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Anthropology and Whites in South Africa: Response to an Unreasonable Critique

Isak Niehaus

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Isak Niehaus is a Lecturer in Social Anthropology at Brunel University in London. He has done extensive research in South African rural areas on topics such as witchcraft, politics, masculinity, and on the HIV/AIDS pandemic. His most recent monograph is *Witchcraft and a Life in the New South Africa* (2013). E-mail: <Isak.Niehaus@brunel.ac.uk>

Anthropology has made a profound intellectual contribution toward understanding the nuances of social life in the unequal, often violent, society that is South Africa (Pauw 1980, Gordon and Spiegel 1993, Hammond-Tooke 1997). The insights generated by anthropology have eclipsed those of far larger and much better-endowed disciplines, such as sociology and psychology. In recent years, only social historians have had greater intellectual impact than anthropologists, but they themselves have drawn heavily upon earlier anthropological writings (Saunders 1988). South African anthropology has nonetheless been subject to a great deal of unreasonable criticism. This is perhaps due to the anthropological capacity to transgress racial boundaries and hereby threaten those with vested interest in them.

During Apartheid, anthropologists provoked a vicious response from those intent upon maintaining the status quo. A native commissioner expelled Max Gluckman from Zululand for transgressing the etiquette of the colour bar. Gluckman upset whites by living in a hut and wearing a Zulu *bheshu* (loincloth) when he visited town (Schumaker 2001: 45). In 1969 police observed the interactions in John Blacking's bedroom from the elevated vantage point of trees outside his apartment, and then proceeded to arrest him for engaging in sexual relations with his Indian lover (Robertson and Whitten 1980). Security police kept a file, headed "Dr. Zion", on Jim Kiernan and trailed him during his visits to London (Kiernan 1997). The inappropriately named Civilian Cooperation Bureau assassinated David Webster, an anthropologist who assumed a more overtly political role (James 2009).

At the end of Apartheid, critics emerged from very different quarters: They were now drawn from the ranks of American liberals and African

nationalists. Vincent Crapanzano (1986) described the opposition of Cape Town's anthropologists to Apartheid as insincere, and Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) blamed the very same individuals for drinking served tea with "colonial precision" whilst complaining about students and being uninterested in politics. Archie Mafeje (1998) called for the abolition of anthropology in Africa, on grounds that whites studying blacks replicated racial inequalities. None of these condemnations of anthropology and of anthropologists were based on any serious critical engagement with scholarly productions.

Francis Nyamnjoh's (2012) recent attack on South African anthropology nonetheless surprised me. First, it does not come from the margins, but from the very centre of the discipline. Nyamnjoh holds the chair of Social Anthropology at the University of Cape Town, possibly the most prestigious anthropological position on the continent.

The ferocity of the attack also came as a surprise. In writing, Nyamnjoh is robust and blunt. He compares anthropologists wishing to understand Africa with "blind men" who encounter an elephant, but can see only a tail, a leg, or a trunk, and are unable to form an accurate picture of the entire animal. Like the blind men, he asserts, we have not sought to escape from our preconceptions and we have not admitted to our own subjectivities. Our claims to scientism and to blindly crafted, single-authored monographs are akin to those of religious fundamentalists. Nyamnjoh argues that South African anthropologists have refused to utilize insights from other disciplines, and have ignored the voices of informants and of native anthropologists. At heart, he writes, anthropologists still subscribe to the fiction of "tribe". We choose to work in arbitrarily demarcated field sites, and map out the continent into distinctive cultural, racial and geographic zones. At the same time, we anxiously police the borders of our own disciplinary tribe. Those of us who are white treat our black colleagues ambivalently, view their work as inferior, and expect them to behave "just like a maid [who] seeks to satisfy her madam" (78). Blacks are simply elephants to be studied. We do not study whiteness, and treat whites as being beyond ethnographic contemplation. Nyamnjoh does not write a single positive sentence about South African anthropology.

The third surprise is that he provides no empirical evidence to support any of his claims. Nyamnjoh does cite influential cosmopolitan anthropologists – such as Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, René Devisch, Don Donham, Harri Englund, Jim Ferguson, and Akhil Gupta – to support his assertions about the alleged crimes that other anthropologists commit. Throughout the article, the good anthropologists are the powerful ones based at Harvard, the Catholic University of Leuven, the University of California,

and Cambridge. But Nyamnjoh does not refer to a single transgressor by name, and does not cite a single work that he finds so offensive. Are the bad anthropologists his junior colleagues at the University of Cape Town? Or are they made of straw?

My response to Nyamnjoh's attack is limited to demonstrating the unreasonableness of only one of his claims – that South African anthropologists and anthropologists who have visited South Africa have not studied whites. I was particularly struck by the following passages in his essay:

The relatively little anthropological curiosity regarding whites in South Africa might suggest that South African whites are – regardless of their internal hierarchies of purity – beyond ethnographic contemplation [...]. (70).

