BURDENED BY RACE

Coloured identities in southern Africa

MOHAMED ADHIKARI (EDITOR)
Burdened by race: Coloured identities in southern Africa

EDITED BY
MOHAMED ADHIKARI
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RAFIQ AND ZAHEER
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On more than one occasion, upon hearing that I was editing a collection of essays, colleagues remarked that the task called for the arts of persuasion and coercion. Although both were used, it was largely cheerful cooperation that marked the compilation of this volume. This, together with ongoing friendly communication with contributors, helped make the production of this book a most gratifying experience. Despite its eclectic nature, there is nevertheless a distinct bias towards historical analysis in this anthology. This is a reflection of my own background and the contacts I have built up over the years among postgraduate students working on aspects of coloured identity in southern Africa.

All of the contributors are young researchers and academics who have either recently completed doctoral dissertations or are still busy with PhD theses. All except one, whom I met at a conference, contacted me at some point during the last decade to discuss aspects of their research. This volume is thus the product of a personal network that grew organically and in the course of time presented the opportunity of compiling an edited volume. Through it I pay tribute to a group of bright young scholars whose ideas have helped refine my own thinking and whose innovative work is transforming our understanding of the nature and history of coloured identity. For me this book is thus a celebration of academic fellowship that in some cases has matured into highly valued friendships.

A special thank-you to Juliette Milner-Thornton for providing the wonderfully expressive photograph used on the cover of this book. I am indebted to all of the anonymous readers who, no doubt, took time out of busy schedules to evaluate the manuscript and provide constructive commentary. I would also like to acknowledge research funding from the University of Cape Town’s University Research Committee.

As usual I salute the close circle of very dear family members who have enriched my life immeasurably over the years. Although the Friday night gym sessions are now a nostalgic memory, the Sunday afternoon shenanigans are still the highlight of my week. And for me, over the last decade, Saturday has not been Saturday without lunch with Nasreen, Riaz and the recently deceased Kader ‘smartypants’ Adhikari, whose knowledge of the world and hunger for more meat knew no bounds. This intimate clique includes – or included, as some sadly are now departed – Peggy, Ratso, Shadow, Edgar, Lady, Prince, Befok, Oscar and Junior Adhikari. Long may you run Junior, keep on rocking Edgar, and don’t you dare start kakling against Mr. Kakles! Finally, the love and warmth of my sons Rafiq and Zaheer make my life a joy.
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In southern Africa, the term ‘coloured’ has a specialised meaning in that it denotes a person of mixed racial ancestry rather than one who is black, as it does in most other parts of the world. In addition to this racialised attribution which defines ‘colouredness’ in the popular mind, it was the marginality of coloured communities that was central to the manner in which the identity manifested itself socially and politically across the subcontinent. Other common features that have historically marked coloured communities include a strong association with Western culture and values in opposition to African equivalents, their claim to an intermediate position in the racial hierarchy, and negative racial stereotyping derived mainly from the idea that racial mixture is pejorative, and results in degeneration and weakness. Though much more pronounced under white supremacy, these characteristics are still present, though usually in modified, veiled or symbolic forms, in the postcolonial environment, as several of the studies in this collection demonstrate.1

This book is not an attempt to cover its subject in any systematic or comprehensive way but rather to showcase current innovative work on coloured identity in southern Africa. It is eclectic in that contributions

INTRODUCTION

Predicaments of marginality: cultural creativity and political adaptation in southern Africa’s coloured communities
draw on a wide range of disciplines and are written from a variety of theoretical positions. There are nevertheless a number of intertwining themes running through the volume that bind it together. They, among other things, highlight common elements in the origin of coloured identities in the region as well as the shaping influence of that familiar historical trajectory of colonial conquest, segregation and resistance, and the reconfiguration of identities in the wake of the overthrow of white rule. These interlinking themes also accentuate common concerns among researchers in the field derived from recent historiographical developments, the application of new theoretical insights and the changing political environment.

