

## ARTICLE

# On the precariousness of address: What narratives of being called White can tell us about researching and re/producing social categories in research

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## Abstract

Social categories hold a steadfast place within social psychological research and theory. Reflecting on the use of social categories in everyday life as well as social psychological research and theory, this article critically interrogates the privileging of hegemonic Western ways of categorizing, addressing and locating people over how they are read and categorized in other socio-cultural contexts. This article draws on four excerpts of women narrating experiences of being called White, *Oboronyi* or *mzungu* (engl. foreigner, wanderer, White person) during their travels to the African continent. The article first excavates, phenomenologically, the precariousness of being addressed as White, *Oboronyi* or *mzungu*. Next, a reflexive account is presented to contemplate how racialization happens in and through the research process. By bringing together phenomenological interpretation and reflexivity, the article explores the limits of researcher and researched positionality in making sense of White as a precarious address, and argues for a view that the meaning of White is established in a four-way conversation between interviewee, African Other, interviewer and our own culture-specific inner eyes. The article thus advocates for scholars to give more attention to how our inner eyes limit how we name, describe and theorize our research.

## KEYWORDS

identity, precariousness, racialization, social categorization, whiteness

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## INTRODUCTION

Social categories are omnipresent in social psychological research and theory. This is particularly true for research on and about identity. Social Identity Theory and, more recently, Social Identity Complexity (Miller et al., 2009; Prati et al., 2021; Roccas & Brewer, 2002) are inextricably linked to processes of (self-)categorization (Abrams & Hogg, 2010; Tajfel et al., 1971; Turner, 1999). The use of social categories to establish, locate, describe people is a given in social psychological research practices and we rarely pause to question the ethics and usefulness of such practices. Crucially, and as exemplified in current critiques of the popular British umbrella categories Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME; DaCosta et al., 2021; Malik, 2020; Onuzo, 2016), social psychological and sociological modes of naming and classifying people inform everyday practices of identifying and categorizing people. As Reicher (2004) observes, “psychological theory is not only a commentary on the world and how we behave within it; it is also part of our world and serves to shape our own self-understandings. Those models that serve to reify social categories in theory may also help to reify categories in practice” (p. 942). Furthermore, and in light of the October 2021 *American Psychological Association's* statement on the role of U.S. American psychology in “promoting, perpetuation and failing to challenge racism [and] racial discrimination” (APA Council of Representatives, 2021, no pagination), attention should be paid to the use of social categories for and in psychological and clinical practice (Fernando, 2017).

In this article, I reflect on the use and re/production of social categories in everyday life as well as social psychological research and theory. These reflections are tied into critically interrogating the privileging of hegemonic Western ways of categorizing, identifying, naming and addressing people over how they (self-)identify and how they are read, addressed and categorized in other socio-cultural contexts. My starting point is four travel narratives by women based in Germany and England who went to visit countries in Africa. Their narratives spurred contemplations about the way(s) I use and used racializing categories in my own research practice(s) and led to my ongoing inquiries into how social categories, and in particular racialized and racializing categories, are employed by researchers and researched, and the implications of that use for social psychological research and theory. These narratives thus became an “invitation for inquiry” (Boler, 1999, p. 175) to engage with the pluralistic and contradictory questions, experiences, knowledges and understandings that emerge in the social world (Decolonial Psychology Editorial Collective, 2021; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) rather than to subscribe to and re/produce hegemonic Western frames of seeing, re/describing, naming research and research participants.

What this paper offers is a self-reflexive intervention to re/producing racialization in social psychological research through the use of historically formed racial and racialized categories. Specifically, I first present a phenomenological interpretative account of four narratives of women trying to make sense of the experience of being called White, *Oboronyi* or *mzungu* during their travels to the African continent. Building on this section, I then develop a reflexive account of how researchers' ways of analysing and engaging with the experiences of our research participants are framed and limited by our “own inner eyes” (Wynter, 1994, p. 2). In doing so, I make the case that the meanings of social identity categories, and in particular the meaning of White, *Oboronyi* or *mzungu* are negotiated and established in a four-way conversation between interviewee, African Other, interviewer and our own culture-specific inner eyes. My main argument is that we need to give more attention to how our place of enunciation and our inner eyes implicate us in the re/production of social categories that name, see and know our research participants through the logic of hegemonic, Western epistemes.

