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Meritocratic masks and the colonial echo of racial distinction

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ABSTRACT

This critique exposes the racial foundations of meritocracy. It challenges the dominant belief that it is an objective path to advancement. Meritocracy is often contrasted with forms of race-aware policies like affirmative action. The foundation of merit itself, however, is historically and epistemologically entangled with race. Drawing on critical theorists such as Mbembe, Fanon, Bhattacharyya and Du Bois, and using Tsitsi Dangarembga's fiction as a method for cultural theorizing, I explore how meritocratic ideals generate internalized hierarchies and conflicted self-perceptions. To do so, I analyse young South African professionals' evaluations of success across racialized groups drawing on an online survey. I discuss how race continues to be masked within contemporary meritocratic beliefs. Ultimately, I seek to make a case for a reimagining of success beyond distinction and towards collective thriving, resisting the logics of individualization and exclusion that underpin racial capitalism.

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Introduction

The making of "merit" cannot be understood without the making of "race". Yet, meritocracy and race are often portrayed as distinct and opposing forces. Facing each other from opposite sides of the playing field, they are locked in an ongoing contest over justice, fairness, progress and equality. This "opposing forces" narrative is especially clear when meritocracy – framed as advancement through talent and hard work – is pitted against policies addressing historical injustice, such as diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies or affirmative action. It shows in studies of higher education, where students admitted through affirmative action policies report distinct experiences and performance outcomes (Mijs 2016; Oliveira, Santos, and Severnini 2023; Sobuwa and McKenna 2019). Or in the exploration of organizational settings, where merit-based performance tests have failed to ensure equal promotions and wages across gender and race (Castilla 2008). Research on public sector admissions have focused on whether affirmative action versus meritocratic policies in public sector admissions enhance efficiency (Durlauf 2008). Within such perspectives, meritocracy remains a practice and ideology distinct from historical disadvantages. It then often becomes a way of establishing new or at least different

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principles that, amidst historical disadvantage, create hierarchies between individuals on more "objective" grounds.

More ideologically rooted approaches to the topic highlight meritocracy's compatibility with neoliberal capitalism. In her book "Against Meritocracy: culture, power and myths of mobility", Littler (2013) emphasizes its legitimization of privilege. Consequently, this also comes with an individualization of failure and a promotion of extreme competition under the mask of meritocracy. Similarly, Sandel shows how a cultural, social and political adherence to meritocratic principles can undermine collective solidarity and erode public goods (2020). This is also echoed, by Viana and Silva who demonstrate the eroding consequences of neoliberal meritocracy and financial capitalism on welfare policies (2018). Taking these critical perspectives on meritocracy into consideration, reveals a two-level critique. The first level embraces meritocracy as "fair in principle" and continues to uphold it as an ideal – the critique is then rooted in the recognition of a flawed implementation and pursuit of meritocratic principles. The second level begins with meritocracies complicity with neoliberal capitalism and lays out arguments as to why it should not be pursued in the first place. Both levels of critique have not sufficiently explored the "intrinsic" nature or enmeshment of the "meritorious" amidst the making of race and racialization. Such an approach would contest the "objective" and "fair" nature of meritocracy – not based on its flawed implementation or concealing of structural disadvantages, but its historical and epistemological foundation.

To understand why meritocracy became an "ideal" in the first place, it is important to acknowledge its origins. Michael Young, the British sociologist who coined the term, saw meritocracy as a dystopian scenario (1994). Instead of aristocratic elites, individuals merely occupied positions in the same hierarchy; just based on a new narrative and principles. Given the historical backdrop of systems where distinction was rooted in innate characteristics set at birth, meritocracy seemed to set in motion a process of liberation – yet largely confined to a Western understanding of such. Despite Young's critical and cynical take on meritocratic elites, his elaborations remain mostly void of linkages to colonialism, racial oppression and exploitation. His "colour-blind" portrayal of society, which at best addresses structural issues like ageism, overlooks a critical and complex connection between former aristocracies and their colonial histories. Instead, meritocracy and its objectivity, even though cynically introduced, arises as a "new idea" without taking its historical roots and enmeshment with racialized epistemologies into account. Thus, while intended as a dystopia, this de-racialized depiction may have contributed to the political adoption of meritocratic beliefs as a remedy for inequality. It thereby overlooks the role of meritocracy as a process and tool of "whitening", in addition reinforcing an exaggerated yet contradictory emphasis on individual agency, status and – often submerged – violent competition. What may be even more crucial is its promise of a positive remaking of selfhood and its dominating forces in emancipatory processes of subaltern spaces.

