WHITEMAN KONTRI AND THE ENDURING ALLURE OF MODERNITY AMONG CAMEROONIAN YOUTH

FRANCIS B. NYAMNJOH AND BEN PAGE

ABSTRACT
This article gathers together representations of whiteness constructed by young black Cameroonians. It contributes to arguments about white identity by arguing that the meaning of whiteness is, in part, made by Africans. It assembles descriptions of white people and of the whiteman kontri (the West) that are often contradictory and that include both positive and negative judgements. In this respect these ideas reflect both Cameroonian politics and Cameroonian identity. The young Cameroonians whose ideas we were interested in were simultaneously drawn to, and exasperated by, a Western vision of modernity. They were despairing of the existing Cameroonian social and political structure and looked beyond national contexts for their dreams. But they were equally sceptical about the justice of the global economic context and articulated their doubts in terms of antagonism towards whites and defence of African identity. We contribute to debates about Occidentalism by suggesting that this is a concept that should be used with caution, since by suggesting an equivalent to ‘Orientalism’ it suggests equality and endorses an essentialized notion of whiteness and blackness, which can undermine attempts to understand the history of relations between Africa and the West.

White man, white man,
White man with the big purse,
Since my mother born me
I’ve never seen such a big purse. (Cameroonian Children’s Song)

THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES THE MENTAL REPRESENTATIONS OF WHITENESS constructed by young black Cameroonians. It does so by gathering descriptions of white people and descriptions of the whiteman kontri — an

Francis B. Nyamnjoh is Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, University of Botswana, Gaborone. Ben Page is a lecturer in the Department of Geography, University College London.

1. The subject of this paper is such that the terms white, black, Orient, Occident, non-West and West are all being questioned; however, for ease of reading we have not used scare quotes throughout.
imagined realm occupied by imagined people, and sometimes located as the West or Europe. We argue that colonization consists of not only a struggle for control over territory, but also a struggle for control over meanings and minds. In particular, we argue that even critical studies of whiteness have suggested that it is white people who produce the meanings of whiteness, whereas we propose that the meaning of whiteness is being contested by the young Cameroonians we interviewed. The term whiteness is connoted by the descriptions associated with a place (described in Pidgin-English as whiteman kontri) and with a people (the general term whiteman includes both men and women from a wide range of ethnic groups). Furthermore, following Edward Said, we argue that the task for the scholar is not to separate the material struggle over territory from the other-worldly struggle over meanings but to connect them. As such, we argue that the representations of whiteness that we have gathered both reflect and produce the history and practice of politics in the African postcolony.

The article begins by introducing our conceptual framework and the sources and methods of our research. It then turns to the representations of whiteness held by young Cameroonians but garnered by white researchers whilst working in Cameroon. This draws attention to the layers of interpretative contest that surround the meaning of whiteness. The article then turns to our primary material drawn from group interviews with Cameroonian undergraduates, which has been organized into themes that reflect the directions in which the interviewees took the discussions. The conclusions relate the theoretical sections to the body of the paper.

**Conceptual framework and research methods**

In the ‘West’ to be ‘white’ is not to have a race. In Cameroon to be white is to be sufficiently different to be constantly remarked upon. Just as white

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gazes on black, so black, also, gazes on white. Yet, all too often, discussions of alterity have portrayed only the ‘Occident’ as the bearer of the gaze and the maker of meaning, whilst the ‘Orient’, the ‘African’ or the ‘Other’ is left as the passive object of Western curiosity. The interlocking of gazes is ignored. In recent years ‘whiteness’ in the West has been subjected to ‘a barrage of unsentimental critique’, but these studies still suggest that only white people construct whiteness. This has engendered a history of white identity pregnant with missing links and missing perspectives. The central claim of this article is that both white and non-white are the makers of the meaning of whiteness. 

To help consider the process of how meanings of whiteness are made in Cameroon we use the concept of Occidentalism. This is not the symmetrical opposite of Orientalism but rather a ‘filter’ through which Cameroonian ideas about whiteness have passed. It reflects Cameroon’s history of dealing with the experience of being ruled over by the Occident. What we have assembled in the body of this article is a Cameroonian imaginative geography of the ‘whiteman kontri’. Existing publications peripherally refer to the social construction of whiteness in Cameroon. They have paid attention to the role of whites within the context of local political struggles and contemporary children’s masquerades. However, to the best of our knowledge this is the first attempt to make Cameroonian representations of whiteness the centre of the discussion.

The process of making the meaning of whiteness in Cameroon matters because it reflects both the practice of power in Cameroon and also the character of Cameroonian identity. Occidentalism assumes that the maintenance of every culture requires the existence of a competing alter ego. The black Cameroonian self is maintained through the production of the white as other. The ideas about whiteness recorded here are important because:

(i) they are embedded within a political context and are mobilized in the interests of national elite groups; (ii) they tell us how young Cameroonians see themselves in a global context.

The article draws on three sources of information. First, a series of focus group discussions with Cameroonian university students. Second, accounts of engagements between blacks and whites in academic research. And third, the work of the Cameroonian satirist Tchop-Tchop. There were three focus groups of 7–10 participants. The members of the groups were mixed in terms of gender and regional background, but relatively uniform in terms of age (18–23). The conversation was often animated and there was undoubtedly an element of public performance, particularly in discussions between men and women. There was equally an element of social constraint because one of the focus group moderators was white, which, given the subject of the discussion, sometimes required participants to pre-empt their comments with apologies or caveats. However, our judgement was that this did not form a barrier to free expression. We checked this assumption by running one group without the white moderator, which had no obvious effect on the results.

We make no claim for the representative nature of this sample. Our aim was not to collate typical responses from a random sample in order to produce a general statistical description of the entire population of young Cameroonians. Rather, our aim was to record in detail the views of a small number of articulate individuals in order to generate some understanding of their own views. The sample was not systematically selected, but relied on volunteers. Some students were clearly influenced by anti-colonial writers (Fanon, Rodney, Amin), some were influenced by popular culture (fashion, dance music, film) and some were actively engaged in current Cameroonian politics. Future research could profitably examine the representations of whiteness produced by other social groups in Cameroon, either other young Cameroonians with different personal experiences (perhaps prostitutes, priests, soldiers or development workers) or with different age groups. The latter project might be a vehicle for developing the historicity of this subject, which is lacking in our own account.

The other sources of data (anecdotes from academic colleagues and the work of Tchop-Tchop) were gathered less deliberately. As we began to talk about this work we noticed a remarkable enthusiasm amongst other researchers to talk about their own experiences of research in Cameroon and the images of whiteness that they had come across. In retrospect, this is not surprising. Most of these colleagues were anthropologists, geographers, political scientists and sociologists, whose own disciplines demand that they somehow account for the impact of their own presence on the results of their research. As such, they had had to give thought to the way that their own whiteness was being constructed by Cameroonians. The first
empirical section of the article contains the interpretations of (mostly white) researchers of the way they are being interpreted by their (mostly black) research subjects and research assistants. It is intriguing how different the white interpretation of black representations of whiteness is from the representations given directly by black undergraduates.