## LANGUAGE, DISCOURSES AND THE PRECARIOUSNESS OF ADDRESS

My concern in this paper is first and foremost with language, discourses and practices. As such, I am concerned with precariousness as a state of uncertainty (Butler, 2015). Butler conceptualizes precariousness in relation to the structure of address. Not only are we addressed by others, but “we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious

when that address fails” (Butler, 2006, p. 130). “Oborɔnyi” or “Mzungu”<sup>1</sup> are a form of address. The Akan word *Oborɔnyi* means ‘wanderer’, ‘stranger’ or ‘foreigner’ but is often translated more narrowly as ‘White person’. *Mzungu*, too, is often translated as ‘White person’ because it was and continues to be used as a term for White settlers. Drawing on the etymology of *mzungu*, Mamdani (1998) explains the literal meaning of the term “means a restless person, a person who will not stay in one place, a person full of anxieties” (p. 6). This restlessness is captured in the allegorical translation of the term *Oborɔnyi* as ‘the person who came across the horizon.’

*Oborɔnyi*, *mzungu* or the Yoruba term *oyinbo* speak to the ‘quotidian racial lexicon’ in postcolonial Africa and how Whiteness is socially constructed in relation to race, class, colonialism, policies and the complex and multifaceted histories that have shaped and continue to shape social relations in contemporary societies on the African continent (Green et al., 2007; Mamdani, 1998; Ochonu, 2019; Pierre, 2013). Autobiographical accounts (Hartman, 2007; Keshodkar, 2004), discussions of African American return tourists and students visiting countries in Africa (Bruner, 1996; Landau & Moore, 2001) as well as Christian and Namaganda's (2022) research on how domestic workers employed by foreigners in Uganda make sense of the term *mzungu* in relation to Blackness, Africanness and Whiteness document the complex meanings attached to these terms. *Oborɔnyi* and *mzungu* are used to situationally mark out the material, symbolic and discursive dimensions of Whiteness. As an address, they are also directed towards bodies which, within Western, hegemonic logics of race would not be described as White, and therefore in ways that can seem paradoxical and unfamiliar to diasporic people of African descent ‘returning’ to the African continent, and who do not expect to be called White (Keshodkar, 2004; Pierre, 2013).

Precariousness is appropriate because the paper is based on travel narratives. As a costly endeavour, these narratives are, implicitly, narratives of privilege including the financial means to travel and access to a passport. By locating precariousness in language and narratives, this article is concerned with a breakdown of the discursive rules and norms of life as the narrators knew them and lived by, and the momentary suspension that caused them to confront a (lasting) sense of insecurity and indeterminacy: who am I *now*? Who can I be? As such, I follow Al-Mohammad's (2012) reading of Butler as proposing precariousness as “a methodological orientation” (p. 600) which returns “us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense” (Butler, 2006, p. 151).

The paper first presents a phenomenological account of the women narrating instances of unbelonging and how, in those moments, social identity categories became precarious. The paper then presents a reflexive account of how my own inner eyes shape(d) and limit(ed) how I name(d) my research, see/saw the women participating in my project, and what I know/knew about their experiences. Critically, this paper has no “comfortable, transcendent end-point” (Pillow, 2003, p. 193). It is born out of ongoing discussions about the limits and limiting power of categories in social psychological research, and it will hopefully spark further discussion. As such, the paper builds on and extends the work of scholars, within social psychology (Coultas, 2022; Gillespie et al., 2012; Howarth, 2009; Reddy & Amer, 2023; Torrez et al., 2022) and in the human and social sciences (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Paris, 2019; Paris & Alim, 2014; Wynter, 1994) grappling with the dilemma so poignantly formulated by Gloria Anzaldúa (2015): “how to write (produce) without being inscribed (reproduced) in the dominant white structure and how to write without reinscribing and reproducing what we rebel against” (pp. 7–8). For this reason, I find it important to situate the writing of this article and the *where* I am thinking, researching and writing *from* (Grosfoguel, 2006; Mignolo, 1999) to bring into play the heightened sense of having to reflect on where I come from and where I am moving to. That is to say, the textual data discussed and interpreted in this essay are taken from my PhD research project. The writing, however, comes at the beginning of my postdoctoral fellowship. Hence, this essay is in some ways a conversation between the research practices of my doctoral work and the practices I hope to carry into and develop as I set up my next research projects. It is also a conversation about the situatedness of racial social categories and processes of racialization – in this case, as situated in and produced in Western Europe,

<sup>1</sup>Throughout this essay, I use the terms *Oborɔnyi* and *mzungu*.

and in particular England and Germany – and the limits and contradictions that come up when these social constructions travel.