I invite two new avenues of understanding. First, how the conceptualization of merit and meritocracy has been racialized from its outset drawing on Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), Bhattacharyya's *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival* (2018), Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008) and W.E.B Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness in *The souls of Black folk* (1994). Here, I highlight meritocracy as a cultural dilemma and performance. This includes its potential for internalized hierarchies of being and non-being, leading to conflicting experiences or even self-hatred

as intricately detailed in Dangarembga's trilogy including *Nervous Condition*, *The Book of Not* and *This Mournable Body* (2004; 2020; 2021). I draw on her fictive stories for a socially embedded view on meritocracy and race to convey deeper emotional and cultural understandings (e.g. Kalkman 2024; Phillips 1995). I further trace forward Dangarembga's historical and fictive account to the contemporary narrative on "Coconuts" in South Africa. Here, I explore the views of a unique sample of young professionals – meritorious born free individuals – in South Africa and their self- versus other-evaluations of success across racialized groups. I reflect on the continued distinction and masking of race in contemporary meritocratic belief patterns in a highly unequal society and formulate an invitation to begin re-imaging – or perhaps re-embracing – success through interdependence.

The making of merit under capitalism

Why was Michael Young's book silent about race? In his narrative of elite formation in Britain, the aristocracies destined for replacement are mostly confined to a local or Western context, without their role and position within former and prevailing structures of colonialism (Young 1994). His conceptualization of meritocracy, deeply embedded in the British education system, framed it as a national project with internal gateways of contested social mobility and external gatekeepers. Moving beyond national boundaries, I examine the epistemic positioning of meritocracy, specifically its institutional introduction through Western education in former colonies.

Meritocracy as part of Western objectivity and progress

> This was the moment I was waiting for when the road to the rest of my life would finally open. Now, with this slip of paper [education certificate] I was able to undo all the cords that bound me in the realm of non-being. (Dangarembga 2021, 222)

Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason* (2017) revisits principles and paradigms born during the enlightenment, specifically their racialized foundations and claim to universality and rationality. They expose how these ideals, rather than being truly universal, were constructed in ways that justified racial hierarchies and colonial domination (Fanon 2001). A general promise of reason and universality was never extended to Black people – on the contrary, Blackness was positioned as the negation of reason, outside the realm of the human and thus subject to control, exploitation, and exclusion. Mbembe's explores this in three keyways: racialized reason, economic and epistemic extraction and colonial legacies in the present. Within rationality and reason, Blackness was formed as an object of knowledge: a curiosity to the Western mind and a space of non-being for Black bodies. This degradation enabled justifications for slavery and domination. Yet, this foundational role of Blackness as non-being has since then been systematically erased, silenced or marginalized. At the same time, racialized colonial dominations continue to present themselves through immigration systems, surveillance, and economic dispossession in the present day.

