2003

Off-White: Creolite and Hidden 'Difference' under Apartheid

Elleke Boehmer

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol25/iss1/12

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
Off-White: Creolite and Hidden 'Difference' under Apartheid

Abstract
SLIDE ONE The way she bent back the small girl's thumb, as if smoothing a wayward dogear in a favourite book. They sat in the white tiled foyer of the Community Museum, the Gemeentemuseum, the early winter dark settling into its comers and alcoves. The darker it grew, and the quieter, the more vigorously the girl swung her legs, her polished, Europe-bought Mary Janes. She swung deeper and higher, higher and deeper, feeling the edge of the oak bench on which they were both sitting digging into her skin. She hoped her energetic activity might distract the attention of the elderly lady who pressed so warmly against her side, whose eyes pressed so intently into her own.
ELLEKE BOEHMER

Off-White: Creolite and Hidden
‘Difference’ under Apartheid

I do not think of myself in those terms [of being white], I daren’t. I don’t let that into my life; you can’t; it’s a trap. (Athol Fugard 4)

SLIDE ONE

The way she bent back the small girl’s thumb, as if smoothing a wayward dog-ear in a favourite book.

They sat in the white tiled foyer of the Community Museum, the Gemeentemuseum, the early winter dark settling into its corners and alcoves. The darker it grew, and the quieter, the more vigorously the girl swung her legs, her polished, Europe-bought Mary Janes. She swung deeper and higher, higher and deeper, feeling the edge of the oak bench on which they were both sitting digging into her skin. She hoped her energetic activity might distract the attention of the elderly lady who pressed so warmly against her side, whose eyes pressed so intently into her own.

She was instructed to call the lady tante, and her face was to some degree familiar. Her mother had left her in her care while she dashed to the Dames — it was a long busride back to their pension. The lady was one of her mother’s many women friends who lived unemphatic lives in this quiet city of peace conferences. Even on this particular short stay in the city the small girl had met the lady at several afternoon teas. The genteel cafes in the old town where the teas were consumed were places her mother had once frequented. The lady and her lady friends continued regularly to visit the cafes together these many years her mother had lived abroad, in Africa.

She herself was, the girl had already figured out, the trophy, somehow, of her mother’s time away. She had, she suspected, been the topic of conversation at numbers of the teas. She was after all ‘African-born’, in Afrika geboren, the ladies whispered bemusedly, but with a kind of hard inquisitive edge. She had been born on a torrid midsummer afternoon when the palm trees visible from the hospital window stood rigid — frozen, said her mother — with the tropical heat.

— Ella — said the lady, taking her hand in a papery clasp. — You know, don’t you, you’re named for me?
— Ja-nee. — Yes, no. The girl resorted to the safe noncommittal response
that her parents’ language conveniently lent her.
— Yes! — said the lady, strangely triumphant, the energy of her feeling
pushing her to capture the girl’s free left hand, too, in her own. — Named for
me, but so very foreign —

The lady’s breath was unpleasantly moist, but the girl decided it wasn’t safe
to shift away.

Eyes askew, she spied, far down the long foyer, her mother returning. The
lady realised time was short.
— African born, — she said right into her ear. — Do you mind? Does it feel
strange? Do you worry? —

It was then that, getting hold of the girl’s right thumb, she began to force it
into a backbend with the ball of her own pale thumb. The thumb obligingly
crooked itself. It was an inverted comma, it was a spandrel. It did not hurt.
Experimentally the girl bent back her other thumb, without assistance.
— Always so! — the lady gloated.

She spoke very softly now, as if to elude the mother who stood before them in
her out-of-date winter coat and walking shoes.
— You see it in the Indonesian-born also, and the folk from Surinam. All the
children of the tropics. It changes them. The limbs grow softer. Bones, they
change. The thumbs get limber. The colour, character, outwardly it seems to stay
the same. Inwardly ... who knows? —
— Ella, dear, get your coat. — The mother pulled the tante to her feet. It was
an abrupt gesture, the girl saw, for a woman as polite as her mum.

* * *

The forced bending of the thumb was a first conscious perception of difference,
of difference within whiteness — a perception that this series of fragments will
try to gain some imaginative and conceptual purchase upon. It was a perception
that was almost impossible, if not preposterous, to articulate during the apartheid
years in South Africa, where white was safe, superior and above all uniform
(superior in part because so ‘purely’, irrefutably homogeneous — indeed
homogenised, like milk). As for a resistant black perspective on the situation —
not that many whites took account of this — to make distinctions within
‘Europeanness’ would rightly have been regarded as decadent in the extreme, a
morally and politically fraudulent splitting of hairs.