The image of whiteness revealed by casual contacts between whites and Cameroonians in Cameroon

As non-blacks walk down the pot-holed street in a Cameroonian city they are likely to be hailed by a variety of names or Americanisms. For example: ‘whiteman’, ‘whiteman woman’, ‘white!’, ‘sara’, ‘mukalla’, ‘nkale’, ‘nduc’, ‘ooyubo’, (a range of terms drawn from local languages meaning albino), ‘honkey’, ‘whiteman-with-your-long-nose’, and ‘whiteman-with-the-big-purse’, ‘agric fowl’, ‘Mr Grab’, or ‘hey man’, ‘hey brother’. These terms are used in a variety of ways with different accents and intonations, some of which are to attract attention, to express surprise or fear (especially amongst children), in mockery and condescension, to cause embarrassment and discomfort (especially by disenchanted or unemployed young people in urban areas) and to neutralize or demystify. As often as not, these salutations are followed up by questions leading to demands for access or money. So for example, ‘you komot [come from] America? Britain? Germany? Holland?’ (These are the key countries of attraction in Anglophone Cameroon where few want to have anything to do with France, perceived as the chief architect of Cameroon’s economic exploitation and political dependence) will be swiftly followed by ‘what e be visa conditions for that una kontri? You fit send me letter of invitation? You fit carry me that side?’ ['What are the visa conditions for that country of yours? Could you send me a letter of invitation? Could you take me along to that part of the world?'] This is immediately followed by precipitate reassurance that the would-be voyager will be no burden; ‘you no go spend any franc for me; I go take care of all expenses, I just wan invitation for get visa.’ ['You won’t spend a penny of your money on me; I will take care of all expenses. All I want is a letter of invitation to help me obtain a visa.'].

In some ways a voyage has already been made in the imagination of the Cameroonian. The conversation itself carries the images of ‘white’ as benevolent but money-conscious, and the whiteman kontri as the ultimate goal but one embedded in the bureaucratic rituals of visas, which are a means of denying potential migrants the opportunity of realizing their dreams of sharing in the good life that whiteman-driven modernization has brought about. The quest for the West is so determined that no possibility seems excluded: ‘If I go for whiteman e kontri illegally, they go put me for prison. I no mind; prison for whiteman kontri e fine plenty.’ ['If I go to the white man’s
country illegally, they are going to put me in prison. I don’t particularly mind; prison in the white man’s country is very good.’ Television, newspaper, and personal accounts of hardship for African immigrants in Europe are no deterrent, as every potential migrant either hopes to be luckier or to embrace the hardship which, by the standards of life in the African cities, is imagined as paradise. As European states tighten policies towards illegal immigrants, so the quest for white facilitators among potential immigrants intensifies.

The white body is simultaneously repulsive, but representative of abundant material comfort and power. This ambivalent image is a fraction of the broader relationship between Cameroon and the West. Whites continue to be perceived both as vehicles for, and obstacles to, the realization of dreams of the West and Western ‘ways of life’. Bars and nightclubs become a location for unrelenting bids by young men to entice the whiteman woman with an exuberant display of highly suggestive local dancing styles such as zengue, zaiko and bikutsi, fuelled not only by universal desires but also by the particular attraction of the exotic body and the liberating material opportunities it provokes in the mind. The whiteman, seen essentially as ‘a wallet on legs’ or a ticket to the good life, is the centre of competing struggles by young ladies dreaming of future abundance, first in a high-class residential area somewhere in Douala or Yaoundé (the local epicentres of modern metropolitan sophistication), and subsequently in Europe or North America. Every visit to the nightclubs, bars, cafés, or beaches frequented by whites, seems like playing the American citizenship lottery — a new game of chance that has come to anchor illusory hope in the 1990s among the disenchanted, unemployed or underpaid youth of urban Cameroon.

A middle-aged white male European academic sitting quietly on the beach contemplating his field notebook has his space abruptly invaded by two young Cameroonian women whose opening conversational gambit (after sitting down uninvited) is ‘vous voulez de la compagnie?’ [‘would you like some company?’], followed swiftly by a gentle fingering of his watch and the comment ‘vous avez une belle montre’ [‘you’ve got a beautiful watch’]. With total lack of interest the male Cameroonian research assistant replies ‘il est marié’ [‘he is married’], to which the girl ripostes dismissively ‘est-ce que sa femme est ici?’ [‘his wife isn’t here, is she?’]. The efforts are only abandoned when it is evident that the researcher is too inarticulate in French to be the Frenchman he appears to be. This is much less a statement on prostitution (which is universal and universally direct in its linguistic performance) than a statement on the immediate association between the whiteness and infinite possibilities beyond mere or instant cash. Young ladies who

13. We are grateful to Jacqueline de Vries for this expression.
comb the beaches in search of whiteness are interested in more than just prostitution; they are interested in a gateway to fulfilling their fantasies, thus making sense of the promises of modernization in a context where the reality of its implementation has failed woefully. Pursuing whiteness is seen as an alternative, more promising way of attaining the benefits of modernity, a strategy which might lead to material abundance for more than just the handful of the black elite that have dominated politics and economics in the postcolony. Similar trends have been observed in other fantasy spaces, especially among Beach Boys in tourist attractions dotted all over the continent. In Zanzibar, for example, Beach Boys have refused to remain passive in the face of marginalization. They wheel and deal with tourists either to realize their dreams of a better life in the West, or, at least, to keep hope alive on the spot.14

Any white who has carried out research in Cameroon will be familiar with the following stories. In a village as well as in the town a child is born and people rush to inform the white that the child is to be named after them, or, if the gender is not suitable, after their husband or wife. The proud parent accompanies the announcement with the explanation that they hope the child will turn out to be like the white. ‘Make this pikin know book like you’ ['May this child be as learned as you']. Much as this is a sincere demonstration of friendship and appreciation, it is also an implicit indication of responsibility on the part of the researcher to help raise the child in his own image — that is, not only learned, but also empowered and financially endowed. Researching somewhere in the Grassfields, a whiteman woman researcher from America is allocated hectares of farmland by her host chief. Despite her protestations that it is not feasible for her to farm from across the Atlantic Ocean, the chief replies: ‘It doesn’t really matter. All you need to do is send the money for your farm to be ploughed.’ She dares not ask him what is going to happen with the harvest.

Another researcher is invited to the chief’s palace in the village where he is working and is told to prepare himself to be ennobled with a traditional title. This procedure normally entails the lavish provision of fowls, goats, pigs, beer and palm wine by the lucky recipient of the title. He needs to have an elaborate embroidered gown made and to purchase a ceremonial sword as well. On the day of the ceremony, he is usually given a symbolic title that states in quite subtle ways the role he has to play in the development of the village. For example, ‘gwei’ or ‘atangcho’ (meaning spy or warlord) suggests he is a bringer of information, knowledge or opportunities from outside, ‘sangntaw’ (meaning the chief’s courtyard), the idea that the courtyard is where the chief receives people and so the researcher

has to make sure that it is well decorated through endowment. Symbolic gifts at the end of your stay in a village are both an expression of friendship and a reminder that you are leaving behind a community that has contributed to your quest for academic excellence, and that counts on you and your resources to emerge from poverty and marginalization.

A research assistant is always keen to integrate the visiting academic into his everyday life, so that the relationship develops beyond the contract of the salary. A request for a loan is generally a euphemism for a grant towards any ongoing domestic projects (building homes, marriage, schooling, businesses) and hence the show of surprise if demands for repayment are issued. In a similar way, the accoutrements of Western academia (laptops, personal organizers, cameras, dictating machines, cars) become subject to negotiations for purchase by instalments, on the assumption that in time the vendor will soon tire of requesting the next payment. Again, there is incomprehension of any fuss that might ensue, as benevolence is expected from those whom the research assistant, or informant, perceives as possessing more than he/she can possibly ever afford. Similarly, the research assistant is at a loss when the researcher shows reluctance to lavish drinks on all the friends and family he brings to meet the researcher in order to demonstrate his new status as the whiteman’s associate. His disappointment reveals his assumption of the high level of the whiteman’s understanding of, and appreciation for, the mores of Cameroonian social practice.

