

# BOOK REVIEW

**Clive Gabay. *Imagining Africa: Whiteness and the Western Gaze*.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. xi + 270 pp. List of figures. List of tables. References. Index. \$105.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1108473606.

Clive Gabay's *Imagining Africa: Whiteness and the Western Gaze* has more to do with post-colonial studies, critical race theory, and Whiteness studies than with African studies. Gabay's concern is not the continent *per se*, but rather the history of idealised visions of Africa in the West, informed by the growing anxiety of Whiteness in perpetuating its mythologized genius. In his introduction (9–22), Gabay posits a distinction between “whiteness” (which defines the status of phenotypical white people) and “Whiteness” (which is seen as a system of privilege involving both white and non-white peoples in safeguarding White and Western genius). The author aims at overturning the conventional post-colonial critique of western imaginaries of Africa “by problematising the sense in which the former consistently holds the latter in inferior relation to it” (4).

Western considerations of Africa, Gabay claims, changed dramatically after the 2007–08 financial crisis, with journalists, policymakers, scholars, NGOs, and international organizations describing Africa as “rising.” These perceptions, according to Gabay, reveal once more the anxiety of Whiteness, which views Africa as the place where it can be redeemed. Gabay does not write a full history of whiteness/Whiteness and its relationship with Africa. As stated by the author, this is not even a “straightforward history book” (34). Gabay's strategy is rather to evoke “illustrative and provocative moments” in the history of whiteness/Whiteness in the past century, with a view to analyzing the rhizomatic genealogy of “anxiety-driven idealisation of the continent.” His analysis, it must also be added, is limited to sub-Saharan Africa and, more specifically, to the “Anglosphere,” that is, English-speaking Africa (especially Eastern and Southern) and its relationship with British and American individuals and institutions.

Gabay divides the book into three thematical and chronological parts, which form its backbone. The first part, which consists of Chapters Two and Three, describes the 1920s, during which Whiteness and the genius of the Western civilization were exclusively associated with the condition of

phenotypical whiteness. As Gabay explains in Chapter Two, “Africa came to be seen as a place where Whiteness could be redeemed, through the settlement of phenotypically white people in the continent” (50). The African continent was understood as offering a possible solution for the declining British race. In Chapter Three, Gabay presents the situation of Kenya in the 1920s, examining the reactions of British settlers, the colonial government, and humanitarians and Fabians in the UK to Harry Thuku’s arrest and their anxieties about the future of Whiteness.

The second part of the book (Chapters Four and Five) deals with the 1950s and the 1960s. As explained in Chapter Four, after WWII, Whiteness became more and more disconnected from phenotypical whiteness. This was partly the result of a new “meritocratic international order” being promoted on the basis of modernization theory. According Gabay, “the colour bar had been replaced by a cultural one” (120). During this period, modernization theorists acted as the new “missionaries” of the post-war era, “seeking to convert the heathen (proto-socialist and/or tribal) world to state-capitalism and secularism” (126). In Chapter Five, Gabay employs the example of the interracial associations formed by “moderate” settlers to promote a multi-racial post-colonial Africa. These, Gabay posits, were again underpinned by the anxieties of Whiteness.

In the last two substantive chapters, the author takes a leap to the early twenty-first century, when the West faces new anxieties related to the 2007–08 crisis. In Chapter Six, Gabay analyzes the spread of African culture in the West and the role played by the so-called “Afropolitans.” However, even though African culture is portrayed in positive ways, it is also “Packed up for consumption, rationalised according to logics of Whiteness” (193). In Chapter Seven, Gabay moves to the economic arena, where the continent is now commonly portrayed as “rising.” Whiteness is still suffering from anxieties, and Africa is still seen as the place where the White historical genius can be once more saved through the process of non-white people becoming White. Western elites actively promote Whiteness in Africa, even as it is waning in the West. “Pluralism, consumerism and liberal politics, then, are the keys to the future for an Africa that can be conceived and recognised through a White ethnocentric lens” (222). A short Chapter Eight provides the conclusions of the book.

Although well written and interesting, this book suffers from a number of flaws. First of all, the term Whiteness is vaguely defined throughout the book, especially in the third part. Second, Gabay takes such concepts as White privilege and White fragility as given, without examining critically the literature that has theorized them and those who have responded to this work. Third, the author’s exclusive focus on the “Anglosphere” is not sufficiently justified, especially when broader generalizations are drawn about the relationship between the West and Africa as a whole. Finally, and most importantly, there is a stark absence of African voices and agency. In Gabay’s

worldview, the African continent seems to exist almost exclusively as a passive object of the Western gaze.

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**For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

Allman, Jean M. 2019. “#HerskovitsMustFall? A Meditation on Whiteness, African Studies, and the Unfinished Business of 1968.” *African Studies Review* 62 (3): 6–39. doi:[10.1017/asr.2019.40](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.40).

Grosz-Ngaté, Maria. 2020. “Knowledge and Power: Perspectives on the Production and Decolonization of African / Ist Knowledges.” *African Studies Review* 63 (4): 689–718. doi: [10.1017/asr.2020.102](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.102).