Yet, as was clear for any white whose position was even slightly other (in my
case, Dutch by language and background), uniformity was a demanding condition
to uphold. It was, it could be said, a nervous condition — at once self-conflicted
and repressed, in the extreme.

Whiteness, as critics writing in the wake of Toni Morrison’s Playing in the
Dark have pointed out, is far from being a given, as was long assumed; it is a
social condition which can — and should — be submitted to critique. Whiteness is not so much a skin colour as a state of mind.

I could not agree more, having lived, year in, year out, that state of mind. From some point in my early childhood, while shuttling between Europe and apartheid South Africa, I became aware that white, though apparently 'right', was a position of acute anxiety. For some — like the pharmacist doling out medicines from two separate counters in his shop — it seemed a worry about racial purity, distinctness, and cultural cohesion. For me, differently, it was a worry about passing; not about purity, that is, but about acting white enough, not seeming 'weird', or what was sometimes called 'continental'. (Continental as distinct from 'European'. European was the name used for whites, all whites, on park benches and in public toilets.)

Whiteness in Africa, whether you were African-born, like me, or African resident and un-English, like my parents, or even, possibly, white and English-speaking and 'native', could not, it seemed, be guaranteed. It was the unmarked state, but it stood out like a sore thumb. Pure whiteness was a perpetual state of siege.

The monolithic uniformity of whiteness could be broken as easily as chalk by one of its central claims, to define and police the limits of the normal.

There was then the acute difficulty of any a-typicality underlying whiteness. 'True' difference of course was radically other to myself.

I remember the day I first read the white Caribbean-born writer Jean Rhys, with what a sense of recognition, of being given a foothold within her own unhappy restlessness. I remember looking up from her pages with an astonished silent 'yes!', acclimatising myself to a writer whose psychic climates, like mine, were upside down, who felt removed from wherever she found herself, nostalgic for her lost yet deeply ill-at-ease childhood in the Caribbean.

The kernel of white unhomeliness, its sorrow, as Rhys knew, is this: creole or migrant whiteness, even when repatriated to Europe, does not magically (re)discover how to belong. Pathologically aware of itself as an identity apart, it remains on edge, on the edge. Foreign-born whiteness — in Africa and in Europe — sits out in the margins, so it feels. Its sense of the normal is 'scrambled' (Nixon 238). It sits flexing its dangerously elastic thumbs, picking at the scabs of its differences. Significantly, therefore, it was only by reaching across a cultural border, to Jean Rhys, that could I find the codes to describe something of myself.

Clarifying the term creole in at least two of its Caribbean significations, Marina Warner neatly captures the ambivalences built into the very term. As she writes in a collection co-edited by Shirley Chew and Anna Rutherford: 'The French include whites in the term Creole, and so do the Spanish, but to English ears, 'Creole' sounds foreign, French, or worse, native, but native of another place besides England' (197).3

Growing up on the island of Dominica, Jean Rhys explored her own sense of
creoleness to the extent that, as she describes, she prayed to be black, and smashed the face of a white doll she was given (39–42). I did not share this yearning. I lived after all within a firmly grounded settler society. Yet as a child I was distinctly confused about my so-called white (African-born but migrant) identity. Was I white, or almost? Somehow I did not seem as white as my Anglophone friends.

I was delighted the day I noticed that the wrapper for the white Lux soap we used bore a picture of a lump of something not quite white, nearly grey. Was whiteness perhaps equivalent to grey? And would it — please — rub off? I was painfully aware of lacking some of the important markers of whiteness: that is, laying claim to an African nanny; being able to speak proper English or Afrikaans; attending tennis clubs, or gymkhanas, or church, on weekend mornings.

Instead we inhabited a small immigrant enclave. We ate hutspot and speculaas sent over from Nederland (Nederland, Neverland, how close the words seemed). At home we made our own beds, cooked our own food. At school my affinity was with the other immigrant children, ‘so-called whites’ : the Portuguese, Greeks, Italians. When I was old enough to read Nadine Gordimer I was puzzled at the foreign ‘Jo’burg’ world she described, which, however, I was told, I was meant to recognise as my own. Was I white like this? Or was I slightly off-white, perhaps slightly beige? I turned to the vagrant, morally dishevelled Russian in Heart of Darkness in his harlequin suit: here was a closer point of identification.

