

'The Girl who made the Milky Way' ... Belonging ... in South Africa

Carin-Lee Masters

'The Girl who made the Milky Way' is a story told in the late 1900s by //Kabbo (a Khoi-San rainmaker). //Kabbo had been in prison for stock theft. When released from the Breakwater Convict Station in Cape Town, instead of returning home he sacrificed the freedom of his final years to teach linguists (Bleek and Lloyd) his language and cultural traditions (Centre for Creating the Archive, 2011; Vollenhoven, 2016) These deeply haunting words from the soulful utterances of //Kabbo evoked my musings, memories and experiences of unbelonging as a person of colour in South Africa.

*My mother is the one who told me the girl arose,
the girl of the Early Race...! Xwe-/na-ssho-!ke*

*She put her hands into the wood ash,
threw it up into the sky,
said to the wood ash,
'You must become the Milky Way
You must white lie along in the sky'*

*My mother is the one who told me
The people go by night
The ground is made light
The Milky Way gently glows
It knows that it is wood ash
It knows the girl of the Early Race
!Xwe-/na-ssho-!ke, said the Milky Way
should give a little light
That we might return home by night*

*My mother was the one who told me
the girl of the Early Race, !Xwe-/na-ssho-!ke
put her hands into the wood ash
threw it up into the sky
said to the wood ash:
'You must become the Milky Way'*

You and I are the wood ash, and we belong to this here country, to life, to the stars, to the Milky Way – we all belong here, and always did. But before I was able to imagine and take this in, sadly, for a long time in South Africa, people of colour, black and brown, were made to believe they did not fully belong, that they were merely here to serve the needs of the so-called 'superior race', the 'Europeans'. We were indoctrinated to believe that this country belonged to them, propagated by a totalitarian and racist government. Many South Africans of colour felt a deep sense of unbelonging, except in their specified 'hoods' – specific areas designated to certain races under the Group Areas Act of the apartheid government [1]. This act assigned racial groups to different residential areas, with two main aims: first to exclude people of colour from living and doing business in the most developed areas which were occupied by whites only. Black and brown people were only given access to these areas as labourers and needed a 'pass' to legally be there. Second, the act also served to prohibit

inter-racial mixing and possible miscegenation.

After the abolition of apartheid and the first democratic government came into being in 1994, we were hopeful regarding a 'new dawn'. Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Tutu heralded the birth of the 'rainbow nation'. The hope was that this might magically heal all the hurts and divisions of racist South Africa. There was a fantasy that the previously oppressed and the oppressor would meet and embrace, becoming 'Mzansi', i.e. one nation. Freud theorised that that which is repressed and remains unknown is bound to be repeated unconsciously. Long (2021) writes that the concept of the unconscious must include the political unconscious, processes that are internalised following decades of immersion in a particular social and political environment. I think the term psycho-socio-political unconscious is more relevant as it includes diverse layers of influence and experience at every level – political/economic, social, and psychological. These layers of influence and experience are absorbed both at a conscious and unconscious level. Our country has failed in its dream of 'Mzansi' because that which we find unbearable to face returns to haunt us and impasses the possibility of moving forward.

Reading /Kabbo re-evoked painful memories of my childhood – profoundly disturbing, racist experiences of being 'othered' as a child. I would like to share a memory: it is in the early 1970s, I am about 4 years old, in Cape Town en route from Lansdowne (still a 'mixed' area at the time) to Claremont by bus. It is my first time taking the bus. I am with my mother, excited, brimming with joy, dressed up for this special occasion – my first bus ride! Hopping onto the bus I joyfully rushed in and plonked myself onto the seat at the front of the bus. My heart danced with joy ... innocent and unprepared for what would happen next. Looking up, I saw my mother glaring at me, while quickly whisking me off my seat. I asked her why she did this and pointed at the many seats available in front of the bus. At the very same time, I looked around and saw some white folk with stern and stony faces. Above us, big red signs demarcated the front seats for 'WHITES ONLY'. My mother sternly whispered that it was illegal for us to do this, and we could be thrown off the bus or worse. This was a defining moment for me, etched painfully and forever in my memory. I realised that bus rides could be dangerous if we did not obey the signs. I became super vigilant about reading signs, and this never left me.

