

Rezensionen

Melissa Steyn, **“Whiteness just Isn’t What It Used to Be”. White Identity in a Changing South Africa.** Albany: State University of New York Press 2001, 228 S., EUR 20,-, ISBN 0-7914-5080-5.

Is it a coincidence that my co-editor for this issue, Hanna Hacker, put some gentle pressure on me, a Dutch historian, to offer to review a book on white identity in a changing South-Africa? Of course it can be expected that a Dutch person has a different experience with ‘South Africa’ than the average German or Austrian historian. There are not only long-standing historical contacts between white Dutch people and white South-Africans, or more precisely Afrikaans speaking ‘Afrikaners’, but South Africa is also close to the Netherlands in terms of national identity. The Boer War, which plays a decisive role in South-African history, is also one of the formative historical moments of Dutch national identity.

Besides, she knew I had some personal connection with the country, being born in Pretoria in 1954, even though I have always denied any real relationship with it. After all, my Dutch family came to South Africa only as a result of Dutch post-war and post-colonial emigration policies in 1951, and moved back to the Netherlands in 1956 before I formed any memory of South Africa. Who could blame me for the fact that as a young girl, hardly able to pronounce the word Pretoria, I gloried in my exotic birth place (today also called Tshwane), and my exotic birth certificate that very amusingly and in that funny Afrikaans language said that my race was ‘blankes’. Since I became somehow politically conscious I stopped being proud and started to feel embarrassed whenever I had to tell my birthplace. And although I was a donor of the *Zuidelijk-Afrika Komitee* for a long time, I did not actively engage in the anti-Apartheid struggle. And why should I? My only relationship with ‘that country’ was with my *not* having any memories from there! So what had Apartheid got to do with me?

The first merit of the book by Melissa Steyn then, is personal: it has made me fully aware of the many South African stories that inform my own autobiography or personal history of whiteness, next to the grand narratives that I grew up with and that I have come to relate to politically and analytically. Even though I have no access to direct memories, the book woke me up to the fact that I do have a lot ‘to tell’ about our family’s South African episode, interestingly enough, mostly in the form of comical anecdotes. Thus, there

always has been the story of how disappointed our black 'maid' was with me when my mother returned home from the (German) birth clinic. Not only was I way too small, but I also had dark brown eyes (turning blue only some time later) and a head full of unruly black hair. This was not as I should have been: a dream of a pink white fatty baby with blue eyes and blond hair. What a funny misconception of that maid!

Another often repeated story, that is more telling of the effects that South African society – still only in the beginning of formal Apartheid – had on my five year old brother, is located in Amsterdam in 1956, shortly after my parents returned to the Netherlands and temporarily stayed with my grandparents. My brother was playing in the garden in front of their house when he was addressed by the milkman who jovially – and probably under the influence of ongoing Americanisation – greeted him with: "Hello boy!" Hereupon my brother reacted as peeked by a wasp: "Ek ben nie boy nie", which is Afrikaans for "I am not a boy", 'boy' clearly having for him only the one meaning of black male house servant. If anything, he wasn't that.

It is not only the sincerity and courage of Melissa Steyn's book that made me realise (and confess) my white South African heritage, it is also the combination of self reflexivity and analytical power with which she has probed the question of what stories white South Africans are beginning to tell about being white in the new South Africa. The new South Africa began on election-day in 1994 and for white South Africans it meant a revolutionary loss, at least of formal political power. Given the way in which whiteness and political power were almost identical under Apartheid, the central question Steyn probes in the book is: how do whites give meaning to 'race' in the new 'rainbow nation' that often presents itself as 'beyond race'? Or more specifically: what 'narratives of whiteness' do white South Africans live by in the turbulence of social change? To answer this question she analysed 95 questionnaires. The emphasis on 'narrative' stems from social constructionism as formulated by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, and postmodern critics such as Walter Truett Anderson: the book's title is a variation on his "Reality isn't what it used to be".¹ Narrative in this context is taken as opposite to modernist foundational knowledge and does not refer to literary form but to an epistemological category.

The book opens with a compelling autobiographical tale of how the author was conditioned into whiteness through a combination of lies and half-truths that were intrinsic to Apartheid society. It is thus that she not only tells her own personal story of whiteness, but also positions herself as a researcher of 'her own kind'. In the emotional minefield of race research this is a highly charged position, as she explains consecutively in the informative and theoretically elegant introduction. Some of the respondents 'confided in her' as 'one of them', others were suspicious of her as a potential 'race traitor'. Without resorting to insider rhetoric Steyn leads the reader along a profound discussion of contemporary whiteness studies, as well as the ethical/political and methodological aspects of her research.

1 Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality isn't what it used to be. Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World*, New York et al. 1990.

She not only explains the increasing attention to contextual whiteness studies (white students in the US who complain of 'reverse racism'; poor whites), but also why the South African case may be most instructive for processes of white marginalization globally and the accompanying urge to engage in processes of cultural decolonization and deracialisation. Following Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Bhikhu Parekh she stresses the importance of this cultural work of addressing the race issue, and not stopping at desegregation.

