

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Becoming African: debating post-apartheid white South African identities

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The post-apartheid era necessitates the rethinking of white identities in South Africa. One way in which some white South Africans are seeking to redefine themselves is through describing themselves as African. However, claims by white South Africans that they too are Africans have been met with mixed responses from black South Africans. In this article I use contributions to an online university students' forum to explore ways in which some white South Africans are embracing an African identity and to consider ways in which some black South Africans are responding to white South Africans' shifting identities. I use contributions to this forum as a starting point to think about the possibilities and limitations of the embracing of an African identity for the development of what Frankenberg calls 'anti-racist forms of whiteness' among white South Africans.

**Keywords:** white South African identity; anti-racism; whiteness; post-apartheid South Africa

#### Introduction

One of the many defining features of apartheid was the way in which white South Africans insisted that they belonged on the southern tip of the African continent, but at the same time insisted that they were different from and superior to other inhabitants of the same land. As apartheid wound down, some commentators pointed out that the end of apartheid meant that white South Africans would have to rethink how they fit into the broader South African community. Njabulo Ndebele talks about the need for white South Africans to develop a 'new sense of cultural rootedness' (2000, p. 52) commenting that:

the quest for a new white humanity will begin to emerge from a voluntary engagement by those caught in the culture of whiteness of their own making, with the ethical and moral implications of being situated at the interface between inherited, problematic privilege, on the one hand and, on the other, the blinding sterility at the centre of the 'heart of whiteness'. (Ndebele 2000, pp. 46–47)

Ndebele suggests that if white South Africans are to find a legitimate way of belonging in South Africa, they will have to engage critically with their whiteness.

One way in which white South Africans are redefining themselves is by describing themselves as African (see for example Du Preez 2005, Kemp Spies 2007, Morris 2005,

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