

## *White Fright: the politics of white youth identity in South Africa*

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**ABSTRACT** *In the 1990s, 'whiteness' in South Africa was open to multiple rearticulations. As white is politically (although not necessarily economically) unhinged from a position of privilege, it finds new paths and trajectories to follow. In this article, I examine how white students at a predominantly black high school in Durban remake and resuscitate whiteness. Using the strategy of resentment, white students negate and dismiss both the historical and contemporary position of their black classmates, instead recentering themselves as victims. As they survey their lives and futures, white students also plot routes of escape out of South Africa, taking refuge in a global whiteness that has many different facets. As white students elude and evade the boundaries of the nation-state in their quest for a secure, privileged whiteness, they lead whiteness to a global stage.*

### **Introduction**

In recent years, the study of 'whiteness' has emerged as an influential and effective tool for analysing and interpreting the workings of power and privilege in numerous societies, including the US (Fine *et al.*, 1997; Giroux, 1997a; Lipsitz, 1998), Australia (Hage, 1998), and Britain (Phoenix, 1997). Central to these investigations is an understanding that, in order to decentre whiteness, it must be scrutinised as a particular configuration or temporary, yet potent, affiliation that is marked and produced in specific ways. In other words, whiteness is not an omnipresent and invisible phenomenon, but a contextual site of identity that emerges and re-emerges from a continually changing set of circumstances (Omi & Winant, 1994; Ignatiev, 1995; Haney Lopez, 1996; Manzo, 1996; Hill, 1997).

In this paper, I examine the specific contours of whiteness among white students at Fernwood High School [1], a formerly white government school in Durban, South Africa that, by 1996, the year of this study, is majority black. I take as my premise that whiteness must constantly struggle to re-invent itself and to maintain its (still) privileged, although increasingly contested, position in a global arena. I discuss whiteness in both the global and South African context, and then give a brief overview of Fernwood High

School and the methodology of this study. I then use student interviews and essays, and ethnographic observations to discuss two prominent themes in the rearticulation of whiteness among white students at Fernwood. First, I examine how whiteness is re-cast as a space of fear, powerlessness, and anger largely understood through what Cameron McCarthy *et al.* (1997) describe as the ‘politics of resentment’. Second, I analyse how white students negotiate and respond to this newly created configuration of whiteness. Using the imagination not as a space of fantasy, but as what Arjun Appadurai (1996) describes as a ‘social practice’, white youth find refuge in escaping South Africa, and a renewed sense of self through reasserting whiteness in a global, not national, context [2].

### **The Politics of White**

Whiteness is a fairly new category of identification, only coming to have meaning within the context of European imperialism/colonialism within the past 500 years (Hill, 1997). Whiteness was launched within specific circumstances. Today, it is not a ‘fact’ that patiently waits to be encountered, but an ensemble that must be actively created and invigorated anew within changing circumstances. Because of this constant need to re-invent itself as a way of maintaining its privilege, whiteness also shifts. For example, in the US, both Jews and the Irish have relatively recently ‘become’ white (Brodin Sacks, 1994; Ignatiev, 1995; Haney Lopez, 1996). White expands, constricts, and changes, creating a circle of privilege that produces desire through its tempting cracks (Hage, 1998) and simultaneously bars entry.

At times, whiteness is invisible. It becomes ‘the norm’ that undergirds the structures of society (McIntosh, 1988). But whiteness is more often visible—it is named and critiqued by those who are ‘not white’, it can be implicit in the construction of a nation and national identity (McClintock, 1995; Frankenberg, 1997), it is acquired through attaining a certain class status. Historically, in South Africa, whiteness is both visible and changing. As a minority power, whites in South Africa were visible not only to themselves and black South Africans, but to the entire world. But even, or perhaps especially, in South Africa, whiteness was never a pre-ordained fact. Instead, as Richard Dyer (1997) argues (in a more general context), whiteness is used to unite ‘coalitions of disparate groups of people’ (p. 19). In South Africa, the manufacturing of whiteness was particularly salient at the beginning of the twentieth century, as poor whites were allowed into the circle of privilege to prevent them from affiliating with blacks who shared their class interests. Later, whiteness also changed to suit the economic needs of apartheid—it is well known that Japanese businessmen visiting South Africa were designated ‘honorary whites’ so that they could enter white hotels, restaurants, and meeting places. Similar status was accorded visiting African heads of state and their children who, by the 1970s, were allowed to attend selected white schools. A cobbled together, shaky whiteness also united a disparate group of South Africans including Afrikaaners, English, Portuguese, Greeks, Germans, Jews, and Hungarians (Nixon, 1994).

