writers, the term “coloured” is rejected in favour of other non-racial, purportedly universal forms of identification or is entirely deconstructed: Bessie Head, Richard Rive, Alex la Guma, Arthur Nortje and Zoë Wicomb. More recent or less well-established writing that foregrounds coloured identities includes the short fiction and novels of Achmat Dangor and Rayda Jacobs; Rozena Maart’s *Rosa’s District 6*; Maxine Case’s *All We Have Left Unsaid* and *Softness of the Lime*; C.A. Davids’s *The Blacks of Cape Town*; Mary Watson’s collection of short stories, *Moss*; Rehana Rossouw’s *What Will People Say* and *New Times*; Nadia Davids’s *An Imperfect Blessing*; Yvette Christiansë’s *Unconfessed*; Kharnita Mohamed’s *Called to Song* and Simon Bruinders’s *A Handful of Earth*.
- 2 Of a possible fifteen students whose work fits the profile, ten students were interviewed: Hilda Andrews, Chad Brevis, Llewelin Jegels, Connie Fick, Hayley Rodkin, Waghied Misbach, Saaligh Gabier, Janine Lange, Jolyn Phillips and Lisa Julie. Creative writing lecturers and supervisors consulted include Meg Vandermerwe, Jacobus Moolman and Antje Krog. The following authors participated in the project: Rehana Rossouw, Zoë Wicomb and Maxine Case. Of the handful of publishers with relevant titles on their lists, an interview was conducted with Colleen Higgs of Modjaji Books.
- 3 The relevant published outputs of the UWC creative writing programmes, the UWC Creates projects and other UWC initiatives include print publications and dissertations available through the UWC Library Dissertation Portal, listed subsequently. Poetry and short fiction consulted, but which may not have been directly cited in the essay, may be found in the following anthologies: *This Is My Land: Writing from the UWC Creates Programme* (UWC publication, no date), *Harvest: The University of the Western Cape Masters in Creative Writing Poetry Anthology 2016* (Department of English, 2016), *Constant Companions: South African Tales of the Supernatural* (edited by postdoctoral fellow Annel Pieterse, UWC Creates and the Stellenbosch Literary Project, 2017), *Cutting Carrots the Wrong Way: Poetry and Prose about Food from the University of the Western Cape Creative Writing Programme* (collected and edited by Kobus Moolman, University of the Western Cape/Uhlanga, 2017). Theses consulted include the following: Jerome Cornelius, *What Lies*, MA mini-thesis (novella), 2014, <http://hdl.handle.net/11394/6486>; Jolyn Phillips, *Let’s Go Home: Stories and Portraits*, MA mini-thesis, 2014, <http://hdl.handle.net/11394/6485>; Bronwyn Douman, *The Marginal Grey: A Collection of Short Stories*, MA mini-thesis, 2015, <http://hdl.handle.net/11394/6484>; Hilda Andrews, *Visklippie and Other Cape Town Stories*, MA mini-thesis, 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/11394/5715>; Muhammad Saaligh Gabier, *The Wedding Interviews: A Novella*, MA mini-thesis, 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/11394/6524>; Janine Carol Lange, *We Dare Not Say*, MA mini-thesis (short stories), 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/11394/5538>; A.W. Misbach, *The Girl with the Red Flower*, MA full-thesis (novel), 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/11394/5884>; Hayley Rodkin, *Of Flowers and Tears: Collection of Short Stories*, MA full-thesis, 2019, <http://hdl.handle.net/11394/6645>.

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