



Risk processing: Mothering in a time of fear

International Sociology

2025, Vol. 40(4) 497–514

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DOI: 10.1177/02685809251318935

journals.sagepub.com/home/iss**Nicky Falkof** 

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Abstract

This article self-reflexively explores the moral ambiguities of white fear in Johannesburg, South Africa, through the lens of motherhood. As a scholar writing on race and whiteness, the author has examined the ideological utility of white fear and its basis in racial mythology, while as a new mother she has learnt to experience fear for the safety of her children. In the wake of becoming a parent, her ability to reasonably process risk has changed, and she finds herself subject to a hyper-sensitised sense of threat that may go beyond ‘normal’ parenting reactions. Being caught between these two contradictory positionalities and being reflexive about them creates what can be described as moral tension. Drawing on this personal experience, alongside a series of vignettes of white mothers’ discourse in social media groups and everyday encounters, she considers how whiteness underpins practices, narratives, and feelings of motherhood for middle-class white women in Johannesburg.

Keywords

Anxiety, moralisation, motherhood, race, South Africa

In 2021, aged 44, I gave birth to my first child. Becoming a parent meant that my pre-existing personal categories – as a white woman, an academic, a South African, a Jew – have had to shift around in various ways to accommodate the notion of ‘mother’. My experience of applying this label to myself has been refracted through my geographical context and my classed and raced identities as much as through my gender. In this reflexive and anecdotal article, which marks a significant departure from the approaches I usually employ in my academic work, I am driven by my own recent experience to consider some of the valences of white mothering in Johannesburg, where I live. I focus on

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feelings of risk, threat, and fear, and consider these as elements of moralising processes that are centrally concerned with white ideas about race.

Since becoming a parent, I feel as though my ability to sensibly process risk has changed. I find myself intermittently subject to a hyper-sensitised feeling of threat. In some instances, my reactions to possible threats to my children's safety seem to be a normal feature of parenting. Long-distance car journeys, for example, have become fraught with an awareness of the many ways in which a small body can be impacted by a crash, and this prickling knowledge is exaggerated by South Africa's high rate of road accidents (Verster and Fourie, 2018): a not unreasonable feeling, since private cars, despite their normalisation, are genuinely dangerous. In other instances, however, I find myself concerned about threats that cannot be as readily explained. I judiciously lock the car doors next to my children's seats in case 'someone' tries to open them while we're moving; I have installed an anti-hijack device in case 'someone' tries to drive away with kids in the back; I am no longer as comfortable walking on the streets or in the parks of my neighbourhood. These inflated concerns, and my reactions to them, are heightened by the current conditions of Johannesburg, which – despite its status as the financial hub of southern Africa and one of the continent's richest cities (Cobbett, 2014) – is experiencing a visible decline. These conditions range from an upswing in an already high crime rate to infrastructural collapse, political in-fighting and middle-class abandonment of the city, discussed in more detail below.

At the same time, this sense of instability is tempered by my knowledge of the political utility and manipulation of white fear, which has formed the bedrock of my scholarly work. The fears I experience for my children – their physical and emotional safety, the truncated possibilities of personal freedom in this dangerous city, the diminishing prospects of living a 'good life' that are implied by a shrinking economy and growing inequality – have their basis in fact, but are also inflated, filtered through my experience of whiteness and the enhanced sense of victimhood and precarity that often comes alongside race privilege (Berbrier, 2000; Marx Knoetze, 2020). Despite my understanding of these issues, built over years of research and writing, I find myself nonetheless prey to the outsized anxieties of the fortunate. My knowledge of the uses and meanings of white fear has not helped me to avoid the affective intensity of white fear. Rather, it has added a further layer of complexity to motherhood.

This article is animated by the tensions between these two operational logics of morality: the imperative to perform good mothering, which valorises certain types of anxiety as useful and appropriate, and the anti-racist imperative, which acknowledges the utilitarian and ideological nature of those same anxieties. To place my questions in relation to the overall aim of this thematic section, consideration of the moral dilemma of progressive white mothers in contemporary Johannesburg reveals an ethical tension brought on by the competition of two seemingly unquestionable moral goods. At an initial glance, it may seem obvious that mothering 'well' – following the common priorities that accrue to raising children – needs no interrogation. However, in the context of Johannesburg and South Africa, this seemingly self-evident moral good is complicated by the imperative to push back against long-standing racial myths and habits, a second moral good that often requires a different kind of knowledge. When practices and ideologies of motherhood are influenced by racial anxiety, as is the case for many

white women in Johannesburg, the already complex notion of mothering ‘well’, of being a ‘good’ mother, demands a specific kind of interrogation.