It would help, I often thought, if I had a label to describe my condition, my too-flexible thumbs, the ‘strange’, non-English voice inside my white skin. Apartheid society insisted that everyone assume an explicit racial identity of some sort. What was mine? By then Creole had been adopted by a different constituency from Rhys’s within the Caribbean. Dutch immigrant — didn’t quite work. In Afrikaans-speaking Africa it had a very different meaning. European, as I said, was a much-abused label. I was not quite white enough, but I was not non-white. Was I invisibly marked somehow? The day I learned the word coloured, was when a new perception began to dawn.

* * *

SLIDE TWO

They are driving the sky-blue Valiant down the broad, sunlit street. To the right is the Bata shoe shop, to the left the liquor store, a queue of people snaking out of its entrance door. It is Saturday morning. The traffic lights show red.

Just as the father begins braking a man dashes across the road, right in front of the car. The flat of his hand slaps the slowing bonnet, perhaps intentionally. Over the years the image of him remains so clear it is as if his photo is stuck somewhere in a familiar album. He wears khaki trousers, an unkempt hat, and a light brown blazer that flares behind him as he darts.
Bloody Coloured! — her father shouts, braking hard.

The eyes of childhood, awake to any oddity, immediately look again. Coloured? Black head, white feet? She imagines something half-and-half, like a Droste chocolate, half dark, half milk. His left side brown, his white side cream? She sees the back of him only, which seems from the glimpse of neck and hands to be perfectly monochrome.

— What’s coloured, Pa?—

Her father chooses never to explain the obvious. Yet he spoke just then in English, so whatever he meant was nothing self-evident.

— It means half-bred. — Her mother obliges, not in English. — Coloured people have different bloods mixed inside them. —

Straightaway the girl has a picture of the man’s insides like an elaborate plumbing system. Different colour liquids run through him, blue and red, yellow and brown, like the illustrations of blood flow in her biology textbook.

But she sits back relieved, more at ease than she has been since that meeting with the aunt in the museum lobby. Coloured. Which means variegated, pied, even dappled. Suddenly she can pinpoint more closely what she is. She’s been given quite by chance a label for the confused feelings she often has, not fitting in. Not English. White but — and not quite European. She thinks protectively of the coffee-stain birth-mark she carries on her lower back. Mixed up, is what she is: basically coloured.

She uses the term privately, to herself, until the day she confirms it on an official form at school almost without thinking twice, so used is she now to it. At the beginning of the year they fill in identity forms, rows and columns of tick boxes. The third or fourth row of boxes is marked ‘Race’. She ticks the place for Coloured. The headteacher calls her father almost immediately at work.

But her father’s furious talking-to explains nothing, other than that Coloured is somehow associated with shame. Never do it again, he shouts in two languages. What a sick, sick joke. Don’t you know they’re society’s step-children? She must never, repeat never again, humiliate her parents like this.

She cries a little, feeling regret, injustice. It is tough to have the label denied her, especially as she had grown so comfortable with it. Using a hand mirror she checks the birthmark, to make sure it’s still there in spite of all, her little mark of piedness — that is, of whiteness.

* * *

In their defiant manifesto, Eloge de la Creolite, Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant wrest away from the white créole the term that to them far more closely describes the self-delighting diversity and connectivity of the mixed-heritage Caribbean. Creolite: a mosaic, a braid of histories; a dense crossing of different axes of heterogeneous interrelationship (86). This ‘Creoleness’ invokes, yet disavows, ideologies of blood — its colour however is definitively not white. It
speaks of the visible translation of dominant forms under the pressure of other cultural presences. It celebrates networks of, in particular, diasporic interconnection.

At the same time, even if implicitly, Bernabé et al offer a discursive figure through which to begin to speak of buried, undercurrent (differently white) créole forms — forms which, for all that they are not obviously colour-coded, are also unsteady, at times self-hating. Under this aspect Creolite gives a new awareness to the blurred chromatics of identity I’ve been trying to discern. It offers a mode of articulation to the Creole, certainly, but also to the hidden créole (in this case, racially identified white, culturally marked as other). On one level at least, therefore, I would like to read the Elogé as pointing to that fissure or diversity within the very heart of sameness, inside the ultimate homogeneity, the often missed mark lying within the unmarked term of whiteness. Just as an ultra-violet light can show up hidden scars on skin, apartheid revealed to us precisely this mark. In a society governed on racial lines, perception is structured to perceive difference. Seen as different, I felt different: white, but — . Certainly, I must emphasise, I was not oppressed on account of this difference. The label, the marking, however, was made to stick.