The role of rationality as a form of domination thus created the dualism of reason and non-reason. The attribution of non-reason to Blackness created a way of "othering" in colonial knowledge systems. Blackness became associated with the irrational, primitive,

and consequently in need of civilizing. This creation of Blackness constitutes a particular form of violence beyond mere exclusion through depersonalization (Fanon 2008). It further masks exploitation or any other corrective measures as logical or even benevolent. Within such reasoning, the introduction of Western education classifies as a benevolent measure: the promise of a positive remaking of the Black self by obtaining Western knowledge. A gateway from non-being into being. In Dangarembga's first book, *Nervous Conditions* (2004) Tambudzai (Tambu), a "Shona village girl", tells of processes of becoming and unbecoming in first Rhodesia then post-independence Zimbabwe during the 1960s to early 2000s. She details her navigation across Blackness and whiteness through pathways of education and work. Her seemingly obsessive admiration and striving for "Europeanness" or "whiteness", gradually fades into suffocating self-hatred increasingly sabotaging her pathway to a peaceful and fulfilled life. As Tambu receives an extraordinary opportunity to attend the missionary school as a "village girl", her uncle instils the value of education by making " … sure that I [Tambu] knew how lucky I was to have been given this opportunity for mental and eventually, through it, material emancipation" (Dangarembga 2004, 133). Tambu is also aware of her education's instrumental role within her family context: " … the blessing I had received was not an individual blessing but one that extended to all members of my less fortunate family, who would be able to depend on me in the future … " (Dangarembga 2004, 133). Education thus was not just a bettering of the mind but held a promise of a material reward beyond the educated.

Her initial encounter with a white influence on her life through education, framed whiteness as distinct from its extractive forms. In this view, education became an act of benevolent giving, closely tied to faith and religion, as opposed to taking:

> The Whites on the mission were a special kind of white person, special in the way that my grandmother had explained to me, for they were holy. They had come not to take but to give. […] They had given up the comforts and security of their own homes to come and lighten our darkness. It was a big sacrifice that the missionaries made. It was a sacrifice that made us grateful to them, a sacrifice that made them superior, not only to us but to those other whites as well who were here for adventure and to help themselves to our emeralds. (Dangarembga 2004, 155)

Mbembe's preposition of Black people as perpetual outsiders to the systems that define success visualises the continuous proving of one's worth once given access (Mbembe 2017). When speaking about her scholarship Tambu obtained for attending one of the most prestigious white schools, the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart, she describes her individualized and limitless aspiration:

> I was thereby being transformed into a young woman with a future […] What I was most interested in was myself and what I would become. […] My desires in that initial year were positive: to achieve, achieve, achieve some more. (Dangarembga 2021, 15, 26)

This passage also shows how gaining merit through education can mean more than just economic mobility or material success. Instead, it speaks to dimensions of "being" as in "becoming some with a future". This in turn places immense pressure to excel on those from subaltern spaces. For example, once accepted to the elite school, Tambu sets out to obtain the trophy for best O-levels in her cohort. Despite diligently studying and achieving the best results, the award goes to a white "more rounded" student with

lower grades. Though a specific event in the novel, it underscores Tambu's desperation to escape the persistent feeling of never being good enough – and her struggle to articulate these experiences. She internalizes both fault and responsibility, rather than recognizing that she is being made to feel this way regardless of her inner responses. In addition, this is reinforced by her family context:

> But, my daughter, if hard work brings you results like these, then it is worth it and surely that will just make you work harder! Anyone can work harder, and do better, my dear! Because no one is ever as good as they should be! I think, my dear, you must try to develop more stamina! (Dangarembga 2021, 107)

Taken together, Dangarembga's account shows the intricate web and enmeshment between selfhood and becoming through the encounter with Western education. Her story of Tambu is illustrating a paradigm within which only an educated person can be "someone", especially so for Black individuals. Western education, as a means to becoming meritorious, then functions as a cultural vehicle across colonial fault lines: away from Blackness and towards whiteness. Apart from its formal curriculum, it is also a space to instruct taste and class. Meritocracy thus did not just comprise hard work, talent, and grades – but also learning about the attached aesthetics of success:

> Since in those days the size of the cars of the elite raised respect rather than questions, I quickly identified and stored the principles of aesthetics exhibited at my school, which informed relationships between design and form and purpose so opulently, without reference to material resources. (Dangarembga 2021, 30)