It's not simply stating an overtly noxious assertion i.e. 'you don't belong', but far more detrimental is the covert message – the one that enters our minds surreptitiously. We internalise these messages unconsciously, we take them inside us and believe them – becoming part of our internal world. But as Freud said so presciently decades ago and which Long echoes – the unconscious is a commanding and active part of our mind, holding many valuable pieces of one's history.

The message I internalised from this experience on the bus is not something I 'knew' at the time. Remembering it now, I understand how it added another layer to an unremitting message – that being brown or black was to be insignificant and that being white was something honourable and worthy of special treatment. To be of no significance because of who you are, and the colour of your skin ... what does that even mean to a child? What vicious hatred can be internalised with such a perverse message?

There was a dominant expectation to be deferential to whiteness, something then which many people of colour loathed, envied and wished for. There were anecdotes that some older folk crossed the 'colour bar' and got themselves reclassified as white, obtaining these documents at the 'Coloured Affairs' office. Reclassification under Apartheid was made possible through the Population Registration Act of 1950, which classified all South Africans as either Bantu (all Black Africans),

Coloured (those of mixed race) or White. Furthermore, the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Immorality Act(1950) prohibited interracial marriage or sex.

With my childlike naivety then, I wondered why we could not do this. I understood it was not possible because my hair was too 'kroes' (coarse), thus failing the 'pencil test'. In the pencil test, a pencil is pushed through the person's hair. How easily it comes out determines whether the person has 'passed' or 'failed' the test. This test was used to determine racial identity in South Africa during the apartheid era, distinguishing whites from coloureds and blacks.

Also, mom was too dark, she cannot look white ... that's another problem, her blackness. Back then, being dark-skinned in a 'coloured' family was not a good thing, and maybe still not ... But being dark-skinned and having 'kroes' hair was a double whammy. Your fate could be total invisibility or worse ...

Matters were (and perhaps still are) equally precarious regarding shades of skin tone – 'the lighter the better'. So even though a person of colour were perceived as a threat in 'white areas', back in the hood if you appeared less black-ish and looked more white-ish, you were special, got special attention. Hearing comments like '*Sy is meer soes n wit kind*' to '*sy is soe pragtig soes n wit kind*' ('She is more like a white child' to 'she is as beautiful as a white child') was a normal occurrence. Persons with light skin tone and light eyes were regarded as more 'blessed', perversely linking this to a distorted perception of 'intrinsic beauty in whiteness'. Trevor Noah, a South African comedian in his Netflix show *Daywalker* and his book *Born a Crime* refer to these problems related to racism, including hair and skin tone issues.

I would like to share another memory: as a ten-year-old girl running errands for the family, I must cross a playpark in Manenberg, Cape Town. Young thugs hang out here, they notice me and do their regular catcall, '*ow whitey, ow dji, green eyes!*' ('hey white girl, hey you, green eyes!') and when I failed to respond... '*kyk die fokken kind, sy hou vir haar wit, wie dink sy is sy, net vol kak, os skop haar sommer binne haar ma se poes!*' ('Look at this fucking girl, she thinks she is white, who does she think she is, just full of shit, let's kick her into her mother's pussy!').

Frightened and confused, I would run away and avoid the park. Being 'white-ish' was to be both admired and despised.

Under apartheid, being black or brown inexorably made you the 'wretched of the earth' (cf Fanon). To compensate for this wretchedness many people of colour would often try to emulate whiteness ... a painful conscious but mostly unconscious longing for all it represented ... purity, goodness and superiority. This included a longing for their skin colour, hair, accent, abilities, apparent status and wealth, bodies and minds – all desirable and enviable. As whiteness was idealised, blackness was abhorred (cf: Clark & Clark) [2].