I have been in South Africa for three years now, and despite the country's long association with whiteness – I might also add that not all white South Africans have direct ties with Europe – very few studies of whiteness by visiting anthropologists exist (69).

Nyamnjoh is wrong. Even during the period of classical ethnographic monographs, influential South African anthropologists transcended the tribal paradigm, and viewed whites as important actors within “composite societies”. This is evident in Max Gluckman's account (1958) of the opening of a bridge in modern Zululand, Hans Holleman's novel (1943) on impoverished Afrikaners in Riversdal (written under the pseudonym Holmer Johanssen), and Hilda Kuper's study (1947) of colonial administrators, missionaries, traders and labour recruiters in Swaziland. Subsequently, Harry Oxley conducted fieldwork (1962) on a small Afrikaans village in the Transvaal, Allie Dubb wrote a series of essays (1970, 1972, 1977) on Jewish experiences in Johannesburg, and Joseph Loudon published *White Farmers and Black Labour-Tenants* (1970). Brian Du Toit wrote *People of the Valley* (1974), an ethnographic monograph focusing on a fairly isolated Afrikaner mountain community, and a series of essays on topics such as the Broederbond, “self-help” among Afrikaners, and the Dutch Reformed Church (Du Toit 1965, 1982, 1984). In Durban, John Argyle wrote an article (1977) on the myth of the elementary family among whites, and Eleanor Preston-Whyte authored a piece (1981) on how white South African families construct genealogies to legitimize their position in an ambiguous social landscape.

I studied social anthropology at the University of Cape Town from 1980 until 1986. At the time, there were nine dedicated members of staff, who devoted their intellectual energies to writing critiques of various notions of cultural essentialism. Whites certainly came under the purview of anthropological enquiry. Martin West wrote a monograph on racial attitudes

in Port Nolloth (West 1987), in which he certainly did study “side-wards” and “upwards”. John Sharp and Emile Boonzaaier worked on different locations in the Richtersveld, where they examined the experiences of people who fell betwixt and between the categories of “white” and “coloured”. In lectures, Sharp made extensive reference to Afrikaner nationalism as a testing ground for his theories on ethnicity (Sharp 1988), and Boonzaaier used observations on the Boy Scout and Voortrekker movements to highlight cultural differences among white youths. Sally Frankenthal had written a dissertation on the dilemma of dependency among white pensioners in Sea Point, and was doing fieldwork on Jewish experiences, both in South Africa and in Israel (Frankenthal 1999). Caroline White studied whites – in her case, Italians – and so did Peter Skalnik – in his case, central European villagers. Robert Thornton, who had previously worked on the Iraqw of Tanzania, was engaged in a historical study of colonial writings on South Africa. His research culminated in an essay on the construction of “the European” in Southern Africa (Thornton 1995). Only two anthropologists focused largely on black experiences. Andrew Spiegel worked on social differentiation in Lesotho and in Matatiele, and Mamphela Ramphele headed a project on the plight of black migrant labourers in Cape Town. They focused on problems rather than peoples.

Students did not shy away from studying the experiences of whites either. My very small cohort of graduate students included Helen Robinson, who wrote a master’s dissertation on whites in Greytown, and Steve Gordon, who devised a project to study “white youth culture” in Cape Town’s southern suburbs. Sean Jones investigated the experiences of white mineworkers, Michael Bothma studied white farm owners, and Stuart Sholto-Douglas’ subsequent fieldwork on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Oudtshoorn also focused on whites (Sholto-Douglas 2001). Leslie Bank and I worked on black businessmen and wage workers in Qwaqwa. Whilst Bank befriended the local magistrate, I avoided whites like the plague. This is not because I saw local whites as unworthy of anthropological attention, but rather because I found it hard to empathize with their views. One of our next-door neighbours in Qwaqwa was Janusz Waluś, a man currently serving a life sentence for the murder of Chris Hani.

But whites have certainly not disappeared from the current South African anthropological radar. Kees van der Waal and Stephen Robins’ (2011) essay on the De La Rey song is not exceptional. Kathleen McDougal, an anthropologist at Stellenbosch, researches the genealogies of white South African families. While she was a student at Stellenbosch Broadbridge (2001), she examined the maintenance and erosion of racial boundaries between whites and coloureds in specific residential areas.

Nyamnjoh's colleagues at the University of Cape Town still study whites. A most interesting chapter in Carolyn Hamilton's historical and anthropological study *Terrific Majesty* (1998) shows how Theophilus Shepstone, the British official responsible for "Native Affairs" in Natal, invoked an image of Shaka as an autocratic leader in order to legitimize his own department's despotic rule. Shepstone, himself, assumed the role of Shaka during the installation ceremony of the Zulu king, Cetshwayo, in 1873. Andrew Spiegel has left his old rural field sites and now works on Cape Town's, largely white, Waldorf schools (Spiegel and Sponheuer 2011). Lesley Fordred-Green studied the experiences of evangelical white Christians in the military, and also the practices of, largely white, journalists in KwaZulu-Natal (Fordred-Green 2000). John Sharp has since moved to the University of Pretoria and now conducts research on the effects of de-industrialization on white working-class communities (Sharp 2006). His students include Jimmy Pieterse and Nina Botha, whose research focuses on white South African schoolchildren and "mof-fies" (Botha 2010, Pieterse 2013).