## METHODS – LISTENING TO NARRATIVES OF BEING CALLED WHITE AND PRACTICING REFLEXIVITY

The four narratives read and discussed in this paper are taken from qualitative interviews that were collected as part of a larger research project on representations of Black hair in Germany and England (Lukate, 2018). Research was conducted between the spring of 2015 and the summer of 2017 and comprised a mixed-methods approach including qualitative interviews with women and experts (e.g. hairstylists and bloggers) as well as ethnographic observations. Interviews were semistructured, lasted between 30 and 90 min, and were conducted in either English, German or, in one case, English and French, according to the interviewees' choice. During the interview, participants narrated their 'hair story', a biographical account of when and why they changed their hair texture and style, and responded to questions on their experiences with hair related to dating, employment, the media and society at large. Participants were not explicitly asked about identity or travelling. The four narratives at the heart of this paper stood out from a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017) of 35 single, semi-structured interviews ( $n_{\text{England}} = 15$ ,  $n_{\text{Germany}} = 20$ ), which was performed to explore the junctures between identity performances and travelling within the women's hair stories. The negotiation and performance of identity through aesthetic changes to the women's hairstyling as a response to changes in socio-geographic context (i.e. travelling or moving abroad) are discussed elsewhere (Lukate & Foster, 2022). In this paper, I focus on what the women's travel narratives and accounts of being called White person, *Oboromyi* or *mzungu* can tell us, phenomenologically, about the precariousness of address and how these narratives offer us, analytically and ethically, a challenge to reflect on our place(s) of enunciation and complicities in re/producing racialization and the social categories that feed into processes of racialization in and through our research.

The first section presents a phenomenological interpretation of the women's narratives. In so doing, I follow in the tradition of Frantz Fanon (1952/2008) and scholars such as Garda Kilomba (2020). A phenomenological account focuses on describing the phenomenon itself, paying attention to questions such as how is being Black/mixed/White performed in the scene, how is being called White experienced by the woman speaking, and what is the function of being called White? A phenomenological account does not abstract because "abstracting could be problematic in that it imposes terminology upon experience, and objectivity upon subjectivity" (Kilomba, 2020, p. 48). Next, I present a reflexive account on researching and re/producing social categories in my own research practice (Dosekun, 2015; Pillow, 2003). In so doing, I follow Wanda Pillow (2003), who proposes uncomfortable reflexivity as a way to not "write toward the familiar" (p. 180). By pushing us to accept and engage the unfamiliar and uncomfortable, Pillow understands reflexivity "as practices of confounding disruptions – at times even a failure of our language and practices" (p. 192). It is this failure and breaking down of our language(s) and practices that I like to explore in this article. As a messy and unsettling practice, uncomfortable reflexivity thus aims to "confound and interrupt [...] to resist disciplinary regimes of truth and try to continuously foreground the workings of power in one's research and representations" (Dosekun, 2015, p. 436).

## ON THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF BEING CALLED WHITE

In this section, I examine how the participants experienced, phenomenologically (Ahmed, 2007; Alcoff, 1999; Kilomba, 2020),<sup>2</sup> the precariousness of social categories when learned and rehearsed norms were turned on their heads. I begin with an excerpt from my conversation with Mona, who was in her

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of the long and conflicting exchanges within Africana phenomenology see Henry (2011).

mid-20s at the time of the interview. In the excerpt, she narrated her childhood journey to Ghana, her mother's country of origin. Mona said,

### Narrative 1

**Mona:** I've been to Ghana, I was really young, I was I was 10, I was 9, I had my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday there

**I:** okay

**Mona:** I loved it but em they would call – cause they knew, like, when they look at you they know that you are not from Ghana, you may have Ghanaian parents but you are born in another country, so they can always tell, so they actually used to call me 'White girl'

**I:** okay

**Mona:** they wouldn't say it, they say in my language, in my mom's language

**I:** yeah

**Mona:** but em they would call me White girl and I never, I used to hate it because I didn't understand why they were calling me White girl

Mona, who was born and raised in England, ended her narrative with the difficulties she experienced in trying to make sense of 'why they were calling me White girl.' The precarious address 'White girl' is delivered in 'my language, in my mom's language'. Language thus works to both establish Mona's claim to being Ghanaian or of Ghanaian heritage in the interview situation ('my language') while it was used to reject her claim in the encounter with other Ghanaians, who, in Mona's own words, could 'always tell' that she was 'born in another country.' In the encounter with other Ghanaians, the power to define themselves as Ghanaian thus rested with the Ghanaian Others while Mona *becomes* White/different at the moment that she is addressed as 'White girl'.

To be called White is then a form of what Judith Butler describes as "the determination of 'the people'", which involves "a discursive border [being] drawn somewhere, either traced along the lines of existing nation-states, racial or linguistic communities, or political affiliations" (Butler, 2015, p. 5). By being called White, a stranger, a foreigner, Mona and the other women we meet in this text, encountered a – physical, material, imaginary, linguistic, performative – border between themselves and the people in the countries they were visiting. The assumption that they are 'one' group or people was violently disrupted. The twin ideas of homegoing and coming home were shattered; the women were located *elsewhere*, and as 'not from here'. An experience which is not unlike the one describe by return migrants, who realized that they have become strangers to the people in their homeland (Tsuda, 2003, 2009). Rebekka said,

### Narrative 2

Of course, I had expected that when I come to Ghana, that there, I'd finally like... blend in with the masses. And it wasn't at all like that, people still stare at you. And they say 'oh... *Oborɔnyɪ*!', which means like, 'you White...' it means White person, right?

