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The social exclusion of poor whites

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Abstract

In its attempt to 'reverse the gaze' in making white people the subject of analysis, this research report falls into critical whiteness studies. Critical whiteness studies places itself firmly in the post-colonial agenda as an anti-racist social movement seeking to dismantle whiteness and white superiority. My interest is therefore not in poverty as such but rather in the threat to whiteness of those who blur the race/class divide. In this research report, I (as a young Black middle class female scholar) explore the social exclusion of poor whites as it relates to the fragility of whiteness. My fieldwork experience amongst poor white people in East Lynne was marked by hostility. Poor white East Lynne residents made it known that they did not want me around them. Highlighting unaccounted for racial dynamics in reversing the gaze in 'ethical' anthropological fieldwork research guidelines, I found that for me to have looked at poor whites solely as they relate to my class position would only hinder the intersectional scope of analysis in a manner specific to being a Black female researcher and its ability to tease meaning and intention out of silence and hostility. With this, anti-Black racism became central to the argument that will be made throughout this research report. Taken from data collected in focus groups comprising of white middle class Wits anthropology students, interviews with poor white East Lynne residents and my own experiences of racism, I engage with African-American political scientist, Tiffany Willoughby-Herard's 'whiteness as misery' as the theoretical framework to the conceptual tool of 'white fragility' (DiAngleo, 2011). I therefore turn away from viewing whiteness as prestige to seeing it as internalised racism, self-hatred and diminished white selfhood expressed in how the feeling of 'anxiety' surfaces when white middle class students see poor white people which they needed distance from. Poor whites, by blurring the race/class divide, are then symbolic reminders of the fragility of whiteness. Diminished white selfhood and self-hatred at not achieving the upward mobility required to distance themselves from Black people, I argue, is seen through poor whites everyday use of various racist strategies demonstrating a desperate attempt at maintaining the privileges of whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa.