1 | *Whiteness, the Western Gaze and Africa*

Without specifically addressing white ethnicity, there can be no critical evaluation of the construction of the other[1]

> … whiteness needs to be made strange[2]

What is the relationship between Whiteness and Africa? How do changing ideas about Africa reflect changing ideas about White racial and civilisational vitality in the West? This is a book that challenges conventional critical and post-colonial accounts of what we might call the Western gaze, and subsequent imaginaries and constructions of Africa. Many critical scholars argue that such imaginaries and constructions, whereby the continent is conceived of as being out-of-time, empty, savage and/or childlike, have been driven either by the material demands of Western capital and crises of over-accumulation in Western capitalist economies,[3] or by civilisational paternalism conjoined with a highly racialised understanding of world order.[4] Both of these impulses can, and have gone, hand-in-hand. However, in both of these accounts Africa is held to be in a directly negative hierarchical relationship with the West. Africa is, in these accounts, and to greater and lesser extents, emptier, more savage, more childlike, less modern, and less civilised than the West. How then can these kinds of approaches account for those times when Africa is not portrayed in such terms, when it seems that Africa is held in important segments

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[1] Coco Fusco, 'Fantasies of Opportunity', *Afterimage Magazine*, December 1988, p. 9.

[2] Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London, New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), p. 10.

[3] See for instance: Bram Büscher, 'The Political Economy of Africa's Natural Resources and the "Great Financial Crisis"', *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 103:2, 2012, pp. 136–49.

[4] See for instance: James Heartfield, *The Aborigines' Protection Society: Humanitarian Imperialism in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Canada, South Africa, and the Congo, 1837–1909* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2011).

of elite Western opinion (i.e., government, media, non-governmental organisations [NGOs], etc.) to be more socially, politically, culturally and/or economically dynamic than the West? What do these accounts miss about the historical engagement and representation of the continent among mainstream Western scholarship and policy-making if we begin to problematise the degree to which Africa has always been held as a denigrated and 'less-than' place with respect to the West? And why is it, given the overwhelming opinion otherwise, that Africa has at times been held, by mainstream commentators, scholars, politicians and others, in superior relation to the West? This book addresses these questions by taking a different approach to exploring constructions of Africa in popular and elite Western imaginaries. In doing so, the book engages in terrain normally under-appreciated by scholarship on the place of Africa and the West in imaginaries of international order. Although there is much to recommend about materialist and paternalist accounts of these imaginaries, this book seeks to supplement such accounts by arguing that over the past century major transitions have occurred which have reset these imaginaries and begun, in specific conjunctures, to place Africa in superior relation to the West, embedded in growing anxieties concerning the ability of phenotypical whites[5] to perpetuate their mythologised historical genius in gifting to the world liberal economy and democracy. It is this mythologised genius, and the way that it has structured social political and economic realities for white and non-white people alike, that I will call 'Whiteness'.

To be clear then, over the following pages I will seek to make a distinction between structures of Whiteness on the one hand, and phenotypical presentation on the other (whereby some people with lighter skin pigmentation may or may not identify themselves as being white, a decision-making process that itself is a privilege of possessing a lighter skin tone). The argument thereafter will suggest that it is racial anxiety, in greater and lesser amounts, rather than simply material or paternal inclinations, that drives shifting imaginaries of Africa. Whiteness, understood as a historical and structural force, has always needed a place called Africa, and the latter has become an increasingly

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[5] I use iterations of the term 'phenotypical whiteness' throughout the book, fully aware that having a lighter skin pigmentation has not always, and continues not always, to be a marker of racial supremacy in Western societies. Jews, Irish and Poles are just three groups to have been historically deprived the social benefits that other groups of phenotypical whites have accrued due to their skin colour. I engage with these debates in more detail later in this chapter.

important component in the ways by which Western elites of many different political affiliations have constructed Whiteness over the past century and invested their hopes for the perpetuated vitality of its related and mythologised social, political and economic historical genius. There has been a rhizomatic quality to the degree to which these anxieties have been foregrounded and backgrounded, mirrored across a range of debates concerning the make-up of international order, many of them unconcerned with Africa.[6] Nonetheless, as far as Africa is concerned, a major high point in considerations of the place of the continent in the international order emerged following the 2007–8 financial crash, with assertions among policy-makers, scholars, management consultancies, NGOs, international organisations and cultural and literary sectors that Africa was 'rising'.[7] An important point to be made about all of this celebratory fascination is that