Rebekka shared her expectation to 'blend in with the masses' and how it clashed with the experience of being called *Oborɔnyɪ* upon arrival in Ghana. All the women, who we hear here, expressed some degree of surprise, shock, bewilderment and sadness at being called White, *Oborɔnyɪ* or *mzungu*. These feelings were prompted by the rejection of a felt connection, which the women had anticipated prior to their journey, and confrontations with a form of Othering, which the women had hoped to escape by travelling to the African continent. The women's expectation to, in Rebekka's words, 'blend in with the masses' was, at least in part, born out of their continued racialization in England and Germany where

Whiteness is primarily identified through skin colour (Campt, 2004; Howarth et al., 2014; Kilomba, 2020; Lukate, 2019). In the context of England and Germany, the women thus confronted repeated experiences of being Othered and identified as 'not-from-here'. This performative migratising displacement of the women fed into their expectation to find a sense of connection and belonging in Africa. Yet not only did being called White shatter the women's expectation, it also constituted an unfamiliar reversal of familiar power relations: the oppressed (Black) person is addressed as the (White) oppressor. Being called White thus refused recognition of the women as Ghanaian, Tanzanian or so and instead marked them as foreigners or strangers inhabiting Whiteness.

The recognition of one's identification, however, plays an important role in people's everyday construction, negotiation and performance of identity. The affirmation of one's identity by others allows humans to participate in the public sphere and builds a person's sense of self and feelings of belonging (Amer, 2020; Blackwood et al., 2013; Hopkins & Blackwood, 2008; Townsend et al., 2009). The denial of an identity, however, and rejection of membership in a group to which a person sees themselves as belonging to undermines a person's sense of self and impacts their well-being (Albuja et al., 2019; Cheryan & Monin, 2005). Amer (2020) maintains that 'how we are seen by others, or [...] how we *think* we are seen and what identities we think are recognized or not recognized, influences how we come to understand ourselves in relation to the categories to which we belong' (p. 533, sic). As an address, *Oborɔnyɪ* and *mɛʒungu* were thus experienced as precarious by the women because it jeopardized the women's identity and sense of belonging. Being called White placed the women in relation to a category, Whiteness, which they did not see themselves as belonging to nor did they expect, from experience, to be recognized as belonging to that category. By designating strangerhood and foreignness (Hartman, 2007), '*Oborɔnyɪ*!' and '*Mɛʒungu*!' thus required the women to, once more, re/negotiate their identities and to re/build a sense of belonging. Consider the following conversation between Harriet and myself:

### Narrative 3

*I:* so mixed-race Black British?

*Harriet:* I identify as a lot of things. I identify as mixed-race, I identify as being Black, when I go to Africa, I identify as being White because they all refer to me as being White

*I:* okay

*Harriet:* when I'm in Africa, cause they, as far as I am concerned, anyone that's from Europe is White, so my little sister refers to me as being White

*I:* is she like...

*Harriet:* she is like fully Tanzanian

*I:* okay

*Harriet:* you know, I am like "yeah, I spend my whole life like being Black" and then when I get to like go to Africa when I'm seventeen and suddenly I was White. I was like "Jesus Christ". Never been what everyone else is

*I:* yeah

*Harriet:* you're always the other, and that's the thing with being mixed-race

*I:* did it put you into some kind of crisis?



**Harriet:** yeah, at the time it did, I felt like I don't belong anywhere, I still have that a bit but actually now I think I arrived at this sense of feeling of not belonging somewhere but now I feel there is a beauty in not belonging anywhere because I don't, there is nowhere I have to be, I could be anywhere

Harriet, who grew up in England, also described the sense of unbelonging and the performative repetition of displacement to an 'elusive elsewhere' (Tudor, 2018), because she is Black, and mixed, then White. Yet, for Harriet, the precariousness of everyday identity categories bears 'a beauty... because ... there is nowhere I have to be, I could be anywhere.' This anywhere manifested, for example, in Harriet's ability to blend in and be perceived and treated as a local while travelling to Morocco. Thus, while the experience of being called White momentarily meant that Harriet's ability to identify and being identified became "precariously dispersed" (Al-Mohammad, 2012, p. 600) it allowed Harriet to develop what Anzaldúa (2015) describes as "a view from the cracks" which "accommodate[s] contradictory identity positions and mutually exclusive, inconsistent worlds" (p. 82). Hence, rather than to refuse and resist the address, Harriet ultimately accepted and integrated it into her own identity and location in the world.