In one sense, coloured identity is a product of European racist ideology which, through its binary logic, cast people deemed to be of mixed racial origin as a distinct, stigmatised social stratum between the dominant white minority and the African majority. In colonial society, effect was given to this ideology through both official and customary discrimination. The colonial state, in its drive to classify and control people, played an important role in demarcating social identities by imposing racially based legal categories and segregatory policies on the population. Colouredness was also partly shaped by colonial social relations in that both settler and indigenous communities helped determine how people of mixed racial heritage were accommodated in these societies. However, in another sense, coloured identity is also very much the product of its bearers who, I would argue, were in the first instance primarily responsible for articulating the identity and subsequently determining its form and content. It is thus not surprising that the most important and most insistent of the themes that unify the contributions to this collection is the agency of coloured and proto-coloured people in the making of their own identities.

All of the contributors argue for a nuanced understanding of coloured and ‘mixed-race’ identities. Their analyses are highly sensitive to changes in the way it has found expression and of the impact of variables such as class, locality, context and ideology on senses of colouredness. They all recognise that an integral part of human social existence is that people self-reflexively create, maintain and revise their perceptions of who they are, and how and why they espouse the values and identities they do, and that social identities are by their very nature contested and unstable. While there is no gainsaying there being a substantive commonality to the concept of colouredness across all of its varied forms in southern Africa,
Christopher Lee’s injunction that local understandings of colouredness be acknowledged and understood is broadly observed by contributors. There is clear consensus in this book that states and ruling groups do not create identities among subject peoples. While they may reinforce, constrain or manipulate such identities with varying degrees of success, bearers in the first instance create and negotiate their own social identities. As James Muzondidya so eloquently summarises this standpoint, ‘coloured people themselves were the primary authors of their identity text’. The challenge is to explain how and why identities come into existence and evolve over time. The contributors to this book approach the problem from many different angles and collectively advance our understanding of this process for coloured identity well beyond the limits achieved by the extant literature.

The significance of colonialism in the making of coloured identities in southern Africa comes through most clearly in the non-South African case studies because colonialism in its formal sense lasted into the mid-1960s in these societies. The Zimbabwean and Malawian examples illustrate very clearly the ways in which colonial social relations and the policies of the colonial state placed limitations on the ways in which coloured identities were able to find expression, yet at the same time presented opportunities for coloured leaders and organisations to take the initiative in advancing identity claims. The Zambian example, because of its focus on a family history, provides insight into how the vagaries of colonial policy and customary discrimination played out in individual lives and across generations in particular families. Colonialism is not synonymous with white domination in this set of case studies because settler, as opposed to metropolitan, control of the state was significant in two of them. In Zimbabwe, white rule was prolonged by a decade and a half as a result of the Rhodesian Front’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence in November 1965. In the case of South Africa, colonial rule was of limited significance because it had given way to a settler-dominated, white supremacist state in the early part of the 20th century as a result of the political settlement following the South African War (1899–1902). In both cases, the ending of metropolitan control exacerbated racial tensions and sharpened the predicaments facing their respective coloured communities.

Despite its relatively early termination in South Africa, colonialism was nevertheless critical to the genesis of coloured identity because it had emerged under the aegis of British rule at the Cape Colony in the late 19th
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century. Although the process of social amalgamation that was to give rise to coloured identity dates back to the period of Dutch colonialism, it was in the decades after the emancipation of the Khoisan in 1828 and slaves in 1834 that various components of the heterogeneous black labouring class at the Cape started integrating more rapidly and developing an incipient collective identity based on a common socio-economic status and a shared culture derived from their incorporation into the lower ranks of Cape colonial society. This emergent community of assimilated colonial blacks consisted overwhelmingly of a downtrodden labouring class of African and Asian origin variously referred to as half-castes, bastards, Cape Boys, off-whites or coloureds, until the last-mentioned became the standard appellation from the latter half of the 1880s onwards. This category was usually taken to include sub-groups such as Malays, Griquas and ‘Hottentots’. It was the transformative impact of the mineral revolution with the discovery of diamonds in 1867 and gold in 1886 in the southern African interior that helped crystallise the identity in the late 19th century. The rapid incorporation of significant numbers of Bantu-speaking Africans into the burgeoning capitalist economy served as the catalyst for assimilated colonial blacks to assert a separate identity and organise politically under the banner of colouredness. With their appeals for acceptance into the dominant society firmly rebuffed, and locked in intensifying competition with culturally distinct Bantu-speaking Africans for social resources, assimilated colonial blacks asserted a separate identity in order to claim a position of relative privilege to Africans on the basis that they were ‘civilised’ and partly descended from European colonists.4

