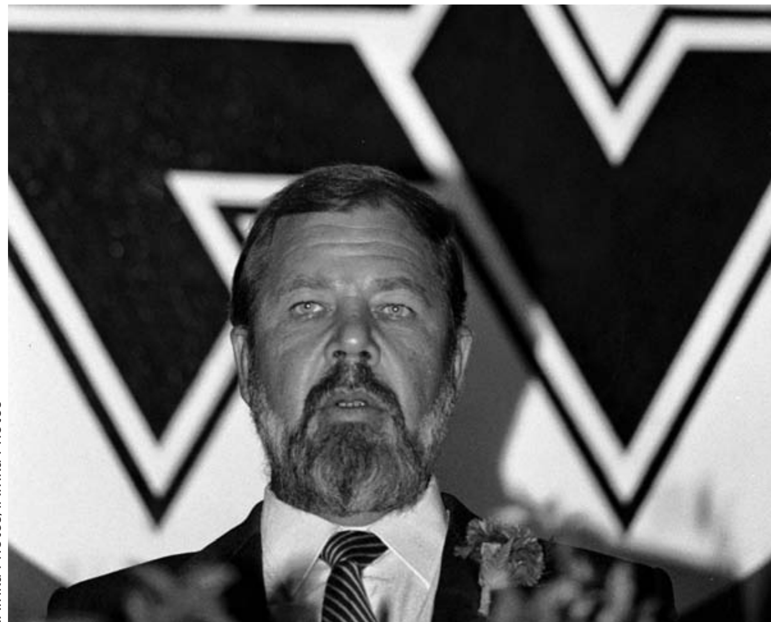
Race and Identity:

The South African experience

By Zukiswa **Wanner**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Eugène Terre'Blanche, founder of the white supremacist Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB).

From the time that Europeans landed on the southern shores of the African continent, race seems to have been the greatest factor in how one is treated, and has formed an integral part of the identity of the country now called the Republic of South Africa. The statement of one of Southern Africa's leading imperialists and former Cape colony Premier, Cecil John Rhodes, is illuminating. Rhodes stated, "I will lay down my own policy on this native question. Either you receive them on an equal footing as citizens or call them a subject race… we have to treat the natives, where they are in a state of barbarism, in a different way from ourselves. We are to be lords over them… The native is to be treated as a child and denied the franchise."[1] This paper seeks to explore how race has been and continues to be a signifier in all things South African, even as the country tries to carve a new identity for itself as a "Rainbow Nation" in a post-apartheid democratic context. In order to make a comparative analysis of how race and identity have evolved, the issue has been analysed from three benchmarks in South Africa's history in the last century – namely, the immediate pre-apartheid era, the apartheid years, and finally, the post-apartheid period.

1910 to 1948

In 1910, as a result of an uncomfortable peace between the Dutch and the British in South Africa (after the Anglo-Boer War), the country that is now South Africa became a union, with the then Basutoland, Bechuanaland, and Swaziland as Protectorates. The irony should not be lost that the country became a union as a result of a war between two non-African peoples. The "natives" (also known as Bantu then, and now known as Africans) immediately felt the pain of the said union. With Louis Botha as Prime Minister, the natives immediately began to feel that a new era had dawned with the drafting and implementation of the Natives Land Act No. 27 of 1913. In order to stage an organised protest against the Act, elite and mission-educated black people formed the oldest of sub-Saharan political parties, the South African Native National Congress (now known as the African National Congress or ANC). The Act, which claimed to look after the rights of both the Europeans and the Africans was in fact "to prevent the natives from ever rising above the position of servants to the whites" (Plaatje 1982, p71). Plaatje substantiates this by stating that after removal of natives from "white farms", as stipulated by the Act, he never saw a situation where white people who may have been illegally staying on land reserved for natives were forcibly removed by the government; "…there is no such person in South Africa as a white squatter. Although it is insistently affirmed that the law applies to both Europeans and natives, the conclusion cannot be avoided that it is directed exclusively against the native" (ibid p61).