The liminality, flexibility, mutability and context-dependency of everyday social identity categories is, or can become, precarious because it takes away the predictability and a sense of control over who we are in our own eyes and in the eyes of others. We are confronted with the mobility of everyday categories, the meanings of which are situationally specific and produced in relation to society, context, geographic region, language, history, politics, policy and political philosophy (Bowker & Star, 2000; Eison Simmons, 2008; Gillespie et al., 2012; Green et al., 2007). Strikingly, precariousness in relation to our identities is communicated *qua* language. "Language communicates the precariousness of life," Butler (2006) argues, because "language arrives as an address we do not will, and by which we are, in an original sense, captured, if not, [...] held hostage. So there is a certain violence already in being addressed, given a name, subject to a set of impositions, compelled to respond to an exacting alterity" (p. 139). *They would call me, they say, they refer to me as... White.*

Who are 'they'? What do we learn or what can be said about the African Other(s) addressing the women as White, *Oboronyi* and *mzungu*? Represented through the eyes of the women, who felt, to an extent, othered by the African Other(s), the African Others appear rather blanketly represented. The narratives discursively re/established binary oppositions of me and they/them. Underlying this oppositional narrating/reading/interpreting, I maintain, is an interpretation/translation of the 'White' in the address *Oboronyi* and *mzungu* as the property of "actual racialized White bodies" (Pierre, 2013). Yet Landau and Moore (2001) observe that "Ghanaian racial codes are wholly different, and indeed may not be appropriately described by [...] 'race'" (p. 52). Centring the perspective of the African Others thus brings into focus the racialization of bodies *as* White and the fact that, in postcolonial Africa, race and class intersect to signify through Whiteness (Ochonu, 2019; Pierre, 2013). For Pierre (2013), Whiteness functions as an ideology, a trope and a visual regime of looking/seeing and manifests in social and cultural practices, mannerisms and codes, which structure power relations in postcolonial Africa. Importantly, "racialization occurs both in tandem with and *in excess* of the corporal" such that "race (in this case, Whiteness) articulates with racialized-as-White bodies, all the while moving beyond such bodies and expressing itself in other representations of itself such as culture, aesthetics, wealth, and so on" (Pierre, 2013, p. 72). Whiteness as experienced through and manifesting in class privileges and foreigner status certainly goes a long way to explaining why Mona, Rebekka and Harriet, who were born and raised in Western European countries, were addressed as White, *Oboronyi* and *mzungu* during their travels. That is, Whiteness is constructed and perceived as performative and embodied, made intelligible through the conscious or unconscious display of behaviours, mannerisms or an understanding of social and cultural codes that speak to a familiarity with and embeddedness in Whiteness. Understanding *mzungu* as a figurative descriptor can then help shed light on the experience of Sarah, who grew up in East Africa before moving to England for her studies, and who was called *mzungu* upon her return to East Africa:

#### Narrative 4

**Sarah:** So for example my [anonymised] work was in Uganda

*I:* ja

*Sarah:* and I mean it's interesting, there, going back, and I mean I'm sure it has to do with more than obviously just my hair but how I carried myself, how I dressed

*I:* okay

*Sarah:* em, people said I was *mzungu*, which is a White person

*I:* mhm

*Sarah:* and for me, I don't feel White at all and I would say my hair for sure isn't White, and yet people associated me with, with yeah being White, even when I was wearing my hair out

*I:* okay

*Sarah:* it was clear this is, you know, mixed hair

*I:* yeah

*Sarah:* em, so that was quite interesting and shocking actually for me, I hadn't experienced that at all growing up

Sarah interpreted being read as *mzungu* while working in Uganda and visiting family in Tanzania as a consequence of 'how I carried myself, how I dressed'. She alluded to the small distinctions (Bourdieu, 2010) between herself and the people she encountered in Uganda and Tanzania. Kae (2020) in her study of British Nigerian girls who were sent to boarding school in Nigeria similarly describes the performance of Britishness through 'carrying themselves in particular ways and displaying certain attributes, ways of speaking, and taste in food and dress' (p. 78) which emphasised and made visible the girls' upbringing in England. Kae argues such performances of Britishness and, I suggest, Whiteness, act as markers of social distinction and a form of symbolic capital in the Nigerian context. Hence, although all the women I spoke to used categories and terms – Black, mixed, White – that fall into Western, hegemonic registers of race to translate, explain and familiarize their experiences, Sarah's assertion that difference was established through how she presented herself speaks to Whiteness as a form of cultural and symbolic capital that is about more than skin colour (Christian & Namaganda, 2022; Green et al., 2007). Indeed, Sarah alluded to *mzungu* as transcending Whiteness as skin colour, when she spoke about her conversations with friends, who, like herself, had gone on to spend time in Europe, and who were called *mzungu* upon their return. These conversations, Sarah said, helped her 'gain a bit of comfort in knowing that no matter how dark your skin is, no matter how much of a tie you have with your mother's country, your father's country, when you live in Europe, and you go back, you've somehow lost that connection.' For Sarah, the precariousness of being addressed as *mzungu* thus manifested in the unfamiliar clash between 'being recognised as [...] foreign' by people in East Africa and Sarah's own 'strong sense of an African identity.'