As apartheid was rocked and finally disbanded, whiteness faced multiple crises. By the mid-1990s, no longer propped up through legal designation or through state power, whiteness needed to be re-invented once again. In some ways, whiteness continues its dominance from the apartheid era, particularly in the economic sphere. Yet whiteness also changes as it loses its political and cultural power.

## Fernwood in Context

Under apartheid, South African students attended schools specific to their 'population classification' [3]. Schooling, like every other aspect of life, was both segregated and unequal (Nkomo, 1990; Unterhalter *et al.*, 1991). While this segregation was never totally complete, until the 1970s few South African children experienced multiracial schooling. In the 1970s, (white) Catholic schools began to defy the government and admit black children, a practice that spread to white private schools in the 1980s (Christie, 1990; Freer, 1991). Although the desegregation of white private schools attracted the majority of the publicity, Indian and coloured government schools also quietly began to admit African children in the 1980s (Carrim, 1992).

As apartheid waned in the early 1990s, white government schools that had previously staunchly refused to admit black, Indian, and coloured students drew up complicated formulas whereby they would desegregate but white students would remain in the majority (at least in most instances). Formerly white schools would be re-classified as 'semi-private' (known as Model C schools), and thus would gain the ability to institute fees, set their own admission standards, and control their population. Under this scheme, it was thought that white schools would be able to control the pace of reform and determine its parameters. At Fernwood, this plan was quickly undermined, as tumultuous change overtook the school by 1996.

Founded in 1965, Fernwood was an all-boys' school until 1976, when girls were admitted due to low enrolments. Its co-ed status makes Fernwood unique among Model C schools in Durban, which even in 1996 were still largely single sex. Throughout its history, Fernwood has been unable to compete with the larger, more prestigious white schools, instead attracting primarily lower middle-class and poor whites who have been refused entry or expelled from Durban's elite schools. Fernwood's population dwindled through the 1980s; it became, as long-time Fernwood teacher Gene DuPlessis describes it, an 'orphan' school, and has been repeatedly threatened with closure.

Given this history, Fernwood eagerly opened its doors to black, Indian, and coloured students in 1991. Faced with the closure of the school, Fernwood initially recruited (relatively) large numbers of middle-class black students who excel at sports and academics, outshining their white classmates. Continuing to aggressively recruit and admit black students, Fernwood's black population jumped from 11% in 1991 to over 40% in 1993. During these initial years of desegregation, Fernwood gained a local reputation as the 'new South Africa' or 'rainbow' school, and was heralded in the local media as a model for other white schools looking to move beyond a token black enrolment. By 1996, black students comprised over 60% of Fernwood's population of 600, with a small number of coloured students (approximately 7%) and a minuscule (2-3%) Indian student population [4]. By this time, the class dynamics of the school also started to shift: while the black students in the upper grades remained largely middle class, younger black students were poorer and less academically prepared for Fernwood.

As the class composition of the school changed, Fernwood becomes less concerned about its reputation as the 'new South Africa' school and more focused on its increasingly chaotic internal situation. The new intake of black students is largely unprepared for instruction in English, and often unwilling to accept the authority of the management and teaching staff. The almost exclusively white staff is generally unhappy with the demographic shifts in the school, and reluctant to teach a majority black student population. While a small minority of the teaching and management staff is committed to transformation at Fernwood, they are, in general, younger teachers who have little

influence on the governance of the school. The whiteness of the school is no longer guaranteed, but must be recreated by a staff desperate to hang onto a sense of privilege [5]. As preserving whiteness, instead of facing change, is the administration's primary agenda, there are no attempts to mediate the ongoing racial conflict among students or between students and staff. Race continues to be an ever-present and ever-divisive factor in the school, whose atmosphere is often tense and on the brink of explosion.

