

# What's in a Name?

*Coloured by any other name would be as grueling:*

The Convergence of Linguistics and Identity

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In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,  
followed by human beings, both male and female.

In the end, human beings, both male and female, created the divisions and  
the politics, followed by racial categories, both black and white...  
and *coloured?*

## **Identity and Politics**

Identity and politics—a seemingly unlikely union, with identity being a personal thing and politics being a societal thing, but in South Africa these two have become intimately intertwined over the years. With the creation of humans has come objectification and classification by humans themselves. Through language and politics, people have been categorized, shoved into boxes, and separated, by their own doing, directly impacting how each one has come to understand the world they live in and the experiences they had. Though language is constantly changing, the attempt to keep these boxes and categories essentially static has left no room for people to form or claim an identity, being pushed instead into collective group identities. In order to try to break away from that, one is confronted with needing to explain their identity and why they do not identify with the collective group created to house them. However, when one tries to use language to explain or understand their identity, they get stuck and confused, forced to use racial discourses already in place, the same discourses that do not allow movement. In the same way when identity is placed on another, the identifier also gets caught in a jam, always needing to rework and reconstruct the definition as exceptions surface and individuals no longer fit into the box.

Gilbert writes, “Identity is perhaps one of the most highly-contested and theoretically-complex concepts to understand when seeking to fuse the conceptual with the lived experiences of people. Identity cannot be described, explained, or categorized” (Gilbert 65). Then throw in politics, equally highly-contested but laden with judgment and the necessity to define, and you really have yourself a problem. Identity continually morphs and changes in response to any number of factors or situations, and is not only how an individual sees and understands themselves, but it also encompasses how other people see and understand them. Thom and Coetzee write, “Identity formation relies not only on societies expectation and recognition of the individual; it also depends on the individuals expectations and recognition of society” (Thom and Coetzee 183). To put it another way, there is an I-identity, discovered from within an individual and a you-identity, constructed from the outside by society, neither of which can be understood with words, but both of which attempt to do as much.

If we look at South Africa and its many attempts to identify the people living in its borders, we will become keenly aware of the problems that arise in socially constructing

identities based on a false notion of race according to biological features. In his work, *The Politics of Naming: the Constitution of Coloured Subjects in South Africa*, political scientist Thiven Reddy takes an interesting sociolinguistic look at coloured identity, maintaining that in no wise can collective identity be free from politics and, taking a structuralist point, says that all created systems are “equally unstable or arbitrary,” which he shows in the analysis of two governmental texts created in 1903 and 1950. In his writing, he makes two major claims:

- 1) The racial classificatory frameworks set up under the Apartheid system still persist in South Africa, and
- 2) The social construction of the ‘coloured’ category sought to homogenize hybrid notions of identity and enabled the creation of a system of racialized political control.

This paper will explore these two claims using the concept of “you-identity,” someone from the outside determining who “you” are, and show that indeed the framework set up under Apartheid still persists supported through politics and language and that the creation of the residual ‘coloured’ category lead to strong racialized political control. It will then look at “i-identity” in the coloured community and the agency of creating for oneself an understanding of oneself both individually and as part of a group, using Bulhan’s three forms of identity development.

### **Coloured “You-identity”:**

In 1951, W. Eiselen, the Secretary for Native Affairs said, “It is almost impossible to determine with any certainty which people are natives and which people are coloureds...It would be an uneconomical waste of time and money to try, throughout the country, to determine a person’s race with precision” (Apartheid museum display), yet through the South African Native Affairs Commission (Sanac) Report nearly 50 years earlier in 1903-1905 there was an attempt to define the native and the coloured and create that box. Then in 1950 with the Population Registration Act, Colourness became a residual category where anyone left over that did not fit into the categories of white or black/native was placed (Reddy 71). Given any other name, the category would have had the same station and purpose; the category was created for “Others.”

Who got to decide a person’s racial category? From 1951 onward, often untrained local white people acting as census-takers became “racial classifiers—making recommendations on a person’s race” (Apartheid museum display-*Apartheid’s System of Racial Classification*). After the 1968 Births, Marriages and Deaths Registration Amendment Act, no. 18, hospital staff were given that right (Reddy 75). Politics and the law handed over the power of naming to people who were in no wise qualified to do such a task. The strong macro-politics of Apartheid instituted racism at

the highest level, and although the system did not legislate that whites must be racist in their interpersonal relationships with others on the micro level, they almost undoubtedly were. So even once institutional racism was abolished, the micro-level interactions strongly sustained the framework set up under Apartheid (Hook 243).

Returning to Reddy's original claim, we ask: does the racial classificatory frameworks set up by the Apartheid system persist in present South African? Most definitely. Will it continue to persist in the future? More than likely, due strongly to the micro-level interactions of people. Does the current system act the same as the one in place during Apartheid? No, but not a lot has changed. Reddy writes, "[nothing] suggest that old racial and ethnic divisions are dying in the post-Apartheid South Africa" (Reddy 64) and although I believe this to be true, I have not missed the slow creeping in of the class system as a new way people divide themselves. Everyone is sick of racism and does not want to be considered racist, so class has taken over as the new racism, which allows people to somewhat escape the confining racial box they had no chance of leaving under Apartheid. An example of this was an experience I had last weekend when I was in Johannesburg for the day. I was to be picked up by an alumni of my college in Minnesota, who told me to look for the black BMW. As I waiting, not one, not two, but 8 black BMWs passed, and there was no pattern as to what "race" the driver was. I luckily picked the correct BMW and as we chatted on the way to his gorgeous house in the middle of a new golf estate, I learned he had grown up in Guguletu, a very different environment from the one he found himself in now. As a Xhosa after Apartheid, he found a situation where he could move up and take advantage of opportunities. For Coloureds and people in the middle, it remained a hard issue, with the often-used comment, "under Apartheid we weren't white enough, now we're not black enough."

