

# CHAPTER 5

## DECENTRING THE ~~RACE~~ OF AFRICANNESS

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Therefore it was necessary to begin by demythifying the concept of Africanity, reducing it to the status of a phenomenon – the simple phenomenon which per se is perfectly neutral, of belonging to Africa – by dissipating the mystical halo of values arbitrarily grafted on this phenomenon by the ideologues of identity. It was necessary, in order to think of the complexity of our history, to bring the theatre of history back to its basic simplicity. In order to think of the richness of African traditions, it was necessary to weaken resolutely the concept of Africa, to rid it of all ethical, religious, philosophical, political connotations, etc., which a long anthropological tradition had overloaded it ...<sup>1</sup>

### 1 Introduction: putting race under erasure

The discussion in the preceding chapters sought to deconstruct the making of African identities in colonial discourses: to question and unmask the overloaded conceptual binaries and hierarchical systems of thought that Hountondji is alluding to in the epigraph. These systems were epistemologies purposefully assembled by the colonial project in order to construct culturally and racially subordinate and exploitable essential Africans. Colonial subsumption of Africanness created not just African cultural alterity – more significantly, it created a dense racial alterity: a race at the nadir of all races. This chapter can be read as a consolidation of the critiques of colonially ascribed identities of Africans. I seek to amplify the deconstruction of Africanness by answering the question: What does

1 P Hountondji 'Que peut la philosophie? (translated as 'What can philosophy do?') (1981) 119 *Présence Africaine* 47 at 52, quoted in VY Mudimbe *The invention of Africa: Gnosis, philosophy and the order of knowledge* (1988) 37. An English translation of Hountondji's article is published in (1987) 1 *Quest: Philosophical Discussions* (now *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy*) 2-28. The epigraph is taken from Mudimbe's translation.

Africanness mean today (or at least what should it mean) when race is deconstructed and when Africanness is read using Hall's template of identification? I wish to deconstruct Africanness in contemporary Africa with a focus on problematising race. In the final analysis, I argue for inclusive Africanness so that Africanness can be imagined less in terms of an overloaded biological race and more in terms of belonging to Africa, as Paulin Hountondji urges us to do in the epigraph.

In my deconstruction of the race of Africanness, I do not deny the materiality that race has historically mustered in the ascription or appropriation of African identities. It is not my aim to dismiss race as something unimportant or to detotalise its social reality. As a point of departure, I concede that race existentially remains a powerful social and political reality such that, indeed, it would be manifestly unconvincing to argue otherwise, precisely because our individuality is partly embedded in a collective history. Linda Alcoff makes the point that though individuals have agency over their history, at the same time they cannot opt to live outside their history, even if history is dynamic.<sup>2</sup> Africa has a history of race which Africanness cannot escape any more than African-Americans can escape the history of Negro slavery or Jews the history of the Holocaust. My aim is to place emphasis on the importance of relating to race as a deconstructed category so that Africanness can be imagined as an inclusive category without the normative albatross of biological and metaphysical essences that both colonial and, significantly, racial emancipatory discourses purposefully saturated it with.

Put differently, this chapter is not about banishing the race of Africanness but, instead, decentring it. Decentring Africanness allows us to imagine difference, as not simply comparative or oppositional difference, but relational difference. We need not continue to think about difference in the manner that the exclusionary colonial ideologies of self and the other did: as external difference between two complete entities that can be calibrated by an external index to determine a comparative relationship of something that is pegged to a gold standard.<sup>3</sup> We should not remain stuck in thinking about difference as an expression of metaphysical polarities and a struggle between two Cartesian entities.<sup>4</sup> Homi Bhabha underscores this point, eloquently asking his own questions:

2 LM Alcoff *Visible identities: Race, gender and the self* (2006) 115.

3 Here I am drawing my argument from Elizabeth Grosz's normative framing of feminist difference: E Grosz 'Derrida and feminism: A remembrance' (2005) 16 *Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 88 at 89-90.

4 Grosz (n 3 above) 89-90; K Oliver *Womanising Nietzsche: Philosophy's relation to the "feminine"* (2016), drawing from J Derrida *Positions* (1981) 41-43.

Must we always polarize in order to polemicize? Are we trapped in a politics of struggle where the representation of social antagonisms and historical contradictions can take no other form than a binarism of theory vs. politics? Can the aim of freedom or knowledge be the simple inversion of the relation of oppressor and oppressed, margin and periphery, negative image and positive image? Is our only way out of such dualism the espousal of an implacable oppositionality or the invention of an originary counter-myth of radical purity?<sup>5</sup>

By decentring Africanness I mean amplifying Africanness without succumbing to the originary counter-myth that Bhabha speaks against. Decentring is a process of *repositioning* and ultimately relegating to a *lower category* the colonial and nativist bequests of raced Africanness while continuing to acknowledge race's social and political presence in the making of Africans. In a deconstructive sense, this repositioning can be understood as bringing 'low' that which has been historically 'high'.<sup>6</sup> Thus, whilst acknowledging the continued social and rhetorical power of race, my discursive aim, in Heideggerian and Derridean senses, is to deconstruct the 'race' in Africanness such that in this chapter and throughout this book it can be *implicitly* read as ~~race~~ – meaning 'race' as a 'concept under erasure'.<sup>7</sup>

The use of race as a concept under erasure is a deconstructive tool. Its heuristic utility lies in creating discursive space for applying to Africanness a dialectic which arises from Hall's identification thesis. The dialectic is that race was historically constructed on a biocentric, racist and racialising premise which we ought not to prolong. However, even if invented, race is an historical and existential reality. For now, we are stuck with race as our social systems, polities and juridical systems have yet to find a substitute for it. We cannot, therefore, 'opt out' of race; we are constrained to continue using the term, but not in its *originary* form. Hall aptly articulates this deconstructive technique when he says:

5 HK Bhabha 'Commitment of theory' (1988) 5 *New Formations* 5.

6 The concept of rendering 'low' that which was once 'high' comes from the deconstructive grammar of Derrida's thinking about difference beyond binary opposition: S Hall 'Who needs "identity"?' in J Evans & P Redman (eds) *Identity: A reader* (2000) 15 at 16, citing J Derrida *Positions* (1981) 42; Oliver (n 4 above); Grosz (n 3 above) 89-90.

7 S Hall (n 6 above) 15-16, citing Derrida (n 4 above) 42. I use ~~race~~ 'implicitly' because, as a matter of technique, I do not actually cross out ~~race~~ but ask readers to always read it in whenever I use the term in this book. Heidegger, the German philosopher, first used the technique of 'concept under erasure'. Derrida, the French philosopher and deconstructionist, popularised it: J Derrida *Of grammatology*. trans GC Spivak (1976) xiv, originally published in 1967.

Unlike those forms of critique which aim to supplant inadequate concepts with 'truer' ones, or which aspire to the production of positive knowledge, the deconstructive approach puts the key concepts 'under erasure'. This indicates that they are no longer serviceable – 'good to think with' – in their originary and unreconstructed form. But since they have not been superseded dialectically, and there are no other, entirely different concepts with which to replace them, there is nothing to do but to continue to think with them – *albeit now in their detotalized or deconstructed forms and no longer operating within the paradigm in which they were originally generated.*<sup>8</sup>

Applied to the African context, what Hall means is that whilst race is extant or remains with us for the foreseeable future, it can no longer operate with the same epistemology that gave it naturalistic validity under colonial *commandement* or even under emancipatory African nationalistic discourses. Africanness, therefore, should be understood as the irruptive emergence of a new concept that could never be included in the colonial discourses.<sup>9</sup> Once detotalised, what race retains is its social or political salience.

## 2 Recalling Hall's deconstructive identification template

The critique of colonial discourses in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 clarifies that the race of Africanness is a historical construction that biologised African cultures. A single index of what is Africa and who is African facilitated racial and cultural dominance as well as economic exploitation in the colonial state, including its outgrowths such as the apartheid state. In the post-independence and post-apartheid African era, Hall's deconstructive work on identity formation is instructive. It allows us to avoid the pitfall of essentialised racial and cultural identities. Hall's identification thesis should cause us, as implored by Hountondji, not only to unpack the loaded essences of our colonial racial bequests and the unities they proclaimed but also not to emulate the same excesses.<sup>10</sup> Hall's arguments about the historical situatedness of identities leave us conscious of the exclusionary tendencies of identities, especially those bequeathed to us by the colonial state as they were moulded in the crucible of colonial *commandement*.<sup>11</sup>

The discussion of the making of apartheid racial identities in Chapter 4, especially, shows how the ascription of racial identities can easily

8 Hall (n 6 above) 15-16 (reference omitted) (my emphasis).

9 Derrida (n 4 above) 42.

10 Hountondji (n 1 above).

11 Hall (n 6 above) 17.

become an exercise in legislation rather than an affirmation of equal humanity. Indignity and oppression are suffered by those who cannot fit into, or cannot see themselves in, the paradigm that is held out to be the model for full citizenship. It can be recalled from Chapter 2 that Hall's basic premise about identity and identification is that identity or identification does not have a determinate existence but is always situated in historical contingencies in which a variety of cultural, religious, political and ideological constellations are in place. Furthermore, identity is rarely if ever complete; it is always in the making – an ongoing process of becoming. The African identities ascribed by the colonial state were an antithesis. They stood for the opposite of Hall's thesis in their quest for completeness, fixedness and transcendence so as to achieve political stability in the hierarchical relations of raced power.