During the 1996 school year, I collected data on race, racial identity, and change in South Africa through a participant-observation case study of Fernwood High. My role at the school was loosely defined: I attended classes, school events, and extracurricular activities, and spent time with students before, during, and after school, and on the weekends and school holidays. In the course of the study, I conducted interviews about race, racial identity, and change at Fernwood and in South Africa with 45 individual students (of all races present in the school and both genders), three-quarters (23) of the teaching and management staff, and a small number of parents and governing board members. I also held focus group discussions and more loosely structured talks with 50 other students. In total, approximately 40% of all interviewed students were white. Fifty-three (23 white) students in two upper-level (Grades 11 and 12) English classes were also asked to write essays about their racial, ethnic, and national identities [6].

### **White Fright: The Politics of Resentment [7]**

Against their will and desire, white students at Fernwood find themselves in a school with a majority black student population. Unable to gain admittance to one of the more exclusive (and still predominantly white) schools in Durban, white Fernwood students feel squeezed out of 'their' school, trapped, angry, and fearful. Caught in the throes of a historical upheaval of which they have little understanding, white students respond to their new reality through what McCarthy *et al.* (1997) (drawing on Nietzsche) refer to as the 'politics of resentment'. Through 'the strategy of negating the other and the tactical and strategic deployment of moral evaluation and emotion' (McCarthy *et al.*, 1997, p. 84), white students are able to position themselves as victims. Resentment allows white students to refocus attention and concern on their plight—to recentre themselves, even as they are (from their perspective), decentred.

In part, the resentment discourses produced by white Fernwood students echo those that reverberate through the larger white community. The following Letter to the Editor (Graham, 1996), printed in a Durban newspaper, is representative of these inclinations,

... Yes, Mr. Mandela, you have made a difference in our lives: 1. We no longer go to the beach for the day. We're scared of being mugged. 2. We no longer go to town by car. We're scared it will be stolen. 3. We no longer go to a restaurant at night. We're scared our car will be broken into. 4. We no longer have a radio or music centre in our car. We're scared it will be stolen. 5. We no longer have hub caps on the wheels of our car. Those were stolen when it was brand new. 6. We no longer go overseas as often as we used to. The rand drops lower and lower every month. 7. We have had security gates fitted to all outside doors of our home. 8. We have had to have an alarm system, an anti-hijack device and an immobiliser fitted to our car. What a pity, Mr. Mandela, that all the differences are on the negative side of the scale.

White students at Fernwood do not simply mimic the discourses represented in this letter, which highlight and emphasise some of the new fears of whites in South Africa. Schools

(and other sites of identity formation) are, of course, productive as well as reproductive sites. Thus, white students negotiate, make sense of, and rearticulate these resentment discourses in the context of their own environment. For example, unlike (presumably) the adult author of the letter, white Fernwood students confront black peers as equals and classmates on a daily basis. Their experiences with blacks are not distant, detached and infrequent, but intimate and constant.

The resentment expressed by white students is undergirded by fear: a fear that whiteness is no longer in control in South Africa, that the 'other' has seized centre stage. White students sense that they are literally encircled by the dual threats of black violence and black economic prosperity. The fear of black violence is a constant theme that circulates throughout my interview transcripts and essays. White students often express the opinion that whites today must pay a bitter price for the actions of previous generations. As Craig reflects,

I don't want to sound racist or anything, but you know, us as teenagers now, we were born in like '78, and whatever the white people at that time did to the black people is now on our backs, we're sort of suffering for them. What's happening is the black people are taking it out on all the white people, hijacking white people in their cars and stuff like that.