Like the women, I shared an initial sense of puzzlement and surprise when I first listened to the women's narratives of being called White. I, too, as I discuss below, narrowly interpreted *Oboronyi* and *mzungu* as an address directed towards 'White bodies' and sympathized with the women's puzzlement because I was looking at them and seeing Black and/or mixed-race women. So, how could they be White? Returning to these narratives several years after my conversations with the women, these narratives became the springboard from which I started to contemplate the use and re/production of racial(ising) categories and, by extension, the racialization of my research participants in and through my research. That is, the precariousness of the address *Oboronyi* and *mzungu* as narrated by the women in my research project opened up possibilities to address my own complicities in seeing the women (Dosekun, 2015)



and framing their identities such that they would fit Western, hegemonic or, following Reddy and Amer (2023), whitestream social psychological understandings of who belongs to particular social categories. *Oboronyi* and *mzungu*, in turn, allowed me to explore, navigate and negotiate the “cracks between realities” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 73), between the racial epistemic logics of the Western European societies that the women and myself lived in and are (most) familiar with and the systems and logics of categorization they encountered during their journeys. So how can we make space in social psychological theories on social categorization for different, local understandings of Whiteness (Frankenberg, 1997), which shape the organization of meanings, the positioning of bodies within matrices of power and domination, and social relations in a particular context at a given point in time? Disentangling what Whiteness signifies for different people and in different contexts, I offer in dialogue with Paris (2019), Hakim et al. (2023), Rua et al. (2023), and Reddy and Amer (2023), shows how naming and framing in academic research is often closely linked to the coloniality of knowledge, that is, the re/production of knowledge which privileges Western, hegemonic knowledge over other forms of knowledge.

## TOWARDS DEVELOPING A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE CRACKS: GIVING ATTENTION TO MY OWN ‘INNER EYES’ AS A REFLEXIVE PRAXIS

In this section, I shift attention to the broader theoretical and ethical questions around Western, hegemonic social psychological investment(s) in categorization and my own discomfort as I struggle *with* and *against* my on-going complicities in re/producing racialization and the social categories that feed into processes of racialization in and through my research. Indeed, “the advancement of a psychology based on an ‘African cultural worldview,’” Coultas (2022) writes, ‘has been constrained,’ locking theories in “Western binary logics” and refusing “the multiplicity of realities” (p. 8). How then can we disrupt the matrices of power and domination which threaten to re/produce and place our research and research participants in familiar, Western and hegemonic ways of categorization? How can we develop a research practice of “listening to all sides” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 82)? What becomes possible and visible when we write *with* the African world view(s) and embrace the multiplicity of realities?

Sylvia Wynter's (1994) idea of our “culture-specific ‘inner eyes’” (p. 10) as the classificatory lens and epistemic logic which puts limits on the ways in which we can see, know and act is useful here. In the wake of the acquittal of the policemen in the Rodney King beating case – and given renewed urgency following the Gorge Floyd killing in 2020 and the global Black Lives Matter movement that followed – Wynter uses the notion of inner eyes to implicate mainstream scholars in the re/production and reification of racializing and racist classificatory logics, epistemes and social systems. For Wynter (1994), new modes of knowing and epistemological orders become possible when a person's inner eyes, moulded by the particular social categories in a society and rooted in culture-specific knowledges and epistemes are disrupted, challenged and faced with the social realities on the ground. Wynter thus calls for us, scholars/researchers/writers, to pay attention to our own inner eyes and for an epistemic praxis which allows for what Mignolo and Walsh (2018) describe as “thought *otherwise*” (p. 18), which challenges, transcends and, ultimately, unravels the enduring patterns of power and dominance which structure identities, social relations, culture, nation and knowledge production to this very day (Decolonial Psychology Editorial Collective, 2021; Hakim et al., 2023; Reddy & Amer, 2023).

How would I frame my research if my inner eyes were not put in place by the prescriptive categories of the dominant, hegemonic Western order? How would I see and name my research participants (and myself) if my inner eyes were not shaped by the dominant, Western epistemic order? How can I go about liberating myself from those inner eyes and the limits they impose upon my seeing, knowing, acting in and on the world? And ultimately, what are the implications of that liberation for envisioning, framing, conceptualizing and doing research?

