



“There’s a drumbeat in Africa”: Embodying imaginary geographies of transnational whiteness in contemporary South Africa



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ABSTRACT

Emerging out of a study conducted in Durban of white, English-speaking South Africans (WESSAs) who had previously lived in the UK and elsewhere, this article argues that, because of South Africa’s past and current liminal position within a global meta-geography of whiteness, “imaginative geographies” are centrally important to the construction of transnational WESSA identities. This article uses an expanded concept of imaginative geographies that encompasses not only discursive modes of representation but also the direct, embodied experiences of differential spaces on the part of transmigrants, as informants emphasised their understandings of the spaces in which white bodies were in and out of place. The most frequently deployed imaginative geographies were meta-geographies of “first world” and “third world,” whilst South Africa was discussed as an African space of emotion, authenticity, and freedom and the UK a drab space of conformity, indignity, and discomfort. The data demonstrates that, for WESSA transnationals, South Africa and the UK emerge as geographies in relation to each other. Additionally, I argue that these unstable imaginative geographies offer potential routes to progressive means by which WESSAs can occupy the space of a democratic South Africa.

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1. Introduction

Noted South African economist and liberal M.C. O’Dowd argued almost four decades ago that South Africa, because it was essentially a colony exploited for its mineral resources, should have ‘remained in a state of overall backwardness’ (O’Dowd, 1976: p. 141), but for the presence of a small class of skilled, English-speaking entrepreneurs and owners of capital, who enabled the country to attain a ‘relatively high degree of economic independence’ (O’Dowd, 1976: p. 149). For O’Dowd, the country thus remained only very precariously outside the category of impoverished former African colonies, due exclusively to the presence of skilled English speakers. Revealingly, however, he disputes the notion that South Africa is actually a ‘developed country’. As he writes:

English-speaking South Africans [have] a tendency constantly to measure South Africa by the pre-conceived model of a much wealthier and more highly developed country. This fact of virtually living in two worlds, a world of ideas imported from one kind of country and a world of reality of quite another kind, is perhaps the essential peculiar predicament of English-speaking South Africa. [...] It was the English and not the Afrikaner in South Africa who first invented the fallacy of South Africa as a

White nation of three million people [...] to be fairly compared with Canada or Australia. (O’Dowd, 1976: p. 150)

O’Dowd here argues that the instability of South Africa’s economic position as a ‘middle income country’ fosters a disconnect between the fantasy, on the one hand, that South Africa is part of the rich world, a ‘white man’s country’ (see Huxley, 1953; Miles and Phizacklea, 1984) and the equally extraordinary notion that simply because of its location on the African continent it could never aspire to be more than a post-colonial basket case. This perceptual disassociation is attributed primarily to the English-speaking population and, he argues, is central to the white, English-speaking South African (WESSA) ‘predicament’ of living in two worlds. O’Dowd also highlights the extent to which understandings of other places—in this case, Australia and Canada—informed WESSA perceptions of South Africa. Since the 1970s the position of South Africa within the global-scale geography—the *meta-geography*—of nations has continued to shift even more dramatically. WESSAs do have a long history of international mobility, and throughout the 20th century were often derogatorily ridiculed by Afrikaners, having few ties to other countries and thus traditionally more likely to stay put, as PFPs (‘Packing For Perth’) or *soutpiels* (Afrikaans for salt-cocks, insinuating that they stood with one foot in South Africa and one in England, with the penis dipping into the ocean) (Thompson, 2001. See also Foster, 2008). However, scholars tracing shifts in contemporary WESSA identities (e.g. Ballard, 2004a,b, South African Institute of Race Relations, 2005; Bloom,

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2009; Andrucki, 2010a,b) have argued that for many more WESSAs the response to the psychic dislocations of the post-apartheid moment has involved a spatial relocation: temporary or permanent migration, or, increasingly, various practices of ‘semigration’ (withdrawal into all-white gated communities or migration to the supposedly ‘whiter’ Western Cape). In short, O’Dowd was only half-right: WESSAs do not only live *virtually* in two worlds.