Doreen similarly (and dramatically) elaborates on the differences she sees between blacks and whites, and her sense that whites are suffering, bleeding, and dying at the hands of blacks,

... I don't kill innocent babies and families and as their bodies fall to the ground and cry for help, I don't think 'They deserved to die because they are white, they must die'. I have culture. I am civilized. I know that not all Africans feel that way, some do have pure intentions and love humans black and white. But then I look into newspapers and I read about mothers and children killed while driving to school, these continuous killings, hijacks, assaults mostly done by Africans, why?

Blacks are positioned as morally inferior beings, who are only interested in retaliation and revenge. Yet, not surprisingly, the morals and behaviour of whites under apartheid (or in contemporary South Africa) are not questioned. Neither Doreen nor Craig confront the contemporary conditions that lead to violence, its economic roots, nor the ways in which black-on-white and black-on-black violence is sensationalised and trumpeted by the media, while various types of white-on-black or white-on-white violence (including 'white collar' violence) are buried. Critically, neither is able to recover or rescue whiteness as a morally defensible position in and of itself. Instead, whiteness can be recouped and repositioned only through a negation of blackness.

White students' resentment is also grounded in their daily experiences. Unlike resentment discourses in the US (Giroux, 1997a, b; McCarthy *et al.*, 1997), for example, that are largely constructed in relation to an other known and encountered primarily through the practices of representation, in South Africa the other is engaged on a daily basis. For example, Peter, one of the white prefects, relates,

There's this one area last year, I had a girlfriend at school, she was a prefect as well. She was walking on the field, this one [black] guy threw this piece of paper down, she tells the guy to pick it up, and he doesn't want to pick it up, so she tells him pick it up and do this and do this, and all of a sudden, a whole lot of black guys surrounded her, and grabbed her and put a knife

to her throat. And no one wanted to help her excepting this one [white] prefect, he ran in there, pushed those guys away, and grabbed her out. And nothing was done about it.

While I cannot personally confirm (nor deny) the validity of Peter's story, as I was not at Fernwood the year of the supposed incident [8], the importance of it lies not so much in its 'truth', but in the images and feelings it represents for white students. A white girl, performing her assigned tasks, is suddenly surrounded by a mob of black boys. She is abandoned by those in charge (teachers and management), only to be rescued by a lone, brave white boy. Here, we see how Peter believes that the protective shield of whiteness, previously provided by the state and its agents (here school staff), is no longer available within South Africa. Peter's recollection (or recreation) of this incident is echoed by Janice's comments about Fernwood, 'Everything is black this, black this. I mean look at Fernwood, it used to be mostly white, now it's overdone by blacks, and there's more violence with the blacks and all that. So I don't think [it is] a rainbow nation, more a black nation'. By focusing on the spectre of black violence, white students are able to cling to some sense of moral superiority, to the 'value' of whiteness, as whiteness slips out of the centre of the nation.

As much as white students fear black violence, they are equally scared of growing black economic prosperity. Many bitterly complain that they believe it will be impossible to find a job or secure a university place when they finish high school. This fear of displacement threatens whiteness' very construction. Through losing their financial advantage, white students are forced to question whether they really still are intellectually and morally superior to blacks, and if so, in what ways. Thus, they express hostility over their black classmates' ability to acquire commodities that they themselves cannot afford. When I ask Jackie, a white student, what was the most confusing or difficult thing about living in South Africa, she replies, 'Looking at a really, really interesting car, and thinking, geez, it's so cool, and looking inside the tinted windows, and it's hard to get used to seeing so many black people now having big cars, now having good clothing. It's just nothing we've seen before'. The politics of taste [9] also inflects these relations, as white students harshly critique black students' choice of clothing. Rosa comments,

We have civvies day at school, and you notice the white people come in baggies and t-shirts, but the black pupils get dressed up in nice larny pants, nice shoes, they think they're going to some fancy party instead of civvies day.