As previously mentioned, I, too, experienced puzzlement as I listened to the women's narratives of being called White. My response, I argue, was born out of my *seeing* the women (and myself) through

hegemonic, Western racialized frames, particularly “the white gaze” (Fanon, 1952/2008, p. 95). Fixed in and through the White gaze, which overdetermines people “from the outside” (Fanon, 1952/2008, p. 95), I named and identified my research participants (as well as myself) as ‘Black’, ‘mixed-race’, ‘women of colour’ – identity categories I have used (at times, working *with* them and sometimes struggling *against* them) to frame and conceptualize my research. Yet something about those frames failed when identity categories became precarious; somehow the frames ‘cracked’ (Anzaldúa, 2015; Pillay, 2017) vis-à-vis the women's narratives of being called White because it required the accommodation of binary oppositional, mutually exclusive categories.

*It means White person, right?* [German original: *weißer Menschen heißt das, ne?*<sup>3</sup>] I am fascinated by this rhetorical ‘right?’, the German ‘ne?’ at the end of Rebekka's narrative and the co-constructive moment of producing ‘White person’ through the joint act of narrating/listening (Frank, 2010; Riessman, 2008). *Right?/Ne?* establishes a joint place from which we translated and made sense of the address: *they say* ‘oh... Oboronyi !, which means like, ‘you White...’ it means *White person, right?* I am no longer just listening. I have become “caught up” (Frank, 2010, p. 48) in the production of what it means to be called White, a ‘White person’. “Once stories are under people's skin,” Arthur Frank (2010) argues, “they affect the terms in which people think, know, and perceive” (p. 48). But these stories about being called White, *Oboronyi* or *mzungu* have not only gone under my skin, they were produced and constructed in response to the colour of my skin and what Rebekka took for granted that she and I *know* about the social significance of the colour of our skins: “storytelling happens relationally, collaboratively between speaker and listener in a cultural context where at least some meanings and conventions are shared” (Salmon & Riessman, 2008, p. 81). Implicit in this joint act of sense-making is therefore a sense of being puzzled: from where we are located, translating *Oboronyi* as ‘White person’ in the sense of White bodies (rather than racialized-as-White bodies) constituted a paradox and discrepancy between how we (had agreed to) see and know ourselves.

Arriving at the realization that the women's narratives are about dialogical constructions of racialization as connected to Whiteness (rather than ‘White bodies’) was both a process of self-reflection and deep engagement with the literature (Ahmed, 2007; Green et al., 2007; Pierre, 2013) as well as working with the reviewers' comments and engaging in an open dialogue with the editors of this special issue. This process also raised questions about what ‘White’ as a word, as a social identity category, and as a system of power and privilege does in the social world and in my/our research praxis, and in turn, what I want the word to do in this text. The capitalization of White(ness) in this paper then acts to emphasize and highlight the social construction and dialogical (co-)production of White(ness) (Appiah, 2020; Ewing, 2020; Nguyễn & Pendleton, 2020; Painter, 2020), which is not exclusive to White bodies. Instead, White(ness) capitalized is an invitation to think about where Whiteness comes from, what is the *modus operandi* of Whiteness, in which contexts does Whiteness attach itself to which bodies, and how does it affect (all) our lives? While the practice of capitalizing White may be controversial because it threatens to reify White as an identity (Coultais, 2022; Swan, 2017), playing into the hands of those who capitalize ‘White’ as a form of violence and dominance, I take a view towards capitalizing White to orthographically disrupt the idea that ‘White is (just) a skin tone’. The capital W(hite/ness), in this paper, then serves to creatively visibilise an oftentimes *invisible(ised)* and unnamed – and in that sense ultimately unraced – racial identity category, and opens up space for all of us to “think deeply about the ways in which Whiteness survives” (Nguyễn & Pendleton, 2020, no pagination).

Language thus frames how we see the world around us. But while ‘White’ feels immediately accessible to me as an English speaker, working *with* and translating *Oboronyi* and *mzungu* is an inherently fraught project for the non-native speaker. As scholars and writers from the African continent remind us, the translation of *Oboronyi* and *mzungu* as ‘White person’ is too narrow (The Kubolor, 2015). For Mamdani (1998), in particular, *mzungu* is embedded in ongoing processes of citizenship-making and negotiating belonging. Belonging, however, is a liminal space and the borders of belonging are continuously drawn and re/drawn

<sup>3</sup>In the German language, *Ne?* is a colloquial version of the rhetorical interjection ‘nicht wahr?’ used to elicit agreement or disagreement from the other person in a conversation.

in everyday encounters. Writing from my desk in Germany, I am therefore confronted with the limits of what I/we can say, and in which language, from where I am/we are working/speaking/writing from. And yet, keeping the terms and working with them is to acknowledge how *Oboronyi* and *mzungu* shaped the women's sense of self and belonging, and to allow their experiences to become (social) research categories (Pool, 2021).