It was during this period too that the pass laws were first introduced, ostensibly to ensure that the livestock the natives drove along the roads belonged to them. The same

rule, however, was not applied to white men although some of them were known to steal horses from the then Basutoland and sell them in Natal (p85). It should not come as a shock though that rules were skewed against the natives. It was, after all, General Jan Smuts (who became prime Minister after Botha in 1919) who said "natives have the simplest minds, understand only simple ideas or ideals, and are almost animal-like in the simplicity of their minds and ways… They are different not only in colour but in minds and in political capacity…" (quoted by Thabo Mbeki in the Steve Biko Memorial Lecture, University of Cape Town, 2007). What is clear about racial relationships – even at this point – is that the natives never had confidence to fight their own battles themselves, and instead seemed to always look for white sympathisers who would bring their case to the authorities for them. This could have been an indication of the inherent inferiority complex that even the black intelligentsia at that time had, and may have served to be the reason why little was achieved since white sympathisers could never articulate the problem as well as the people who experienced it themselves. Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa*, for instance, was written as an appeal to the British monarch for imperial protection of the natives in their fight with the Union government to retain their land. As an indication that he is not being totally unreasonable, Plaatje, in his book, mentions the number of white clergymen and parliamentarians who support their cause. But if things were bad for the non-white races during the years of the Union, they were to get worse with the emergence of the National Party..

The Apartheid years

With the emergence of the National Party as the ruling party in South Africa in 1948, a new policy of apartheid came into effect; a separation of the races, was introduced. With each new prime minister, the laws only appeared to get tougher for black people. Laws such as the Immorality and Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act No. 55 of 1949, which forbade sexual relations between people of different races, were enacted. Maybe as an indication of justice being a blind goddess, one of the first victims of the law was a Dutch Reformed church minister – ironical, given that the church formed the cornerstone of the apartheid state. To the black world, people like Richard Khumalo and Regina Brooks who broke this law immediately became cause célèbres as shown in black magazines of those days. But sexual relations were the least of the black people's problems. Pass laws became more stringent, with black people being relegated to the homelands which were touted as "independent states" under puppet leadership of the apartheid state. In order to be in any town outside the homelands, black people had to either be around illegally or carry *dompasses* signed by white employers to show their eligibility to be in towns. In spite of mass-based organisations like the ANC and the Native Indian Congress attempting to get into dialogue with the apartheid government, the laws only became more and more stringent for non-whites. Other acts, like the Group Areas Act No. 41 of 1950, which removed non-whites who owned freehold land in towns to townships were put in place resulting in the forced removals in Sophiatown in 1955. The Urban Areas Act sought to separate (and succeeded in separating) the races and making some members of the subjugated races divided. The reasoning was that if, for instance, the Indians and the so-called Coloureds were not as good as the whites, at least they were better than the natives, so they were given slightly better housing and slightly larger school budgets. Fortunately for South Africa, there were some leaders across the colour bar who saw through this divide and conquer rule, and who worked together to fight the unjust laws. Peaceful marches were organised, people across the racial lines were consulted to draft a document known as the Freedom Charter (which is the foundation of the current South African Constitution), but this made no difference to the apartheid state. In 1960, in response to mass rallies called by the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) to refuse passes, 60 people were gunned down in Sharpeville and many others were injured. It was this one incident that brought the brutality of the apartheid government to the attention of the world, and South African blacks earned themselves some international sympathisers, at a time when most of Africa was still colonised and probably considered inferior. It was then that the leadership of the leading anti-apartheid organisations (ANC and PAC) and the South African Communist Party decided that violence could very well be the only dialogue that the apartheid state understood, and military wings to the organisations were formed.

Unfortunately, the efficient machine of the apartheid state quickly identified the leadership, charged and imprisoned them (many earning life sentences). Those who were not arrested managed to escape into exile for military training in the hope of sabotaging the apartheid government. It would be a

while, though, before any of these actions made an impact. Arrests and exiles in the 1960s had ensured that the subject races of South Africa now had a leadership vacuum. Yet again, Black people were looking towards sympathetic whites to speak on their behalf while doing little to break the chains of their oppression. The late veteran journalist Bazel "Doc" Bikitsha, often talked of how he had an exclusive interview with a white member of the United Party (then the leading liberal white voice and main opposition to the ruling National Party) and was let in through the front door as an "intelligent and different black"; and yet this so-called white liberal insisted that her black "maid" use the side gate and a different set of cooking utensils.