My approach is in line with critical autoethnography, a type of ‘cultural analysis through personal narrative’ that requires ‘a critical lens, alongside an introspective and outward one, to make sense of who we are in the context of our cultural communities’. Autoethnographers ‘research themselves in relation to others’ (Boylorn and Orbe, 2020: 16). I follow a tradition of female scholars using autoethnography to consider the contradictions and experiences of mothering (see, for example, Crossley, 2009; Lester Murad, 2005; Radhakrishnan, 2023; Yoo, 2020). I draw too from Jack Halberstam’s (1998) notion of queer theory as ‘scavenger methodology’, in which unlikely methods and approaches are pulled together to investigate a topic which may be ill-served by more conventional methods. I illustrate my arguments with a series of vignettes of white mothers in Johannesburg, who I have encountered in person or online.¹

The anxieties that plague women like me are by no means unique to white people, or to parents, or to South Africans. My interest in them, however, is dictated by the way in which social scripts about mothering can legitimise fears that might otherwise be subject to more critical reactions. I argue that the public performance of mothering bypasses concerns about the racialised nature of white South African fears. To put this another way, I am interested in how outsized or exaggerated fears that are common to middle class and/or white South Africans escape moral scrutiny when expressed from the position of maternal care, as though the condition of mothering automatically imposes an alternative moralising framework that justifies this affective excess.

I start by offering some discussion of the sociology of motherhood. I go on to contextualise the political utility of white fear in South Africa and the psychosocial and economic conditions of white mothering in Johannesburg, and to think through how common anxieties of middle-class motherhood manifest in these racially fraught environs. I end by circling back to my original questions about my own conflicted experience of anxious mothering, considering how my own and others’ positionalities might be enriched and even remoralised through an ethics of care that foregrounds awkward questions of race.

Mothering and meaning

When I talk about mothering, I mean not simply the physical act of birthing a child or the daily work of keeping that child fed and safe. Rather, I am interested in a sociological approach to mothering that sees it as a set of beliefs, injunctions, and practices that are

defined as social norms and as implicit rules of endorsed and expected behavior and collectively shared systems of meaning . . . Mothering practices [are] various ways of doing, thinking, or *feeling* [that are] distinct from but linked to the social grammar of norms, and to wider systems of meanings and cultural scripts. (Schmidt et al., 2023: 57, emphasis added)

The inclusion of feeling in this list is important. I am interested not just in how mothers perform their roles, but also in our emotional reactions to the experience of mothering, the expectations around mothering, our own sense of our competence, success and enjoyment of mothering, intertwined with our attachments to our children.

The social conditions and expectations for mothering manifest differently for different subjects in different places. The meaning of mothering is impacted in significant ways by class, race, sexuality, and ability as well as by gender (see, for example, Barn and Harman, 2015; Dow, 2019; Vincent, 2009). This contextual variety applies as well to the affective elements of mothering. Understandings of what it means to mother appropriately, and emotional experiences of satisfactory mothering, are different in different places. The norms, expectations, and feelings of mothering are not the same for me, an employed middle-class white woman in the suburbs of Johannesburg, as they would be for, say, a mother who lives and works informally in one of South Africa's many economically deprived townships. For women like me, being a good mother is also a way of publicly performing your whiteness; as Ann Anagnost (2000) explains, parenting has become a measure of 'value, self worth and citizenship' (p. 392) for middle-class white people.

The idea of the good mother is a potent one. Her image '[persists] in public policy, the media, popular culture and workplaces, and [saturates] everyday practices and interactions. [It continues] to powerfully shape women's lives' (Goodwin and Huppatz, 2010: 1). Many prevalent assumptions around motherhood rely heavily on a white, middle class, heterosexual (we could add cis-gendered) and aggressively normative stereotype (Kawash, 2011: 979). Carol Vincent (2009), citing Sharon Hays, refers to 'good' mothering as 'an approach that is child-focused, with the mother having the responsibility to care, both intensively and extensively, for all aspects of the child's physical, moral, social, emotional and intellectual development' (p. 110). Taking into account how these notions impact on the everyday experiences of individual people, what is important here is not simply *being a mother* – a definition that could, at least in theory, be restricted to a biological process – but rather *doing motherhood*, being seen and feeling to have performed this role in an appropriate and broadly acceptable manner.