Apartheid propaganda and daily micro-aggressions by racist whites would have contributed to the development of a perverse, punitive, and self-hating super-ego.

How does one cope psychologically with all these attacks on selfhood? This is very complex and not possible to expand in this paper. But I believe some coped by only feeling 'at home' in the townships, while others tried to escape via 'racial' reclassification. There were those with money who could leave South Africa; but many retreated into 'madness' and addictions; many died a soul death, the walking dead. There were good things too – like resilience and a strong sense of community and connectedness in the liberation struggle. What is agonising, however, is that no matter how we

struggled and fought back and seemingly attained freedom, this was insufficient to heal the broken souls of people of colour.

I entered therapy in the early '90s to work through aspects of this brokenness but mostly the therapists then were white and could not grasp this deep sense of racialized unbelonging, only focusing on my internal world as it related to my personal history. Yes, there was this too – my internal dynamics, my family history and individual psychology are essential to my beingness. But this individual me was fundamentally moulded by the politics of race and identity that saturated my childhood. It was also shaped by the terrors of a state which made me, and my ancestors believe and internalize their perverse, hateful propaganda.

The writings of bell hooks resonate as she shares her own racialized hatred and says *Intensely sad and self-hateful...longings led me to therapy but in those early years therapy did not help. I could not find a therapist who would acknowledge the power of geographical location, ancestral imprints, of racialized identity. Even when I felt therapy was not helping, I did not lose my conviction that there was health to be found, that healing could come from understanding the past and connecting it to the present.*

How is healing a damaged country like South Africa even possible?

This is a question that cannot be answered through a singular discrete journey. It must be attended as a nation. There needs to be a willingness and openness for all communities in South Africa to face the atrocities of our past and the present. We should let go of our magical thinking about a 'rainbow nation'. To heal we must address our raw, internalised hatred which haunts us to this day. Acknowledging its bearing on how we treat ourselves, our relationships, our work, our parenting – essentially how we approach and manage our psychic lives.

I began this paper with a quotation from an ancient story voiced by //Kabbo. That story stresses how in the circle of life we humans burn and become ash. The story tells that the ashes of our ancestors gathered to form the Milky Way guiding us in our journeys. I believe we can only follow that light if we stay truthful and authentic concerning the tragedy of our past and its ramifications. The difficult task and challenge of staying close to the truth of our experiences belong to us all. Authenticity and truth-telling is a central part of this journey of being and belonging.

[1] The Group Areas Act (1950) was fashioned as the 'cornerstone' of Apartheid policy and aimed to eliminate mixed neighbourhoods in favour of racially segregated ones which would allow South Africans to develop separately (South African Institute for Race Relations, 1950: 26).

[2] The Clarks' doll experiments grew out of Mamie Clark's master's degree thesis. They published three major papers between 1939 and 1940 on black children's self-perception related to race ... The experiment showed a clear preference for the white doll among all black children in the study.

References

- Centre for Creating the Archive, University of Cape Town, 'The courage of //Kabbo and a century of Specimens' – Bleek and Lloyd conference August 2011; <http://www.cca.uct.ac.za>
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin.
- Freud, S. (1914). Remembering, repeating and working through. *S.E.* 12; 5. London: Vintage: 2001, pp. 145-156.
- hooks, b. (aka Gloria Jean Watkins) (2003). *Rock my Soul, Black People and Self-Esteem*. NY: Atria.

hooks, b. (aka Gloria Jean Watkins) (2009). *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. NY: Routledge.

Long, W. (2021). *Nation on the Couch*. Cape Town: Melinda Ferguson.

Noah, T. (2017). *Born a Crime - Stories from a South African Childhood*. UK: John Murray Publishers.

Vollenhoven, S. (2016). *The Keeper of the Kumm - Ancestral Longing and Belonging of a Boesmankind*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.