Janice, another white girl, expresses a similar sentiment as she comments on black girls' choice of attire for civvies day,

... Whites wear what is comfortable, they [blacks] always dress up smart, smart, smart. If you look on break-up day, if we still had civvies on break-up day, you would be hysterical. One girl came in a bridesmaid's dress last year. [Nadine: Why is that?]. I've got no clue. I think they are trying to act better than whites. I don't think they are purposely trying to do it, but in their subconscious they are.

Janice and Rosa are threatened by the black girls' display of material possessions—the scenario makes them uncomfortable as it forces them to re-examine whiteness as a space of unquestioned superiority. Mark similarly comments on the 'Indian guy who lives next door and has six Mercedes', and many white students remark on the fancy cars they claim to see parked at squatter camps. Some students, like Theresa, assume that squatters choose to live in squalid conditions so they can afford luxury cars,

*Theresa:* ... Like some squatters drive around in BMWs

*Nadine:* Do you know squatters who have BMWs?

*Theresa:* No, but you go by the squatter camps and there are BMWs parked outside.

*Nadine:* How do you think that happens?

*Theresa:* They don't pay for rent or nothing.

In these comments, we see how commodities become the site for resentment—the ways in which white students negate the other. Neither Mark nor Theresa can afford pricey consumer goods, and they are frustrated to see blacks in better positions than they are. While it is of course far-fetched to assume that many (if any!) squatters own BMWs, Theresa's assertion about the purchasing power and economic status of even the poorest of the poor in Durban speaks to her feeling that every black person is more privileged than she. Yet, she also finds a way to 'explain' this privilege—squatters don't pay rent—and thus hangs onto her sense that she is still, really, better than a squatter (her family pays a rent/mortgage and thus cannot afford a BMW).

As the old contours of whiteness disintegrate, white students realize their innate sense of whiteness' moral, intellectual, and economic superiority can no longer be maintained on South African soil. They must alight, if not physically, then imaginatively, to other places, as the historic bond between whiteness and the nation-state of South Africa is served. 'Escape' emerges as a defining trope of whiteness.

## **Escape**

Fernwood is no longer a safe refuge for whites; students feel surveilled and monitored by their black classmates, as Sandy so sharply expresses in her essay, '... I feel everything I say or do is restricted. I feel I'm crammed into a little box and until I paint my skin black and I act like a black person I'm not coming out'. Sandy feels strongly that her new minority status at Fernwood has limited her options, her freedom, and her comfort level. Suffocating under a crush of blackness, the only solution she sees is to change her skin colour and behaviours so that she is black. Yet, her desire is not a liberal hope for change or the annihilation of difference; instead, it is an angry response to what she sees as an intolerable situation for whites. Sandy's response to whiteness is to avoid it, to retreat within herself until such a time that she can decide how to move forward (as it is unlikely that she will be able to 'become black'). Like Sandy, Jackie moves inward, shutting out the noise of life in a multiracial school. She writes, 'I am white, in fact people say that I am too white. I don't really care what people say about me anymore. I have learnt not to listen to their nasty words filled with contempt'. Jackie's regret and remorse about apartheid mingles with strong feelings that she should not be blamed for systems in place long before she was born. She continues '... a lot of the time I feel ashamed for what happened during apartheid. I do not feel guilty for it, though because I was not responsible for everything that happened. I didn't do those terrible things. It wasn't me'.

Escape can also be imaginative, as students call up and cling to connections that they have to nation-states other than South Africa. These are not distant fantasies, but practices of the imagination (Appardurai, 1996) that take on real qualities in the course of daily life. For example, when I ask Peter about his position on political issues in South Africa, he replies,

... I really don't care who wins, because in three months, if I don't get into the

Navy I'm leaving the country, if I don't, I'm either going to England to become a pilot, or to Mauritius to live there, because my Dad lives there, it's my Dad's home country.