As emphasised in Chapter 2, Hall's critique of Cartesian identities is principally directed at essentialist or 'naturalistic' identities. These are identities which hold themselves as binaries that signify a completed, constituted unity of the collective self without any internal differentiation. The point is that we should be wary of identities that come with certitude and sharp antinomies. Such identities are more an effect of the marking of difference and exclusion than they are a sign of inclusive sameness.<sup>12</sup> It can be recalled that identities are not constituted in a vacuum but within a discourse in given historical and institutional sites. In the process of recognising some persons and social groups, identities concomitantly exclude other persons and social groups. Internal homogeneity, which is what consecrates an essentialised identity category, is in fact the construction of closure that keeps out other persons or groups precisely because identities are constructed *through* and not outside of difference – the 'constitutive outside'.<sup>13</sup>

To borrow from Ernesto Laclau, the idea of African identity as something which conveys homogeneity requires us to establish unity and internal homogeneity through excluding others.<sup>14</sup> This requires us, in the end, to establish a 'violent hierarchy' unless, of course, African identity and Africanness are pegged at a very high level of generality that accommodates internal differentiation and, more crucially, a fluid rather

12 As above.

13 Hall (n 6 above), citing J Derrida *Positions* (1981); E Laclau *New reflections on the revolution of our time* (1990) 17-18; J Butler *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of 'sex'* (1993) 3.

14 Laclau (n 13 above) 33; Hall (n 6 above) 18.

than static Africanness.<sup>15</sup> What this chapter seeks to highlight is that a saturated Africanness today would be an imposed, stereotypical mirror of its colonial counterpart. It would be out of place and not useful to contemporary Africa as it would demand a cramped African identity which lies outside history.

### 3 Decentring the race of Africanness

Race has been the platform from which to comprehend the contingency and historical situatedness of African identity-formation. In this sense race has been Africa's own identitarian crucible: something inscribed onto Africans by colonial *commandement*. As part of decentring Africanness it is necessary to emphasise that the scientific basis for the division of the world's populations into different races with different racial essences has been refuted, despite extraordinary attempts by white supremacists and eugenicists to lay down such a foundation.<sup>16</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah accomplishes this refutation in his influential book, *In my father's house*.<sup>17</sup>

#### 3.1 Appiah's *In my father's house*

In his book, Appiah deconstructs the racial making of African peoples into a single index of Africans by showing that the colonists' perception of the African race was self-serving, a register of race moulded from a biocultural construction of race framed on an axis of Cartesian alterity. Appiah's argument is that for the purposes of racial exploitation, race has worked as a metonym for culture.<sup>18</sup> The morphologies (the 'bio' component of racial construction) of the colonised people were combined with their cultures (the cultural part of racial construction) to produce a distinct African race with calibrated racial essences. Appiah's fundamental argument is that neither race nor culture should be the foundation upon which to essentialise identities and, furthermore, science does not favour the apostles of race – the racial supremacists and ideologues of racial purity.

Neatly summarising his extensive research about the science of race, Appiah's conclusion is that similarities with other human beings aside, given a person's 'race', it is hard to tell beforehand what his or her

15 As above; S Newman *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-authoritarianism and the dislocation of power* (2001) 117.

16 Ch 4 discusses white supremacists' attempts in using, for example, IQ testing, craniometry and phrenology to establish Africans as people of inferior intelligence.

17 KA Appiah *In my father's house: Africa in the philosophy of culture* (1992).

18 Appiah (n 17 above) 6.

biological characteristics will be save for morphological differentiation.<sup>19</sup> We may differ greatly in colour, hair and bone but are so much more alike than we are different. The genetic variation between the populations of Africa, Asia or Europe is not much greater than that found within a given population.<sup>20</sup> Differences in language and civilisation are patently poor guides as indicia for biological differences precisely because, as Appiah argues, race has historically worked as a metonym for culture.<sup>21</sup> It has served as a political tool for biologising culture.<sup>22</sup> Of course, badges of colour and nineteenth-century racial theories of polygenesis continue to hold sway among racial supremacists. However, we need not cavil with the fact of our monogenetic origins. Although populations moved in different territorial directions, as the human race we descend from one original population.<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless, race is socially and, more pertinently, politically real not least because, although it was imposed on 'Africans' and people of African ancestry, they themselves ended up appropriating the imposed racial identity even if only to challenge the suppositions and the burdens that came with that African/Negro racial identity. Self-identification with the African race, for example, can be understood as the explanation for the solidarity between African-Americans, Afro-Caribbeans and pan-Africanists before and after the Second World War. It is obvious that race was a central organising factor in the rise of African nationalism and struggles against colonialism and apartheid. The question to ask is whether racial affinity and solidarity suggest more than political organisation based on common interests so as to also indicate an assimilation of colonial racial views about the essence of race.

An argument can be made that political struggles against racial oppression have tended to absorb and implicitly accept European racial thinking, that there are, in fact, races with different racial essences. Appiah makes this point in his exploration of early articulations of race by black intellectuals.<sup>24</sup> He builds his thesis by exploring, especially, the writings of WEB Du Bois, the African-American sociologist, civil rights leader and

19 Appiah (n 17 above) 36. Ch 2 of Appiah's book is devoted to refuting scientific claims about innate racial differences.

20 Appiah (n 17 above) 35.

21 Appiah (n 17 above) 45.

22 As above.

23 Appiah (n 17 above) 37.

24 Appiah (n 17 above) chs 1 & 2.

pan-Africanist. Du Bois was an apt figure for Appiah to study as he was not just a prolific black scholar who wrote about race,<sup>25</sup> he was also a pioneer of both African-American liberation and African liberation in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, precisely the time when Europe consolidated and firmly inscribed in colonial discourses the racial inferiorisation of black people. Du Bois was able to reflect on white racial thinking not only in relation to black people in the United States – the Negroes – but also in respect of black people in the Negro motherland – the Africans.

Appiah is of the view that although Du Bois was cognisant of the social construction of race and its historical making, at the same time he seemed, initially, to be influenced more by race as biology than as a constructed notion.<sup>26</sup> To a point, in an essay written in 1897, 'The conservation of races' Du Bois demonstrates this ambivalence, as is apparent in this extract:<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, in our calmer moments we must acknowledge that human beings are divided into races. Although wonderful developments of human history teach us that the grosser physical differences of colour, hair and bone go but a short way towards explaining the different roles which groups of men have played in human progress, yet there are differences – subtle, delicate and elusive, though they may be – which have silently but definitely separated men into groups. While these subtle forces have generally followed the natural cleavage of common blood, descent, and physical peculiarities, they have at other times swept across and ignored these. At all times, however, they have divided human beings into races.<sup>28</sup>

But as Appiah concedes, at the same time as appearing to give credence to phenotype as a sign of racial essence and destiny, Du Bois was clearly not saying that the intellectual and cultural capacities of black people were inferior to those of their white counterparts.<sup>29</sup> Seeming to give credence to a biological conception of race, Du Bois at the same time resists it.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, in the same essay, Du Bois says 'when we come to inquire into essential difference of race we find it is hard to come to any definite

25 Foner has edited the speeches and writings of Du Bois in two volumes: PS Foner (ed) *WEB du Bois speaks: Speeches and addresses 1890–1919* (1970); PS Foner (ed) *WEB du Bois speaks: Speeches and addresses 1920–1963* (1971).

26 Appiah (n 17 above) 33.

27 WEB du Bois 'The conservation of races' (1897) in Foner (ed) *WEB du Bois speaks: Speeches and addresses 1890–1919* (n 25 above) 73–85.

28 Du Bois 'The conservation of races' (n 27 above) 73–75; Appiah (n 17 above) 28.

29 Appiah (n 17 above) 34.

30 KK Smith 'What is Africa to me? Wilderness in black thought, 1860–1930' (2005) 27 *Environmental Ethics* 279 at 292–293.



conclusion'.<sup>31</sup> Notwithstanding, Appiah argues that Du Bois took the fact of race for granted but sought to revalue the hierarchical essences it came tethered to.<sup>32</sup> In Appiah's view, Du Bois received a concept of race as hierarchy and a vertical structure but sought to rotate the axis to give it a horizontal reading.<sup>33</sup> But this is only one reading of Du Bois.

A different reading of Du Bois is that his seeming acknowledgement of the essence of race, on the one hand, and its revision to rotate the axis and give it a horizontal reading on the other, needs to be interpreted contextually. It needs to be understood in a historical context in which denying race would have been a bridge too far. Du Bois' approach to race was not untypical; it was shared by several other black writers and intellectuals of his generation.<sup>34</sup> He was seeking to confront a racialised juggernaut of his day. Du Bois was courageously confronting intermingled social, political, legal, philosophical, theological, racialised opposition that did not point to a peaceful co-existence but instead a 'violent hierarchy' in which 'white' had the upper hand over its 'black' counterparts. He was operating in a polity in which a virulent strain of racism had acquired the status of an organising principle. To have attempted to deconstruct race so that race would be the irruptive emergence of a new concept would have been to move too quickly – to jump a step – in ways that would have left the prevailing oppressions untouched. A pragmatic or even strategic option for Du Bois was first to acknowledge the existence of different races and then to proceed patiently to affirm the equality of races.

Responding to Appiah and other writers from a deconstructionist perspective who have been critical of Du Bois' position on race, Nahum Chandler makes the salient observation that one needs to keep in mind that Du Bois was trying to contend with sedimented discourse of not just white supremacy but, more significantly, black degeneracy.<sup>35</sup> At the same time

31 Du Bois 'The conservation of races' (n 27 above) 74.

32 Appiah (n 17 above) 46.

33 As above.

34 Names that can be cited in this connection include Walker, Stewart, Douglass, Harper and Crummell: ND Chandler 'The economy of desedimentation: WEB du Bois and the discourses of the Negro' (1996) 19 *Callaloo* 78 at 79.

35 Chandler (n 34 above). Appiah aside, Chandler cites the following writers: A Reed *Race, politics and culture: Critical essays on the radicalism of the 1960s* (1986) 61-95; A Reed 'Du Bois's "double consciousness": Race and gender in progressive era American thought' (1992) 6 *Studies in American Political Development* 93-139; P Gilroy *The black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness* (1993) 112-145; K Warren 'Appeals for (mis)recognition: Theorizing the diaspora' in A Kaplan & DE Pease (eds) *Cultures of United States imperialism* (1993) 392-406.

as fighting for the civil liberties of black people, Du Bois was seeking to do the basics: to first vindicate the very identity of black people as persons who were 'fully' persons, against the backdrop of congealed politics and discourses about the supremacy of a *pure* white race whose polar opposite was an intellectually and culturally *degenerate* black people.<sup>36</sup> It can be recalled from the discussion in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 that in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the European global project of classifying world populations into races and asserting white supremacy hardened. White supremacy was content only with establishing and maintaining that black people were not fully human. Given this social and political context, a totally deconstructed discourse of race would not have been intelligible to Du Bois' audience.