How these introductions with culture and privilege can manifest in small practices, show Tambu's reflections about food items. Those are additional items that Black and white students would bring to dinner, reflecting their different economic and cultural positions. It expands education as a site of racialized knowledge production to more intimate ways of being, speaking, pronouncing, eating:

> Foodstuffs' she called them disdainfully, those nourishments stuffed with food content and class. Even the way she spoke the word, with a great hiss on the "f" showed it was not her mouth that dictated her taste, but another agenda. (Dangarembga 2021, 50)

Tambu's struggle continues into her attempts of finding her place in the labour market, encountering different mobilizations of talent and hard work. Despite having a "white" degree, Tambu diminishes its power due to her mediocre results at her A-levels. She fails to find opportunities where she can claim her space and competence. Bhattacharya's critique of meritocracy is specifically directed to its claim that anyone can work their way up while ignoring the systematic dispossession of Black and Indigenous communities (2018). Concerning Tambu, this critique shows in her dispossession of selfhood while turning against herself: "I was depressed at my inability to excel, to do what was clearly possible as other human beings managed it" (Dangarembga 2021, 33). Tambu's sentiment also carries Fanonian thought on the internalization of inferiority and the psychopolitics of aspiration. In other words, the psychic violence to become what the white world deems valuable (Fanon 2008). Along these lines, the failures of meritocracy are not just "mere oversights" or design flaws but a form of violence through structural domination. Bhattacharyya (2018) further addresses racialized forms of labour framed as "deserving minorities" – here meritocracy rewards those that assimilate into the system

creating new dichotomies between good and bad forms of hard work. Tambu's strive for an engineering job is one that depicts an orientation towards status and also shows in her reflection about being useful: " … so being good at a useful job was quite different from being useful at a useless job like prostitution or politics, where no one benefitted" (Dangarembga 2021, 125).

Becoming meritorious fostering double consciousness

> … a Ghanaian writer called Ama Ata Aidoo declared at first she had not known she was the colour she eventually learned she was, that the term black held no meaning for her until she found herself amongst white people. You laughed then as you read it, thinking, *Oh, as though they dip you in paint.* (Dangarembga 2021, 82)

W.E.B Du Bois coined the term double consciousness in his work *The soul of Black Folk* (1994). He describes double consciousness as the internal conflict experienced by Black individuals when being part of a racially prejudiced society. A famously quoted passage of his book speaks about a feeling of two-ness, two souls, two unreconciled strivings held together by the dogged strength of a Black body (Du Bois 1994, 38). Double consciousness provided an important multi-directed perspective of racism: a dual perspective between self- and other-perceptions and a racialized dissonance between "how I see myself" and "how society sees me". He pointed out the struggle for self-definition of Black individuals which closely resembles Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks'* argument of having mostly two options: assimilate towards whiteness or remain in the alienated space of the subaltern (Fanon 2008).

Du Bois' concept of double consciousness and the idea of meritocracy are then deeply connected through the making and re-making of selfhood. A re-making is inherent in the acquisition of whiteness by means of Western education. Here, race becomes a distorted lens through which meritocratic judgment of the self and others happen. Tambu's recall of quotas and affirmative action, the gateway for exceptionally gifted Black girls to access the white school, reflects the tension of being both: a minority and a symbol of meritocratic "exceptionalism". One the one hand she acknowledges that: "once we arrived at the school, the two of us found out we were five percent" (Dangarembga 2021, 45). While at the same time, being five present translates into the pressure to evidence not exclusion but exceptionalism by outperforming others. Fanon (2008) would describe it not just succeeding but to justify one's place. In Tambu's words, this sounded like:

> It was especially important to be at the top, as it was quite clear to me and to everyone I had to be one of the best […] Average simply did not apply; I had to be absolutely outstanding or nothing. (Dangarembga 2021, 31)

As mentioned in the previous section, despite excelling academically in her O-Levels, Tambu's absence from being awarded the corresponding school trophy leads her to question her own achievements and self-worth. This internal conflict echoes Du Bois' (1994) perspective: the tension between two irreconcilable identities but also, linked to meritocracy, the struggle of success at the cost of wholeness (Fanon 2008). For Tambu, to question whiteness and the presumed sophistication or rationality behind its gatekeeping decisions, would be to undermine the very framework that offers her the only perceived path for emancipation and self-realization.