In this article I argue that historical and contemporary circuits of migration between South Africa, the UK, and other former ‘white dominions’ inform the propensity of WESSAs to construct imaginative geographies through a meld of both fantasy and embodied practice, as places one has experienced come to be understood in relation, and often opposition, to each other. Thus this article addresses the multiple ways that South Africans imagine, code, and perform the transnational spaces through which they move. Focusing in particular on how these are understood and come to matter through the power of geographic imaginations, it examines the ways in which South Africa, as an indeterminate node within a global space economy of whiteness, is constructed and performed, co-constitutively with the UK, through racialized discourse of desire and abjection, as well as the everyday embodied practices of whiteness. I argue further that geographic imaginaries of where the Anglophone white body is in and out of place play a central role in the construction of WESSA transnational subjectivity, but that the concept of imaginative geographies can be usefully extended to encompass formations rooted not just in fantasies about places but also to those based on embodied experiences of places relationally constructed and experienced as different. I draw on phenomenology in order to highlight this essential connection between the spaces that bodies inhabit and the embodied modes of subjectivity that arise out of and project onto these same spaces. I suggest that attending to embodied life histories of transmigrants moving through and making sense of divergent spaces, and the disparities between them, allows for a more nuanced reading of the nature and role of imaginative geographies in shaping the ongoing phenomenon of white South African mobility circuits. Although much of the experience of migration and return, and the geographic imaginaries engendered by these mobilities, are doubtless shared by many South Africans of other backgrounds, the specificity of WESSA expectations and experiences of home and away in the UK and South Africa is central to the argument of this article. I highlight three main themes through which specifically WESSA imaginative geographies constitute not only sites of representation but also modes of experiencing space: the distinction between ‘first’ and ‘third’ worlds; the deployment of the South Africa’s ‘Africanness’; and the identification of London as an unsuitable place to live. Through an historically-situated exploration of post-apartheid WESSA discourses on the UK and South Africa as very much contested spaces this article also argues that a closer reading of narratives of imaginative geographies reveals the potential for more cosmopolitan ways through which whites in South Africa can engage with the spaces and subjects of post-apartheid South Africa.

2. Methods and context

This article draws primarily on interview material with 42 white, English-speaking South Africans (WESSAs) living in Durban, South Africa but who had spent between 3 months and 8 years living overseas. EThekweni Metropolitan Municipality, which encompasses Durban, is an industrial metropolis of approximately 3.5 million. Although its population is roughly equivalent to that of Cape Town, it is usually considered South Africa’s third city, without the ‘world city’ aspirations of Johannesburg and Cape Town (McDonald, 2008). Though its mild weather makes KwaZulu-Natal, and Durban’s ‘Golden Mile’ of beaches in particular, the

top domestic holiday destination, the city is home to heavy industry, including oil refining and automotive manufacturing. It is Africa’s busiest port, connected by road and rail to the Johannesburg region some 500 km to the north. The city region is demographically unique in South Africa, with its large Indian population (80% of the country’s total) and largely homogeneous Zulu-speaking black African population, and it is the only region of South Africa where the white and Coloured (mixed-race) populations are majority-English-speaking. The former province of Natal (since 1994 merged with the former homeland into the province of KwaZulu-Natal), founded separately from the Cape or the Boer Republics,¹ and its primarily British-descended white population, is renowned for its staunch history of loyalism, royalism, and even separatism before and during the apartheid period. Even after South Africa became a republic in 1961, Natal was often dubbed ‘The Last Outpost of the British Empire’ (Thompson, 1990).

Respondents’ ages ranged between 21 and 57; 27 interviewees were female and 15 male. This article is part of a broader research project on circular migration practices between South Africa and other Anglosphere countries; all but one interviewee had experience of living in the UK (the other had lived in Ireland), though some had also lived in Canada, Ireland, Taiwan, Zimbabwe, Dubai, Gabon, the Netherlands, Australia, and Germany. Most had in fact made multiple long-term sojourns to the UK, returning to South Africa each time. At the time of interviews some were in the process of re-emigrating to the UK and Australia, ostensibly for good, though this was of course unpredictable. All research subjects’ overseas experience had taken place during the post-apartheid period, defined most liberally as the time since 1990. This is the period during which South Africa re-entered the Commonwealth and began its uneasy reinsertion back into the global economy and world stage.

3. Imaginative geographies

Drawing on the late cultural critic Edward Said, geographers have contributed to a growing body of work on ‘imaginative geographies,’ or what Derek Gregory (2004) calls ‘constructions that fold distance into difference’ (17). Imaginative geographies are popular understandings of faraway places and are usually understood as discursive productions that cement identities through the creation and continuous deployment of a spatially distant constitutive exterior in which otherness is embedded. Said, quoted in Holloway and Valentine (2000: p. 337), writes that ‘there is no doubt that imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the difference and distance between what is close to it and what is far away’ (Said, 1985: p. 55). This phenomenon is of course most notoriously associated with ‘orientalism’—a discursive mode through which Europeans, by ostensibly coding ‘the Orient’ as primitive, exotic, and unchanging, were in fact attempting to shore up their own distinctiveness and its supposed relation to white racial superiority. Derek Gregory, also citing Said, (2004) writes that

European and American imaginative geographies of ‘the Orient’ combine over time to produce an archive in which things come to be seen as neither completely novel nor thoroughly familiar. Instead, a median category emerges that ‘allows one to see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing’ (p. 58). This [...] is immensely important because the citational structure that is authorized by these accretions is also in some substantial sense performative: it produces the effects that it names. [...] [I]maginative geographies are not

¹ It was the site of the short-lived Natalia Republic, which was founded in 1839 and annexed by Britain in 1843 (Thompson, 2001).

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