These stories (mostly provided by white academics) all illustrate the way that whites experience black representations of whiteness. Despite their often cited intelligence, whites, it seems, are not so clever as to be beyond manipulation or immune from flattery, while the lone voyager is also always in need of companionship and friends. Above all, they illustrate a popular and indeed stubborn representation of whites as people whose problem should be that of disposing of excess wealth, not of earning wealth. And any white who is reluctant to live up to this representation has no business to be white.

Images of whites among contemporary Cameroonian youth

The character of the whiteman. At a very general level, first impressions of the whiteman are split between positive aspects which we could summarize as ‘efficiency and creativity’, and negative aspects which are characterized as ‘exploitation and disingenuousness’. So, for example, whites are described as: ‘straight’ (i.e. frank and direct in what they say), ‘time-conscious’, ‘hard-working’, ‘duty-conscious’, and generally perfectionist, to the point that: ‘if somebody does something well, then we say, it is like how the whiteman does it.’ Similarly, the whiteman is seen as ‘objective’, especially in the context of constitutional politics where, as one
student put it: 'I have never heard that there has been cheating in elections there in Europe.' However, his objectivity or straightforwardness is often seen to be limited to his dealings with fellow whites: 'when he is dealing with the blackman he always tries to gain from him. It is as if they are dealing with colonies; the whiteman's relationship with the blackman is based on interest. He doesn't negotiate on the basis of equality.' Comforting to whites as these positive points may be, they are clearly overshadowed by more extreme negative outbursts from which the following are excerpts.

Whites are seen as cruel, exploitative, selfish, arrogant, jealous, ignorant, racist, hypocritical, violent, unemotional, physically weak, cunning, deaf to rhythm, unable to eat African food, not very attractive, cold, shabby, unnatural, unreliable in friendship, far behind in terms of body hygiene, and incapable of putting in full tackles in football. They would not hesitate to take credit for someone else’s idea, given their tendency to want the best for themselves, including even that which the black man has toiled hard to achieve.

A whiteman is somebody who is so cruel. He will eliminate you immediately to get what you have. When they came to Africa . . . they exploited us too much. They gained a lot from us and we gained little from them.

Whites are not emotional. Take for instance the gifts they give. They only give them because they have too much and they are afraid that these are going to expire. That's why they send them here to be consumed by us.

Whitemen are like snakes.

The whites are really jealous. They come here as tourists, they only photograph backward places, so that the whites over there think that Africa is a backward place.

When I see a whiteman on this campus today . . . the first question that comes to my mind is: 'What do you want to gain?' I always ask myself: 'What does he want? What does he want to learn from me? What does he want to get out of me?' It’s always that . . . that image. I always believe that a whiteman can never truly be a friend to me, you know, and . . . it has proven right in many instances, that you think you are friendly with him but, you know, he disappoints you at a certain point in time. I see them as exploiters, the people all come for their own interest, they never have anybody else’s interests in mind.

I look on them as brain-drainers. . . . They only take intellectuals to Europe. They give scholarships to the very intelligent people, then they pay them so much to keep them there.

Such condemnation of whites does not exclude the clergy — 'the white men of god'.15 As one student said: 'Even in church they don’t treat you as

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they would treat another fellow whiteman.' The whites are perceived as being intolerably condescending towards blacks, and therefore not deserving of all the attention and respect they tend to get among blacks:

I see the whiteman as somebody who always looked down on the blacks. Because I'm a black, they didn't want to see us as . . . to see our real identity, as people who have kind of merged two identities together, that is the Western culture and our own culture . . . They imposed theirs on us, we are trying to mix the two together, but they will never, never try to see us in that way, they always try to see us as inferior. We are superior in our own way, as blacks. I feel that whites, they are still our colonial masters, though they are out of the country, they are still around; they control us though they are out.

I believe that no whiteman who came here during the colonial era and before was altruistic or philanthropic. They came for their own interest, and no whiteman till today, I firmly believe it, really wants anything more than his own good and his own country's good. They have a very high sense of nationalism, they are patriots and they do everything so that their nations may be first, always. And what you may call our weakness, it is not because somebody is weak that you have to oppress a person, it all goes together with their imperialistic views; they want to dominate the world, they want to exploit others. That's always what I feel. . . . [they] made us believe that they are little gods and that we are nothing, that everything that is related to us is bad, we could only idealize them. [. . .] The basic image that I have is of the whiteman as an exploiter, as a very egocentric person, as a capitalistic person.

These unflattering attributes were brought out in most of the interviews and focus group discussions we had with the students. It was evident that a growing number of students are critical of white assumptions of superiority and any collusion or uncritical endorsement of these assumptions by Cameroonians. The students were very well informed about the history of unequal relations between whites and blacks, and were particularly bitter about persistent attitudes of racism, especially among those whites they believed were their intellectual equals or inferiors.

My image of the white man has been evolving as I grow up. When I was a child my impression from my grandfathers and parents was that the white man was a demi-god. He had created the aeroplane, the car, all these things which we were seeing. He is a super-being. I am always supposed to be below him. But now I have the impression that the white man is a cheat. That he wants to continue keeping the black man down. These days, I know I can compete with him equally. I do not believe that they are superior intellectually.

There was a Peace Corps Volunteer with us, she could eat well, she even tried to learn the dialect. But I noticed that my father was giving her everything — you know my father is a traditional healer. He was more powerful than her. She would just follow him around asking 'What is this leaf for? What is this plant?' She was only taking from him . . . If they had never come here we would never have regarded them as sophisticated.
The white body. Most students took the pains to emphasize that whites were not white but pink. A few tended to lump together as white every other race but African (Europeans, Asians, etc.). The general impression was that whites have very weak and delicate bodies, and that they would be helpless if they had to rely on physical exertion to get by. Our attention was drawn to boxing and other physically demanding sports which are dominated by blacks, as evidence that whites are not physically competitive. The whiteman is thus in control of the world, not thanks to his body or his physical strength, but to his cunning and ability to subjugate others through a history of imperialism and relations of unequal exchange. As the protagonist in Nyamnjoh’s The Disillusioned African argues in relation to Africa in general, from the point of first contact a division of labour was imposed by the whites between whites and blacks:

While the white man admired the black skin for being physically resistant (for physical power, if you prefer), the black man admired the white skin, because with such a skin one could afford to be in control and authority, and to live in luxury without having to make a lot of physical sacrifices. Thus from the outset, the black man was there to make the good life possible, while the white man was there to enjoy it. It’s a situation which continues today. The black man does the physically demanding activities, while the white earns money on him. Take sports — boxing, athletics, etc — where blacks dominate, and take music and dancing as well. What do you notice? White men, yes, white men as contractors, managers, promoters, etc., all there to milk the blacks dry of their talents and earnings! Won’t you say that such exploitation is perhaps largely to blame for the heavy pressures which have pushed many a black athlete to stop at nothing, including drug-taking? Personally I see a strong connection, just as I do with most things.16

Among general statements critical of the white body, we had the following: ‘They are red not white, especially when they sweat or they are angry. They look weak physically’; ‘Basically they can’t dance’; ‘Their bodies aren’t resistant to skin disease’; ‘Some white woman came to our house, so we specially prepared food for her. She vomited everywhere. It was terrible.’ Such physical weaknesses are seen as contradicting the whiteman’s hegemony and global economic power, but also as proof of how exploitative and manipulative he is in his relationship with Africa and the rest of the world. A further discussion, in detail, of these generalities with three students yielded the following assertions, among others:

A: The whiteman is not very attractive, I don’t love him, he’s cold.