Peter's fantasies of escape shape his response to everyday life; here, fantasy has important social consequences for his negotiation of reality. Peter is disconnected and unconcerned with the chaos that surrounds him, as he imagines himself, only months from that moment, safely located outside of South Africa. Janice also hopes for a better life elsewhere,

... I want to go overseas, I don't want to stay here. I won't see my mother, my nephew, my niece, my niece is on the way. All my friends will be here, but it's no life to lead.

But, by itself, escape is inadequate. By simply escaping, whether within themselves or to another geographic location, white students concede to blackness; they admit defeat. Somehow, whiteness must recoup the privilege it has lost in South Africa.

### **Renewal: Resuscitating Whiteness**

Given their expressed feelings, it seems reasonable to assume that white students would disassociate themselves from the new South Africa. Yet, simultaneously, white students do not try to reassert or reclaim a white identity within the borders of South Africa. The whiteness they seek is not that of the Boer or the English, it is not tied to the land, nor to cultural practices established on South African soil. While whiteness is often analysed as a phenomenon that is contained within the nation (Giroux, 1997; McCarthy *et al.*, 1997; Hage, 1998), here the nation is abandoned [10]. Instead, the framework for interpreting whiteness both refuses and stretches beyond the nation—whiteness is able to reposition itself as part of a global whiteness that promises the power and privilege unavailable within the confines of the nation [11].

For white Fernwood youth, the only way to rescue a sense of a 'white' self is to connect to whiteness outside of South Africa's border—specifically, to the global flow or 'scape' (Appadurai, 1996) of white popular culture that unites white youth around the world. These desires for escape, for breaking the bonds and bounds of blackness, manifest themselves in the limited public arenas of the school where students have outlets for expression. Cultural practices, below I discuss the example of the school fashion show, become a way for white students to assert a collective racial self that attempts to burst out of the blackness in which it feels encased.

It is my first week at Fernwood High School, and I stop in to visit Michael Green, one of the assistant principals, during the second period—right before the first break of the day. Our conversation is abruptly cut short by Jenny King, a Fernwood teacher, who bursts into the office, apologising for the interruption, but imploring Mr Green to hold the bell for the upcoming break. As she explains somewhat frantically, the cast of the fashion show is planning a protest on the field during the break to demonstrate their unhappiness with the decisions being made in regards to the production. Quickly, Mr Green and Mrs King decide to avert the planned strike through calling a mandatory meeting of the entire cast of the fashion show during the break. Students oblige and the strike does not materialise.

As I was to learn later, even the threat of a strike was significant, as no one could remember Fernwood students ever before contemplating such an action. Yet in 1996, a long-standing tradition at the school and a cultural practice common to many Durban-

area schools, becomes a ground of struggle. White students (who are the leaders of the planned strike) try to seize ground, to retake control of their school through protesting the choice of music for the fashion show. They insist that the music for the fashion show be exclusively techno music, which they and others consistently identify as music that signifies white (Dolby, 2000a). Black students, in general, are not part of the strike, as they are content with the current mix of techno, pop, rap, and children's songs. What is significant about white students' actions in this context is the way in which they construct and project whiteness within this particular field. Whiteness here is defined through a mode that goes outside of the borders of South Africa. The music of the fashion show becomes synonymous with control of the space of the school, and the projection of a racialised identity that is grounded in a global whiteness centred in techno music. This, of course, does not mean that whiteness is everywhere the same, but instead 'global' whiteness speaks to identities that defy and circumvent the nation-state. White students in this instance are not gathering around a whiteness that is distinctively South African, but instead one that is detached both from the borders of the nation-state and from cultural practices based on ethnic affiliation. Students are not insisting that the fashion show include cultural markers of apartheid-era nationalism, or even what might be described as a more generalized South African white culture. Instead, students cling to the styles and tastes of 'global whiteness', here specifically music, to consolidate an identity about which they feel and express passionate attachments. This 'global whiteness' has its roots in popular culture and functions as a scape that binds, however unevenly, white youth around the world through the cultural practices of techno music. It matters little that the 'roots' of techno music are to be found in the African-American community in Detroit (Cooper *et al.*, 1995). As a genre, techno music operates globally as music associated with white youth, who have re-situated its roots in various European nation-states. Through asserting selves based on the practices of white youth throughout the globe, white Fernwood students escape the confines of their black reality. They do not resist blackness, but rather elude it.