It hardly needs stressing that Du Bois was not operating in a 'free zone' in which a non-essential discourse about race could emerge and be given audience.<sup>37</sup> The ascribed sub-human status of the African/Negro object was inextricably tethered to the supposed purity of the white subject.<sup>38</sup> Given this context, as DA Masolo puts it, confronting white racism at the time required blacks first to redeem 'their own identity' and refute the foundation for discrimination so as to gain a 'self-identity'.<sup>39</sup> To contest white supremacy, therefore, one had first to affirm the separate, as it were, equal humanity of black people even if through the route of acknowledging *different* races.

The acknowledgement of different races by Du Bois and other black intellectuals of his generation, therefore, is an historical approach that can be understood as a political effort to deal with white supremacy. Du Bois' political project was to respond to the prevailing social, political and economic exclusion of black people from full citizenship in various locales, whether in the United States, the African colonies or in the Caribbean islands, by arguing for racial equality. The concession by Du Bois and other black intellectuals that *different* races exist is racial reasoning that was already sedimented or even required by its *other*: its constitutive outside or boundary (white racial identity) that it sought to challenge.<sup>40</sup> It is a concession that existed only because the adversary was a white polity and acknowledging different races was the consequence of the racialised society in which Du Bois, a committed and formidable advocate of an

36 Chandler (n 34 above) 79-81.

37 Chandler (n 34 above) 80.

38 Chandler (n 34 above) 79.

39 DA Masolo *African philosophy in search of identity* (1994) 11.

40 Hall (n 6 above) 17.

egalitarian society, lived and could impact positively only through arguing for equality between *races*.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, to render his racial equality cause intelligible, Du Bois first had to acknowledge the existence of different races but without necessarily giving succour to the thesis of different and hierarchical racial essences or 'scientific' racism. Indeed, in his later writings Du Bois clearly walks the line of refuting 'scientific' racism. Writing in the *Crisis* in 1911, he made the point that it would not be legitimate to argue from differences in physical appearance to differences in mental attributes or to treat the civilisation of a given 'race' at any historical moment as offering an index to its innate or inherited characteristics.<sup>42</sup>

There is, of course, a danger that in responding to white racism, one can, paradoxically, end up finding purchase in biological essence, including aligning the black race with notions of black racial purity, a distinct black personality and black vocational competence. Equally, responses to white racism can excite narrow, exclusionary sentiments about what constitutes an authentic black race. To a point only, the racial thinking of Edward Wilmot Blyden can be understood as exemplifying both these excesses.

### 3.2 Blyden's black personality

Blyden was Afro-Caribbean.<sup>43</sup> In 1851, he emigrated from the Danish island of St Thomas (now the Virgin Islands) to West Africa, settling first in Liberia and later in Sierra Leone. He was largely self-taught. Notwithstanding the racial obstacles he encountered in accessing higher education, remarkably, he rose to become a prolific writer and intellectual.<sup>44</sup> VY Mudimbe notes that Blyden witnessed, first hand, not just the 'Scramble for Africa' but also the first European settler arrivals in West Africa.<sup>45</sup> Blyden invested considerable time in thinking about race

41 Grosz (n 3 above) 89.

42 WEB du Bois 'Races' (1911) 2 *Crisis* 157-158, cited in Appiah (n 17 above) 34.

43 Ch 4 of Mudimbe's (n 1 above) is devoted to examining the legacy of Blyden; HR Lynch *Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-Negro patriot 1832-1912* (1967).

44 On Blyden's obstacles to education see V Pawliková-Vilhanová 'The African personality and the self in the philosophy of Edward W Blyden, 1832-1912' (1998) 7 *Asian and African Studies* 162 at 166.

45 Mudimbe (n 1 above) 99.

and the place of the African/Negro in the racially oppressive polities of his time.<sup>46</sup>

Blyden contributed positively towards repairing the sullied dignity of people of African ancestry. He made it his lifelong project to counter the white supremacist belief that Africans were destined for lifelong servitude at the hands of colonial masters. Blyden raised political consciousness about black self-rule, nationhood and self-identity. He was acutely aware that the institutions of slavery and colonialism had left black people, including those in the diaspora, with a deep psychological dependence on whites for affirmation. In his writings, he sought not just to counter white ethnocentrism and rebut the ascribed intellectual inferiority of black people, but also sought to cultivate a new understanding of history in which notions of civilisation and progress were relative and not the preserve of a Western interpretation. To this end, he urged black people to master and write their own histories according to their own experiences and epistemologies without depending on a Western perception of them.<sup>47</sup> He said:

The songs that live in our ears and are often on our lips are the songs which we have heard sung by those who shouted while we groaned and lamented. They sang of their history, which was the history of our degradation. They recited their triumphs which contained the records of our humiliation. To our great misfortune, we have learned their prejudices and their passions, and thought we had their aspirations and their power.<sup>48</sup>

We have neglected to study matters at home because we were trained in books written by foreigners, and for a foreign race, not for us – or for us only so far as in the general characteristics of humanity. We have had history written for us, and we have endeavoured to act up to it; whereas, the true order is, that history should be first acted, then written.<sup>49</sup>

Blyden's writings are credited with announcing West African regional unity, pan-Africanism, African nationalism and *négritude* as byproducts of

46 The works of EW Blyden include *Vindication of the Negro race: Being a brief examination of the arguments in favour of African inferiority* (1857); *Liberia's offering* (1862); *The Negro in ancient history* (1869); *Liberia: Past, present and future* (1869); *Christianity, Islam and the Negro race* (1888); *Africa and the Africans* (1903); *African life and customs* (1908).

47 Mudimbe (n 1 above) 121-122; Pawliková-Vilhanová (n 44 above) 169.

48 Blyden *Christianity, Islam and the Negro race* (n 46 above) 91, cited in Mudimbe (n 1 above) 121.

49 Blyden *Christianity, Islam and the Negro race* (n 46 above) 221, cited in Mudimbe (n 1 above) 122.

his lifelong commitment to achieving racial justice and African national selfhood.<sup>50</sup> At the same time there is a manifestly contradictory side to Blyden. He was far from consistent in the manner he advocated for African liberation. Moreover, he held quite ambivalent views not just about colonialism but also slavery.<sup>51</sup> His views about race were contradictory in that Blyden was, himself, not above the racism that he passionately stood against.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, it is not unfair to say, as Mudimbe has argued, that Blyden had quite a narrow understanding of race.<sup>53</sup> Paradoxically, he seemed to derive the main foundation for his views about race from the very eighteenth-century European racial thinking and colonising structure that he was seeking to challenge and negate.<sup>54</sup>

What is of interest in an appraisal of Blyden's philosophy of race in a discourse on Africanness is not so much his belief that Africans historically constituted a different world with its own history and traditions, it is the emphasis he placed on innate and normative racial difference between blacks and whites. Albeit with some vacillation, Blyden seemed to implicitly find purchase in a racial differentiation thesis that, in substance, would have struck rapport with the apartheid doctrine of a hierarchised separation of races.<sup>55</sup> Even if his objective was to equalise races, his approach detracted from equality on a horizontal axis partly because he prescribed a regimen of mutually exclusive races in which racial capacities were dichotomised. As the following passage suggests, Blyden had an abiding belief that races were *really* different:

There is no absolute or essential superiority on the one side, nor absolute or essential inferiority on the other side. It is a question of difference of endowments and difference of destiny. No amount of training or culture will make the Negro a European; on the other hand, no lack of training or deficiency of culture will make the European a Negro. The two races are not moving in the same groove with an immeasurable distance between them, but on parallel lines. They will never meet in the plane of their activities so as to

50 Mudimbe (n 1 above) 98, 117; Lynch (n 43 above) 252; Pawliková-Vilhanová (n 44 above) 172-175; Masolo (n 39 above) 11-12; F Viljoen *International human rights law in Africa* (2012) 152.

51 Mudimbe cites as one example Blyden's statement that transatlantic slavery was 'deportation from a land of barbarism to a land of civilisation': Blyden *Liberia's offering* (n 46 above) 156; Mudimbe (n 1 above) 105.

52 Mudimbe (n 1 above) 98 119; Masolo (n 39 above) 12.

53 Mudimbe (n 1 above) 104.

54 Mudimbe (n 1 above) 104 129, citing CH Lyons *To wash an Aethiop white: British ideas about black educability 1530-1960* (1975) 108.

55 See ch 4.

coincide in capacity of performance. They are not identical, as some think, but unequal; they are distinct but equal.<sup>56</sup>

In his laudable pursuit of racial equality and repairing the spoiled identity of people of African descent, nonetheless, Blyden made the same error of biologising culture and thinking about race in oppositional differences as did the colonists. In this regard he strikes a marked contrast to Du Bois, who advocated racial equality but without apportioning different racial capacities. Blyden seems inexorably drawn to the thesis of race as destiny with Africa as the 'natural' home of Africans, including her Negro descendants in the diaspora. Whilst, on the one hand, purporting to affirm equality between races, on the other hand, it seems that Blyden conceived races along Cartesian dualisms in which races have dichotomous essences; his thinking is thus implicitly wedded to polygenesis. He seemed to hold a strong conviction that the assertion of a liberating African identity and humanity required the abjuration of any commonalities between the black and the white race. Blyden believed that each race had its own inherent attributes and destiny, which were different from each other. Furthermore, in this 'never the twain shall meet' thesis he believed that each race had a moral duty to 'retain race integrity and race individuality'.<sup>57</sup>

Blyden is credited as one of the pioneers of 'black consciousness'.<sup>58</sup> He is remembered for his original effort to theorise 'blackness' in the form of an attempt to ascribe to Africans/Negroes a distinctively 'African/black personality'.<sup>59</sup> The idea of an 'African personality' was a benevolent and reparatory one. It was spurred by the objective of countering embedded white racism and ethnocentric denigration of African peoples by affirming the humanity of Africans and restoring dignity to an injured and derided black race. Through the assertion of black personality, Blyden sought to recover black human dignity; to restore pride and to retrieve from the past the wholeness of black people and their civilisation by asserting positive human qualities that were 'authentically theirs'.<sup>60</sup> But what did black personality imply? What were its main contents?