B: When they come to Africa they are very dirty. I don’t know whether back in Europe they are just as dirty as when they come here. You see the way they dress, and . . .

C: What I think is that they are not natural. . . . they are not natural.

B: You see them wear dirty clothes, those sort of things, it appears er . . .

A: Shabby.

B: Just their development makes them think they are superior, but in actual fact they are very dirty, from my own personal observation.

A: Some people say that is because they have really transcended a certain level of things, which means that the things they wear don’t really matter; it’s what they have in the brain.

C: Even a white who is made up, she’s not natural, she’s like . . . artificial, something made. Black men and women are natural.

A: I don’t totally agree because there are black women here, even as students in this university, as students we are not all that natural. All the colours and things we put on our hair and the masks we really paint into. I don’t think they are more artificial in terms of making up and everything. It’s just the result . . . if you talk about plastic surgery, it’s just the advancement that they have, you know.

B: Is it totally necessary? It is not.

A: It depends, it may be necessary to some people.

C: To the individual.

A: It depends on the personal image that you have of yourself, the way you want to appear.

C: No, for me, I think it is that they are so mechanical . . . that is, they are not natural. Everything about them is mechanized, they do not do anything . . . very soft, you see. They don’t work very hard because machines do most of the work. If there is some place to clear, they will look for a machine to clear it, but I think I will do it manually, that is, I will apply some force.

There is a strong sense of critical awareness that permeates most discussions of relations between whites and blacks with Cameroonian university students. The students are no longer at the stage of uncritical internalization of ideologies of superiority nor of the sense of inferiority induced by passivity in victimization. One sees them questioning, fighting back, deconstructing victimhood, ready to explore new horizons on their own terms, and negotiating new identities for themselves, drawing both from forgotten or devalued traditions and from parochial Western values that have been raised to the status of goliaths through globalization. The following statement by one of the students captures this spirit and trend among university students:
When I was small, I thought that I was black because I wasn’t very clean. So I used to bathe in very hot water. In those days I still thought that white was, you know, . . . superior . . . I used to bathe in hot water thinking I would become lighter. But I think they created all those creams and perfumed soaps and all those things, it’s for themselves. We must use all kinds of deodorants and all those kinds of things and they themselves use them, but they don’t do the basic kind of thing, which is to wash every day. You know I doubt whether each of them has a bath, one bath, every day. But we here, you find us, we bathe three times a day, or at least an average of twice, that is morning and evening . . . Some of them can even eat when they have not brushed their teeth. At home the other day, I was watching a film and they brought breakfast in bed to one white in the film. So I asked my friend: ‘those people say that we should always brush our teeth first thing in the morning, how come they are eating breakfast in bed?’ You know, so I don’t think they are cleaner.

Personal experiences with whites. Many of the judgements by the students were made in reference to anecdotes of personal experiences with whites in Cameroon. Many of the interviewees based their opinions on the teachers, priests, doctors, employers, Peace Corps, businessmen and tourists they had either seen or been introduced to. In general terms, these experiences are often articulated through a rhetoric of national characteristics. The French, as a result of their high-profile presence, are seen as particularly exploitative, while the British and Germans by dint of their virtual absence are seen as less aggressive. ‘The Frenchman is not serious . . . a clown . . . when I see a Frenchman I think of a clown.’ With a touch of bitter irony, Tchop-Tchop, the famous Cameroonian satirical comedian, shows us just how exploitative and pervasive in its presence France has been in Cameroon and Africa:

France has given all to Africa. She gave Africa independence at no cost . . . This same France that saved Africa from natural disasters, is today like Jesus Christ to Africa . . . the African subsoil was in the past plagued with excessive riches in oil and natural gases. And you know that these were for long unexploited, and if they had stayed as such, the result would have been explosions of exceptional catastrophes — volcanoes here and there. France, conscious of this situation, put herself to work. She has exploited these oils and gases from Independence to date. She has exploited energetically, meticulously and profoundly, the African subsoils. I am not sure if by the year 2000 there will still be any oil or gases in the African subsoils and oceans. Wherever you visit in Francophone Africa, it’s the big French oil companies that are prominent there. To save us from these natural calamities . . .

While not perceived as being as exploitative and pervasive in their presence as the French, ‘the British are more racist, more conservative than the Germans who are more open. To go to Britain is not popular; they always give you good reasons why you can’t get in.’ Compared with Americans, ‘an
Englishman is tricky, . . . tight, but an American is loose . . . flexible’, perhaps ‘because he [the American] has been able to mix with blacks in his own country’.

The whites who are in Cameroon are often assumed to be second-rate relative to those in Europe. The experiences suggest that few whites who are in Cameroon merit the positions of authority in which they find themselves: ‘They can open doors which the blackman cannot open.’ Talking about a European academic, the students concluded: ‘Each time we went to a lecture we didn’t really understand him, all the Cameroon teachers here at the university were better than him for us. We gave him too much respect which he didn’t deserve. After a time we stopped going to his classes.’ Cameroonian young people are particularly bitter that, at a time when unemployment is rife, when diplomas and degrees no longer serve as a magic wand, when there is a massive international brain-drain in search of jobs, Western governments can still afford to hire second-rate whites to work in Cameroon at salaries that the best local minds can only dream of. This predicament was aptly captured by Tchop Tchop, again in his sharp ironic tone, in his 1998 sketch on the illegal African immigrants in France who took refuge in a church in Paris, to avoid repatriation:

Whom are these Africans mocking? . . . What unemployment are they talking about? . . . I can count about 1000 unemployed French nationals I knew when I was in France, who today are directors of firms in Africa. They are general and commercial directors, even though in France they used to pass their time taking drugs. And if you look closely, they may not be able to write their names, but they have something to do in Africa. And these whites do not require any papers to enter Africa. It suffices to be white and you can penetrate our airports without the police, immigration or customs asking you a question. And you want to say there isn’t any work in Africa? I for one, as a politician and Professor of International Affairs, I accumulate at least 10 duty posts . . . There are many more people like me who accumulate many posts because we lack the men to do the work. There is work without men to do it. How can you talk of unemployment in Africa? Even French beggars come here to work for us. How can you say we lack work here?18

This experience of the opportunities that being white in Cameroon provides, breeds resentment: ‘A German girl came to do public relations work with NGOs. I discovered that before she came we were struggling to expand and trying to publicize our work, but when she came we were suddenly able to go and sit down with the Dean of the Faculty and drink coffee with him straightaway, just like that.’ The black Dean in this case is mockingly portrayed as someone who treats whites with reverence and is rather dismissive of his fellow blacks. This attitude is prevalent in most of Africa, where it is generally believed that politicians, bureaucrats, and

18. Ibid.
people in other walks of life would place more value even on second-rate white experts than on their first-class local experts and talents. It shows how successful negative Western representations of Africans and African cultural values have been in bringing the Africans to doubt their own humanity, intelligence and competitiveness, even when they have trained in the same schools as whites and have proved their scholarship and worth beyond their national borders.