* * *

**SLIDE THREE**

At the end of winter is the annual school play. The girl is a little older, maybe twelve, thirteen. She has been, oh happiness, cast in a prominent role in a one-act farce, the part of a doctor, Dr Patel. Dr Patel plays a po-faced verbal punch bag to the play’s eponymous character, George.

Tweenie, an extrovert redhead in an older class, will play the part of George. Tweenie will spend the entire play lying in a hospital bed centre-stage, doing nothing more than suffering delusions and turning them into jokes, Jack Nicholson-style. The doctor, the *Indian lady* doctor (the teacher-producer says the words with a noticeable emphasis) pays him regular visits. She comes to hold his hand, shake her head, and repeat ‘in a worried voice’, *Unfortunately we are not knowing what is wrong with George.*

— You must get the accent right. — she is instructed.

— It’s a British play. They have *Indian* doctors there, it can’t be changed. The jokes depend on it. Go visit the Indian shops down-town. Get the feel of it. —

But this is not exactly easy. OK, they live in Durban, biggest Indian city in the Southern Hemisphere, but the fact is that she already has an accent, as her friends regularly remind her. She puts tongue-flipping ‘r’s in all the wrong places. How will she fit the frame of a second accent across her own awkward vowels?

As for eavesdropping downtown, well, it’s impossible. It’s Indian territory. Her mother, for one, would ban her from doing so.

Eventually Tweenie bails her out. A born joker, he can do many voices,
including a ripe ‘Coolie’, as he says. He speaks the lines, she mimics him. Before
too long the teacher is smiling approval. *We are not knowing what is wrong with
George.*

One final ingredient remains to complete the act: costume. You talk real
Indian, they say, now you must dress the part, like an Indian doctor. Wear
something white — a white sari of course! A public call is made, and the *Indian*
lab assistant’s cousin, or cousin’s friend, phones in. Yes, a white sari can be
loaned, no problem. As for the Indian doctor’s skin colour, this goes without
saying. The make-up box is already equipped with brown shoe polish. The girl
wears it at rehearsals, daubed on to her cheeks in order to get into character. On
the night itself she will be fully browned up.

*Browned up, is it, or browned down?* She’s not sure. No one speaks the
instruction.

On dress rehearsal night, at last, the *Indian lady* brings the sari. She has
delayed coming up to this point, everyone has grown anxious. She enters the
dressing room carrying a flat cardboard box. She is not introduced, and doesn’t
introduce herself. She herself is wearing jeans and a red t-shirt. She sets the box
down delicately, as if it carried bone-china, the most fragile pastries. The sari is
a ceremonial garment of some sort: extremely long, of the purest white, decorated
with tiny, diamanté beads. Each white fold is swaddled in the whitest tissue
paper. The sari takes ten minutes to wind on, which the Indian lady does for the
girl.

Two things about that night the girl will never forget.

How the woman’s eyes jerked wide-open, as if she’d been struck, when first
she saw that her sari was to be worn against browned-down skin. Shoe-polish
skin. But she never said a word. Without a word she helped the lady doctor
dress, prodding and pushing her to turn, without roughness. She maintained her
silence at the end of the show, when again she circled the girl, unwinding the
long glimmer of white, and folded it back into its box.

And that was the second thing. How she sat it out. Night after night the
woman waited in silence in the cold concrete-floored dressing room for her sari
to be returned in good order. She sat motionless, arms folded, and must have
heard how, out in the hall, an Indian voice was performed to universal white
laughter. *We are not knowing what is wrong.*

By the final performance the girl has learned something. How to wind on,
and walk in a sari. But there is something else again too. Something about
whiteness, she has learned, is far from pure and simple. Something about
whiteness with a double accent, in a pure white sari, makes her feel deeply
ashamed. Far more ashamed than *Coloured.* *Not knowing what is wrong.*

Every night after the play the girl resists taking her brown make-up off. She
says she wants to stay in character, it hurts to scour her skin — but she knows
there is more to it than this. Her mother says she had better learn to launder her
own bed linen as the treacly brown stain on the pillowcase is a devil to remove.