To understand Blyden's black personality one has first to adopt Blyden's situatedness: his own racial vantage point of seeing humanity as made up of different races and among them a distinct African race with its

56 Blyden *Christianity, Islam and the Negro race* (n 46 above) 227.

57 Quoted in Pawliková-Vilhanová (n 44 above) 170.

58 Blyden *Christianity, Islam and the Negro race* (n 46 above) 276; Mudimbe (n 1 above) 121.

59 Mudimbe (n 1 above) 118-129; Pawliková-Vilhanová (n 44 above) 170; Masolo (n 39 above) 11-12.

60 LS Senghor 'Foreword' to EW Blyden in HR Lynch (ed) *Selected letters of Edward Wilmot Blyden* (1978) xv-xxii.

own essence. From this interpretive vantage point the possession of African racial identity becomes a precondition for correcting colonial and racial inequalities as well as for the socio-political transformation of the continent. The essentials of blackness, according to Blyden's thesis, were to be found foremost in the race itself: in its history, customs and institutions and, ultimately, in its capacity to be independent. The qualities of independence and self-realisation which, of course, are positive socio-political characteristics were the fulcrum of Blyden's project of African redemption.<sup>61</sup> However, the black personality was far from being unproblematic.

Part of the shortcoming of the black personality thesis arises from Blyden's attempt to produce a list of race-based characteristics that are peculiar to black people. Important as it was to counter white supremacy by invoking positive qualities of black people, Blyden ended up compiling his own stereotypes of black people, which, incidentally, were likely to serve white supremacists. This is partly as a result of Blyden's believing that it was in the areas of spirituality and culture that blacks were destined to make their mark in contributing to human civilisation, implicitly leaving out, for example, the intellectual realm.<sup>62</sup> The virtues of the black personality, which Blyden sought to extol, were to be found, among others, in the character of 'simple and cordial manliness and sympathy with every interest of actual life and every effort for freedom' among black people.<sup>63</sup> The subjects of Blyden's black personality were marked by 'cheerfulness, love of nature and willingness to serve'.<sup>64</sup> Blyden seemed to put a particular stress on willingness to serve, including serving the interests of the civilising mission of the colonial project. He saw black people as a people with a disposition towards being 'supple, yielding, conciliatory, obedient and gentle' with a 'musical spirit' to boot.<sup>65</sup>

The issue is not whether Blyden's concept of black personality did not convey to black people positive notions of self-affirmation, pride in one's identity and black emancipation at a historical time that these attributes were sorely needed. Of course, it did. Notwithstanding its liberating trajectory, however, Blyden's black personality was a problematic concept in its attempt to compile a single racial index for black people. His

61 R Nathan "African redemption": Black nationalism, and end of empire in Africa' (2001) 30 *Exchange* 125 at 133.

62 Pawliková-Vilhanová (n 44 above) 170; Masolo (n 39 above) 171.

63 HR Lynch (ed) *Black spokesman. Selected published writings of Edward Wilmot Blyden* (1971) 197, cited in Pawliková-Vilhanová (n 44 above) 171.

64 Lynch (n 63 above) 207, cited in Pawliková-Vilhanová (n 44 above) 171.

65 Blyden *Christianity, Islam and the Negro race* (n 46 above) 276.

conceptualisation of the African/black personality predictably ended up unduly trapped in an essentialised racial identity.

The philosophical weakness with ethnocentric concepts such as 'African personality' or its successor, *négritude*, is that they depend heavily on creating binaries and normative essences. As Edward Said and others argue, it is an emancipatory approach that places too much demagogic stress on ethnocentric identity to the point of, paradoxically, appearing to be cut from the very same cloth it wishes to oppose.<sup>66</sup> Achille Mbembe makes a similar point.<sup>67</sup> He understands the autochthonous rationale of self-regeneration, self-knowledge and self-rule behind concepts such as *négritude*.<sup>68</sup> At the same time he laments that *originary negation* – the effort to negate and dislodge the canon instituted by discourses of colonialism – has culminated in imprisoning rather than liberating articulations of African identity.<sup>69</sup> The effort to negate a spoiled identity, Mbembe argues, has produced the praxis of Afro-culturalism which is ensconced in the nativist thesis of radical difference and is preoccupied with the purity and authenticity of African identity.<sup>70</sup> It is a thesis which is fixated on the past and above all, on countering the originary events of slavery, colonialism and apartheid in ways that obscure other vectors of history and multiple ancestries of identity.<sup>71</sup> Its ahistorical and archaeological orientation inclines it towards creating an ontology of Africanness in which African identity manifests not as open, ever-evolving subjectivities and identifications that are subject to radical historicisation and that create pathways for the enunciation of new forms of African ethnicities. Instead, African identity appears hypostatized: as an epidermalised monument which articulates the final truth about the qualities of black people and their normative future.<sup>72</sup>

*Négritude* (translated from French as *Negro-ness*) began as a literary movement founded by black writers living in France in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>73</sup> Aimé Césaire, a Martinican and founding member of the

66 EW Said *Culture and imperialism* (1993) 275-276; F Fanon *The wretched of the earth* (1967) 170.

67 JA Mbembe 'African modes of self-writing' (2002) 14 *Public Culture* 239; JA Mbembe 'On the power of the false' (2002) 14 *Public Culture* 629.

68 Mbembe 'On the power of the false' (n 67 above) 635.

69 As above.

70 Mbembe 'African modes of self-writing' (n 67 above) 252-256.

71 Mbembe 'African modes of self-writing' (n 67 above) 241-242; Mbembe 'On the power of the false' (n 67 above) 636; A Quayson 'Obverse determinations: Africa' (2000) 14 *Public Culture* 585-586.

72 Mbembe 'On the power of the false' (n 67 above) 629.

73 Mudimbe (n 1 above) 85-87; R Zahar *Frantz Fanon: Colonialism and alienation* (1974) 60.



*Négritude* movement, is credited with coining the term *négritude* in a poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Return to my native land*).<sup>74</sup> In the poem Césaire seeks to repair a sullied dignity through retrieving the past. He harkens to the past not just to recall and assert the personhood and humanity of black people against the backdrop of European ethnocentrism; equally significantly, he also seeks to recover a 'black' worldview to rival Cartesian rationality.<sup>75</sup> In a hermeneutical sense, *Cahier* represents the poetics of black/African identity as *originary*:<sup>76</sup> the desire to recapture an uninferiorised Africanness and restore its imaginary fullness. Among intellectuals from mainland Africa, *négritude* was articulated first by francophone Africa, with Leopold Senghor (later to become the first president of independent Senegal) as its best-known exponent.<sup>77</sup>

Initially, the common ground among the Parisian black exponents of *négritude* was that to oppose dehumanising colonialism and racism it was desirable to develop a counter discourse that would affirm the equal and full dignity of black people. However, as the movement grew, *négritude* gestured towards a worldview of black people that espoused a distinct, oppositional black racial essence, consciousness and civilisation.<sup>78</sup> Senghor described *négritude* as 'the sum of the cultural value of the black world'.<sup>79</sup> In this sense *négritude* can be understood as a gloss on and successor to Blyden's black personality. Indeed, Senghor treated Blyden's ideas as a forerunner of *négritude*.<sup>80</sup> *Négritude* spoke not just to a given nation but across nations where black people were located. It was a pan-African/Negro philosophy – its *Weltanschauung* – in its enunciation of a rooted, if not primordial, culture, subjectivity and spirituality of black people on the continent and in the diaspora.<sup>81</sup>

74 Masolo (n 39 above) 1; A Loomba *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (2005) 176.

75 Masolo (n 39 above) 24-28.

76 See ch 3 sec 4.1; Hall (n 6 above).

77 Senghor's works include LS Senghor *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (Anthology of the new Negro and Malagasy poetry in French) (1948); 'Prière aux masques' (Prayer to masks) in *Oeuvre poétique* (Poetical works) (1990); 'Négritude: A humanism of the twentieth century' in P Williams & L Chrisman (eds) *Colonial discourse and postcolonial theory* (1994) 27-35.

78 Mudimbe (n 1 above) 85-87; Loomba (n 74 above) 25; Zahar (n 73 above) 67, citing as an example Cheikh Anta Diop's articulation of the relationship between whiteness and blackness as epitomised by diametrically-opposed socio-economic, cultural and moral values such as patriarchy versus matriarchy, individualism versus collectivism, and war-like use of force versus ideals of peace, justice and goodness: CA Diop *The cultural unity of black Africa* (1962) 195-197.

79 Senghor 'Négritude' (n 77 above) 28.

80 Mudimbe (n 1 above), citing Senghor's foreword to Blyden *Selected letters of Edward Wilmot Blyden* (n 60 above) xv-xxii.

81 Loomba (n 74 above) 176-177.

The imperative in *négritude* to rehabilitate a spoiled identity and to restore the dignity of black humanity was a given, as Frantz Fanon underscored.<sup>82</sup> The European colonising structure had not stopped at only imposing its rule and will to dominate and economically exploit the continent and its people; more significantly, the colonising structure had come tethered to a violent epistemological model that insidiously renounced all that was black African – the identities, physical appearances, histories, cultures, ethnicities, spiritualities, creativity and voice.<sup>83</sup> Doubtless, therefore, the passion in *négritude* to confront racism and colonialism and their debasement of black people was called for.