From 1948 to 1969, therefore, it was almost as though Black people – save for the protests against the forced removals in Sophiatown, District Six and Cato Manor, the already mentioned Sharpeville anti-passes march, support for black leadership at the Treason and Rivonia Trials – lacked cohesion in fighting against the scourge of their exploitation, preferring instead white liberals to speak on their behalf. It was into this leadership vacuum that South African Student Organisation (SASO) was formed in 1969. Among SASO's most significant leaders were Steve Biko, Peter Jones and Mamphele Ramphele. With support among the Indian, Coloured and African tertiary students who now collectively called themselves "black", SASO was formed as a response to the liberal white-led National Union of South African Students (NUSAS)'s inability to address the issues affecting Black students in institutes of higher learning. SASO sought to restore the pride of the Black person. Naturally there were some who saw SASO and its Black Consciousness theme as being "racist", but in defence Biko stated in *I write what I like*, "What Black Consciousness seeks to do is to produce at the output end of the process, real Black people who do not regard themselves as appendages to White society. This truth cannot be reversed. We do not need to apologise for this because it is true that the White systems have produced throughout the world, a number of people who are not aware that they, too, are people." The inferiority complex of blacks was not just something that Biko perceived, but was also noted by Burman and Reynolds in *Growing Up in a Divided Society:* "Results from South African research have consistently shown that black children from an early age prefer white stimulus figures." (p168). The SASO leadership was acutely aware that even if black people should achieve the vote, there could never really be any form of black independence unless black people had an appreciation of who they were, and shed the mentality of white being right, black being wrong, and black and white being not too wrong. In response to this consciousness on the part of the black youths, and the rejection of Afrikaans language usage in schools, South Africa experienced a brutal decade that resulted in the death and exile of many of its leadership including Steve Biko and Robert Sobukwe, but a decade that probably agitated for the democracy that is now enjoyed.

Post 1994 – notions of a rainbow nation?

In 1994, South Africa held its first democratic elections, and the belief of one rainbow nation under heaven was born. And while many white South Africans would like to believe that they are all equal and now have equal opportunities, 400 years of oppression cannot be buried just by giving the black people a flag, an anthem and a president – what then would be the difference between the nation and a soccer club?

As a parent I dream, like Martin Luther King Junior, of a time when my son will not be judged on the colour of his skin but on the content of his character, but I am skeptical.

I am skeptical, not because in the post-apartheid South Africa that I live in I do not relate to any white people, but because when I walk into a restaurant with a white male friend, I feel black males' eyes boring into me, and their voices calling me a "coconut."

I am skeptical because inherently, when I see a good-looking, successful black man with a white woman I want to ask why he feels the need of going to the other side when he makes it, instead of just thinking of them as any other couple.

I am skeptical because I know my fellow black people are still bitter that in spite of a political independence and being a majority in the country they have no control of the economy and so long as this is the case, we have a recipe for a racial explosion. I am skeptical because some of my white compatriots fail to see the injustice that was brought upon black people by apartheid and are forever whining about affirmative action.

I am skeptical because when I walk in the mall in a "white area" I see an older white woman clutching her bag while looking suspiciously at bald-headed me or my dreadlocked black friend.

I am skeptical because whenever I invite a white friend to a party where the majority of people are black

she has to apologise for her whiteness, and whenever I am invited to a party by my white friend I have to prove that I am "civilised" and explain where I get my accent from because "you are very well-spoken for a South African" (read: you speak English well – and that is a compliment in spite of English not being my first language).

I am skeptical because some time ago at Oliver Tambo Airport a little white girl happily wanted to play with my black son and her parents snatched her away angrily in front of hordes of people, without in the least being ashamed of how their actions could be perceived by the rest of the onlookers in a democratic South Africa.

In spite of my skepticism, however, I am still hopeful that there is a way that we can still shake off the shackles of race. Yeah, I know. Sounds very optimistic but is it not optimism that creates an open society?

White people need to start looking at black people as individuals in their own right, and not as representatives of the race. Until this happens, black people will always feel excluded as humans on the dinner table of equality in South Africa. From my personal experience as a writer, in spite of having written a novel with characters of different races, I have often been perturbed to find that I am considered a black writer (thereby implying that my audience should just be black, or that I am an expert on black issues to the exclusion of everything else). There are many South African black writers who can recount similar and sometimes worse experiences both at home and abroad of how they have been discriminated against or pigeonholed into being spokespersons of the race or the continent. But this is not only exclusive to the literary world. Tiisetso Makube recounts in *The Myth of The Rainbow Nation* that he remembers, "… a situation at some firm I used to work, where remarkably, almost every black employee woke up one pay day to discover that they had not been paid. The reason given for this was that the work on some accounts had not been delivered and this was a lesson. On investigation, however, the black employees discovered that their white colleagues had been paid."

In *The Powerless Corporate Darkie*, Ndumiso Ngcobo says, "… but to hear white people talk during those fake, superficial diversity workshops at work, you'd think the period between 1652 and 1984 was a little misunderstanding involving a few harmless skirmishes." Unless and until white people in South Africa can look at the past, admit and apologise for their wrongdoings, and attempt to know their fellow citizens of different races as opposed to wanting to convert other races to the white way of life, race will always be an issue where two South Africans meet.