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[6] For insight into this rhizomatic quality in the context of debates concerning US decline, see Michael Cox, 'Is the United States in decline – again?' *International Affairs*, 83:4, 2007, pp. 643–53. In this book, I do not engage with the debate over United States' decline, primarily because it does not concern itself with Africa. However, as Cox argues, these debates also have historical provenance, dating at least as far back as NSC 68, the 1950 US National Security Council memo that helped to usher in the Cold War. In its more contemporary iteration, much of this literature is far more bullish than the literature concerned with Africa (see note 7 for examples of this). Examples of the more bullish attitude concerning US decline include John Ikenberry, 'Is American Multilateralism in Decline?' *Perspectives on Politics*, 1:3, 2003, pp. 533–49; Robert Kagan, 'Not Fade Away: The Myth of American Decline' *The New Republic*, 11 January 2012, available at: https://newrepublic.com/article/99521/america-world-power-declinism, accessed on 21 August 2017). There are however exceptions – i.e., Charles Kupchan, *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[7] A brief sample: Jean-Paul Severino and Olivier Ray, *Africa's Moment* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011); Steven Radelet, *Emerging Africa: How 17 Countries Are Leading the Way* (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2010); Charles Robertson, *The Fastest Billion: The Story behind Africa's Economic Revolution* (London: Renaissance Capital, 2012); McKinsey & Company, 'The Rise of the African Consumer: A Report from McKinsey's Africa Consumer Insights Center', available at www.mckinsey.com/~/media/McKinsey%20Offices/South%20Africa/PDFs/Rise_of_the_African_consumer-McKinsey_Africa_Consumer_Insights_Center_report.ashx, accessed on 14 January 2015; Deloitte, 'The Rise and Rise of the African Middle Class', available at www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/au/Documents/international-specialist/deloitte-au-aas-rise-african-middle-class-12.pdf, accessed on 15 January 2015; Goldman Sachs, 'Africa's Turn', Equity Research Fortnightly Thoughts (Goldman Sachs newsletter), Issue 27, 1 March 2012, available at http://allafrica.com/download/resource/main/main/idatcs/00031978:a218704b4806a5136c18f03d75a4529c.pdf, accessed on 15 January 2015.

while the titles of the reports, books and blogs all deploy 'Africa' as their locus of analysis, as we will see in Chapter 7 where this literature is explored, Africa north of the Sahara is barely mentioned. Implied by this is a resonance with older ideas about the continent that divided it between a 'dark', 'Black' Africa south of the Sahara, and a more complex form of civilisation North of the Sahara, although, as we will see, arguably in the post-crash conjuncture these roles have been flipped somewhat.

The racial anxieties underpinning this plethora of upbeat analysis will be explored in further detail in Chapters 6 and 7. More broadly however, the book sets out to make four core contributions. First, it foregrounds Whiteness as a constitutive element in the construction of imaginations about international order. Secondly, the book overturns the conventional post-colonial critique of Western imaginaries of Africa by problematising the sense in which the former consistently holds the latter in inferior relation to it. Third, through a series of contextual and historical case study chapters, the book provides a historicisation of contemporary debates about Africa's economic, political and cultural 'rise', embedding them in a rhizomatic genealogy of anxiety-driven idealisations of the continent that have patterned imaginations of Whiteness for at least the past century. Lastly, in doing this, the book provides a sociology of significant shifts in how Whiteness has been (re)constructed over the past century, shifts that began to take place after World War II, and that began to manifest more openly following the 2007–8 financial crash in the context of major anxieties about White civilisational vitality. Importantly then, I do not propose to write a full history of changes in Whiteness, instead taking several illustrative or provocative moments over the past century to illustrate the centrality of racial anxiety to White supremacist understandings of international order and the West's and Africa's relative place therein.