However, in its defence as well as assertion of black humanity, the semantics of *négritude* succumbed to an ethnocentric trap. While appearing to re-evaluate the relationship between an existing or erstwhile hierarchical relationship, Said argues, ethnocentric efforts to recover an injured identity tend to reinforce the very same hierarchy by continuing to look for clear-cut absolute difference.<sup>84</sup> The danger with this ethnocentric approach is that those seeking to recover from a sullied dignity may be obliged to invent an ‘originary counter-myth of radical purity’ in which Africanness emerges as an extraordinarily reified normative identity.<sup>85</sup>

Handel Wright observes that *négritude*’s articulation of an African identity in ‘direct opposition’ to what was prevailing in Eurocentric discourses was a strength and as well as a weakness.<sup>86</sup> *Négritude* valorised African-centredness. It idealised African culture, implicitly imagining its aesthetics to be singular, static and shorn of any propensity towards modernity.<sup>87</sup> Fanon understood that liberatory efforts, such as *négritude*, were an effect: the predictable emotional antithesis of a racialising and racist polity in which to be black was to have a spoiled identity.<sup>88</sup> He warned that the historical necessity of those at the receiving end of racism to racialise their claims when seeking to vindicate their humanity can cause them to miss a more heterogeneous political and cultural configuration.<sup>89</sup> Whilst admiring *négritude* for its courage and

82 Fanon (n 66 above) 170-171.

83 See ch 3 sec 3.2.

84 Said (n 66 above) 275.

85 Bhabha (n 5 above) 1; C Eze ‘Rethinking African culture and identity: The Afropolitan model (2014) 26 *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 234 236; JA Mbembe *On the postcolony* (2001) 12.

86 HK Wright ‘Editorial: Notes on the (im)possibility of articulating continental African identity’ (2002) 16 *Critical Arts* 1 at 3.

87 As above.

88 Fanon (n 66 above) 171.

89 Fanon (n 66 above) 172-173.

combativeness, Wole Soyinka has been critical of the oppositional dualisms in the discourse of *négritude*. In his view it not only failed to refute a racialising and racist ideology but drank from the very same founding colonial wellspring, thus inadvertently reinforcing the ideology.<sup>90</sup> Soyinka says:

[N]égritude trapped itself in what was primarily a defensive role, even though its accents were strident, its syntax hyperbolic and its strategy defensive ... *Négritude* stayed within a pre-set system of Eurocentric analysis on both man and his society, and tried to re-define the African and his society in those externalized terms.<sup>91</sup>

Soyinka's critique of *négritude* as a philosophy of blackness in which Blyden is credited with being an inspirational figure, equally applies to its forerunner – the black personality. Blyden's ideas about distinct races and his attempt to equalise the black race with the white race led him into a number of blind alleys – racial suppositions that can only be understood as a mirror of eighteenth-century European views about the racial supremacy of the white race. Blyden apologetically sought to carve an African zone of equality out of a racist ideology by attempting to give a badge of equality and virtue to what Victorian anthropologists had already documented and inferiorised as some of the regular characteristics of Africans. Accepting Blyden's African personality thesis requires us, among other unpalatable racist outcomes, to accept a division of labour between whites and blacks, assigning the tasks that require intellectual effort to whites and those that require muscle to blacks – the beasts of burden.

Blyden's belief that races were real, in the sense of being natural and that each race had a 'purity of blood' of its own, led him to adopt racial positions that are patently untenable as they were separatist and unmistakably racist against persons of 'mixed' racial ancestry, not unlike the position adopted by advocates of eugenics. Blyden, who seemed to derive virtue from being described as a person of 'unadulterated African blood' and of 'the purest Negro parentage',<sup>92</sup> rallied against 'the introduction on a very large scale of the blood of the oppressors among its victims' believing it to weaken the black race.<sup>93</sup> My point is that in the laudable effort of contesting white racism, Blyden ended up hurting the

90 W Soyinka *Myth, literature and the African world* (1976) 127; Said (n 66 above) 276; M Saman 'Senghor's other Europe' (2012) 1 *Savannah Review* 23 at 27.

91 Soyinka (n 90 above) 129 136, as cited in Said (n 66 above) 276-277.

92 Pawliková-Vilhanová notes that these epithets were used by Samuel Lewis in an introductory biographical note to the first edition of Blyden's *Christianity, Islam and the Negro race* (n 46 above) vii viii; Pawliková-Vilhanová (n 44 above) 165-166, footnote 12.

very cause he was committed to – racial equality – by succumbing to a paradoxical exclusionary nativist discourse of race.

Clearly, Blyden's black personality had some disquieting, contradictory features. Its heavy accent on phenotype left it porous to black exceptionalism by way of nativist political opportunism and an ethnocentrism that would exculpate black colonists. Blyden's racial thesis did not allow him to appreciate that the colonisation of Africa by its 'Christianised' and 'civilised' repatriated black diaspora, ostensibly to uplift the African people, would be tantamount to ethnic chauvinism.<sup>94</sup> It would be just as unwanted and as oppressive as colonisation by white colonists. Like some of the black intellectuals of his time, such as Alexander Crummell and Martin Delany, he developed with equanimity a parallel thesis to the 'white man's burden' urging black Americans and Afro-Caribbeans to colonise and 'civilise' Africa.<sup>95</sup> For Blyden Africa was not just the racial birthright of the black diaspora,<sup>96</sup> it was also an object to colonise and civilise complete with mimicry of the predatory and condescending predilections of white colonists.<sup>97</sup> However, seeing the contradiction between, on the one hand, espousing a single index of blackness and pan-Negro/African racial unity and, on the other, promoting a black-ethnicised version of a colonial project against the other blacks in the motherland seemed a bridge too far for Blyden. He was unable to comprehend a simple truth about equality and human freedom: that an exploitative and oppressive boot remains so irrespective of the colour that wears the boot. Colonists are persons who make an appropriate

93 Blyden *Selected letters of Edward Wilmot Blyden* (n 60 above) 488, cited in Mudimbe (n 1 above) 119.

94 Blyden *Selected letters of Edward Wilmot Blyden* (n 60 above) 349-355.

95 A Crummell 'Relations and duties of free coloured men in America and Africa' (1860) in H Brotz (ed) *African-American social and political thought, 1850-1920* (1992) 171 at 173; M Delany *The condition, elevation, emigration, and destiny of coloured people of the United States* (1852); Smith (n 30 above) 285-286.

96 Blyden wrote: 'The exiled Negro, then, has a home in Africa. Africa is his, if he will. He may consider that he is divested of any right to it; but this will not alter his relation to that country, or impair the integrity of his title.' Blyden *Christianity, Islam and the Negro race* (n 46 above) 124, cited in Mudimbe (n 1 above) 105.

97 In 1877, in a letter to the Secretary of the American Colonisation Society, Blyden wrote: 'There is great wealth in their fatherland of which if they do not soon avail themselves, others will get their first pick and perhaps occupy the finest sites.' Blyden *Selected letters of Edward Wilmot Blyden* (n 60 above) 260, cited in Mudimbe (n 1 above) 104.

investment in colonising others and need not be persons of white European descent.<sup>98</sup>

The purpose of this commentary on Blyden is not to render a comprehensive appraisal of his life work, or much less, to judge him with hindsight outside of his given historical period and the prevailing intellectual ferment. Indeed, in respect of the latter, it serves well to stress, as I argued in the preceding section in respect of the racial views of Du Bois, that Blyden, too, was also not operating in a 'free zone' in which a non-essential discourse about race could emerge and be given an audience.<sup>99</sup> His recourse to a nativist discourse of race is not hard to appreciate in someone who was politically engaged in a struggle against, literally, the erasure of the humanity of black people.<sup>100</sup> If anything, Blyden was at once a courageous politician and formidable African intellectual. The mantle of first articulating intellectual ideas about African cultural autonomy and African liberation, political independence and nationhood on the African mainland is, perhaps, one that belongs to Blyden more than any other black intellectual of his time. The passion with which Blyden argued for African cultural autonomy shorn of dependence on Western affirmation is nothing short of remarkable given the domineering colonial and racist discourses of his time.

Rather, the point of my assessment is to argue that Blyden's black personality and black nationalism were pioneering emancipatory concepts, but only for Blyden's time. In contemporary times we need not reinvent the concepts in their orthodox forms – even in our understandable need to counter orientalisating discourses – whether in our anti-colonial, nationalistic, Afrocentric or Afro-radical discourses. This is because the concepts betray a positionality, political opportunism and nativism exposing the limits of expedient, binarised, biocentric nationalism and certitudes and therefore inconsistent with egalitarian and inclusive Africanness. They are concepts and certitudes that cannot serve us well today when, to borrow from Alcoff and Bhabha, we are more able to unmask and contest colonising and racialising self-aggrandising structures without having to invent a counter-myth of radical purity.<sup>101</sup> Above all, ethnocentric concepts betray a single narrative of history and a panoptic account of identity inconsistent with the hybridities and multiplicities of the cultures and subjectivities of contemporary Africans and contested

98 E Tuck & KW Yang 'Decolonization is not a metaphor' (2012) 1 *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1 at 7.

99 Chandler (n 34 above).

100 Eze (n 85 above) 236.

101 Alcoff (n 2 above) 125; Bhabha (n 5 above) 1.

meanings of Africanness.<sup>102</sup> In short, it is a ‘pluritopic’ rather than a ‘monotopic’ hermeneutic of Africanness that is apt to adequately explain our African selves today.<sup>103</sup>

#### 4 Retaining the political salience of race

Efforts to deconstruct race aside, it hardly needs to be stressed that race commands an existential, durable presence as a social construction that is materially real in political, economic and cultural senses. Without race, transatlantic slavery, the colonisation of Africa, the oppression of colonial peoples, resistance to colonisation and their interimbrication with the formation of African identities would be inexplicable. Equally, without race, the identities of people who belong to Africa as a spatial location, but do not necessarily describe themselves as ‘Africans’ in a racial sense, would also be inexplicable. Race remains an associational criterion that people often claim as part of their identity or that may be ascribed to them by others or the political community of which they are part. Race has political implications where the body politic is racialised, overtly or covertly, in the sense that racial differentiation is tethered to hierarchised essences that carry social, political and economic meanings that may be positive or negative for the racialised subject, depending on which side of the ‘colour line’ the person falls or is deemed to fall.<sup>104</sup>

Therefore, to dismiss race as inconsequential because it is without scientific salience, would be to miss its political salience – its significance as social practice with a social ontology. This is the point made by Alcoff in her discourse on identities of race, gender and the self.<sup>105</sup> Alcoff’s argument is that our capacities to transform or even eradicate race, whose once-claimed scientific basis has been disabused, should go hand in hand with fully taking into cognisance the social and political reality of race as lived embodiment, with its hidden epistemic effects and the hold it has over collective imaginations whether as privilege or at the receiving end of race.<sup>106</sup> Indeed, it is not lost on Alcoff that the classification of people according to the racial categories devised by Europeans is precisely what

102 Alcoff (n 2 above) 124-125, citing W Mignolo *The darker side of the Renaissance: Literacy, territoriality, and colonization* (1995) 15-16.