The formation of two souls through the acquisition of Western education and merit, further remain attached to fear and unresolved questions of belonging. Tambe experiences an increasing distancing from her mother who she begins to see as uneducated Black woman. At the same time, she also begins to question her aunt – an educated Black woman and the appropriateness of her feelings towards her origins:

> But Mai was probably frightened of this girl who was growing beyond her into the European world. At times like this, it is a case of muscles and blood and contractions and pain, a case of out of whose stomach a person came that makes one woman to another a mother or daughter? How does a daughter know she feels appropriately towards the woman who is her mother? (Dangarembga 2021, 14)

In her idealization of whiteness, Tambu resists a reconciling of suffering with the imagined process of becoming white. This tension is brought to surface when she is confronted with her cousin Nyasha's eating disorder as an act of quiet rebellion and suffering. Nyasha once idolized by Tambu, embodies the psychological costs of becoming white. Tambu's mother's stance on Nyasha's mental and physical state mirrors her distance and distrust of "growing into the European world" and thereby serves as a counterpoint to Tambu's idealization.

> I would have said it was impossible for people who had everything to suffer so extremely. I may have had no explanation, but my mother had. […] It's the Englishness', she said, "It'll kill them all if they aren't careful". (Dangarembga 2004, 296)

Tambu's narrative thus shows her irritation with forms of contesting or questioning of whiteness as an ideal. The second, whitened, soul that is forming and that she aims to hold onto and strive towards, however, remains a contested one. Due to Nyasha's education in the UK, Tambu encounters a rejection towards her cousin: " … as it turned out, it was not Nyasha's accent they disliked but Nyasha herself. 'She thinks she is white', they used to sneer, and that was as bad as a curse" (Dangarembga 2004, 142). In other occasions, it is the uncomfortable navigation across two souls, two spaces, that manifest in her emotional and physical discomfort. An example of this is given in facing the headmaster of school where Black and white physical obedience struggle to co-exist in one body:

> … as we were keeping our head uncomfortably downcast, with our foreheads wrinkled and our eye sockets aching from swivelling our eyeballs up under our brows. For each one of us had learnt in infancy how to respect [head down], but we had all, since that early teaching, discovered white people expected you to look straight at their eyes when you communicated. (Dangarembga 2021, 88)

As Tambu matures through her striving and failing, her focus towards whiteness becomes more critical. In addition, the holding of two conflicting identities leads to further distinction and a constant search of classification and boundary-making when it comes to shared social spaces. Tambu's confusion also shows in her increasing hatred towards herself and others, increasingly including whiteness:

> … it thus became clear to me that the trouble lay in the Europeans. Yes, this was always the trouble with white people, I decided. With some relief, I consequently indulged in the idea that living with them was making me as bad as they were. […] but now there was this difference of appearance between us, with neither of us looking like the other. So, the logical end

> point was […] that I was glad the Sinai boys [freedom fighters/ guerrillas during the independence struggle] suffered their fate because they possessed different skin colours! Aiwa kwete! […] I was appalled at the very notion of it, the idea that, like the worst of them, I was myself metamorphosing into a racist! (Dangarembga 2021, 124)

Tambu's continued struggle is one of belonging in as much as it is about estrangement. Having assimilated towards whiteness through her Western education, she struggles to connect with her world in general. This alienation manifests in small yet significant experiences, like her daily commute in overcrowded minivans to jobs she did not aspired to, which become degraded spaces of "undistinguished humanity" (Dangarembga 2021, 254).