It is hardly surprising that whites were experienced as capricious and patronizing in their teaching: ‘There was one who came here, even last year, one Peace Corps Volunteer and . . . . it’s like she believed that we are really dull children, I don’t know where she got that view from, but she thought that we were very stupid children, and what I wrote, she found everything I wrote so special; till one day she came into class and told us that she couldn’t imagine that blacks could write like that.’ Such stereotypes suggest that young Cameroonians perceive every white person as someone who looks down on blacks. What is more, some students argued that whites who came to Cameroon under the guise of development assistance were not really out to help, but to live cheaply off the backs of the blacks. For:

If you say you are a co-operator, and that you are really coming to help, you know we are miserable so you take whatever we can give you. There are some of them who get about one million [c.£1,000] or more every month, just to teach and they are not even competent, they even send stupid people. We had one in secondary school. We drove him out. He came and he was teaching the wrong maths; he couldn’t explain what he was teaching. ‘Look,’ we just told him, ‘Pack up, get out.’ We drew a picture of him and put it on the blackboard and he had to leave. OK, he would talk and shout but he left and never came back. We told the headmaster, that is the Principal, that we didn’t want him any longer and that’s how the story ended.

The resentment towards whites is compounded by what the young perceive as the unfair advantages whites receive from government services and other local institutions, which readily pay them exorbitant salaries which often do not match their poor performance. ‘When whites are employed to work in Cameroon they are more highly paid than blacks themselves, who may be more experienced in the particular job than the whites. Just because they are whites they tend to be rated higher than blacks. So blacks are being brainwashed to see whites as superior than themselves.’ True as this might be, some students were also quick to point out that sometimes the whites were more efficient, as the blacks tended to be uncommitted:

... sometimes we don’t do our work well either. You take the case of that road at Rondpoint Deido [in Douala]. That work has been done about four times, this is the fifth time they are doing it perhaps. If they had given it to white contractors and paid the price for it, the road would have been completed a long time ago. You see the roads that were built during the German times, the roads are still standing, they are lasting
far better than the roads we tarred five years ago. So we recognize that we ourselves perhaps know how to do it, but we don’t know the things . . . the way we should do it. There should be a certain consciousness, we should raise our common consciousness to a certain level to see the interests of the nation. I won’t blame any white because they are looking after their own interests too. Do our things for your own self, not as if you are doing them for somebody else’s children, you should do it for yourself.

. . . in most cases you see that the demands made by the whites are more respected than the demands made by the individuals in our countries. If a contract is to be carried out for ten million, a black makes a bid for more than the amount, they say they will give you five million. But a white will ask for just the exact amount.

In effect, the experience of contact is less appealing than that of the media representations fed to Cameroonian young people by satellite and national television (in the form of series like ‘Santa Barbara’, ‘Dallas’, ‘Dynasty’, ‘Mari Mar’, etc.), movies, popular music, magazines, fashion (designer) catalogues, advertisements, the internet, postcards and novels. One student summed it up as follows: ‘When I compare the whites I know with those on TV, it seems that those who come here are rather simple. Dirty jeans, simple slippers on their feet, plain T-shirt — they defeat our image of the white man on TV.’ Some students suggested that, though you may feel from your personal encounters that you are equal to or even superior to the white man, the media are always there to bring you back to ‘reality’. One commented: ‘I have mixed feelings as well. You think you are equal to them, but then you see TV — Beverly Hills — you see skyscrapers, flyovers, the Channel Tunnel between England and France, . . . you think: “these are wonderful things”.’ To another student, thanks to sustained media propaganda: ‘He [the white man] has created the impression that they are always superior, and that is why if the white man comes here we always revere him.’ Something happens, regardless of the perceived inadequacies of the whites who are encountered in personal meetings:

Then some researchers came to our house, and they wanted to find out what my father knew. They lived with us for almost a year, and I saw that there were things I could do that they couldn’t do. They can’t dance Makossa, they can’t eat fufu and eru. There was one, a lady, who never liked to take a bath in the morning. But in my imagination, you know, the white man is meant to be clean. If you didn’t wash my grandmother used to say ‘you are a dirty black boy’, she used to be a servant in a white man’s house so she thought that all these whitemen were very clean. But there was this woman refusing to take a bath in the morning, just putting on dirty jeans and the same T-shirt she wore the day before. I washed myself in order to be like the whiteman and there is a whiteman who doesn’t bother to bathe, there must be something wrong.

The media reinforce ideas of Western superiority and attractiveness, thus buttressing fantasies that deny the reality of actual experience of the modest circumstances of the white tourists, volunteers, researchers or
clergy often encountered by Cameroonian young people. Sometimes the Cameroonian would rather believe that the white he knows is pretending to be poor, rather than deny media representations of white opulence. There is a stubborn opinion that whites are very rich. Those who display the contrary must be pretending: ‘Peace Corps like to pretend they are poor, they will walk from Muea to Buea Town with big bags on their back. They say they don’t have the money to pay for a taxi.’ ‘Peace Corps’ in this context refers not just to the American volunteers but to a particular group of young whites, whether tourists or residents, who tend to demystify the idea of whites as rich. Daily contact with whites can leave young Cameroonians baffled and disappointed. Real experience is dismissed in favour of mass-mediated fantasies.

Love and relationships

Many of the students’ most detailed and fulsome comments about whites related to love and relationships. Most of these comments suggested that genuine inter-racial romantic love was rare, although not impossible. There was considerable scepticism, indeed cynicism, about the sincerity of inter-racial marriages and relationships, which, it was suggested, should mostly be understood in the context of materialism. The asymmetry of wealth between black and white enabled the black partner to achieve a higher standard of living, and the white partner to exploit their husband or wife. According to this view, what makes whites attractive is money, class, style and prestige.

For me it’s usually more acceptable in poor families, because the white man means money. You know their money is substantial, so he will bring capital to the family. It’s usually for money.

If I date a white man it’s for financial reasons. Clearly. If you see me with a white man, you will know that I’m looking for something. If it’s not to go out [travel overseas] it’s to get money or something, but in normal possession of my senses and my everything — my money and everything — I don’t think I can.

Let’s say you went out with a white man, they will say that girl is a girl of class because she has something to do with that particular white man.

Yes, when you see a black man with a white woman, it’s prestigious because it means he has been able to attain a certain level, . . . a certain standard of life.

For young male students, the attraction of a white girlfriend was also monetary. Relative to a black girlfriend, whites were seen as less financially demanding. However, in addition white girlfriends were seen by some male students as more faithful. Precisely because they were less concerned with money, white girls, it was suggested, were more interested in romantic love.
Such opinions were contested by the women in the group, as the following exchange shows:

A (male): The white man is a human being. If you look at the emotional aspect, I don’t think there is much difference between white men and black men. What is completely different between white girls and black girls is the way they behave. White girls are more faithful; when a girl says it is love, she means love and nothing else. But with African girls, nothing goes successfully without money.

B (male): When black girls say that white men are handsome it is because of their pockets; there is more to extract.

C (female): No, that isn’t true, I would go for love not money.

D (female): It is the social and economic situation of the black girl which makes her put money first. I don’t think a white girl will prefer to go out with a poor boy. It is just the way we live here.

A (male): Whites are more emotional. If you are opening up your heart, a girl here doesn’t want to listen.