103 Alcoff (n 2 above) 125.

104 In 1903, Du Bois famously wrote: ‘The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour-line – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea: WEB du Bois *The souls of black folk* (1903) 19.

105 Alcoff (n 2 above) 179-194.

106 Alcoff (n 2 above) 182.

was used by Europeans to develop a cartography that gave order and intelligibility to the new expanding territories that were being discovered, and that would eventually become colonial possessions and, therefore, raced worlds.<sup>107</sup> Ultimately, according to Alcoff, race is given a reality in given contexts. In this sense, Alcoff is asking us to think about race as an identity under Derridean ‘erasure’.<sup>108</sup>

But whilst in the Western archive, especially, Africa as alterity has endured,<sup>109</sup> it is not this knowledge that makes Africans. Knowledge of Africa as alterity exists among other archives. Ultimately in this book, it is no longer the sedimented discourses – the congealed pasts or archaeologies – that are crucial to understanding the espousal of Africa and Africanness. What matters more is the present and future representation of Africa and Africanness. When Hountondji implores us to undo the myth and weaken the very notion of historical Africa,<sup>110</sup> he is calling for a critical interpretation of African culture and history against the backdrop of a sedimented Africa invented from outside. Necessarily, as Mudimbe observes, Hountondji is calling for a discourse that is porous to radical historicisation.<sup>111</sup>

In a Goffmanian sense and on two fronts – race and culture – the transformed colonial discourse laid the durable and stable seeds for a ‘spoiled African identity’.<sup>112</sup> To be African would come to mean, to be black or ‘non-white’ or ‘non-European’ under apartheid, to possess an ‘attribute that is deeply discrediting’<sup>113</sup> in an epidermalising and epidermalised world.<sup>114</sup> Being black as opposed to being white has meant reducing the bearer from a ‘whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one’.<sup>115</sup> Categories that carry stigma are potent immobilising

107 Alcoff (n 2 above) 179.

108 Hall (n 6 above) 15.

109 Mbembe (n 85 above) 2.

110 Hountondji (n 1 above).

111 Mudimbe (n 1 above) 37.

112 E Goffman *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity* (1963).

113 Goffman (n 112 above) 3.

114 IM Young *Justice and the politics of difference* (1990) 123; TF Slaughter ‘Epidermalizing the world: A basic mode of being black’ in L Harris (ed) *Philosophy born of struggle: Anthology of Afro-American philosophy from 1917* (1983) 283-287. Slaughter explains the notion of an epidermalised world as how the stigmatised group experiences discursive consciousness of its lowly status through the body language of the ‘superior’ group such as through the physical distance that the ‘superior’ group keeps from the stigmatised group or even a certain nervousness that it displays when compelled by circumstances to share physical space with the stigmatised group: Slaughter (above); Young (above).

115 Goffman (n 112 above) 3.

forces. By themselves, categories, in a Hegelian sense, can become a form of oppression that is capable of imprisoning and distorting the self to the point of crippling self-hatred.<sup>116</sup> A positive understanding of the self derives in part from intersubjective approval.<sup>117</sup> Stigma often serves to discourage stigmatised individuals and groups from taking up rights and privileges and is conducive to the creation and sustenance of a passive sub-class, instilling into stigmatised subjects real feelings of intergenerational inferiority.<sup>118</sup>

In the epigraph, Hountondji invites us to stop caricaturing Africanness through perpetuating the archive of panoptic identitarianism imposed from outside of Africa. When reflecting on 'who/what is African', Hountondji implores us to engage critically with a history of Africa, especially its construction from exteriority, which produced an Africa and Africans that were over-determined and fossilised, rendered non-reflexive objects of a cavilling power and devoid of a history and subjectivity of their own.<sup>119</sup> At the same time, and this is Hountondji's ultimate point, correcting the excess of colonialism and Western epistemology that historically and materially have othered Africa, should not mean recourse to appropriating an authentic African identity in the way, for example, Blyden or *négritude* attempted to do.

Hountondji should not be misunderstood as rejecting 'Africa' or the term 'African' but, instead, should be understood to be seeking to disrupt their interpellated status as concepts which are the product of an enduring bipolar discourse by the West that consigns the continent and its peoples, especially dark-skinned peoples, to an instantly recognisable and indelible register of racial and cultural alterity. Moreover, Hountondji is not seeking to expunge African ancestry or descent as markers of usable and existential socio-political identity, including solidaristic identity, but seeks to argue for an anti-essentialist, non-primordial idea of African identity so that

116 C Taylor 'Multiculturalism and the "politics of recognition"' in A Gutmann (ed) *Multiculturalism. Examining the politics of recognition* (1992) 25.

117 A Honneth 'Integrity and disrespect: Principles of conception of morality based on the theory of recognition' (1992) 20 *Political Theory* 187 at 188-189.

118 Assertions about the negative effects of stigma should be read as generalisations rather than invariable universal experiences as there are always exceptions to the rule. Alexander argues that the effects of stigma and prejudice are contingent on a number of factors and will not be uniform amongst all societies, groups and societies, and historical eras. For some groups, stigma can paradoxically lead to the opposite – a sense of superiority and a redoubling of efforts: L Alexander 'What makes wrongful discrimination wrong? Biases, preferences, stereotypes, and proxies' (1992) 14 *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 149 at 163. See also K Karst 'Foreword: Equal citizenship under the Fourteenth Amendment' (1977) 91 *Harvard Law Review* 1 at 7.

119 Hountondji (n 1 above).



African biological descent and territorial setting no longer are all-telling signposts in deciphering African identity. Ultimately, he is contesting biologised nativism in the same way that proponents of Afropolitanism have done in recent years in their effort to replace a monochromatic African identity with polychromatic, fluid, de-ethnicised and de-raced identities.<sup>120</sup>

#### 4.1 Afropolitanism

Taiye Selasi is credited with coining the term 'Afropolitan', having used it in a magazine piece published in 2005.<sup>121</sup> 'Afropolitan' began its life as a conceptual resource for conveying the self-identity of 'Afropolitans', meaning mostly upwardly mobile people in the diaspora who share African descent (though not necessarily in a biological sense) and who have other belongings and cultural identifications which cannot be explained by reference only to Africa. Of Afropolitans, Selasi says:

They (read: we) are Afropolitans – the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You'll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos. Most of us are multilingual: in addition to English and a Romantic or two, we understand some indigenous tongue and speak a few urban vernaculars. There is at least one place on The African Continent to which we tie our sense of self: be it a nation-state (Ethiopia), a city (Ibadan), or an auntie's kitchen. Then there's the G8 city or two (or three) that we know like the backs of our hands, and the various institutions that know us for our famed focus. We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world.<sup>122</sup>

120 Commentaries on Afropolitanism include T Selasi 'Bye bye Barbar' *Lip Magazine* 3 March 2005, <http://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76> (accessed 1 January 2017); JA Mbembe 'Afropolitanism' in N Simon & L Duran (eds) *Africa remix: Contemporary art of a continent* (2007) 26-30; S Gikandi 'Foreword: On Afropolitanism' in J Wawrzinek & JKS Makoka (eds) *Negotiating Afropolitanism: Essays on borders and spaces in contemporary African literature and folklore* (2010) 9-11; M Salami 'Can Africans have multiple subcultures? A response to "Exorcising Afropolitanism"' (2013), <http://www.msafropolitan.com/2013/04/can africans have multiple subcultures a response to exorcising afropolitanism.html> (accessed 1 January 2017); Eze (n 85 above); S Gehrman 'Cosmopolitanism with African roots. Afropolitanism's ambivalent mobilities' (2016) 28 *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 61.

121 Selasi (n 120 above).

122 As above.

In an identitarian sense, Selasi's Afropolitanism enunciates the positionality of a class of peoples of African descent who participate in the cosmopolitanism of the global North. At first glance, Afropolitanism seems to portray not just a sense of cosmopolitanism but also a select Afro-lifeworld not accessible to continental Africans. This perception of Afropolitanism has made it the subject of criticism for its exclusivity and classism in debates about African identity.<sup>123</sup> The perception of elitism notwithstanding, as Chielozona Eze underscores, Selasi's contribution is significant for giving voice to an elective affinity which challenges and unsettles the notion of African identity as a closed racial and cultural identity, thus revealing the heterogeneities of Africanness.<sup>124</sup>

In explicating Afropolitanism, Simon Gikandi emphasises recognising Africans in their fluid heterogeneities as being both rooted geographically somewhere and released from a normative homogenising African identity. In Afropolitanism Gikandi captures the notion of an Africanness that is made up both of roots and routes. He explains the impetus behind Afropolitanism:

the desire to think of African identities as both rooted in specific local geographies but also transcendental of them. To be Afropolitan is to be connected to knowable African communities, languages and states. It is to embrace and celebrate a state of cultural hybridity – to be of African and other worlds at the same time.<sup>125</sup>

Afropolitanism is an important addition to post-Cartesian discourses on Africanness after the primal moment of colonisation. It serves as a platform for a conversation in which assumptions about African identity as singularly modular, static and necessarily racial are interrogated in order to reveal cultural hybridity and, more specifically, the presence of new or evolving African identifications. To borrow from Hall, what is significant about the discourse of Afropolitanism is the enunciation of new, non-coercive African ethnicities in ways that signify the refutation of an essential African subject.<sup>126</sup> Afropolitanism underscores the view that the African subject is not a stable category of nature with a fixed transcultural

123 Eze (n 85 above) 240; Gehrman (n 120 above) 62; E Dabiri 'Why I am not an Afropolitan' (2014), <http://africasacountry.com/2014/01/why-im-not-an-afropolitan/> (accessed 1 January 2017); R Fasslet "'I'm not Afropolitan – I'm of the continent": A conversation with Yewande Omotoso' (2015) 50 *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 231 at 235.