Raka Shome (2011), writing on cross-racial adoption, discusses the 'discourse of global motherhood' that centralises white women as a maternal ideal, and which 'must be situated in the context of contemporary neoliberal conditions of unequal flows of global capital and cultural exchanges' (p. 389). White motherhood, as a concept and set of practices if not necessarily an accurate reflection of the lived experience of all white women, remains central to our cultural imaginings.² The anxieties and imperatives that form part of the fabric of my experience of mothering in Johannesburg cannot be divorced from the impact of whiteness; my position as a mother intersects with my racial, and thus my social and economic, positions.

Marketizing white fear

From the colonial to the apartheid periods and beyond, white South Africans' fears have proved ideologically useful and have consequently been stoked and exaggerated by a variety of political actors. The early twentieth century, for example, saw a dramatic moral panic around white poverty. Concerns about the increase in the so-called 'poor-white problem' (*British Medical Journal*, 1933) became a political hot point in the 1930s, during a time of intense urbanisation. In the wake of the South African war that ended in 1902 and the loss of the Boer republics to the British, many white Afrikaners were forced

to move into newly burgeoning cities, particularly Johannesburg. There they found themselves living closely alongside people from other racial designations, competing for menial jobs and generally failing to embody the 'civilised' behaviour that Eurocentric conceptions of race demanded. For wealthier whites, as well as for observers from elsewhere in the western world, these poverty-stricken Afrikaners presented a problem as well as a threat. In their relative indistinguishability from the rest of the urban underclass, they made it clear that whiteness was not automatically superior, and thus imperilled the moral justifications for the colonial project: 'the very existence of such white people challenged the belief that the racial labour hierarchy was the result of divine order' (Willoughby-Herard, 2015: 41). The presence of poor whites 'was a constant threat, challenge and embarrassment to South African formations of white identity' (Ntshanga, 2016: 65).

Anxiety about what poor whites meant for society was so intense that the urban poor were the subject of a 1932 investigation by the Carnegie Corporation, the US philanthropic organisation (Bell, 2000; Willoughby-Herard, 2015). Carnegie envisioned its work in South Africa as a blueprint for developing strategies to mitigate white poverty in the United States. The commission 'found echoes in eugenicist fears held by groups within both [South Africa and the US] that white "civilisation" could decline' (Bell, 2000: 489).

Fears about the implications of white, particularly Afrikaners, poverty played a significant role in legitimising the Afrikaner establishment's push for segregation. In the 1930s, DF Malan – one of the so-called architects of apartheid, later to become South Africa's fourth Prime Minister –

tapped into a widespread fear of miscegenation in the wake of the Carnegie Commission . . . to depict Africans as a direct threat to the survival of the white race. The segregationist measures his party advocated during this time would be reflected in the first apartheid laws to be instituted in 1949 and 1950. (Koorts, 2013: 555)

White people who failed to perform whiteness were far from the only bogeymen of the white South African imagination. The National Party and the racist state it birthed in 1948 made effective use of long-standing white anxieties about the violence of black South Africans. Indeed, the 'cyclical reinforcement of white fear [was] one of the vital ingredients for keeping the NP in power' (Van der Westhuizen, 2007: 163). The *swart gevaar*, the black threat/danger, was one of the most powerful tools in the NP's ideological arsenal, activated to garner white voters' support for increasingly repressive laws. This 'paranoid belief, propagated by the National Party and some of its predecessors, [suggested] that blacks would swamp the cities, and that anarchy would be the result' (Stephney, 2000: 158). *Swart gevaar* mythology insisted that the only alternative to apartheid was a violent race war, a bloody rebellion that lurked just around the corner. Similarly concerning was the belief that allowing black people to live in cities and to work, earn, and spend freely would mean the end of white civilisation. Throughout the 'golden years' of apartheid, the white electorate voted to support the party that promised to protect them from these threats.

Despite the fact that the race war failed to materialise, and, indeed, that white South Africans retained much of their economic power after the end of apartheid, white fears

of racial violence continue to manifest, and are skilfully manipulated. Within the ongoing panic about so-called white genocide, violent murders of white people on farms and in rural areas are narrativized as part of a planned campaign to rid South Africa of whites (see Gedye, 2018; Moses, 2019; Pogue, 2019). While violence is endemic in South Africa, its greatest victims are disproportionately black and poor (Silber and Geffen, 2016). White people, and white farmers, do indeed suffer terribly from criminal violence, but no more than other groups in South Africa. Nonetheless, the white genocide myth suggests that their deaths are organised and ideological rather than being simply more tragic consequences of the country's current dysfunction.