C (female): Anyway, a girl here, in Ebolowa, took a hundred tablets of quinimax. She was 17. She did that because she suspected her boyfriend wanted to leave her, they were already living together. If you put money first that might be all you care about, but some black girls put love first.

Where inter-racial marriages have occurred, the students felt that the couples were rarely happy. Cameroonian family members might look down on a Cameroonian woman who marries a white man. Such relationships are seen as akin to prostitution because of their implicit economic basis. In terms of the portrayal of whites, it was suggested that there is something suspect about the white men who marry black women because of the particular women they consistently choose to marry. Either individually or collectively, whites are portrayed as being ashamed of black partners, who are excluded from white social life. Far from being trophies, black wives are treated as an embarrassment. The students assumed that there was a continuing sense of cultural superiority amongst whites. This was also illustrated by the unwillingness of some white spouses to fully embrace Cameroonian culture.

And what I’ve noticed again is that they never have really pretty girls or even decent girls; perhaps the girls of low African descent go to a whiteman but they never take decent girls. Anyway . . . even my parents, for example, when you say you are dating a white, the first thing that comes to their minds is that you are loose. Although I don’t like the term loose as applied to women, that you are a cheap girl . . . yes . . . yes, when they see you with a white you are a prostitute. [. . .] Like my mother used to tell us . . . she wouldn’t like any of us to get married to a white.
Talking about those people [white boyfriends] they never take us to serious places. . . .
I have a cousin who got married to one of them; they would go out only to places
where they would meet blacks. He was French. When there are those French meetings,
you know they have socials from time to time, he wouldn’t easily go with her, or when
he goes with her he doesn’t treat her really as a woman should be treated by a man
who loves her. It’s as if she’s second-class and the other men who have white ladies
tend to belittle these black girls.

I also take the case of that white lady who went into this Bamileke chiefdom, who is
now a queen or something. OK. At first I wanted to believe that she genuinely loved
her man and that . . . she loved Africa and that it was just as simple as that. But when
she wrote her book and now she has refused to perform the widowhood rites, I just
saw in her another white lady like all the others. Why should she refuse? Why should
she accept a man who is the incarnation of a certain culture and reject his culture?
She said she married the man and not the culture. Anyway . . . I just said she wanted
to write the book, she wanted to get into Bamileke, write the book and make money
out of it . . . like all the others.

Students were divided over whether whites were physically attractive as
lovers. However, the general feeling was that whites were weak and that they
tended to age prematurely. Whites were best in their prime, and unlike their
black counterparts, they were believed to have little stamina in love-making.
Once again, the gulf between the whites who were seen on TV and the
whites who were encountered in the flesh was a common theme in the dis-
cussions; it was widely felt that TV tended to exaggerate the physical attrac-
tiveness of whites.

There were two white women who came here. When I saw them I was disappointed,
they were not beautiful as such. I said ‘why do people want to marry them?’

The white woman, when you see her she’s beautiful, she’s beautifully built, she’s beauti-
ful I mean. But you cannot stay with her for let’s say two years. She wears out . . .
When they are in their teens they are very beautiful, beautiful lines, firm . . . But they
shrink up. They start shrinking. So they prefer black women. And they are not strong.

I believe the African in himself, or in ourselves, we have something very sensual, the
black woman in herself is sensual, and that makes it all . . . The African man has some-
thing, he’s virile. Even from his stature you can really feel it . . . Heat, heat seems to
come out of them uh-huh. But I believe Africans are better in bed than . . . and it isn’t
a myth about this, I believe they too think that Africans are better. We have whites who
are just dreaming of having an African man in their bed, and if a blackman dreams
of a white woman, I think it’s for prestige, or just out of curiosity; it’s not that he badly
needs somebody to love as a partner.

I don’t think they look as handsome in life as they do on TV. They are always rushing,
they are red, they are not handsome or beautiful. If you compare white girls with black
girls, black girls are more beautiful.

On the other hand, white men were sometimes portrayed as more sensitive
to the desires of women than black men. Furthermore, whites of both sexes were perceived by some students as being more experimental and less conservative in bed. This, of course, did not imply that blacks were not inquisitive, but simply that they were less so: ‘Blacks also have the tendency to experiment: black, white, albino, lame. Just to have the experience.’ However, unlike whites, there was a limit to what black lovers would do: ‘In pornographic films they [whites] are disgusting. They do nasty things. Things I couldn’t do.’ Whites, it was further observed, could be good, curious and adventurous at love-making, if one were to judge from ‘what we see in pornographic movies and television’.

There is a general tendency in men, it’s not only in African men, to be very selfish, so if they are liberated, if they are taught to be more altruistic in the way they approach women, I believe they will also be better lovers. You know, it is related to the image that each has of the other sex, African men may view African women as sex objects, you know. You are there to give them pleasure, and he takes his own pleasure and he’s off. But if a blackman is made to understand that a woman is a woman, a human being, and that the sexual act should be enjoyable for both of them, that she needs pleasure too, I believe they will be better. And the blackmen who are abroad and have come across new techniques and you know, I wouldn’t call them new, they are old techniques instead but new to our African continent, I believe they are better lovers, that’s why the whites look out for them.

The difference in sexual terms may come from the fact that they [whites] are perhaps more liberated, not stronger but more liberated in terms of sexual activity, that is the coital techniques. You know, this mystification of the sexual act in our own society may make us not feel really free in bed. I don’t think it means we are really . . . less than them. I mean if an African girl is liberated in her mind — there’s a lot of mind playing inside — if she’s free in her mind, I believe she could, most probably, make a better lover than a white woman.

In terms of physical attraction many of the students identified pale-skinned blacks as the most beautiful. Despite the cynicism amongst the students about the motivation underpinning inter-racial relationships and despite the considerable scepticism about the aesthetic and sensual appeal of whites, the general feeling among them was that light-skinned black women were considered attractive because of the positive association with whiteness. The students we interviewed felt that pale-skinned black women were considered by black men to have some of the merits of being both black and white simultaneously. This explained why a good number of young women continue to apply skin-lighteners or bleaching agents. Examples of these mercury- and hydroquinone-ridden bleaching toxins include such brand names as: Hi-Lite, Artra, Ambi Special, Ambi Extra for men, Butone, Metamorphosa, Mekako, Jaribu, Karibu, Nku Cream, Asepsos, Amira, Rico, Miki, IKB Symba, Magilear, Palmers Skin Success Fade, Shirley, Top Cream. There are echoes of this penchant to use skin-lightening creams all
over Africa. Writing in the *Botswana Mmegi* recently, Busisiwe Mosieman argues that these creams continue to be massively consumed, despite attempts to ban them in some southern African countries. Manufactured mainly in Britain and the USA, the skin-lightening products are ‘smuggled into Africa in a multi-billion Rand underground industry’. The biggest users of these products are women, who are ‘usually thrilled with the results at first’, but who soon become disappointed as red blotches appear followed by dark blotches. ‘Users think the creams will make their skins lighter and more beautiful. Instead, the chemical burns up their faces and destroys the skin.’