124 Eze (n 85 above) 235.

125 Gikandi (n 120 above) 9.

126 S Hall 'New ethnicities' in D Morley & K Chen (eds) *Stuart Hall: Critical dialogue in cultural studies* 442 at 448.

and transcendental constitution or orientation but a social construction.<sup>127</sup> It is challenging the centrality of race in dominant notions of ethnicity. It tells us that, whereas in the aftermath of slavery and colonialism race played a central historical role in the formation of African identities, it is now being displaced by other categories – even if it has not been eclipsed.<sup>128</sup> Present constructions of African identities and subjectivities are being articulated in an identarian conceptual structure, which includes class, migration and cosmopolitanism, to signify African heterogeneities rather than a transcendent singularity.<sup>129</sup>

It needs stressing that Selasian Afropolitanism stands for the particular. Afropolitanism speaks to Alcoff's point that when claimed by the self, social identities are context-variable and, above all, fundamental to one's experience of the world.<sup>130</sup> Ultimately, any claimed identity is autobiographical. Thus, Afropolitanism is not immune to solipsism and, therefore, should be hesitant to universalise its experience.<sup>131</sup> The unities Selasian Afropolitanism pronounces as 'we' in fact stand for 'I'.<sup>132</sup> The homogeneities and affiliations it claims and the identity it names, in the end are *naturalised* and over-determined processes of closure which are always situated.<sup>133</sup> Selasian Afropolitanism cannot articulate a universalism about the identifications of migrants of African descent who have migrated to and live in the global North. It need not speak for the identifications of migrants of African descent who experience virulent forms of racial exclusion or xenophobia and form part of the underclass in the global North. Indeed, if Afropolitanism attempts to do so it risks articulating a false universalism that comes with any attempt to generalise identity and in consequence overlooks the cleavages of difference, varied histories and imbalances of power.<sup>134</sup>

Even if Afropolitanism is to be welcomed as an enunciation of diversity within Africanness, it is possible to argue that in contesting the essentialisation of African identity, paradoxically, Selasian Afropolitanism may end up essentialising the identity of continental Africans. A glaring weakness in Selasian Afropolitanism is that it has nothing insightful to say about movement in the identifications of continental Africans. It seems that it stands or falls by direct participation

127 Hall 'New ethnicities' (n 126 above) 444.

128 Hall 'New ethnicities' (n 126 above) 446.

129 As above.

130 Alcoff (n 2 above) 90 92.

131 See ch 2 sec 2.

132 As above.

133 As above.

134 As above.

in the cosmopolitanism of the global North. In its imagination the transformation of African identity into cosmopolitan identifications seems to occur only when people of African descent locate themselves in the global North. This is a fallacy in its argument that leaves Selasian Afropolitanism vulnerable to the charge that it appears to harbour latent nativising tendencies of its own. Let me extend this argument.

It can be recalled that identities are relational accounts which are established partly by excluding something and by establishing a 'violent hierarchy'.<sup>135</sup> Selasian Afropolitanism is relational to something: 'a margin, an excess'.<sup>136</sup> It is an Afropolitanism that seems to assume stable identities among continental Africans as its relational comparator is what it implicitly misperceives to be uniformity and the lack of movement in the cultural identifications of continental Africans. If this is the case, then Afropolitanism is open to criticism as an Afropolitanism predicated on an orientalising 'them and us' discourse. There seems to be an assumption that Africa and continental Africans are cut off from the rest of the world. Another assumption is that Africa can only be impacted upon by the world but can never exercise any radiating impact beyond its cartography. These assumptions are juxtaposed against an intrinsically dynamic West and highly mobile Afropolitans. In this sense, on one hand Selasian Afropolitanism is a contribution towards the enunciation of African heretogeneities yet on the other, it paradoxically repeats some of the excesses of coloniality. It seems to reappropriate coloniality and reinscribe primordialism on continental Africans, however unintended the result.

For Afropolitanism to be able speak to a broader Africanness in ways that do not mimic coloniality and its nativising discourses, there is a need to radicalise its conceptual parameters. Its philosophical reach can be extended and its meaning deepened beyond Selasi's original conception of Afropolitanism as a subculture tethered to the diaspora and a cosmopolitanism which is dependent on a specific territorial location. The work of Mbembe is a pointer in this direction.<sup>137</sup> It is orientated towards an Afropolitanism that is non-exclusive and has the conceptual capacity to address broader African identifications. Mbembe argues that Afropolitanism is significant, not as a new idea but in its amplification,

135 See discussion in sec 2 above.

136 Hall (n 6 above) 18.

137 Mbembe (n 120 above); Gehrman (n 120 above) 64-65.

which reflects a historical moment in the intensification of Africa's entry into dispersion and vibrant mobility at a cultural level.<sup>138</sup>

Membe's Afropolitanism seeks to articulate African cultural movements in whatever spaces they occur. It requires moving away from notions of a closed African identity constructed around autochthonous fundamentalism in order to generously encompass fluidity in the constant making of Africanness.<sup>139</sup> Mbembe's Afropolitanism is made up of lifeworlds which register African itinerancy, intercultural mixing and blending in ways that are transformative and are situated in a 'geography of circulation and mobility' rather than territory.<sup>140</sup> Thus, Afropolitanism need not be tethered to diasporic movements that exclude continental Africans as mobility occurs in all spaces – within the nation and across the nation, between rural and urban spaces, within Africa and across continents including not just the Western world. Of course, not all spaces will have the same intensity of movement as movement comes with its own heterogeneous valences.

It is significant that in his conception of Afropolitanism, Mbembe puts 'race' under erasure. Race is not a precondition precisely because race is essentialising and exclusionary, such that it obscures the heterogeneities and movements of Africa and Africans. In an interview, Mbembe explains the non-essential place of race in Afropolitanism:

[T]o say 'Africa' does not necessarily mean to say 'black'. There are Africans who are not black. And not all blacks are African. So Afropolitanism emerges out of that recognition of the multiple origins of those who designate themselves as 'African' or as 'of African descent.' Descent here, or descendants, or genealogy, is a bit more than just biological or racial, for that matter. For instance, we have in Africa a lot of people of Asian or Indian origin. We have people who are Africans but they are Africans of European origin in South Africa, and other former settler colonies like Angola, Mozambique. We have Africans who are of Middle Eastern origin, for example in West Africa, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire. And more and more, we have Africans of Chinese origin.<sup>141</sup>

138 Gehrman (n 120 above) 65, drawing from JA Mbembe *Sortir de la grande nuit. Essai sur l'Afrique décolonisée* (translated as 'We must get out of the great night: Essay on decolonised Africa') (2010) 221, where Mbembe argues that as early as the 1960s some African writers were already contesting the idea of a pure African identity.

139 Mbembe (n 120 above).

140 S Balakrishnan 'Pan-African legacies, Afropolitan futures: A conversation with Achille Mbembe' (2016) 120 *Transition* 28 at 34.

141 Balakrishnan (n 140 above) 30.

It is not that Mbembe is denying the place of 'race'. He accepts that 'race' remains and may never disappear and yet concomitantly it is being 'renamed and repurposed' in ways that are no longer originary.<sup>142</sup> Framed in this way, Afropolitanism gestures towards Hall's dialectic of identification; a dialectic between an *originary* perspective where African identity is transcendent and intrinsic and a *transformative* one where identity is subject to radical historicisation.<sup>143</sup> Afropolitanism can be understood as a discursive space for articulating African transformative self-identification through the appropriation of a nuanced understanding of African identity and the rejection of a raced, essentialist, monochromatic identity that has its genesis in coloniality and serves to deny the diversity of Africa and heterogeneities among Africans.

## 5 Africa as space for diverse identifications and recognition of ever-evolving ethnicities

Hall urges us to think about 'race' historically as an 'already-produced' collective identity but whose 'master' status and explanatory power have been weakened and become problematic.<sup>144</sup> 'Race' has not disappeared but it no longer comes with the same racial code as in the past. Its purchase and efficacy remain, but *not* in their originary form. The 'comprehensive' power 'race' had in the high noon of colonisation has been weakened.<sup>145</sup> Equally, 'race' no longer can be appropriated by Africans in the same way as during the anti-colonial struggle. The race of Africanness and its supposed completed unities no longer can be conceptualised as they were in the past if we are to be attentive, not just to 'race's' historical contradictions and fragmentations, but to increasing social diversity and existentially pluralistic articulations of African subjectivities.<sup>146</sup> Ultimately, in thinking about Africa and African identities, it serves us well to recognise the emergence of new identities and new ethnicities which exist side by side with old identities and old ethnicities, including racialised identities and ethnicities.

As Africans, when addressing Africanness, we should strive to be as reflective and as nuanced as we can, partly as celebratory homage to the

142 Balakrishnan (n 140 above) 33.

143 See ch 2 sec 4.1.

144 S Hall 'Old and new identities, old and new ethnicities' in AD King (ed) *Culture, globalization, and the world system: Contemporary conditions for the representation of identity* (1997) 41 at 45-46.