Fernwood, and South Africa, are no longer comfortable, secure refuges for these white students. Every day, their world is rocked and destabilised by forces they do not understand, except for knowing that their lives will not follow the predictable path they once imagined. Some students retreat—putting up psychological barriers to insulate themselves from the whirlwind of change that surrounds them. Others, perhaps the majority, plot escape. Resistance, it seems, is an option that interests few, if any, white students at Fernwood. While many dream of a 'white nation', they do not connect that imaginary to the geographic space that is South Africa. Instead, some look around the world and see (from their vantage point) stable, white-dominated nations that can provide the safety they desire. Others (and the groups are not necessarily mutually exclusive) feel compelled to assert a whiteness within Fernwood, within South Africa. Yet, this is not a whiteness that is of South Africa—it defies commonsense explanations of whiteness as necessarily connected to a national project. Whiteness instead breaks the bonds of its national location, and re-emerges as a global phenomenon that takes as its centre the practices of popular culture; in this case, techno music. Techno music, and the subcultures and practices that develop around it, provide the sense of affiliation, of connection, of power, and location that white students can no longer find within South Africa. By suturing whiteness to techno music, white Fernwood students are able to rescue and resuscitate whiteness as a valid, vibrant node of identity. No longer victim, no longer trampled, mocked, and forced into hiding, whiteness finds its feet once again.

## The Future of White

The white ‘race’, as Mike Hill (1997) has noted, has only existed for, at best, several hundred years. Its creation and sustenance has been heavily tied to the nation/empire building and sustaining projects of imperialism and colonialism—projects that endure today, although in changed forms. Still, whiteness is not the (virtually) unchallenged force that it has been previously. Demographic changes in ‘centre’ nation-states such as the US, Britain, Canada and Australia, and many European countries, have made problematic the assumed coherence of ‘white’ and ‘nation’, at the same time that these very states are no longer (necessarily and absolutely) at the world nexus of economic and political power.

Whiteness in South Africa is, of course, particularly troubled. Politically, if not economically, destabilised, whiteness is still privileged, although in ways that are somewhat more constrained. But white Fernwood youth do not see, cannot feel, and do not recognise this reality. As Mark writes, ‘I didn’t have all the privileges (*sic*) of being white, I had to work hard to get to where (*sic*) I am today, no body gave me special treatment just because I was white’. And at some level, it is true that the majority of white students at Fernwood have not reaped the enormous economic benefits that have historically been attached to whiteness. Perhaps because of their (relatively) more tenuous position, they feel the impact of the decentering of whiteness stronger than others [12]. Yet, whiteness’ decentering within South Africa (and it is debatable whether or not this is actually true—it is certainly not absolute) can lead in multiple directions—to the calling up of imagined ‘roots’ such as in the much-publicised campaigns for an Afrikaaner homeland, and to the plotting of ‘routes’ (Clifford, 1997), which lead whiteness out of South Africa, and onto a global stage [13].

Examining these routes alerts us to a potential change in the constitution of whiteness. Historically, as Radhika Mongia (1999) argues, whiteness has been linked to nation and political empire; however, its current trajectories may be both more diverse and more complex. While whiteness suffers economically and politically in many locations around the world (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1999), it will not easily disappear or concede defeat, but will instead find new spaces in which to reassert itself as a still powerful, although battered, formation. As I have discussed in this essay, the global flow of white youth culture is one potential haven for whiteness. Although white youth in South Africa may not locate their whiteness within South Africa’s borders, they have not surrendered their quest. In the process, they have found not just refuge, but a potentially troublesome and dangerous renewal.