'So mixed-race Black British?', I asked Harriet halfway into our conversation. Re-reading my conversation with Harriet I recognize in my own interview practice the very logic of addressing, naming, classifying, categorizing my research participant(s) not as they are but in the way I have learned the Western academy need them to be: along clearly defined, mutually exclusive, racialized categories. By asking Harriet to identify as 'mixed-race Black British', I have become myself complicit in the re/production of racialized national social identity categories. Harriet's refusal, however, is powerful as well as analytically and ethically insightful. 'I identify as a lot of things', Harriet said. In the eschewing conversation, Harriet emphasized not just the multiplicity of belonging (Gaither, 2018) but the multiplicity of categorization and identification processes, each informed by local modes of *seeing* and *being seen*. 'I identify as mixed-race,' Harriet asserted, 'I identify as being Black, when I go to Africa, I identify as being White because they all refer to me as being White.' Far from there being "only one way of perceiving others, and only one form of intergroup relations" (Reicher, 2004, p. 942), Harriet's encounter with being called White became an invitation to develop "a third point of view" (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 79) and to "listen to all sides" (ibid., p. 82).

## CONCLUSION

This paper, like many, suffers from the problem of circularity. To critique social categories, I had to invoke social categories. My contention is thus not to get rid of categories, but to grapple with and critique the ways racial categories are often used and, ultimately, re/produced in social psychological research and theory. As Caroline Howarth (2009) points out: "if we accept that there is no essential basis to the concept of distinct racial groups, then we need to be vigilant against this tendency to essentialize, reify or naturalize 'race' in all areas of interaction including *our professional practice*" (p. 421–422, sic). Using four narratives of women who struggled to make sense of the precarious address White person, *mzungu* or *Oboronyi*, which they encountered during their travels to countries in Africa, I have argued that we need to give more attention to how our culture-specific inner eyes shape and limit how we, as researchers/scholars/analysts see, name, frame and go about our research.

In so doing, my contention is not to suggest that I name and re/describe my research participants (as) White. The precariousness of the addresses *Oboronyi* and *mzungu* also stems from the imposition of a name and category membership, which the women did not will and which did not reflect the women's own identities. In the interview, Mona and Sarah, for example, outrightly rejected and disidentified with the address. Rather, I see the women's narratives as an intervention and an invitation to reflect on how social psychological naming practices and our place of enunciation shape and limit how researchers see/know/name their research and the people participating in their research. As such, I see this article as being in dialogue with other articles in this Special Issue including Hakim et al. (2023), who draw our attention to the settler-colonial gaze that shapes and frames experimental social psychological studies conducted from a supposed position of distance and neutrality, or a zero-point epistemology (Castro-Gómez, 2021; Decolonial Psychology Editorial Collective, 2021; Mignolo, 2009). By centring history, place (also, of enunciation) and context, Hakim and colleagues show how these studies contribute to the coloniality of knowledge, that is, knowledge which privileges Western, hegemonic knowledge over other forms of knowledge. What I struggle *with* and *against* is therefore my complicity in re/producing "the dominant white structure" (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 7; also Reddy & Amer, 2023). Instead, I struggle with Rua and colleagues (2023) and Reddy and Amer (2023) *towards* possibilities to undo the coloniality of knowledge and the precariousness of identities, knowledges and lives it gives rise to. Concretely, I want to suggest that we give, in our research practices, theories and concepts, more attention to the contradictions, frictions and cracks that make up reality and that we become more open to listening to and working *with* all sides.

In this paper, *all sides* speaks to the idea that the meanings of social categories – Black, White, mixed-race, *Oboronyi* and *mzungu* – were negotiated and established in the four-way conversation between interviewee, African Other, interviewer and our own culture-specific inner eyes. Although the perspectives of the African Others remain limited, represented first and foremost *in* the women's narratives and *through* the women's eyes, working to analytically *centre* their perspectives (Malherbe et al., 2021) brings into sharp relief social psychology's privileging of hegemonic, Western ways of naming and addressing people over how they (self-)identify and how they are read, addressed, identified and recognized in other socio-cultural contexts. Being called White, *Oboronyi* or *mzungu*, I maintain, thus disrupts the White gaze and the coloniality of knowledge because the address unsettles hegemonic notions of Whiteness as lying only within White bodies.

What this paper then calls for is a willingness and, ultimately, commitment to “scrutinise and crack” (Pillay, 2017, p. 4) our ways of seeing the world and naming, framing and doing research within that world. I would like to conclude with Kathrine McKittrick (2021), who reminds us that “if we are committed to anticolonial thought, our starting point must be one of disobedient relationality that always questions, and thus is not beholden to, normative academic logics” (p. 45). For me, this starting point was the precariousness of address embedded within the dialogical construction of Whiteness and racialization, which I encountered in the narratives of four women telling me about their experiences of being called White, *Oboronyi* or *mzungu*.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Johanna M. Lukate:** Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; funding acquisition; investigation; methodology; project administration; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

I have no conflict of interest to disclose.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data not available due to ethical restrictions.

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