The following section expands on the question of how I seek to deploy Whiteness in this book. Before that, a brief reflection on where this book began will help in understanding how the above contributions have, over time, been formulated. During the summer of 2012 I was grappling with a project exploring the contemporary nature of sovereignty in Africa (which never went anywhere) when I stumbled across something quite different. It began to strike me that there were two very different perspectives that were emerging on the state of African states. One was a more pessimistic, or at least constructively

sceptical account, found in the arguments of, for instance, Pierre Engelbert, when he asserts that African states at a fundamental level simply do not work.[8] In a similar vein, others have argued that African state sovereignty in the sense of manifesting as coherent territorial states is ultimately mythical.[9] On the other hand, a literature was emerging that trumpeted African state agency in shaping international order, ranging across climate change treaties, responses to HIV and Aids, poverty reduction and trade.[10] These two positions were not mutually incompatible; the latter foregrounding the place of African governing elites in international affairs, the former on the lack of writ these elites exert domestically.[11]

It was not, however, this debate on African statehood that really stood out. Rather, it was the breathlessness of some of the arguments being put by some advocates of 'African agency'. Arguments asserting Africa's 'agency', or its 'rise', did seem unusual. Indeed, if we were to take the conventional critique of Western representations of Africa, which suggests that Africa has historically served as the image of the degenerating old man in the youthful Dorian Gray's mirror,[12] then proclamations such as '[a]n Africa of 1.8 billion inhabitants will rapidly impose itself in the globalization game',[13] or assertions that Africa is 'Leading the Way'[14] and undergoing an 'Economic Revolution'[15] would seem to suggest that Africa's place in Western narrations of the continent were perhaps undergoing something of a transition. Moreover, it

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[8] See especially, Pierre Engelbert, *Africa: Unity, Sovereignty, and Sorrow* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reinner, 2009), p. 1.

[9] Oliver Jutersonke and Moncef Kartas, 'The State as Urban Myth: Governance without Government in the Global South' in Robert Schuett and Peter M. R. Stirk (eds.) *The Concept of the State in International Relations: Philosophy, Sovereignty, Cosmopolitanism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015) pp. 108–35.

[10] Sophie Harman and William Brown (eds.), *African Agency in International Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); Sophie Harman and William Brown, 'In from the Margins? The Changing Place of Africa in International Relations', *International Affairs*, 89:1, 2013, pp. 69–87.

[11] In many senses, therefore, these debates reproduce an older argument about Africa's 'quasi states'. See Robert Jackson, *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[12] Chinua Achebe, *An Image of Africa* (London: Penguin, 1977/2010), p. 19.

[13] Severino and Ray, *Africa's Moment*, p. 3.

[14] Radelet, *Emerging Africa*.

[15] Robertson, *The Fastest Billion*.

was not just one or two books that were making these claims. A quick
glance at the bookshelves in the O. R. Tambo International Airport in
Johannesburg, always a purveyor of popular 'state of the continent'
literature; a perusal of the investment guides produced by some of
the big management consultancies and accountancy firms;[16] a note of
the prominent 'Africa Rising' conferences being held by international
organisations;[17] the rise of African film, food and fashion festivals in
the capitals of former imperial powers; or even seeing the fictional
character Clare Underwood, one of the main protagonists in the pop-
ular drama *House of Cards*, reading a copy of Jean-Michel Severino
and Oliver Ray's *Africa's Moment*,[18] tells us that something was going
on here that, while faddish, guilty perhaps of 'a triumph of hope over
experience',[19] and in many respects quite short-lived, undone by the
bursting of Africa's commodity boom since 2014–15, nonetheless
represented a burgeoning field of knowledge and construction site of
ideas about a place called 'Africa', as well as an insight into the state
of racial anxiety in the post-financial crash era – the conjuncture in
which all of these manifestations of Africa's rise began to appear.

Notwithstanding that much of this 'Africa Rising' literature had a
whiff of what Peter Vale has called 'airport literature' to it, which,
devoid of any serious conceptual or theoretical reflection, describes
a homogeneous relationship between Africa and 'globalisation',[20]
the turnaround from pessimism to optimism in popular coverage of
the continent had been stark, something I reflect on in more detail in
Chapter 7. For now, it is important to note that only eleven years sep-
arated an infamous front cover of the Economist magazine from a very
different one. In 2000, under the headline 'The Hopeless Continent',
a black front page featured, adorned simply by the figure of a young

16 For instance: McKinsey & Company, 'The Rise of the African Consumer';
    Deloitte, 'The Rise and Rise of the African Middle Class'; Goldman Sachs,
    'Africa's Turn'.
17 See for instance, the International Monetary Fund's www.africarising.org.
18 Series One, Episode Nine.
19 Keith Somerville, 'Africa Emerges, but from What into What?', available
    at: http://africanarguments.org/2013/09/04/africa-emerges-but-from-what-
    and-into-what-a-triumph-of-hope-over-experience-in-robert-rotbergs-new-
    assessment-of-contemporary-africa-by-keith-somerville/, accessed on 18
    November 2014.
20 Peter Vale, 'The Movement, Modernity and New International Relations
    Writing in South Africa', *International Affairs,* 78:3, July 2002, pp. 585–93.