The results of these studies have not found their way into the press nearly as often as they should have. But their existence contradicts Nyamnjoh's blunt assertion that "there is little anthropological curiosity regarding whites in South Africa" (70).

Local anthropological writings on whites dwarf in comparison to those produced by anthropologists based at institutions abroad. Toward the latter years of Apartheid, and after the country's first democratic election, a stream of visiting anthropologists found it convenient to study South African whites. Vincent Crapanzano (1986) wrote *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa*, Walton Johnson (1994) *Dismantling Apartheid*, Gerhard Schutte (1995) *What Racists Believe*, Peter Carstens (2001) *In the Company of Diamonds*, and Catherine Besteman (2008) *Transforming Cape Town*. These works all provide detailed ethnographic accounts of the perceptions and experiences of white people struggling to adapt to situations of political change. These studies do not treat whites as sociological isolates, but capture the diverse experiences of white farm owners, mine managers and wage workers. Anne-Line Hanesen's (2007) short monograph *Bitterkomix: A South African Comic as an Indigenous Ethnography* builds on these themes.

Visitors have also published a series of interesting articles. Schutte (1989) wrote on white ethnic self-reconstruction in times of crisis, Rob Gordon (1989) studied the invention of customary law by whites, John Perry and Cassandra Perry (1991) covered Afrikaner nationalist ritual, and Nancy Schepher-Hughes (1994, 2007) reported on the experiences of white people who survived the massacre at the Heidelberg tavern and on the politics of remorse. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (2001) analysed white people's obsession

with protecting indigenous vegetation against invasion by alien plant species as an allegorical pretext for xenophobic fears. Joan Wardrop (2001, 2002) studied the experiences of white men in the Soweto flying squad and also the saga involving South Africa's cricket captain, Hansie Cronje; Paula Girshick (2004) studied the politics of the blood river memorial; William Leap (2004, 2005) the use of language and construction of space among gay men in Cape Town; Renée Hirschon (2005) the migration of Jews from Greece to South Africa; Spierenburg and Wels (2010) the involvement of white business elites in nature conservation; and Thomas Kirsch (2010) white security professionals in East London.

Several visiting students have based their Ph.D. theses on studies of South African whites. Janet Wojcicki (from UCLA) studied white sex workers in Johannesburg, Lindi Todd (SOAS) produced an interesting thesis on right-wing whites, Anika Teppo (Helsinki) worked on housing and rehabilitation among working-class whites, and Kristina Kjellin (Uppsala) wrote about white Pentecostals in Durban. Meike DeGelder (Toronto) studied diasporic consciousness among white South African immigrants in Canada before proceeding to conduct fieldwork and HIV outreach project work involving Afrikaner and black Christians in Pretoria. Katherine Mathers (Berkeley) studied the experiences of, largely white, American exchange students visiting Cape Town, and their interactions with, largely white, South African hosts. Dinah Rajak (Sussex) did multi-sited fieldwork on a transnational mining corporation, tracking the practice of corporate social responsibility from the company's global headquarters in London to the platinum mining belt of South Africa. Josh Gordon (Yale) is currently doing exciting fieldwork on young white rugby players. These studies have already produced two excellent monographs – Mather's (2010) *Travel, Humanitarianism and Becoming American in Africa* and Rajak's (2011) *In Good Company* – and a string of other publications on the diverse experiences of whites in South Africa (Wojcicki 1999, 2003, Kjellin 2006, Teppo 2009, Teppo 2011, Houssay-Holzschuch and Teppo 2009, Todd 2011, De Gelder 2012, Rajak 2010, 2012). These studies are bound to have an important effect, not merely on the study of South Africa, but also on the international development of anthropology.

Seven monographs, several important and innovative essays and many interesting Ph.D. theses are by no means a negligible contribution. The existence of this body of literature certainly does not merit the claim that “few studies of whiteness by visiting anthropologists exist” (69). If Nyamnjoh is so wrong about what his colleagues study, then it is hard to treat him as a reliable source on other issues that irk him. Yes, anthropology in South Africa, like all other disciplines in all other places, demands constant and profound critique. And yes, we can all do a lot more to support young black scholars.

We can also learn much from other disciplines, including literature. But this does not mean that we should abandon evidence in favour of fiction. It is not clear what lies behind Nyamnjoh's unreasonable attack. Does anthropological research unsettle the assumptions underpinning new kinds of identity politics in a similar manner as it undermined reified notions about race and culture in the past?

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