The white genocide myth has been hugely influential among far-right communities elsewhere in the world (Jackson, 2015) and posits South Africa as a kind of ground zero for the racial disaster that stalks the febrile imaginations of paranoid white supremacists. The genocide myth has also been enthusiastically, if sometimes obliquely, disseminated by Afrikaans organisations like the self-proclaimed minority rights group AfriForum, on fora such as Tucker Carlson's show on US channel Fox News (Marx Knoetze, 2020: 59; Tazanu, 2019: 11). These kinds of 'rights groups' activate white fear and further their agendas by propagating the idea that whites are subject to a literal genocide that is being ignored by the government.

These three instances – the poor white panic, the National Party's use of fear as an electoral tool, and the myth of white genocide – give a sense of how white people's collective fears in South Africa are never *just* fear, never just an emotional experience or reaction to circumstances, but are filtered through a foundational agenda that aims to maintain racial anxiety and separation, thus strengthening the boundaries of whiteness.

Mothering while white

The intersection of race and class in South Africa demands a complex conversation that is beyond the scope of this article (see, for example, Alexander et al., 2013; Iqani, 2015; Marks and Trapido, 1987). Nonetheless some brief contextualisation is necessary.

As any trip to a private school or high-end mall will show, many of those who can be classified as middle or upper class in Johannesburg today are not white. Indeed, the black middle class has been a subject of intense scholarly and political interest in South Africa for some time (see, for example, Southall, 2016). Similarly, increasing numbers of people classified as white could not be considered middle class, as evidenced by the now-established presence of white beggars at street corners. Whiteness does not automatically translate into class position.

That said, the fact remains that white people are statistically over-represented in the ranks of the wealthy. A 2016 study found that 'the racial wealth gap between the Black race and the White race is high, with a typical Black household holding relatively less than 5% of the wealth held by a typical White household' (Mbwewe and Woolard, 2016). This dominance is not only economic. Many of the common features of middle and upper class life, from schooling and language to personal and domestic aesthetics, derive from a traditionally white habitus. Mark Hunter (2016) calls this 'white tone': the astonishing ability of white social, cultural, and linguistic norms to remain prevalent and retain their high status regardless of the racial identity of those who enact them. In the

context of suburban Johannesburg, whiteness is largely associated with (relative) wealth and privilege, and these associations impact on how women perform and feel about motherhood.

Johannesburg is an insecure city, defined by the pervasive anxiety that underpins daily life (Van Staden, 2020). At the time of writing, in mid-2024, it is broadly acknowledged to be in crisis.³ The city is under the leadership of a series of failing and combative coalitions that have gone through eight mayors between 2019 and 2023. A shrinking tax base and rising crime rate alongside ageing and unmaintained infrastructure have made South Africa's richest urban centre a difficult place to live in, even for the well-off, who are affected by long water cuts and who must drive on crumbling roads. The emotional conditions of this contradiction – everyday insecurity and precarity alongside a high standard of living for the middle classes – lead to a sort of cognitive dissonance, whereby the wealthy feel unusually vulnerable, unusually at risk, even while they buy their way out of the most pressing threats and inconveniences of South African daily life.

Middle-class white mothers, like other privileged South Africans, have for years had access to privatised operations that one can pay for in order to bypass the state.⁴ These include schooling, healthcare, and power generation. Alongside more typical topics (breastfeeding advice, yoga chat, questions about mysterious infections), the moms' WhatsApp groups that I belong to feature multiple discussions about, for example, solar installation companies and medical insurance schemes. Members share information, discounts, contacts, and experiences to help each other navigate a complex web of privatised services, all within a broader discourse about how this kind of information-gathering is a necessary part of caring for our families. The lack of coherent or reliable services in South Africa has turned us into repositories of knowledge on how to circumvent lack or who to speak to get things done.

Middle-class white families have the resources to fortify our homes with security technologies such as burglar bars, high walls, razor wire, surveillance cameras, electric gates, motion sensors, and floodlights. We are able to employ private security firms, which are endemic in Johannesburg and other South African cities (Bénit-Gbaffou, 2008; Murray, 2020). These militarised firms offer services from panic buttons, armed response alerts, and street guards to task force teams and even hostage negotiation. In many suburban areas, they form agreements with local residents' associations, portraying themselves as neighbourhood stakeholders. They employ dramatic marketing strategies that invoke the many risks faced by anxious suburbanites while also displaying their proficiency in chasing and catching (always black) 'suspects' and 'perpetrators', whose blurred out faces feature in this promotional material. According to Martin J. Murray (2022), 'Despite hiring private security companies to provide round-the-clock armed patrols to monitor activities on the public streets of their residential neighbourhoods, suburban homeowners have continued to feel unsafe' (p. 110). As an important body of literature has shown, fear of crime can be hugely debilitating, regardless of the actual risks faced (Caldeira, 2000; Hale, 1996). White mothers' capacities to protect our families from some of the most pressing risks of Johannesburg life do not necessarily lead to a cessation of maternal anxiety. Crime, and how to protect yourself from it, is a consistent feature of the WhatsApp group conversations I am part of, which range from fear, sorrow, and anger to sharing information about weapons training in the name of maternal empowerment.