The manufacture of and aggressive traffic in such toxic skin-lighteners is a statement in favour of debasement, devaluation, and distortion of black humanity, on the one hand, and on the other, the glorification of whiteness as the only mode of existence tolerable in a civilized, modern or globalized world. By inviting blacks ‘to lighten their darkness’ manufacturers of skin-lightening creams imply that ‘black cannot be the ideal of beauty’. Yet, since physically it is impossible to keep the lightness and smoothness of the bleached skin for long, being white is always a temporary reality, like putting a ‘white mask’ over a ‘black skin’, when it suits the creative agency of the black actors. Hence the ambivalence in this statement by one of the students about the identity of the bleaching black woman: ‘because the fair woman shines, she is white somehow but she’s pure African, and that’s why they sell, they sell more.’ A significant number of men tend to go for light-skinned women, and see in the light-skinned generally an elusive sign of beauty or handsomeness — elusive because it is usually a surface, transient, unaffordable type of beauty for most men. The naturally light-skinned are rare, and the bleached skin soon wears out, due to the effects of the toxins, so both are fantasies, mirages or illusions.

**Dreams and doubts**

Despite the often negative personal experiences, the whiteman is still seen very much as a solution to misery and impoverishment — the gateway to a brighter future in the West itself, where menial work brings great financial rewards: ‘They are people who can help us. You do a little job there, they give you a lot of money. There is a lot of money there, they can help us.’ The tendency is to think that all a young person needs is to make his/her way to Europe, and everything else will take care of itself ‘There . . . is the

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idea of the American Dream — that anybody can make it, trust yourself and try to work hard and you will be able to make it. It’s in that sense that I see opportunity. It is true not only of America but of everywhere. If you really want it, and put all your effort into obtaining it, if you believe in it you will be able to make it.‘ It is such resolve that keeps them hoping, even when reality leaves little room for hope. Hence the dream of most young people to make it to America or Europe some day: ‘Just to have the experience of the place, [so] I can tell my friends or relatives what it’s like. The type of life there.’ Indeed, ‘Every family wants to have a child out there. Germany and Holland are very popular. The US was popular but it is very far from home.’ The list of perceived routes by which it is possible for young Cameroonian students to reach the West is short and often linked either directly or indirectly to contacts with whites. ‘A scholarship, the American lottery, a relative taking me there’, and possibly ‘a husband who is white’.

Thanks to national and international television, a young person in the heart of an African village, who has never been to the capital or the nearest African city, is more likely to know the streets of Paris, London or New York by heart. The average African young person is generally better informed about the West than about their own country, and this has been blamed on television — both local and international — that often contrasts the modern buildings, technological sophistication and high life in Europe with the rats, potholes, refuse heaps and misery of Africa. Western media representations of the West are not always positive, but African consumers of these images are prone to selective retention of those representations that perpetuate their fantasies and keep alive their hopes of personal wealth. This imagined geography elides the spaces of the West with worlds of material consumption as the basis of an enduring dream.

The dream of Europe remains fascinatingly ambivalent — a solution, but one the dreamer knows to be flawed. Evidence from those who have travelled, or from broadcast media, allows a note of doubt to enter into some descriptions. The firm conviction that the dream will be achieved through hard work, is tempered by some of the tales of the physical consequences of exploitative labour:

I think Europe is a fantastic continent, because of what we have heard about it: skyscrapers, roads, vehicles, . . . it’s beautiful. My older brother is there, in Germany. He tells us all this, but he says they overwork you, that it can carry you to your grave.

My image of Europe is from those who have been there. It is a kind of heaven — you have to get there before you die. But then there is the other image of Europe from Africans who have been there and come back, or those Europeans who come here; they talk about the problems they have there. They have some funny diseases like stress. Stress is a disease of the whiteman.
Furthermore, there is a realization that not everyone in the West is rich. In some contexts this is treated almost gleefully, as evidence of the duplic- itous character of the Western media. This is often linked to a frustration that international TV images of Cameroon focus on poverty and ignore the achievements of Cameroonian culture and society.

Yes, that’s the problem, the films of the whiteman. If you watch CNN, if they are showing Africa, they will show the worst parts of Africa. They show war, they show poverty, you see the market, you see rats, they televise rats! But if it’s Europe you will not see that. You just see how things are beautifully displayed on the counter, you see a well-dressed lady. I think the way they use their media, their own medium TV, let me say TV specifically, you see how it is biased, because if you watch CNN the way they show Africa, you see war, famine, illnesses. You don’t see beautiful things about Africa.

In other contexts the evidence of poverty in the West is treated more hesi- tantly, as doubts start to creep into the accounts of the imagined West.

My dad spent time in Russia . . . he saw how the people there were totally poor and they were really suffering. Some people there were really rich like the ones we see on TV. I thought the place was a great place until people started to tell me these things. There are some people there who live very well and some who live in squalor. Is it really that different from us? I saw a TV documentary. In New York there are over 13,000 homeless people, I mean they have nowhere to go. But here we are OK, everyone has somewhere to sleep — with their brother or an uncle. They showed them searching for food in trashcans; if you do that here they consider you mad. Only a crazy person would do that.

Conclusions: Writing back, blacking white

The conclusion uses the empirical material we have gathered to return to the three questions implied in the opening section of the article. How do Cameroonians redefine the meaning of whiteness? What does this redefinition of whiteness tell us about the filter called Occidentalism which shapes the imaginative geography of Whiteman Kontri? What does this redefinition of whiteness tell us about Cameroonian politics and Cameroonian identity?

Meanings of whiteness. The Cameroonians we interviewed define whiteness largely in terms of white people and less frequently in terms of the place, whiteman kontri. Whilst this could have been a consequence of the questions put to the focus groups, it was more often the case that questions about places quickly slipped back into answers about people. Young Cameroonians see white people as exploitative, creative, hard-working, self-interested, incor- ruptible, cruel, efficient, ignorant, racist, unemotional, cunning, and unnat- ural. White bodies were seen as weak, alluring, non-responsive to rhythm,
clever, unable to stomach African food, shabby, sweaty, dirty and effeminate. They see the behaviour of whites towards blacks as patronizing, capricious, partisan and bossy, though it is assumed that the whites encountered in Cameroon are only second-rate examples. As lovers whites were seen to be economically rather than physically attractive. Finally, the whiteman kontri was seen as a place of material wonders, overwork, technical mysteries and hidden inequality. Even the most guilt-ridden white liberal is unlikely to concur with this image of whiteness in its totality, and as a construction of whiteness we are fairly confident it would be contested. As such, it supports our claim that there is a struggle over the meaning of whiteness and that young black Cameroonian are also the makers of the meaning of whiteness.

The representations of whiteness we have accumulated are profoundly internally incoherent. Whites are simultaneously described as weak but strong, exploitative but hardworking, ugly but attractive. This is much like representations of Orientals by Europeans who are simultaneously fascinated and revoluted by the exotic. Of course, part of the incoherence in our example relates to differences of opinion between individuals within our sample, but there is more to the apparent contradiction than this. The division between white weakness and Western strength is also the division between body and mind. Through intellectual manipulation these weak individuals have achieved a position of entrenched power, from which they are reluctant to move. For all the hostility that we gathered, there remained a sense in which these ardent critics of whiteness still aspired to whiteness as power.

The filter of Occidentalism. The filter of Occidentalism starts by doubting the ‘truthfulness’ of the images of the West that are available. The ‘texts’ on which the students based their ideas of whiteness tended to valorize the West, yet our interviewees were sceptical about these images. Africans are bombarded with mass-mediated accounts of the glory of Western cultural achievements and the local sense of self-worth is eroded on a daily basis. ‘By painting white as the ultimate judgement of all aesthetics, good and beauty, the blackman is made to understand that he is far from being equal to the whiteman, and that he can be salvaged only through a pursuit of the liberating culture — the Western culture.’23 Attempts by Africans to change their appearance in order to be ‘more Western’ are often seen as the result of such ideas. Yet, just as these young Cameroonian are transfixed by the allure of Western modernity, they also see through it. They point an accusing finger at the dubious aspirations of international image-mongers.