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## NOTES

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

[2] As this article specifically concentrates on the views and experiences of white students at Fernwood, black

students' perspectives on similar issues are not discussed. For an extended discussion of black students' experiences of Fernwood, see Dolby (2001, in press). This is not to suggest, however, that black students have no influence on how white students construct their identities. As I argue elsewhere (Dolby, 2000b), the production of racialised identities at Fernwood is relational. See also Perry (1998) for a discussion of how white students in a majority white high school have a very different sense of whiteness than white students in a minority white high school.

- [3] Under apartheid, individuals were classified into population groups using the categories of African, Indian, coloured and white. 'Black' exists as a category of identification in two ways: first, it emerged as an oppositional discourse that both refused apartheid categorisations and signalled the common oppression of Africans, Indians and coloureds; second, in the parlance of everyday life for many South Africans, black is equivalent to African. This double usage presents a particularly tricky dilemma for this article because, for white students at Fernwood, 'black' means African (although at times they comment on their Indian and coloured classmates, they use those terms directly). Although my usual practice is to use 'black' in a manner consistent with the Black Consciousness usage of the word (i.e. as encompassing Africans, Indians, and coloureds), for clarity and to allow readers to easily follow my arguments, in this article I use 'black' as the white students do.
- [4] Statistics on the racial composition of Fernwood High School in 1996 are my estimates based on long-term observation. No official (at least public) records on race were maintained.
- [5] Space considerations preclude an extended discussion of the racial dynamics of Fernwood, particularly the institutional structures, policies, and practises that encourage the flourishing of racial tension. See Dolby (1999b) for extended description and analysis.
- [6] The data discussed in this article are part of a larger research project on the construction of racialised identities at Fernwood High School. During my year at Fernwood, I established relationships and friendships with both black and white students, although my closest alliance was with a group of coloured students. While some of the opinions expressed by white students may seem extreme to readers unfamiliar with South Africa, students did not hesitate to share their views either with this researcher (who is white) or the teacher (also white) who assigned and marked the essays. For a complete discussion of my positioning as a researcher in the school, see Dolby (2000c). It should be noted that white students often did not try to hide their views from their black classmates—the administration's practises also served to encourage and facilitate this open expression of racial hatred and ongoing racial conflict.
- [7] The analysis presented here is generally representative of the perspectives and opinions of white students at Fernwood based on my interpretation of the interview and essay data, corroborated by 1 year of participant observation at Fernwood. Exceptions to these patterns were few, although there were isolated instances of friendships between black and white students (see Dolby, 2001, in press). I should also note that the white students discussed in this article were from Grades 11 and 12; the racial dynamics and patterns in the younger grades (especially Grade 8) were significantly different (see Dolby, 1999, 2001, in press).
- [8] Although no other student ever mentioned that particular incident to me, I heard similarly constructed stories from other white students on occasion.
- [9] The politics of taste is a significant component of the racialised landscape of Fernwood, although a complete discussion of the dynamic is beyond the scope of this essay. See Dolby (2000a, 2001, in press). For a theoretical discussion of taste and habitus, see Bourdieu (1984).
- [10] However, there is certainly a large body of literature that examines 'whiteness' as a global, colonial practice. See, for example, McClintock (1995) and Chambers (1993).
- [11] Radhika Mongia's (1999) analysis of the history of the passport demonstrates the historic links between race and the nation-state, as she argues that the modern nation-state was established along 'national lines that are explicitly raced' (p. 554). My analysis in this essay suggests that whiteness can no longer automatically use the nation-state in this way, and is thus forced to search for other locations.
- [12] While the discussion of this question is beyond the scope of this essay, I can note (although only anecdotally) that white students at a more prestigious Durban area school (where I conducted a short-term research project) expressed little to no anxiety about their futures in South Africa.
- [13] I do not mean to suggest here that whiteness (or blackness) in South Africa previously was somehow detached from the global—evidence strongly suggests otherwise (see Nixon, 1994; Manzo, 1996; Marx, 1998; David, 2001). However, I argue here that this articulation of whiteness is a specific response to a new set of global circumstances, which make it increasingly possible for identities in specific locales to refuse or engulf national borders.

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