Like other well-resourced parents, white Joburg mothers have easy access to domestic labour, in the form of nannies, cleaners, and gardeners who perform domestic tasks from cleaning and cooking to child-rearing, and who can help to mitigate some of the stressors of parenting. These sectors, which have been part of urban South African life for decades, are poorly paid, badly regulated, and rife with exploitation (Ally, 2008; Cock, 2019). Many of those undertaking this work in Johannesburg today are migrants from elsewhere in Africa. Illegal migrant workers' 'isolation and dependence create the conditions for their exploitation, as reflected by their long working hours, low and/or variable pay levels, and limited access to leave' (Griffin, 2011: 83). Ignoring the imbalances that are built into such relations, white employers of domestic workers often engage the discourse of family to define their interactions with domestic staff. According to Du Preez et al. (2010),

The family metaphor is a way in which employers and (less so) workers, deal with the paradox of doing caring work (which almost inevitably develops into a human relationship) for money. In turn, this metaphor hides the fact that there is a power relationship between the employer and employee, and allows employers to switch between regarding the relationship as contractual or familial, depending on what suits them at the time. (p. 395; see also Jansen, 2019)

'Help' is a word that crops up frequently in conversations about this kind of labour: women ask each other what kind of help they have, whether they need extra help, whether their help is good. Popular mothers' social media groups are littered with references to helpers. These range from posts in which white women who are leaving Johannesburg try to find new positions for their employees, often accompanied by photos of these workers and patronising first name descriptions of their dedication, to posts in which frustrated white women ask their compatriots for advice in managing 'inefficient' workers. In some WhatsApp groups, mothers intermittently pass around a now-canonical domestic worker schedule/list of daily duties which many of them swear by as a way to teach their staff how to effectively run their domestic lives. These discussions often take on an exasperated tone, as white mothers bewail the fact that the black women they hire do not seem to understand how they expect their homes to be managed. Defining domestic workers as helpers rather than as labourers allows white mothers to discursively centralise their own roles, emphasising that, regardless of how much employees do in terms of child-rearing and housework, or how reliant they are on their employees, these other women are simply there to assist the primary work that is done by mothers.

None of this, of course, means that white women are free from the social expectations and concerns of parenting. Affective responses to parenting may be powerful, even for those who know that their children will be fed, clothed, and cared for by an employee. Having help does not free one from worries, insecurities, or senses of failure and vulnerability, even while it alleviates some of the daily grind of mothering.

Racial fears, fears of race

As previously stated, middle-class white mothers' fears are not unique. They operate within established patterns that see fear working as an element of an ideological project.

Threats like crime and failing infrastructure affect all South Africans. Yet they are differently narrativized by white people, who often place them within a racial framework of vulnerability and blame, and by white mothers, who draw on a discourse of good mothering to support their responses to threat.

Let us start with crime, the most potent of South African worries. Crime is ‘often a placeholder for a range of wider concerns’ (Falkof and Van Staden, 2020: 9) as well as a ‘critical prism through which societies know themselves’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2016: xiv). Opportunistic and street-level crime in South Africa is largely perpetuated by black men. As Gary Kynoch (2013) points out, this single fact dominates crime narratives for many whites:

whereas gender, class and nationality all mediate the ways in which crime is experienced and perceived by residents of South Africa, for a considerable portion of the white population race remains the predominant factor when it comes to fear of violent crime. (p. 427)

White South Africans, he argues, understand crime in ways that emphasise the race of both victim and perpetrator, in contrast to other kinds of people. He writes, ‘Perhaps the most significant difference in black narratives is that black South Africans do not conceptualise violent crime in terms of a racial assault’ (Kynoch, 2013: 427).