Do white South Africans not feel any embarrassment that they can talk of reconciliation when they are staying in Sandton and yet have never been to the township of Alexandra a stone's throw away? The fact that many white South Africans, born and bred in this country, have never attempted to learn any African languages in spite of their claims of being African, is also a cause for concern. Is the feeling among white South Africans that Afrikaans and English are superior to any African language and if this is the case, can they truly claim that they look at their black compatriots as equals? While it is a great improvement to note that many white people born and bred in this country finally seem to acknowledge their African-ness, I believe that being African must also include the ability to speak at least one African language (and in all technicality and with apologies to anyone who feels otherwise, I do not think "bastardised" Dutch does count as an African language in as much as I do not feel the *fanakalo,* a "bastardised" and oversimplified Zulu that was spoken in the mines during the apartheid era, is an African language).

But not all blame should lie at the door of the white world for the way race has excluded the black person from having an equal share of the pie since 1994. Black people too must take their share of the blame. Molefi Asante notes in his essay titled *Solution to Our Problems begins with Afrocentricity* that "The sad truth is that we still have the idea that whites know better. We have the idea that they can run institutions better than we can. We have the idea that they are more capable than we are." Unless and until black people can look at whites as equals and not as superiors, without deriding all that stems from their own culture, black people in this country will never have an identity except that which is carved for them by the dominant white culture. Education is very much the key.

While many black people know the intricacies of the white world because white culture has been the dominant culture in our country, they have little knowledge of their own culture or history and indeed in some instances, they have a resentment for it. I watched with trepidation on the news the other day a black parent in Limpopo who spoke with disgust at the Department of Education's insistence on having black languages taught in her son's Model C school. "I don't know why they want to do that," she said

angrily, "I put my child in this school so they could learn English. No one speaks Venda internationally." That is true and chances are, no-one will ever speak tshiVenda internationally but what should be worrying this parent is that so long as her son cannot speak his language, he cannot truly know who he is, and when he becomes a parent he cannot tell his children fairy tales in his language because he cannot speak it. The only heroes that he will know in history are Nelson Mandela and nothing of the heroes from his own past, and that should be worrying to the parent. How indeed can the so-called Black Diamonds of South Africa insist and expect white people to respect them and their history when they do not know who they are themselves? Part of the reason why colonialism was successful in Africa was that the colonialists came and imposed their history on the continent while making us feel that our history was tainted and we were inferior. In order to reverse the legacy of colonialism, black people need to rediscover who they are – and I am not just talking here of our glory days as some Africanist historical revisionists would like to do, but also our mistakes so that these will not be repeated in the future.

Conclusion

The so-called educated black would like to believe that we are all the same. This is a false argument brought forth by white South Africa to make us think that all is equal post-apartheid, but all is not equal and if there are semblances of equality in certain quarters, then white South Africa is still more equal than black. If indeed we have reconciled and are equal, as some would like to believe, how come when I go to Orania, I am spoken to in Afrikaans, when I am in Camps Bay, I am spoken to in English and yet when a white South African comes to my Eastern Cape village of Stutterheim, they never attempt to speak to me in isiXhosa? Just as no-one speaks tshiVenda internationally, no-one speaks Afrikaans internationally either, but one does not see the Afrikaners wanting their language scrapped from national usage. Why is it okay for Afrikaners who make up less than two percent of the South African population to cry about the reduction of Afrikaans language use in public institutions as though they are the only taxpayers; and yet Zulus who make up the largest of South African language groups do not bat an eyelid when all the signage is written in Afrikaans and English, and classes at University of Kwazulu-Natal are not conducted in isiZulu except for those studying for a bachelors in that particular language? Should not the Black Diamonds be trying to bring their languages and culture to the forefront as well so that they can indeed be perceived as equals? You will note that I never mentioned anything above about "black pride." That is because I believe that if we are to move towards becoming an equal society, we should come to the table knowing our differences and being able to celebrate them; and yet one cannot, as an identity, be proud to be black/white/other because one should be proud of something that one has achieved, and being black, a woman, an African is not an achievement but an accident of birth. Being conscious of who I am, however, without denigrating anyone who is different, is an achievement and it is this that will make me be treated as an equal by the different other.

Stereotypes continue to be the greatest stumbling block to learning about each other, and stereotypes will never be truly be erased until we make an effort to walk across the bridge to the other side through intermingling. If each and every South African starts to bridge the difference today, we can ensure that we become members of more than just the black/white/brown/yellow race, but that we belong to a larger race – the human race, comfortable in our differences yet able to celebrate our similarities.

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Endnotes

1 Quoted in Ben Magubane's "Race and the Construction of the Dispensable Other".

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