The girl lies in bed staring at the ceiling, keeping her brown cheeks off the pillow. She is now not so young as to be unaware that, had she not been classified white, she would not have been in a position to play an Indian lady doctor, in white sari and brown face, with an accent. She also suspects that, had it not been for her accent, her own obvious difference, she would not have been asked to play the role at all.

* * *

So there came gradually, by infinitesimal degrees, an understanding of the super-subtle gradations of 'colouredness' — including of whiteness. Of variegation, some of it officially categorised, all of it loudly visible, or vividly audible, within a state-authorised system of racism, where all differences were eventually, in one social situation or another, made to count. Creole: where white creole (normality) is different from black creole. Native: where black native is a tautology in terms, and white native signifies a kind of scandal. Yellow: the colour of illegitimacy and the inbetween.
The day of my refusal eventually arrived: when I learned to say no out loud to the apartheid state. Briefly then I longed for a different skin entirely, for a visible sign of the internal fission-within-whiteness I had long experienced. I wanted not only a label for my perceived condition of difference, but to inhabit the perceived difference itself. I wanted, at last, a marker to relieve me from the strain of play-acting white. Truth to tell, I had for a while believed — had been made to believe — that I possessed this marker. So culture, so voice — so look. Once experienced, of course, the sensation of creoleness, no matter how partial it may seem, never entirely rubs away. My other-than-whiteness, my illicit 'yellowness', was my imagined identity — simultaneously hated and nurtured, cradled and denied.

* * *

SLIDE FOUR

Sitting high up on the bleachers behind the back field at school the girl and her best-friend watch the boys play rugby. With one eye on the game they are at the same time critically scrutinising vital aspects of their bodies and exchanging beauty tips as they do so: your blemishes, my spots, your hang-nail, our split-ends.

Relaxed as they are, the friend’s remark catches the girl unawares.
— Your skin’s not really white, you know. Not really. Not white like ours. —
— Immediately the girl begins to blush.
— What d’ye mean? —
— You know how your name’s funny. And things are different at your house. How you wear vests and eat raw onions. It’s not like we do, not white really. —
— Suddenly awkward, the girl presses her arm against her friend’s.
— Look. Same. —
— Not. —
— White as you. —
— No way. Different. —
— What colour then? —

The girl can feel the sweat beading her forehead. She remembers her father’s livid talkings-to on this precise question. She feels the ground shifting under her feet. What does her friend know? Playing for effect the friend is considering her choices.
— Yellow, probably, — she finally says — Yellow like Javier. —
— Javier is a white Angolan newly arrived at their school.
— Yellow like Frik and Fanie? — the girl asks, holding her breath. These are two poor white Afrikaans-speaking twins no one plays with.
— No. — says the friend decisively, — Not like them. Frik and Fanie don’t wear shoes, they’re just plain brown. —

The girl looks down at where their skins — upper arms and thighs — lie side by side. To her consternation she sees her friend is right. They plainly don’t
match. Her skin is probably slightly yellower, or sallower. Yes, no.

Later that day alone in her bedroom she checks again. Nowadays such distinctions have begun to matter. She examines her skin against white paper. Definitely yellow. She decides she will from henceforth bath in camomile, eat carrot, catch a sun-tan, anything to shift the tinge. Although nothing comes of these plans in her mind’s eye it is yellow that she stays. At first this is anxiety, later a willed delusion. She will always register surprise when she is called white. Sometimes, to be quite sure, she checks her ID document. This, however, does not mince its words, or numbers:

611114 0004 001 (where the final 1 means white, only white).

NOTES
1 This essay aligns itself with Toni Morrison’s perspective where she writes that her project is to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject (70). Writing as a white, however, my hope is that my repeated questions about the status of whiteness as racial identity will sufficiently call into question the problematic re-privileging of whiteness that this shift of gaze can entail. See also Dyer.

See Warwick Anderson, or Ghassan Hage, for example.

2 The 1993 Chew and Rutherford collection Unbecoming Daughters, a pooling of memoirs and testimonies from ‘colonial girls’, was remarkably foresighted in fine tuning a wide range of colonial states of ‘unbelonging’ and outsidersness.

By borrowing the term into a different cultural context I acknowledge the precedent set by Francoise Lionnet in transporting the term from the Caribbean into the ‘African Indian Ocean’, specifically into Mauritius and Reunion. Translating a term across cultural or linguistic boundaries is of course itself a creolising move.

WORKS CITED