It is important to note here that young black men, as a group, are the most vulnerable to homicidal violence in South Africa (Ratele, 2010). They are victims as well as potential perpetrators, a fact that is left out of many common narratives about crime. The way that crime is spoken and thought about among white South African communities paints whites as the primary victims of the predation of always-black criminals. White fears of crime and criminal violence emphasise white vulnerability specifically *on account of whiteness*, insisting that being white is actually a predictor for victimisation. This is in contrast to the story told by anecdotal evidence and crime statistics, which show that wealthier people – a category that includes an outsized percentage of the white population – avoid the worst of the violence that plagues South Africa (Silber and Geffen, 2016). White fears of crime also emphasise the inherent criminality of particularly younger black men, who are seen as automatically threatening, requiring surveillance and securitisation. These fears are part of a continuum of thought that has demonised black men as a category, defining them as conduits for sexual, social, or criminal misbehaviour.⁵ In contemporary Johannesburg, white fears of crime are not simply common-sense responses to living in a dangerous place. They are also recurring iterations of a powerful belief in the exceptional nature of whiteness and the instinctual, naturalised violence of blackness.

White mothers’ discussions about the threat of crime and criminal violence often repeat a ‘mama bear’ discourse, in which women are encouraged by their peers to do whatever it takes to keep their children safe. This can manifest as a collective refusal to acknowledge the racial stereotyping involved in speaking about crime. In social media and in casual conversation, white mothers are often explicit about their fears of black men and emphasise that they are ‘not sorry’ for saying this out loud, as their need to protect their children outweighs considerations about racial speech. In one of the F groups that I belong to, local mothers share information about self-defence classes for

children as young as three. The digital flyers for these classes exclusively feature white instructors, parents and children, and sometimes – similar to the marketing material employed by private security companies – contain images in which black men with their faces obscured menace or threaten white families and children. They imply that victimisation and whiteness go together, and that white women must ‘empower’ their children to resist danger.

Other fears that plague middle-class white mothers are more diffuse, but in many instances these too defer back to old ideas about blackness. Particularly common are tropes around corruption and incompetence that draw on the assumption that majority rule in South Africa was a mistake, as ‘they’ – meaning black South Africans – are not capable of running a country. Concerns about infrastructural collapse are often expressed in frustration about erratic power and water supplies. There are complex reasons for these failings, some of which relate to aged infrastructure that was never designed to support South African cities’ expanding populations.⁶ Within the discursive landscape of white suburbia, however, power cuts are entirely the consequence of corruption and incompetence within the ruling African National Congress (ANC). The ANC is often discussed as a metonym for black South Africans as a whole, particularly in light of the fact that many people continue to vote for them.⁷ Corruption in South African governance and procurement long predates ANC rule (Van Vuuren, 2017). Nonetheless, for some white people, infrastructure problems are an everyday manifestation of the idea that black South Africans suffer from intellectual weaknesses and moral vulnerability which should have disqualified them from being in charge. In the lead-up to the 2024 elections, such concerns were common among worried white mothers. Around that time I found myself chatting casually with another mother in a queue at Woolworths, an expensive and much-beloved food store. Our conversation turned to the upcoming election, and this stranger – assuming that, as a white person, I would of course agree with her – began to complain that ‘they’ will once again damage our children’s future by handing victory to the reviled ANC instead of ‘sensibly’ voting for the Democratic Alliance (DA), a party led by a white Afrikaans man and known for its neoliberal and often anti-poor (which means anti-black) policies. She must have noticed that I recoiled rather than agreeing, and so quickly dialled back her anger, mentioning how sad it was that the black majority did not receive a good enough education to understand the obvious truth, that – to paraphrase its election slogan – only the DA could save South Africa.

While mothers everywhere worry about their children’s access to higher education and employment, contemporary white South African discourse often frames blockages in these areas as a consequence of the victimisation of whites. This is due to the implementation of entry quotas at some of the country’s top universities (Mabokela and Mlambo, 2017; Van der Merwe et al., 2016) and of affirmative action policies like Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE). Critiques of BBBEE are widespread. Some argue that the policy ‘has not changed the racial character of the economy, and fundamentally resulted in the co-optation of a small black elite into the wealthy white capitalist elite inherited from the apartheid era’ (Govenden and Chiumbu, 2020: 32). Within anxious white discourses, however, resistance to BBBEE emerges not because the policy has created a new class hierarchy but rather because it is seen as an instance of white people being unfairly locked out of economic opportunities that should accrue to them due to

their natural merit. Claims of reverse racism ‘meld abstract liberalism and cultural racism to assume that skilled and talented white students and jobseekers are being overlooked in favour of “incompetent” black people’ (Steyn, 2023: 10). Each year, as the university term begins, South African news coverage features stories about white mothers making angry social media posts after their children did not receive the university offers they were hoping for. White youngsters who have not been accepted to the most prestigious degrees, such as law or medicine, are presented as casualties of reverse racism. During my time as Head of Department, I received a number of irate calls from white parents who were enraged that their children had not been admitted to the university, and who insisted that this must be because of unfair racial quotas.