Although her story is set within a specific context and time, contemporary colloquial terms in Southern Africa continue to echo Tambu's struggle. In South Africa, the term "Coconut" is often used as a racial slur to describe someone who has " … a foot in the black and white worlds, but acceptance in neither" (Xaso 2019). Kopano Matlwa's novel *Coconut* (2015) set in post-apartheid South Africa during the early 2000s, follows the distinct yet connected narratives of two female protagonists, Ofilwe and Fikile. Ofilwe is a privileged Black girl living in a white suburban neighbourhood in Johannesburg. She struggles to reconcile her African heritage while aspiring to integrate into a predominantly white culture. Fikile, living in the townships, mirrors Tambu's aspiration to escape poverty in pursuit of a more refined, white lifestyle. Through these contrasting lives, Matlwa extends Dangarembga's critical perspective, illustrating how the legacy of apartheid continues to shape identity and self-perception, alongside the societal pressures to conform to whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa.

Members of the Black South African community also resort to the term Coconut " … when we are most upset and outraged at the behaviour or conduct of one of our own, when they have betrayed us, and/or our community" (Bond 2015). "Coconuts" can be seen as a lived expression of Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, where an individual cannot fully be seen as either Black or white. In this context, a Black person adopts white habits, symbols, and cultural traits, leading to a fragmented sense of identity. This adoption, also termed as "transgressions" can symbolize " … having defiantly forced your way into a space previously inaccessible due to racism" (McLeod 2022). While often linked to cultural examples, being a Coconut is also used to describe Black South Africans who speak English fluently or succeed in predominantly white spaces – such as coming from middle or upper-class backgrounds and attending former "Model-C" schools (previously whites only). A Coconut then has distanced themselves from the "authentic" Black experience, e.g. Matlwa's (2015) character Fikile rejects her African language and culture entirely, seeing them as barriers to success – while at the same time, turning Black "authenticity" into a contested space. It somewhat leaves what "authentically" Black unanswered and thus the larger question of how emancipation can look like without its direction towards whiteness.

Meritocracy thus plays a critical role in continuing distinction. This includes the internalization of racism and the development of a fractured sense of self. Despite Young's (1994) colourblind portrait, it is difficult to distinguish meritocracy from its socio-political foundation and function of creating pathways towards whiteness; predominantly through institutions of Western education. Returning to Mbeme's critique of Western education as a site of racialized knowledge production (Crawford, Mai-Bornu, and Landstroem 2021;

Studien 2015), it is then implausible to see meritocracy as a non-racialized idea. The components talent and hard work carry lasting colonial legacies in how they are formulated and evaluated. Talent, is often seen as a starting point or natural foundation with an ontological basis in nature (Herrnstein and Murray 1994; Scarr 1996). Historically, it was understood as biological differences in intelligence, used to explain variations among individuals who were otherwise similar in terms of their social environment (Tanner 1994). Yet, with Black individuals relegated to spaces of non-being, the concept of "talent" was never fully formulated within those spaces. Hard work, on the other hand, was applied to both human and non-human spaces. This returns to Bhattacharyya's (2018) arguments about deservingness, classifying hard work into meritorious – as in closer to whiteness – and non-meritorious; the latter reserved for an exploited majority.

Moving towards South Africa today – an inquiry

How do meritocratic beliefs manifest in post-apartheid South Africa today? What contributes to being successful and does that differ for oneself versus other members of society? Before turning to these questions, I look at South Africa's context concerning racial inequality today. Taken together, studies that look at various dimensions of inequality tell a story of continued stratification and marginalization along racialized lines. Post-apartheid, Leibbrandt, Finn, and Woolard (2012) showed that income inequality within South Africa's racial groups (Black, coloured, Asian/Indian, and white) has increased while inequality between the groups declined. With the removal of apartheid barriers to economic mobility, a minority of excluded individuals were able to rise towards the top. At the same time, a typical Black household continues to own about five present of the wealth compared to its white equivalent (Chelwa, Maboshe, and Hamilton 2024). In the private sector, top management positions are predominantly held by white individuals (66 per cent) versus Black individuals (14 per cent) (Peyton and Peyton 2024). Unemployment, on the other hand, lies predominantly with the Black population, rising from 29 to 31 per cent between 2011 and 2017 versus merely 6 to 7 per cent for white South Africans. Interestingly, among unemployed South Africans, the idea of worthiness or deservingness through labour plays a crucial role, creating preferences for work programmes or job guarantees instead of other redistributive measures (Fouksman 2020). While a few Black South Africans made it to "the top" doing as well as or economically better than their white peers, Black South Africans also represent the biggest share of those living under the poverty line (South African Human Rights Commission 2018).