145 Hall (n 144 above) 46.

146 As above.

conceptual complexity of Africa and partly in order to avoid the pitfalls of serving to propagate centuries-old pejorative stereotypes, contemporary oppressive hegemonies and appropriations of the identifications, identities and representations. Our inquiry into Africanness should be as varied and as inclusive as the multiplicity of peoples, historical communities and cultures, together with their social structures, spatiotemporal contexts and connectedness to and interdependence with a larger global community. Whatever typologies we use to explain African identities and Africanness, they should remain as pluralistic explanatory devices that are open to democratic iteration, multiple mappings of Africa, heterogeneous identifications and transformation, rather than epistemologies that are normatively fixed and immune to change.<sup>147</sup> Certainly, any typologies or categories should not assume a transcendence of their own, becoming an albatross that cramps the human agency of how we, as Africans, define ourselves.<sup>148</sup> Identity is becoming and being.<sup>149</sup> The past is there but we produce our identities in the future.<sup>150</sup>

What is striking about Africa and the people who live in it is its palpable diversity. The claim that Africa and Africans are 'racially' or culturally homogeneous always requires first 'balkanising' the continent in order to create smaller cartographies of Africa – smaller Africas so to speak – which are more amenable to reading in homogeneity, although in some Africas more than others.<sup>151</sup> However, even balkanised geographies cannot assure homogeneous identities. If placed under a pluralistic spotlight, they easily reveal diversity and movement in what appeared at first sight to be a homogeneous political community. Let us consider two examples, precisely for the reason that they are often cast as homogeneous smaller Africas – Arab Africa and sub-Saharan Africa.

In the first place the examples of Arab Africa and sub-Saharan Africa tell us that we cannot think about African identity through privileging a particular race as that would be exclusionary. In the second place the examples tell us that even within each smaller Africa, racial and cultural homogeneity exists only as a relative concept. At first sight a semblance of

147 PT Zeleza 'The inventions of African identities and languages: The discursive and developmental implications' in OF Arasanyin & MA Pemberton (eds) *Selected proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference on African Linguistics* (2006) 14 at 18.

148 Zeleza (n 147 above) 20.

149 See ch 2 sec 4.1.

150 See ch 2 sec 4.1; A Paul 'The ironies of history: An interview with Stuart Hall' (2005) 4 *IDEAZ* 30 at 44.

151 I have appropriated the idea of 'smaller Africas' from Zeleza who uses 'little Africas' to capture smaller African spaces from which to construct identity: Zeleza (n 147 above) 17-18.

racial and cultural homogeneity seems apparent when Arab Africa and Black Africa – the sub-Saharan part – are separated. However, on closer examination numerous problems of diversity arise, which can only be resolved by the construction of inclusionary and exclusionary criteria that privilege certain morphological and social markers over others among the citizens of one country.

In many of the predominantly Arab-speaking countries in North Africa, there are diverse morphologies and diverse cultures among populations that are not always acknowledged by institutions of state and the country's media, which tend to portray a particular image of racialised Arab identity.<sup>152</sup> The question will always be what makes one citizen more Arab than the other so as to legitimise the construction of hierarchical citizenship based on Arabness. The very use of the term 'Arab', at least within the cartography of Africa, is problematic if it is intended to convey national or regional homogeneity. It is an exercise in differentiation and assuaging a majoritarian impulse which erases the presence and histories of peoples who were present on the land before Arabisation. For example, in the case of Libya, Arabisation has served to marginalise Berber-speaking Libyans. In Sudan, Arabisation served to disenfranchise the south which led to a violent conflict that culminated in the partition of Sudan.<sup>153</sup> Looking for racial or cultural homogeneity in a nation, much less on a continent, requires establishing a violent hierarchy in order to suppress difference. In the end it requires the institution of a reconstructed apartheid system as the blunderbuss for managing diversity. The argument here is not that there cannot be an Arab identity in Africa, but that such an identity even within the confines of one country, is not the only so-called 'national' identity but is instead expressive of a majoritarian impulse.

Sub-Saharan Africa throws up similar challenges. Racial homogeneity can only be claimed as a majoritarian impulse at the expense of diversity. If we use an epidermalising axis – blackness – as the criterion for homogeneity, then sub-Saharan Africa is a slippery place, even historically, without taking into account more recent immigrants to Africa. Colonisation brought white settlers. Whilst, at the advent of African independence, many returned to Europe some remained behind. In southern Africa and South Africa, in particular, successive generations of white people have made Africa their home. Migration and indentured

152 Zeleza (n 147 above) 16.

153 DM Wai *The African-Arab conflict in Sudan* (1981); M Mamdani 'South Sudan: Rethinking citizenship, sovereignty and self-determination' 4 May 2001, <http://www.pambazuka.org/governance/south-sudan-rethinking-citizenship-sovereignty-and-self-determination> (accessed 12 October 2016).



labour under British colonial rule brought Asians to Africa, especially to East Africa and South Africa.<sup>154</sup> Successive generations of Asian people have made Africa their home. Thus, in a racial sense, sub-Saharan Africa can pass the homogeneity test only by disenfranchising millions of its inhabitants who are not epidermally black Africans.

As axes of identities culture and religion throw up the same challenges. Nigeria provides an instructive example. Paul Zeleza observes that long before the colonisation of Nigeria by Britain, the Hausa people of northern Nigeria were already converts to Islam, sharing a script – Arabic – and trading with neighbours in North Africa.<sup>155</sup> There are other parts of sub-Saharan Africa that exemplify Nigeria in terms of religious diversity and for which religion rather than the epidermal axis, would be the more significant identity.

It is better to concede that there is no single racial or cultural signifier for Africa. Such a marker is absent, even if we can imagine it. Africa and Africanness are open to multiple mappings, as Zeleza has argued.<sup>156</sup> Depending on the context and our interpretive horizon, it is really up to us how we construct taxonomies for explicating African identity. In the final analysis, identitarian taxonomies are interrelated. Each is a social construction and none is exhaustive, self-standing or immune to debate and iteration.<sup>157</sup> If African identity and Africanness were to be conceived in terms of a recognition of a common origin or shared characteristic, ideal or aspiration, then we need first to narrate and fill in the substance of the common origins, characteristic, ideal or aspiration. This will always be an exercise in the construction of identity – of becoming and ever becoming.

On account of the cultural diversity within Africa, I maintain that attempts to find cultural unity across the continent would be fruitless. At the same time my argument is not that Africans merely occupy geographical space. Rather, it is that they comprise a social group with identifiable equality needs. In this connection I draw support mainly from Young's argument that the possession of any inherent characteristics or even cultural or political unity is not necessary for persons to be constituted as a social group with common inherent characteristics.

154 G Oonk *Global Indian diasporas: Exploring trajectories of migration and theory* (2007); P Richardson *Chinese mine labour in the Transvaal* (1982).

155 Zeleza (n 147 above) 16.

156 Zeleza (n 147 above) 18.

157 Zeleza (n 147 above) 14-15.

In *Justice and the politics of difference*, Iris Young reminds us that groups are socially constituted categories and that there are a variety of ways rather than a single way in which a social group might be constituted.<sup>158</sup> Ultimately a social group is not a thing in itself or something that has an immutable identity or common origins.<sup>159</sup> Instead, a social group is a social relation: it exists only in relation to another group.<sup>160</sup> A social group need not always be constituted through the possession of common inherent characteristics, or by consciously professing its own social or political identity. It can also be constituted through a common experience of exclusion and social oppression, even if the experience is not conscientised at a group level.<sup>161</sup> According to Young, whether a group counts as an oppressed group depends on whether it has a collective experience of being at the receiving end of what she describes as the five faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.<sup>162</sup>

Writing about race, gender and the self as identities, Alcoff argues that an adequate account of social identity must be able to do two things simultaneously.<sup>163</sup> On the one hand it must be able to account for the historical fluidity and instability of identities.<sup>164</sup> On the other it must be able to account for the powerful salience and persistence of identities.<sup>165</sup> In appropriating Hall's theoretical approach to thinking about Africanness, I have taken, as a point of departure, that Hall already concedes that there are reasons (good and bad) that account for the powerful salience and persistence of identities such as race, and the focus in this sub-section has been on highlighting the historical fluidity of identities so that race need not continue to govern our future.

Needless to say, the concept of Africanness that I am putting forward here is particularly indebted to the deconstructive archive of cultural theorists and their notion of identity as real and imagined, as well as complex, fluid, dynamic and open-ended. Adopting this position, including appropriating Hall's cultural theory, should not be misunderstood as taking refuge in an empty linguistic postmodern

158 Young (n 114 above) 42-43.

159 Young (n 114 above) 43.

160 Young (n 114 above) 44.

161 Young (n 114 above) 46.

162 Young (n 114 above) 38-65.

163 Alcoff (n 2 above) 87-88.

164 As above.

165 As above.

conception of identity that denies the materiality of identities or even the materiality of discourses.<sup>166</sup> Rather, it is to argue, as Hall did, that identities are made within rather than outside of discourse and that to ground African identity in archaeology would be manifestly ahistorical and incomplete.<sup>167</sup>

At a basic level, a simple though not simplistic response to the question of who is African might be: 'You are African if you say you are. Africanness is belonging'.<sup>168</sup> In answering the question simply and without equivocation, my aim is twofold. First, it is to centre the discourse of equality and sexuality in ways that speak to the concrete lives of people who live in the geographical enclave called Africa (or who identify with it) and the political community called the African Union in ways that do not essentialise identities but are, instead, inclusive. This approach is tied to acknowledging the diversity of political subjectivities, including aligning with discourses on the contingency, heterogeneity and fluidity of identity. Ultimately, the need is to develop a discourse on Africanness that avoids preempting equality, in the first place, through the trap of nativist identities, whether for race, culture or sexuality, that are predicated on hermetically sealed, monolithic notions that are immunised against contestation. Monolithism and prescriptiveness in recognising identities easily create room for dominant discourses to seek exceptions to the imperatives of substantive equality.

166 Mbembe (n 85 above) 5.

167 S Hall 'Cultural identity and diaspora' in J Rutherford (ed) *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (1990) 222 at 232.

168 Here I have appropriated the semantics from the disability work of Simi Linton. In order to highlight the elusive nature of the definitional construction of disability, Linton said: 'The question of who "qualifies" as disabled is as unanswerable or as confounding as questions about any identity status. One simple response might be that you are disabled if you say you are.' S Linton *Claiming disability: Knowledge and identity* (1998) 12-13.