These angry appeals are couched in the language of white victimhood, a trope that – as I have discussed elsewhere (Falkof, 2023) – remains common despite the enormous changes the country has gone through over the past 30 years. The idea of white victimhood takes in not just dramatic events like farm murders, but also white people’s experiences of everyday events as racial microaggressions, and their misreadings of the common problematics of race. In one recent example, the mother of a girl the same age as my elder son arrived at a child-focused event and began complaining to other white parents about a radio report she had just heard about racism in schools. Gesturing dramatically, she explained to us how severe this was, how dangerous for our children, and insisted that it would keep getting worse as supposedly leftist political parties began to get more power. One of the other parents interrupted to ask which news story she was referring to. Our original speaker had not, it turned out, heard the whole report: in this case, as in most highly publicised instances of racism in South African schools, the victim was black and the aggressors were white. But this mother, attuned both to possible future threats to her child and to common assumptions about white vulnerability, had assumed that when racism was mentioned, it must obviously be aimed at people who look like her.

Returning

And so I come full circle, back to the questions that animated the start of this article. The idea of the ‘good’ mother, of mothering ‘well’, is woven through with multiple anxieties: not only about our children’s safety, happiness, status, and futures but also about our own performances of motherhood. How do I, as a white mother, position myself in the midst of a heightened awareness that these fears are filtered through whiteness?

It will be clear to the reader by now that my perspective on white South African fear is a critical one, and that I view many of the concerns of white mothers as exaggerated and ideologically driven, exacerbated if not fundamentally underwritten by the intense racial anxiety that underpins much of the culture of South African whiteness (Hook, 2020a, 2020b). These critiques are important; but it is also important to acknowledge that they are structural and historical rather than personal. On a less theoretical level, a discussion of maternal fear requires empathy as well, not just towards my mothering contemporaries but also towards myself. Our fears may be cultural, but this does not make them any less frightening. My discussions above, of the political utility of white fear, the

privileged conditions of white mothering and the racialising nature of these emotions, do not negate the fact that I am still afraid of crime, afraid of my children being hurt, afraid that my choice to live in Johannesburg may impact negatively on my family.

I began this article by wondering how we might reimagine white motherhood from an ethics of care, and whether white mothering, both in Johannesburg/South Africa and elsewhere, could be in a sense remoralised. There are no easy answers to these questions. But as the discussion above has shown, many white mothers exhibit a (wilful?) blindness to the impacts of racial history and anxiety on their own thinking, retreating instead into a discursive dead end that refuses to interrogate mothering talk, in which mothering – as a collective rather than an individual experience – is positioned beyond critique. But white motherhood deserves critique. White South African mothers, if they are to move beyond the hurt feelings and exaggerated victimhood that often characterises white people's responses to being asked to think deeply about race (Lentin, 2020), need to be able to see our own whiteness, to understand our imbrication in the powerful politics of race and the effects that this can have on society more broadly. Mothering through an ethics of care would require white women to understand and acknowledge not only that our society is unjust and unequal, not only that we have an ethical imperative to resist and counter that injustice, but also that the structural nature of that injustice means that we both benefit from and support it, whether intentionally or not.

In *Nice White Ladies* (2022), which focuses on femininity and white supremacy in the United States, Jessie Daniels writes about white mothers' tendency to hoard resources for their offspring through mechanisms like passing on generational wealth and using illicit pathways for university access. She argues that women do this, and justify doing it, *because of* rather than *despite* the social pressures of good mothering. To put it another way, in the hyper-competitive environment of neoliberal capitalism, good mothering can be seen to necessitate this kind of stockpiling. To be a good mother is to ensure your individual child's success rather than to work towards an equitable social world in which the majority of children are able to thrive.

In hoarding resources, retreating into silos and emphasising our own children's well-being over any broader social progress, white women behave according to neoliberal imperatives of good mothering, which take on an extra dimension in the context of South Africa's persistent rates of racial inequality. The idea of the good mother, an unquestioned albeit contextually changing aspiration, allows white women to ignore our whiteness by hiding it underneath our motherhood. The social, economic, educational, geographic, and other choices we make for our children are powerfully influenced by white racial anxiety, but we are shielded from this knowledge by the much more visible imperatives of good mothering.

The anxieties that we feel, the fears that we are subject to, may have their bases in lived reality, but their expressions and – perhaps more importantly – their consequences are filtered through and warped by the tendencies of whiteness, its lean towards victimhood, its exceptionalism, its demonisation of difference, its segregationary urges. White mothers, in South Africa as elsewhere, must learn to make our whiteness visible *to ourselves*, in order to consider what part it plays in our performances of parenthood.