This historical background is crucial to an understanding of coloured identity free of the essentialist notion that colouredness is an automatic product of miscegenation. There is an abiding popular perception that colouredness is an inherent, biologically determined condition that originated almost immediately with the onset of Dutch colonisation of the Cape – ‘nine months after Van Riebeeck landed’, as a popular joke would have it.5 It is also important to an understanding of the making of the identity in the region as a whole because British colonialism expanded from its Cape colonial base into the subcontinent in the late 19th century under the twin influences of the ‘scramble for Africa’ and the development of large-scale mining in southern Africa. Not only did these factors precipitate the South African War, but the hope of discovering a second Witwatersrand motivated Cecil John Rhodes’s drive into south central Africa. Hand in hand with the spread of British colonial rule in southern Africa went a particular set of attitudes and practices towards people of
mixed racial origin encapsulated in the particular meaning of the term ‘coloured’ as it had developed in the Cape Colony.

A point made in all three of the chapters on societies north of the Limpopo is that South African notions of colouredness influenced local conceptions of the identity. This was most patently the case during the earlier years of British rule when colonial administrations first sought to racially classify and regulate the population using received notions of racial difference, and when ideas, experience and immigrants from the Cape were at their most influential. Later, these governments also looked to neighbouring states for suitable models on which to base policies toward people of mixed racial origin. South African influence is clearest in the case of Zimbabwe. James Muzondidya on several occasions demonstrates how ideas and circumstances in South Africa, often through the influence of South African-born immigrants, impacted the life of the Zimbabwean coloured community. Both Juliette Milner-Thornton and Christopher Lee allude to the significance of South African assumptions about racial mixture for their case studies. Not surprisingly, being more remote, South African perceptions and developments had less of an impact on Zambian and Malawian senses of colouredness than they did in Zimbabwe. The relatively small sizes of their settler populations were also significant because this affected both the size of the ‘mixed race’ populations as well as the tenor of colonial policy towards this group.

The pronounced role of segregation and apartheid in the moulding of coloured identity is a common theme that shines through in this collection of essays. Being racially classified by the white supremacist state and pushed together into racially defined residential areas, with many, especially among the small elite, spending their formative years in educational institutions reserved for coloured students, were all significant factors in creating a sense of separateness and community among people of ‘mixed-race’ parentage. There is no shortage of examples in this book that illustrate this, whether it be Helene Strauss’s subtle analysis of what Chris van Wyk’s reminiscences of life in the coloured township of Riverlea during the 1960s reveal about the making of his personal sense of colouredness, or James Muzondidya’s discussion of the significance of the cadastral development of Zimbabwe’s two main cities for reinforcing coloured identity in the first half of the 20th century. In this regard, one can also point to Juliette Milner-Thornton’s reflections on how the colonial administration’s collusion in the omission of white fathers’ names from the official records in Northern Rhodesia affected
their ‘mixed-race’ progeny’s ‘bonding in their abandonment’. Christopher Lee details the interesting example of Nyasaland, where the possibility of privileged treatment, though never realised, had an important and lasting imprint on expressions of coloured identity in Malawi.

The considerable effect of forced removals in consolidating communal consciousness among coloured people features prominently in this anthology, with two chapters devoted to the issue. These studies give substance to the familiar observation that being compelled to live in racially homogeneous residential areas under apartheid reified coloured identity as never before. Henry Trotter explains how evictions under the Group Areas Act helped to bond removees and their social networks into a more intimate sense of what it meant to be coloured, while Christiaan Beyers shows how symbolic meanings attached to District Six after forced removals helped produce a more exclusionary sense of colouredness in contemporary Cape Town. What both Trotter and Beyers very effectively demonstrate is that while it might have been the apartheid state that enforced residential segregation and other draconian forms of social engineering on the coloured community, it was the victims of these injustices themselves who gave content and meaning to the identity reconfigurations that ensued. Both emphasise the significance of a common experience of trauma and a deep sense of social injustice in cementing solidarity within the coloured community in the second half of the 20th century.

As important as such measures imposed from above were, one cannot ignore the complicity of coloured people, both individually and collectively, in the implementation of segregation. They often exploited, supported and sometimes even demanded segregatory measures where these were seen to be to their advantage. As John Cell observed in his study comparing segregation in South Africa and the American South, even though ‘force lay behind segregation … most of the time segregation was self-enforcing’.