African man carrying a rocket or grenade launcher, transposed over the shape of the African continent. In 2011, the Economist returned to the continent with a very different message (although similarly problematic front cover – see Chapter 7). Under the headline 'Africa Rising' we saw an empty savannah at sunrise, with a young boy in the foreground running with an Africa-shaped, rainbow-coloured kite.[21] Such a turnaround was emblematic more broadly of the shift I have already described, and its starkness demanded an analysis. That the emergence and prevalence of this narrative seemed to match with growing tensions and unrest in Europe and the United States – not least the 2007–8 financial crash and its aftermath – seemed to reinforce the need for further investigation and contextualisation.

One way of interrogating all of this is to focus our attention on what kind of Africa is being constructed, and to an extent, this book does do this. However, of more interest perhaps, is what these ideas and proclamations say about the social context from which they emerge. Toni Morrison has suggested that what she calls 'Africanism'[22] serves a particular and, indeed, primary function for those who deploy it, namely 'a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom'.[23] As such, we should expect imaginaries and projections of 'Others' to be in a state of almost constant flux, from positive to negative and back again – or to be positive in some quarters and negative in others. Indeed, and despite claims from some who suggest that there is a reasonably constant historical and hierarchical relationship in Western imaginaries of Africa,[24] flux is a persistent feature of these historical imaginaries of the continent, whereby 'there were drastic changes in

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[21] Images and references are provided in Chapter 7.
[22] '[A] term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about those people', Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 6.
[23] Ibid., at p. 11.
[24] See for instance, Valentin Yves Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. xi; Stuart Hall, 'The West and the Rest: Discourses and Power' in Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, Kenneth Thompson (eds.) *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), p. 308.

the imagery [of Africa] even in periods when Europeans had no con-
tact whatsoever with black Africa'.[25]

None of this is to suggest that there is not a discursive unity to such
fluctuating imaginaries. However, this unity is not always to be found in
the geo-politics of the West/Africa relationship that asserts the West and
its largely phenotypically white elites as better than the 'Rest' (including
sub-classes of whites in the West,[26] but with Africa at the bottom of the
pile[27]). Rather, and because imaginaries of Africa are best seen as being
determined by a form of ethnocentric self-referentialism,[28] this unity is
to be found in the degree to which such imaginaries and projections
redraw the boundaries of Whiteness. As such, this book is not particu-
larly concerned with the veracity of analyses suggesting that Africa
has 'arisen'.[29] Nor is it particularly concerned with acclamations of
African political and economic power that have emerged from the
continent itself.[30] Rather the book is concerned with the claims that

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[25] Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in
    Western Popular Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 29;
    See also Phillip Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action 1780–
    1850* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964).

[26] Dyer, *White*, p. 8.

[27] Hall, 'The West and the Rest'.

[28] Pieterse, *White on Black*, p. 29; See also Harrison's argument concerning
    British attitudes when he argues that 'representations of Africa are best
    understood as narratives about Britishness first and about Africa second',
    Graham Harrison, *The African Presence: Representation of Africa in the
    Construction of Britishness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013),
    p. 71.

[29] For counter arguments to this assertion based on African public opinion
    see Boniface Dulani, Robert Mattes, and Carolyn Logan, 'After a Decade of
    Growth in Africa, Little Change in Poverty at the Grassroots', Afrobarometer,
    October 2013, available at: www.afrobarometer.org/files/documents/policy_
    brief/ab_r5_policybriefno1.pdf, accessed 1 November 2013; For an analysis
    based on the bursting of Africa's commodity boom see Ian Taylor, *Africa
    Rising? BRICS – Diversifying Dependency* (Oxford: James Currey, 2014).

[30] The past two decades have been replete with iterations of these, often for
    instrumental reasons. In 1998 former President of South Africa Thabo Mbeki
    declared an 'African Renaissance' (Thabo Mbeki, 'The African Renaissance
    Statement of Deputy President, Thabo Mbeki, SABC, Gallagher Estate, 13
    August 1998', available at: www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/1998/mbek0813
    .htm, accessed on 1 October 2015) although this was widely thought to
    mask South African hegemonic aspirations (Rok Ajulu, 'Thabo Mbeki's
    African Renaissance in a Globalising World Economy: The Struggle for the
    Soul of the Continent', *Review of African Political Economy*, 28:87 (2001),
    pp. 27–42). Interestingly though the term 'renaissance' implies a re-entry
    onto the stage of world history, rather than a first appearance, as implied by

have emerged specifically among policy and political elites beyond
Africa (or settled in Africa), during the post-crash period, historicising
some of these claims, examining what they can reveal about the evolv-
ing social construction of Whiteness, and foregrounding Whiteness as
a constitutive principle in imaginaries of Africa and relatedly interna-
tional order.