But, however much they doubt the veracity of these images, they also wistfully hope that they might be true.

Second, whilst the Occidentalist filter helps to define the self in terms of its difference from the other,\textsuperscript{24} it also obscures a history of connections. Occidentalism is a concept which should be used with caution, as it can obscure as much as it reveals. The history that is lost is not only one of connectedness, it is also one of Western domination. Indeed, the very idea of symmetry between Orientalism and Occidentalism is a stereotype that powerful Westerners have fashioned for themselves to justify their global dominance.\textsuperscript{25} This is a dominance of which young Cameroonians are well aware.

We have been made part of the world system so that we cannot escape from it, they are exploiting us — we are aware of that — but there is no way that we can escape from the exploitation. You know they are manufacturers while we are producers, we produce raw materials and we depend on them for other services. Even though they exploit us, we know they do so but there is just no way we can escape . . .

Third, to deploy the notion of Occidentalism it is necessary to carefully police different types of representation on the basis of who they were produced by and who they were produced for, particularly since our aim is to suggest that not all the representations of the West are produced in the West. In the context of our student Cameroonians the ideas about whiteness are transmitted via a number of different routes and deposited in a number of different ‘archives’. There is no Cameroonian library of printed literature similar in scale to the Orientalist canon,\textsuperscript{26} and most studies of African images of whitemen have been based on oral literature and interviews.\textsuperscript{27} However, traveller’s tales are still one of the key means of moving ideas across space. The reports sent back by Cameroonian students, tourists, sportsmen and women, official delegations, priests and businessmen are still important, but they are likely to be expressed in phone-calls, e-mails, behaviour, photographs, videos, dress, bodily and verbal mannerisms. In this case Cameroonians outside Cameroon are the authors of representations of the West which are then transmitted back to Cameroon (‘been to’). These representations are joined by radio, TV, Internet, film and printed representations of the West authored by non-Cameroonians.

\textsuperscript{24} Said, \textit{Orientalism}, p. 7
\textsuperscript{26} Nader, ‘Orientalism, occidentalism and the control of women’, p. 327.
(black or white) outside Cameroon but disseminated by their creators in Cameroon (‘beamed to’). A further category of ideas about whiteness (the one on which this article mostly dwells) describes those ideas of whiteness that are produced in Cameroon in response to personal engagement with whitemen located in Cameroon (‘bumped into you’). These three categories seem to be the main sources of ideas about whiteness amongst young Cameroonians.

The development of Occidentalism is not only limited to the production of ideas about whiteness, but is also related to the interpretation of the texts transmitting those ideas. Interpretation is part of the process of making meaning. So a letter written home by a Cameroonian describing life in the West may be written with particular representative intentions, but may equally be interpreted by the reader in a quite different way. This also raises the possibility of the unintentional leakage of materials originally intended for a Western audience to a Cameroonian audience (‘accidental Occidentalism’). For example, there is a lively market in second-hand French and American glossy women’s magazines around Cameroonian universities. Clearly these were written for a different audience from the group which is consuming them, yet these readers often cite such magazines as the source of their ideas about whiteness. Occidentalism needs to be alert to both the context in which representations are produced and the context in which they are consumed.

Cameroonian identity and Cameroonian politics

We are superior in our own way, as blacks. The representations of whiteness we have described matter because they are used to articulate expressions of personal and national identity and are a reflection of the local political context. They are an expression of the desire for Cameroon to be more than it is, but also of a stoicism about the possibilities of internal political transformation. Some students went so far as to suggest that they aspired to whiteness because they had been so disappointed by their own elite. The image of the West provides an alternative to the existing system of social and political organization in Cameroon, which they so disdain. The popular disenchantment with the Cameroonian state’s abysmal attempts at modernization, combined with the ever growing threat of household poverty and misery in a time of unprecedented global prosperity and uncertainty, has pushed many Cameroonians, the young in particular, actively to seek association with whiteness as a way out of their individual or collective predicament. However, in some representations of the Whiteman kontri, aspects of Cameroonian society are vigorously defended. This is part of a general process of moral protectionism which
draws attention to the negative aspects of white, Western modernity in a variety of contexts.\textsuperscript{28} Identifying with the allure of, or disdain for, the West is an active part of the process in Cameroon that separates backward from civilized, traditional from modern, rural from urban, and old from young. Like many dreams, modernity is something the dreamer simultaneously desires and recoils from. In this context the incoherence of the representations of whiteness seems explicable.

The students’ representation of their own society draws particular attention to the material lives of the Cameroonian elite, who have become consumer zombies, for whom life has been reduced to feeding the Western consumer machine at the expense of their disillusioned unemployed young people.\textsuperscript{29} With their penchant for consuming the most expensive Western goods, the local ‘Pajero-crats’ (as they are known in Cameroon — Pajero being one of the expensive cars loved by the elite) have raised consumerism to a cult, and provoked a similar craving in the masses to consume Western goods, even if it means second-, third- or fourth-hand goods that the West is dying to dump.\textsuperscript{30} Yet the young are quite aware that to indulge in consumerism even at such a marginal level, they have to look further afield than the predatory, criminalized and corrupt state of Cameroon where modernization and development have become empty political rhetoric.\textsuperscript{31}

In a context where youth unemployment is rife and where education has ceased to be equated with social mobility, the frustrations of Cameroonian young people are quite understandable. The ‘petit’, the ‘sauveteur’ or the ‘dévrouillard’, unable to make ends meet in the midst of official optimism about the future, and daily provoked by the sumptuous display of wealth by a few, finds himself at the mercy of violent thoughts and acts, which in turn are used by the filthy rich to justify further containment of the poor.\textsuperscript{32} Feymania (crookery), prostitution, burglary, riots, are various practical survival strategies for the side-stepped in the face of the repressive instincts of the state. Dreams of escape, and fantasies articulated around the West and whiteness, are the mental equivalents of those material survival strategies.

\textsuperscript{28} Tavakoli-Targhi, ‘Imagining Western women,’ p. 77.


\textsuperscript{30} Nyamnjoh, “For many are called”, p. 15.


I think there is a kind of awakening among us, you know, we are the young generation who believe in our country, in our abilities and in our own future.

The venom that Cameroonian young people direct towards the wealthy African elite occasionally also emerges in their discussions of whites. A thinking, articulate, warrior generation has emerged, one increasingly impatient with the uninformed stereotypes still harboured by whites about the African continent. They find it incomprehensible that a white young person at the start of the twenty-first century should still think of Africa in the manner of their parents and grandparents. While they are ready to show humanity to the whites they encounter, they are exasperated by the persistence of the stereotypes and misrepresentations of Africa and Africans on the part of the white man. To them, whites would have to be a lot more unassuming, modest, tolerant and respectful of African humanity, sensitivities and value systems, for both races to celebrate contact and edify inter-racialism.

It's like they take us for animals in a zoo, because one Saturday she would say ‘Wear African dresses and come to my house. I have a few friends who want to see them. Cook African meals but don’t put in too much oil.’ But for God’s sake! If my own food is cooked with a lot of red oil, let me cook it the way it is and take it that way.