The book is made up of two parts. The first one consists of a historical and conceptual analysis of the "Master Narrative of Whiteness" and a more context specific history of "'White' South Africans". Steyn stresses two core elements of South African whiteness. As a deep settler society South Africa shares traits with other such communities as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. It is, however, different from these societies with respect to the fact that the white population remained a small group that contested but did not destroy the majority of indigenous peoples and therefore was destined to always live in fear; the other core element is the fact that from the beginning of the nineteenth-century there has been an ongoing competition between two white groups to the point of a racialisation of Afrikaners by the British.

These chapters prepare the ground for the core of the book which consists of a display and explanation of the five distinct narratives that Steyn distilled from the often elaborate answers to her questionnaire, making ample use of citations from the responses. These narratives are presented as: 1. "Still Colonial after All These Years"; 2. "This Shouldn't Happen to a White"; 3. "Don't Think White, It's All Right"; 4. "A Whiter Shade of White"; and 5. "Under African Skies (or White but Not Quite)". The first narrative, *Still Colonial after All These Years*, is based on the old master narrative of whiteness and is told in differing degrees of animosity or goodwill, accordingly labelled by Steyn as the hardliner colonial version and the altruistic colonial version. The second narrative, "This shouldn't happen to a white" is testimony to the respondents' discovery that whites have been racialized, which is lamented and deplored as unjust. Instead of former (deplorable) black discrimination, 'Now we are discriminated against.' In the third narrative "Don't think White, It's all Right", which Steyn subdivides in a stronger and a weaker version, a sense of natural belonging in South Africa is expressed, though now in full realisation of the fact that whites form a minority group within South Africa.

The fourth narrative "A Whiter Shade of White", is told in many different versions of denial: 'we are all South Africans'; 'as a British South African I have always abhorred the Afrikaner racism' etc., which Steyn has named respectively 'Appeals to an Overarching Identity, Appeals to Nonapplicability, Appeals to Political Correct Ethnicity etc.

The fifth and most hopeful narrative "Under African Skies (or White but not Quite)", consists of three variants, from "I Just Don't Know What to Do, being White" and "I Don't Wanna Be White No More" (in a romantic and a dedicated version) to "Hybridization. That's the Name of the Game". It forcefully argues that whiteness is a thing of the past and should be redefined on a personal level. Though in the first two versions guilt, shame and despair are expressed, especially the latter speaks of personal growth and lear-

ning, rewards and losses, of unknown futures, personal responsibility and the implication of larger structures. It not only deconstructs the master narrative but insists on a dialogue with 'other voices' and aims at co-construction of self and other.

The last chapter is dedicated to a discussion of the main features of the narratives that are "more, or less, fundamentalist in their relationship to the master narrative". Steyn discerns in the narratives "stories of crisis" that lament "postmodern displacement" in a series of losses: the loss of home, the loss of autonomy and control, the loss of sense of relevance, the loss of guaranteed legitimacy, and the loss of honour and face. According to Steyn the narratives also testify to the fragmentation of whiteness, or whiteness becoming visible everywhere due to globalisation and shifting balances of power. The last she discusses is the Hybridization narrative as departing most from the master narrative and capable of creating a heterogeneous identity as 'White African' (not White South African). Here she expresses hope that especially the South African context with its heritage of schisms in the white psyche left by the colonial and Apartheid system is a fertile ground for more complex identifications. And just when I am beginning to feel a bit uncomfortable about the story of progress that organises the book (all is well that ends well) – Steyn intervenes with a sensitive Final Comment on the "rousing tones of the previous paragraph" and the irony that is in the "nature of a story that wants closure".

This book is exemplary in many aspects: the theoretical approach, the clear and transparent treatment of difficult and sensitive issues that surround discourses of race, the unemphatic self reflexivity and the style: Steyn illustrates and enriches her arguments with mottos from fiction and non-fiction, poetry and songs. I do have some difficulty, however, with the degree of subtlety with which the main narratives are distinguished in different versions that in their turn are often subdivided as well. Even though Steyn makes use of 'catching titles' that seem to be derived from popular music culture (I am illiterate in this field, but I recognised and traced on the internet song titles such as *A whiter Shade of Pale*, *Still Crazy after all these years* and *Under African Skies*), I doubt whether she has managed to "catch social construction in the act", as she hopes to do. I am capable of reproducing some of the main narratives but far from all, and I find it not so easy to put my finger on the choice of citations for the particular narratives. Another question which remains unanswered is why Steyn has chosen the method of the questionnaire (I do miss the questionnaire in the Appendix on Methodology) and not another type of discourse "to catch social construction in the act". Are respondents not always already on their guard?

These are, however, minor issues compared to the richness and the depth of this study, and the hope it entails for a move towards a white African identity or an identity of African whiteness.

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