In regards to the second claim, we now ask, "Was the 'coloured' category created to homogenize hybrid notions of identity in order to create a system of racialized political control?" Yes. Colonial powers have been masters at the strategy of divide and conquer. Through the political divisions, people became disunited and hierarchies formed. Erasmus writes, "growing up coloured meant knowing that I was *not only* not white, but *less than white; not only* not black, but *better than black*" (Erasmus 13). This became especially problematic if ever attempting to unite and challenge the system as a group. One's whole experience was determined by their racial categorization. "Racial identity determined the 'lifeworld' of the Apartheid subject. All other identities were subordinate to the racial/ethnic political categorization of the person" (Reddy 77). So although people of hybrid identities found themselves to be very different from each other, creating further divisions, the political powers wrote them all off as one-in-the-same, creating a united front that maintained their power and allowed them to conquer.

## Coloured “I-dentity”

Under such harmful politics, how were coloured people able to find an identity and a voice? As Adhikari emphasized in his paper, “The Burden of Race?” that at both a popular and academic level, coloured people have remained “marginalized by history and even historians” (Adhikari 1). In this way, they have become alienated from themselves, as Frantz Fanon says, through the violence of the colonizers and the oppressive views they hold of the natives that further oppresses the minds of the natives (Zahar 13). When one begins to know themselves in the oppressor’s terms, there is an ever-present “risk of using racist formulations as a way of understanding self—of unintentionally objectifying oneself in terms of these racist values” (Hook 97).

H.A. Bulhan talks of three phases of identity development: capitulation, revitalization or radicalization—read: damage, pride, or synthesis. There is first a kind of self-hate and alienation from oneself, assimilating into the dominant culture with a particular denunciation of one’s own culture, otherwise known as the ‘mark of oppression’ (Foster 137). It is followed by a pride in oneself and where one comes from, eventually leading to the synthesis of a group of people with “unambiguous commitment to radical change” (Foster 137). These three phases can be experienced simultaneously or apart and can occur in individuals or in generations of people or both (Foster 587). People can move between them and through them in any direction.

The coloured community in South Africa has experienced these stages in a number of combinations and continues to pass through and between them. Capitulation still plays out a great deal regarding standards of beauty, with many girls trying to ‘relate more to the white side of the family,’ most manipulated in hair. Erasmus writes that with curling or straightening your hair comes shame and humiliation in the coloured community because it places you in the ‘other’ side, which under capitulation is being rejected (Erasmus 13). Additionally many people find themselves co-existing between capitulation and revitalization, being forced to choose an extreme on the black-white binary, ultimately having to reject a part of themselves and their identity.

The biggest move into radicalization as a group came with the evacuation of 60,000 people from District Six between 1966 and the early 1980s under Apartheid. It now sits as a wasteland, but is a stark reminder of injustice as well as resistance and hope for tomorrow (Kester xi). It was “where the new layers of immigrants came, where the free slaves came, where all this hybridity took place, and [which] symbolizes a tenacity in mankind [*sic*] to resist imposed identities and imposed social structures” (Soudien 124). Most people who grew up in District Six

seem to have created a group synthesis, which is the unification that results from the coming together of different ideas and influences—hybridity of all sorts. But what happens when the group splits apart and individuals find themselves without that foundation and support of other people in a similar situation as themselves? They get overpowered.

## **Conclusion**

It is only until racial discourse, as we know it, is eliminated and politics uses language in a new way that the strong racial classificatory framework of South Africa will crumble. Once people are able to reclaim their history and determine their discourse, only then will things change. One of the things I love most about Jamaica is the way they work with the hybridity and diversity of the people. Similar to South Africa, Jamaica is a land full of diversity of peoples with the presence of Indians, Chinese, Germans, Africans, and others but the difference lies in the pride in hybridity and its creation of a place for everyone. Their motto, “Out of many, one people” is understood in its essence and can be seen in the beautiful mixtures of people. Instead of focusing on always trying to find their roots and create separations accordingly, they have put their energies into moving forward to create a place where all are welcome and able to succeed regardless of any notions of ‘race.’ Diran Adebayo, in her book, “Some Kind of Black” comments on this nicely, “...roots? ...I swear, if I had a puff for every time black folks drone on about ‘roots this’ and ‘roots that.’ I’m more worried about my branches, you know. It’s the branches that bear the fruit and tilt for the sky” (Adebayo).

Coloured by any other name *would* be as grueling. It would *also* be as rewarding, as can be seen in the case of Jamaica. Progress is slowly being made as Coloured communities are reclaiming an identity and perhaps creating a new discourse that will change politics and help eliminate the racial structure in place. As the sun shines brighter, the fruit grows larger, and the world becomes healthier. Soon people will begin branching out.

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