

Twentieth Century Coloured Identity

Mohamed Adhikari, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community*

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Mohamed Adhikari has written a much-needed study on twentieth century coloured identity, entitled *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough:*

Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community. The timing is fortuitous. Against widespread expectations that coloured identity would wither at the end of apartheid, scholars have been keen to understand the efflorescence of coloured assertion over the past decade. A myriad of essays have been published about this phenomenon – each seeking to find that key ingredient for its persistence and resonance, especially why coloureds voted for the National Party in 1994 – but the virtue of Adhikari’s study lies in its sustained historical focus on the development, consolidation, continuity, and change in expression of coloured identity since 1910. The book is the product of over a decade of research, illustrating a profound engagement to a complex history.

Adhikari’s central argument is that “Coloured identity is better understood not as having undergone a process of continuous transformation during the era of white rule, as conventional historical thinking would have it, but as having remained essentially stable throughout that period” (p xii). Coloured identity historically “derived from a central core of enduring characteristics”: a desire to assimilate into dominant white society; an intermediate status in a racial hierarchy with relative privilege over Africans; a feeling of shame arising from the “taint” of racial hybridity; and a frustrating condition of marginality. The book, while not focused on coloured ethnogenesis, *per se* (which he places at the Mineral Revolution), takes us through the many political movements and social developments from that time to the present, showing precisely why this racial identity has remained so stable.

The study is structured around six chapters. The first offers an overview of coloured identity within the context of white supremacy, discussing its key features and ambivalences. The second provides an indispensable historiography detailing the writings of interwar *essentialists* who viewed coloureds as the natural product of “miscegenation” (Cruse, MacMillan and Marais), 1980s *instrumentalists* who asserted that the coloured category was a state-manufactured divide-and-rule mechanism (Hommel, Lewis, Goldin and Du Pré), and more recent *social constructionists* who focus on “fluidities” and “ambiguities” in the coloured self-identification process (Adhikari, Bickford-Smith and Erasmus).

The next three chapters are taken up with the published ideas of the coloured elite: political, professional, and literary. Adhikari first examines the *APO* newspaper from Abdurahman’s African Political Organization and the *Education Journal* of the all-coloured Teacher’s League of South Africa, both of which were prominent in the first half of the 1900s. He then takes us to the “radical” era of the mid-century,

assessing the Non-European Unity movement's mouthpiece, *Torch*, and Alex la Guma's novel *A Walk in the Night*. Lastly, he explores "coloured rejectionism" through James Matthews' Black Consciousness poetry and the populist, UDF-affiliated publications *South* and *Grassroots*. Through these analyses, the book pieces together the intellectual trends that shaped the coloured identity discourse within the community over the twentieth century.

The final, and perhaps most interesting chapter, looks at coloured identity in the "New" South Africa. It discusses some of the alternative identity proposals that have been proffered by various culture brokers: Rainbowism, Nonracialism, Brown Nationalism, the December 1st Movement (embracing a slave heritage), Khoisan Revivalism (embracing "indigeneity"), coloured rejectionism (embracing "blackness"), and so on. Most of these have been spectacular failures, and Adhikari explains why.

Like any good history book however, it raises as many questions as it answers. On a theoretical level, one crucial question relates to the study's use of the term "identity". According to Adhikari, "social identity is largely and in the first instance the product of its bearers and can no more be imposed on people by the state or ruling groups than it can spring automatically from miscegenation or their racial constitution ... At most, social identity can be manipulated by outsiders – but even then, only to the extent that it resonates strongly with the bearers' image of themselves and their social group as a whole" (p 36). Thus, "identity" is socially constructed largely by a process of *self-identification* rather than *external-identification* (by whites or Africans) or *state codification* (through the Population Registration Act).

This definition is meant to correct the inaccuracies of the essentialists and instrumentalists whose writings stripped coloureds of agency, reducing them to dupes of history and power. Adhikari rightly attempts to correct this impression by highlighting coloured participation in identity-formation.

Perhaps this corrective insight goes too far. My caution is partly inspired by the title of the book – *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough* – which derives from a popular saying amongst coloureds for describing their predicament in contemporary South Africa. The saying implies that they do not feel in control of their identity, nor their future prospects, but that they are pinned between two dominant social groups, who both define them as outsiders to privilege. Adhikari admits as much by making marginality a key feature of coloured identity. Thus, I think a

more open-ended definition would be useful, in which external-identification and state codification remain central to the historical construction of coloured identity along with self-identification. These three processes should be seen as mutually constituting, rather than discrete spheres of influence.

This book provides the most comprehensive treatment of coloured self-identification to date, but it should serve to inspire further research as well. For instance, in the definition above, Adhikari says that an identity must “resonate” within the group, which speaks to the concept’s interior and tacit dimensions. While this study looks mostly at explicit identity claims by coloured political organisations, professional bodies, and literati, it often assesses the viability of those claims by gauging whether it resonates amongst coloureds in general. Thus, the great protagonist of this book is oftentimes the coloured working-class, who ultimately determine whether an identity claim will fly or sink. As so many would-be culture brokers have learnt, if it does not resonate with them, it is doomed.

Thus Adhikari points the way for future scholars to explore the resonance – the depth, power and relevance – of coloured identity, especially as it is expressed in non-instrumental, non-explicit forms. His treatment of explicit coloured self-identification through the twentieth century provides a historical framework by which another set of questions – about coloured gestures, body movements, narrative conventions, humour, culinary norms, rituals, hair politics, speech, sentiment, and self-understanding – might be usefully asked so that we can gain a fuller sense of coloured identity through explicit *and* implicit indices.

Not White Enough, Not Black Enough will be valuable to the general reader for its clarity and insight, but its major strength will be in the university classroom, where students will be able to engage with the historical voices that helped to shape the contours of coloured identity.

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