The fundamental reason for this acquiescence in their own oppression among coloured communities is patently clear. The original motivation behind the expression of a separate coloured identity, and the most consistent dynamic behind its subsequent assertion under white supremacist rule, was to claim and protect a status of privilege relative to Africans. First prize for the coloured elites of southern Africa would have been acceptance into the dominant society, even if only on the basis of individual merit. Since white racism ruled out any such accommodation,
the coloured communal and political leadership successfully claimed second prize, an intermediate standing in the society that privileged coloured people over Africans. The greatest threat they perceived to their communities' well-being and future was for coloureds to be relegated to the status of Africans in the eyes of the white supremacist state. Despite the history of coloured politics in the region under white domination being a sorry tale of compromise, retreat and failure – essentially because of their marginality – the strategy of claiming a position of relative privilege was nevertheless highly successful. This approach paid off because it resonated so strongly with the ruling establishment’s perception of humanity as consisting of a racialised hierarchy ranked in terms of the degree to which people conformed to the somatic and cultural norms of western Europe and its diaspora. Coloured communities and identity entrepreneurs were able to capitalise on the dominant societies’ perception of them as ‘different’ because of their racial hybridity, and as ‘superior’ to Africans because of their European parentage, and use these to claim an intercalary ranking in the racial order.

Under white rule, the instrumental and material motivations for associating with whiteness and distancing themselves from Africanness through the espousal of coloured identity were considerable for people who were able to claim mixed racial ancestry. Africans were subject to pass laws, and often to curfews, and were restricted in their ability to do things such as buy liquor or own firearms. Also, coloureds were accorded better political representation, had access to superior housing and social services, and generally earned higher salaries. It is thus not surprising that just as there were some coloureds who managed to pass for white, there were also Africans who succeeded in passing for coloured. It was in particular the growing coloured petty bourgeoisie that benefited from this status of relative privilege and that spearheaded the drive for coloured exclusivism. Each and every one of the contributors to this volume acknowledges the considerable extent to which coloured individuals and communities benefited from, and defended, their intermediate position in the racial hierarchy. Of all the cases considered in this collection, only in Malawi did this strategy not lead to the institutionalisation of coloured privilege vis-à-vis Africans despite a fair degree of official sympathy for coloured lobbying in this regard. Besides the miniscule size of its coloured community, the exigencies of indirect rule in Nyasaland pushed the colonial state into playing down racial distinctions among subject peoples in the colony.
All of the studies in this book to varying degrees engage with the ways in which the transition to majority rule affected coloured identities. In all four of the societies under scrutiny, the new political paradigms and the social changes that came in their wake undermined, and even invalidated, the most basic assumptions and practices that framed the expression of coloured identity under white supremacy. Very importantly, that central pillar in the affirmation of a separate coloured identity – the protection of a status of relative privilege on the basis of its proximity to whiteness – was no longer legitimate. Also, Africanist and nationalist values and identities were now emphasised in contrast to the racial solidarities and Western mores that prevailed under white domination. In all of the societies surveyed, there is clear evidence of a hasty re-alignment of political priorities within coloured communities with the approach of majority rule. Most striking, however, has been a newfound creativity in the manifestation of coloured identities in the postcolonial and post-apartheid milieus.

Although the newly democratic environments brought a measure of freedom of association and possibilities for ethnic mobilisation not possible under white domination, they also presented obstacles to the pursuit of coloured communal interests, and posed dilemmas for the political leadership and identity entrepreneurs who sought to mobilise coloured ethnic sentiment. The continued salience of race in the postcolonial situation has left coloured communities in a most uncomfortable position. In addition to still having to shoulder the racial baggage and stigmas historically attached to colouredness, in the new dispensation coloured communities have had to face up to accusations of having benefited unfairly under white rule and of having been complicit in African oppression. Coloured leaders and organisations have also had to tread warily for fear of being accused that they were subverting the state’s nationalist project, be it the rainbowism of the new South Africa or the more Africanist conceptions of the nation north of its borders.