Acknowledgement

With thanks to Manuel Dieterich, Boris Nieswand and Damian Arias for their valuable comments on the first draft of this article. Thanks also to Maya Loon, whose outstanding doctoral research allowed me to open up this line of thought.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. The ethics of researching closed/encrypted WhatsApp groups, which offer users an illusion of privacy, are a subject of developing debate among communications scholars and digital ethnographers (see, for example, Piaia et al., 2022). For the purposes of this article, I have followed the key provision suggested by Sergio Barbosa and Stefania Milan (2019), to ‘do no harm’ when using private chats as research data. As such, I have loosely described discussions in WhatsApp chats rather than quoting them directly and have offered no information that could identify the participants or reveal which specific Joburg mothers’ WhatsApp group, of the hundreds that exist, is being discussed.
2. As Samira Kawash (2011) explains, an important body of scholarship has examined motherhood beyond the binary of good and bad. Much work has also been done on the multiple diversities of mothering (see, for example, Dow, 2019; Lewiecki-Wilson and Cellio-Miller, 2011). Nonetheless, mainstream culture remains remarkably attached to an idea of the good mother that is associated with whiteness.
3. See, for example, investigative work from Mark (2024) and Magome (2024) on water infrastructure and Banda (2022) on housing.
4. In some instances, such as the ‘mixed use mega-development’ Waterfall City, urban privatisation has gone to such extremes that property developers perform ‘all the conventional functions expected of a municipal administration . . . [and] have effectively replaced public authority with private management and control’ (Murray, 2015: 503).
5. See, for example, scholarship on the historical ‘black peril’ in South Africa and the United States, which centred on fears about black men’s sexual predation of white women (Apel, 2004; McCulloch, 2000; Ullmann, 2005).
6. The national power supplier Eskom, for example, has been undermined by a “‘perfect storm” of “peak coal”, patronage, poor planning and lack of accountability’, much of which is down to the way parastatals were set up during the apartheid era (Lawrence, 2020: 59).
7. In 2019, the ANC won the National Assembly with 57.50%, down from 62.15% in 2014. In 2024, the party finally lost its overall majority, earning 40.2% of the vote and forcing it into a coalition government.

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Résumé

Cet article analyse de manière autoréflexive les ambiguïtés morales de la peur des Blancs à Johannesburg (Afrique du Sud), à travers le prisme de la maternité. En tant que chercheuse qui écrit sur la race et la blancheur (*whiteness*), l'auteure a examiné l'utilité idéologique de la peur des Blancs et ses fondements dans la mythologie raciale, en même temps qu'elle a appris à craindre pour la sécurité de ses enfants en devenant mère. En devenant mère, sa capacité à traiter raisonnablement le risque a en effet changé et elle se retrouve sujette à un sentiment de menace hyper-sensibilisé qui peut aller au-delà des réactions parentales « normales ». Le fait d'être prise entre ces deux positions contradictoires et d'y réfléchir crée ce que l'on peut appeler une tension morale. À partir de cette expérience personnelle ainsi que d'une série d'extraits des propos tenus par des mères blanches dans les groupes formés sur les réseaux sociaux et au cours des rencontres au quotidien, l'auteure analyse comment la blancheur sous-tend la maternité telle qu'elle est vécue, décrite et ressentie par les femmes blanches de la classe moyenne à Johannesburg.

Mots-clés

Afrique du Sud, maternité, moralisation, peur, race

Resumen

Este artículo explora de manera autorreflexiva las ambigüedades morales del miedo de los blancos en Johannesburgo (Sudáfrica) a través de la perspectiva de la maternidad. Como académica que escribe sobre raza y blancura (*whiteness*), la autora ha examinado la utilidad ideológica del miedo de los blancos y su base en la mitología racial, mientras que como madre primeriza ha aprendido a sentir miedo por la seguridad de sus hijos. Tras convertirse en madre, su capacidad para procesar razonablemente el riesgo ha cambiado y se encuentra sujeta a una sensación hipersensibilizada de amenaza que puede ir más allá de las reacciones parentales “normales”. Estar atrapada entre estas dos posiciones contradictorias y ser reflexiva sobre ellas crea lo que puede describirse como tensión moral. Basándose en esta experiencia personal, junto con una serie de viñetas del discurso de madres blancas en grupos en redes sociales y encuentros cotidianos, analiza cómo la blancura sustenta las prácticas, narrativas y sentimientos de maternidad de las mujeres blancas de clase media en Johannesburgo.

Palabras clave

ansiedad, maternidad, moralización, raza, Sudáfrica