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Shades of blackness: politicians' performances of blackness in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Over the decades, the concept of race has been interpreted and altered in various ways. Supposed characteristics have been imposed by society on groups of individuals as stereotypes of what they should be or do. This is the basis for racism, as it has been proven through studies on genetics that all races of humans bear the same genetic makeup. This has not only allowed for divisions between races but has created space for differences within them. However, scholars have, in recent years, come to an understanding of race as a social construct that is performed, instead of something that humans are born with. This study seeks primarily, to explore the diverse and fluid black identities that are present within South Africa's political sphere. It seeks to understand the varying and opposing ways in which South African politicians display their blackness, and simultaneously develop an understanding of how this is received by the media and the South African public alike.

To establish these differences, this study seeks to employ three case studies from the South African political landscape. The case studies are the ANC's Jacob Zuma, the EFF's Julius Malema and the DA's Mmusi Maimane. The study hopes that in exploring three very different political personas, some of the many varying tropes that exist will become lucid. In To structure this study, one speech by each case study politician has been selected as a text to be analysed. This speech, in turn, consists of three components which are critically unpacked: a video recording of the speech, an article posted alongside it and comments posted below it.

All three components of the text are analysed in detail, to ascertain the different approaches and responses (both by the author of the article and the public commenters) each politician receives with regards to their black identity. These responses then feed the research in terms of understanding the tropes of blackness that each politician enacts, determined by a range of factors including their specific masculinities, accents, dress styles, approaches to the systems in place and so forth.