If anything, the postcolonial situation seems to have intensified coloured perceptions of their marginality. Many coloured people, especially among the poorer and less-skilled sectors, have felt more vulnerable to unfair discrimination than under white supremacy. Some even argue that they were better off under white authority. Whereas under white rule they enjoyed a degree of privilege, albeit that their second-class citizenship was inscribed in law, they now see themselves as occupying the lowest rung in the social pecking order and as defenceless victims
of unscrupulous governments that favour their own racial and ethnic constituencies. Ongoing African racial chauvinism towards coloured people only serves to deepen coloured disaffection and feelings of insecurity under the new order. Thus despite the coming of independence and democratic government having endowed coloured people in these societies with full citizenship rights, many would argue that they are still being marginalised. This sentiment of being trapped in a perpetual state of marginality is captured in the refrain common within South Africa’s coloured community that ‘first we were not white enough and now we are not black enough’.

Coloured communities in the region have accommodated themselves to majority rule in a variety of ways. In Zambia, a dominant trend has been for the coloured community to develop a diasporic outlook that sees Great Britain, and to a lesser extent other parts of the English-speaking First World, as places of possible refuge from a hostile homeland. The Zambian nationalist movement, understandably, had no sympathy for coloured exclusivism and, as Milner-Thornton reports, expected coloured people to renounce their European ancestry. Economic decline from the early 1970s onwards accelerated the exodus. By now over half the Zambian coloured population has left the country. Those who have remained, especially the generation born after independence, have generally come to accept majoritarian norms and values to the point where intermarriage with Africans has become common. In Malawi the coloured community by and large resigned itself to suppressing separatist tendencies and embracing, as best it could, state-sponsored visions of an inclusive Malawian nationalism under the autocratic regime of Hastings Banda, who followed a policy of ‘non-tribalism’ for the three decades he was at the helm. Today the term ‘Anglo-African’ is regarded as anachronistic and most people of ‘mixed-race’ descent identify primarily as Malawian although there were attempts at rallying separatist coloured sentiment after the dissolution of the Banda dictatorship in 1994. In Zimbabwe, while some coloured people sought to reinvent themselves as African with the advent of independence, the majority had little option but to acclimatise to living in a society politically dominated by an African exclusivism that envisions the nation in terms of race and indigeneity, and that shows scant regard for coloured communal interests. Like other non-autochthonous minorities, coloured people suffer discrimination in the economic arena and are effectively excluded from political power. The remnant that has not fled deteriorating conditions during the latter part of Mugabe’s rule remains unorganised and completely marginalised.
In South Africa there has been a resurgence of colouredism from the early 1990s onwards in stark contrast to the growing and vocal coloured rejectionism fostered by the non-racial democratic movement of the 1980s. Aided by ever more strident appeals to coloured identity from across the ideological spectrum for political support, including from the ANC that sidelined its anti-racist lobby soon after its unbanning, it once again became acceptable to espouse a coloured identity. Fear of African majority rule, the exploitation of these anxieties by political parties and leaders in pursuit of factional agendas, perceptions that coloureds were being marginalised, a desire to project a positive self-image in the face of pervasive negative racial stereotyping and attempts at capitalising on the newly democratic environment to mobilise coloured communal resources have all played a part in fuelling coloured assertiveness in the new South Africa. The most dramatic and forthright manifestation of this trend came with the majority of coloured voters rallying behind the National Party in the 1994 elections. It is ironic that with the abolition of legally binding race classification as enshrined in apartheid legislation, coloured identity has gained renewed salience in South African public life under democracy. South Africa’s contrasting experience to the rest of the subcontinent in this regard is mainly due to the relatively large size of its coloured population and its regional concentration, giving coloured people considerable political clout in the Western and Northern Cape provinces, where they form a majority of the population.