'whiteness' and 'Whiteness'

Returning to some of the questions that opened this book, I want to
dwell on what Whiteness represents in this current work, and how it
relates to other key terms that will also appear, such as 'Western' and
'Eurocentric'. Most centrally, the book rests on the distinction between
whiteness as a form of phenotypical presentation (itself historically
fluid), and Whiteness as a system of privilege that has historically made
some people of a phenotypical white presentation more likely to expe-
rience social and economic upliftment than their non-white,[31] or non-
white-enough counterparts, although it is important to note that this
is a process that continues to unfold unevenly and inter-sectionally.
Importantly, as perceptions of the failure of this system to work even
for those who consider themselves to be phenotypically white grows[32]
(despite most indicators pointing in the other direction in terms of the
overrepresentation of non-white groups in incarceration figures, gaps
in educational attainment, low incomes, etc.), this system of privilege
becomes more and more untethered from phenotype and projected

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much of the post-financial crash 'Africa Rising' narrative. Rwanda's President
Paul Kagame has also often talked of Africa's rising power, although again,
some have seen in this an attempt to mask Rwandan regional hegemony and
Kagame's domestic authoritarianism (Danielle Beswick, 'Managing Dissent in
a Post Genocide Environment: The Challenge of Political Space in Rwanda'
Development and Change, 41:2 (2010), pp. 225–51). This is discussed further
in Chapter 7.

[31] Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,
1997), p. 106.

[32] See for instance, research in an United States context which suggests that
over half of white working class people 'believe discrimination against
whites has become as big a problem as discrimination against blacks and
other minorities', Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch, and Robert P. Jones, 'Beyond
Economics: Fears of Cultural Displacement Pushed the White Working Class
to Trump', *Public Religion Research Institute*, 9 May2017, available at: www
.prri.org/research/white-working-class-attitudes-economy-trade-immigration-
election-donald-trump/, accessed on 22 August 2017.

onto peoples and territories where it might be seen to function effectively again, thus at least safeguarding the mythologised historical genius of Whiteness, previously assigned solely to Western political, economic and cultural practices, as a form of bequeathment.

The importance of the conceptual distinction between phenotypical whiteness and socio-political and economic Whiteness is relevant here to a discussion concerning international order, and the discipline that claims to study and explain it – International Relations – because of the discipline's failure to address this latter form of Whiteness head-on. The past two decades have seen a proliferation of work on race and international order, and global studies more broadly.[33] Such scholarship has worked to uncover both the racialised and normative assumptions that underpin much mainstream theoretical modelling about international order, and the variety of silences and erasures that these assumptions have manifested under the pretence of universality. For instance, Robert Vitalis argues that mainstream International Relations (IR) historiographies that locate the birth of the discipline in interwar debates concerning security and cooperation have erased the radical anti-imperial analyses of IR that were being generated by African-American scholars in the early part of the twentieth century,[34] thus rendering race absent (in both authorial and subject terms) in canonical debates, what Vitalis earlier called 'a norm against noticing'.[35] However, the study of race and international order has largely held up a homogeneous and pre-social conception of Whiteness as the backdrop for racial hierarchy in international order. This has been a necessary step in the valuable work of interrogating and isolating the

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[33] A brief but indicative list includes: Alex Anievas, Nivi Manchanda, and Robbie Shilliam, *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* (London: Routledge, 2014); Branwen Gruffydd Jones, 'Race in the Ontology of International Order' *Political Studies*, 56(4), 2008, pp. 907–27; John H. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory 1760–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Robbie Shilliam (ed.), *International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism and Investigations of Global Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2010); Robert Vitalis, 'The Graceful and Generous Liberal Gesture: Making Racism Invisible in American International Relations', *Millennium – Journal of International Studies*, 29:2, 2000, pp. 331–56; Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

[34] Vitalis, *White World Order*, pp. 7–11.

[35] Vitalis, 'The Graceful and Generous', p. 353.