Attempts at re-conceptualising coloured identity have thus been particularly conspicuous in the case of post-apartheid South Africa. Not only is South Africa’s transition to democracy the most recent, but it also exhibits a much broader range of responses to the postcolonial situation. The precipitate change in the political and moral climate in which the identity has had to operate has faced the political and intellectual leadership within the coloured community with the unenviable task of reorienting a profoundly racialised identity in an environment in which racial ideology has been thoroughly discredited. This quest has been complicated by the widely held perception of coloured complicity in maintaining white supremacy. The transition to democracy has, on the other hand, opened new ways of perceiving and articulating colouredness. It has brought forth creative responses to questions around the nature of colouredness, and stimulated innovative ways of marshalling coloured ethnic resources. After nearly a century of remarkably stable existence under white supremacy, coloured identity has been in flux since the early 1990s and there have been unprecedented changes in the ways...
the identity has found expression. This fluidity has resulted in a degree of uncertainty, even confusion, around colouredness and the extent to which it is appropriate to espouse or invoke it. Within South Africa’s coloured community there is a tentativeness about whether members should express their identity as black, as African, as South African, as coloured, as Khoisan or as descendants of slaves, or whether they should make a stand on the principle of non-racism – or what combination of these forms of self-understanding are pertinent in what contexts. There have been various attempts at reconfiguring the identity by small groups of intellectuals and community activists, none of which has yet found general acceptance within the broader community.13

Two chapters in this compilation focus squarely on the attempts by political elites within the South African coloured community to realign the identity in ways that are commensurate with the values of the new order. Michele Ruiters unpacks some of the key challenges of being coloured in the post-apartheid environment in her broad survey of endeavours to refashion coloured identity. Ruiters points out that the political leaders and organic intellectuals involved in this formidable enterprise need to make meaning out of the identities and histories of a disparate group in a situation of radically changed power relations and rapid social transformation. In addition to overcoming a historical legacy of oppression and racial stigma, this reformulation needs effectively to happen within a framework acceptable to the ruling party’s nation-building project. Michael Besten narrows his focus to the ways in which the Khoisan revivalist movement and claims to indigeneity by various interest groups within the broader coloured community have been used to distance themselves from what they see as a humiliating form of self-identification. To them, colouredness represents the coloniser’s perverted caricature of the colonised. Their Khoisan heritage is being creatively exploited to affirm a new identity in which they feel they can take pride and assert legitimate claims to national resources. Besten identifies some of the tensions between competing interests within this movement, and spotlights the tendency for what are essentially coloured concerns and interests to be clothed in Khoisan garb. It seems clear that elements within this movement are trying to use their claims to indigeneity as a way of legitimising a new form of relative privilege, that of being the true indigenes or ‘first nation’ of South Africa. Helene Strauss’s chapter is also fundamentally about the adaptation of coloured identity to the new South Africa because it examines how intercultural interactions under apartheid are being interpreted from a post-apartheid perspective by a
coloured author. She explores some of the new ways of thinking about colouredness that have emerged in contemporary South Africa, and some of the revisions to apartheid-era notions of the identity that are being made in recent ‘stagings’ of the identity.

A consistent thread that runs through this collection of essays is the extent to which the marginality of coloured communities has governed their social and political lives. In the context of inter-group relations, marginality implies a predicament, that of overcoming the disabilities of being marginal or, worse, of being marginalised. All marginalised groups, whatever the basis of their marginalisation, confront the challenge of countering their exclusion from the mainstream of society. The marginalised – those who are deliberately singled out for collective discrimination – of necessity face severe disabilities, especially if they form a small minority and lack political clout. Being marginalised entails suffering varying degrees of political repression, economic exploitation and social stigma, and the erection of barriers, whether legal or customary, to specific forms of social interaction between dominant and marginalised groups. By these measures, all the coloured communities of southern Africa were marginalised under white dominion even though they may have enjoyed a status of relative privilege.

The coloured communities of southern Africa have been marginal both in terms of their small proportions of national populations and also their lack of political or economic power. In South Africa the coloured population as enumerated in censuses has remained stable at between eight and nine per cent of the national total over the last century. The Zimbabwean, Zambian and Malawian coloured communities have been much smaller, all below one third of one percent of their respective domestic populations at any time during their existence. During the 1930s, the period on which Christopher Lee focuses his analysis, the Malawian community formed a miniscule 0.07 per cent of the territory’s inhabitants. Their lack of political and economic power is clearly also the product of a history that included slavery, dispossession, enserfment and institutionalised racial discrimination. The coloured communities of southern Africa are also marginal in other senses in which the concept has been used within the scholarly literature, ranging from Robert Park’s initial idea of applying it to those who live in two social spheres but feel accepted and comfortable in neither, to the more conventional conception that it refers to social groups who have been alienated from the mainstream of society through a stigmatised identity linked to otherness, and inferiority.