Despite such stark inequalities, meritocratic beliefs (predominantly measured by hard work alone) are overall given more weight than non-meritocratic factors (such as family connections, race, religion, or gender) in South Africa (Kirsten and Biyase 2023). Meritocratic beliefs have also emerged in public narratives as a solution to issues like cadre deployment in the appointment of state leaders (Maja 2020; Amusan 2016) or to critique a flawed implementation of meritocracy in higher education (Sobuwa and McKenna 2019). Hence, while there is limited research on the subject matter, meritocracy seems to – as often – stand in a juxtaposition to structural inequalities that prevail in South Africa until today.

In a racially divided context, I thus examined whether an individual's perception of their own success changes when considering the success of others, particularly across

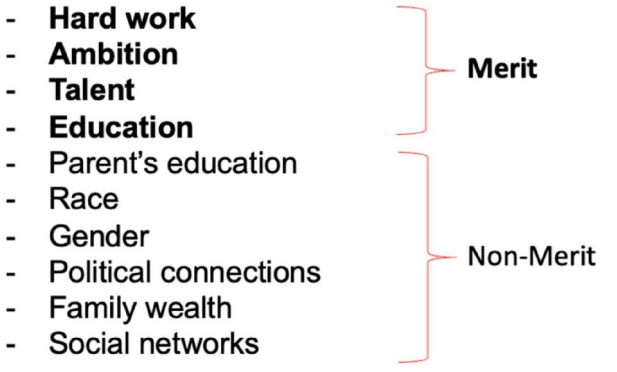

Figure 1. Evaluation criteria for perceptions on meritocracy.

different racial groups in society. To date, a perspective which contrasts self- versus other evaluations concerning meritocratic beliefs, especially across race, is still lacking in South Africa. I hence introduced an explicit reference group when individuals evaluate success. Here, I took inspiration from a study by Shane and Heckhausen's (2017) who distinguished between merit agency (self) and merit societal (most others) beliefs. In my inquiry, "most others" are defined as two groups: group 1 (Black) and group 2 (white) South Africans. As a consequence, respondents evaluated their own success followed by the evaluation of the success of Black and then white South Africans. The question posed at them was "when thinking about [your own, Black South Africans, white South Africans] opportunities for getting ahead in life, how important were the following elements". Scoring each element from zero (not important at all) to 100 (very important), respondents evaluated a list aligned with Castillo et al. (2021), as shown below:

It is noteworthy that the above criteria correspond to perceptions of meritocracy (what is) rather than preferences (what should be) and can be distinguished into meritocratic and non-meritocratic ones. In terms of who participated in this exercise, I used an online survey facilitated by Qualtrics. I draw on a small and specific sample of 365 South African's aged between 18 and 40 years old, half of which are female (51 per cent). The age range covers mostly the born-free generation, hence those born around and after South Africa became a democratic country post-apartheid. The sample presents a snapshot of the "meritorious": 58 per cent hold a tertiary degree compared to a 12.2 per cent national share (Jack 2023). About 40 per cent hold a secondary and just 2 per cent a primary school degree in the selected sample. More than half of the respondents work in the private sector (56 per cent), followed by 24 per cent in the public sector and about 20 per cent who either pursue economic activities in the informal sector, are currently without a job or still completing their education. In terms of race, the survey follows South Africa's national categories: Black, coloured, Asian/Indian and white. The sample closely matches racial representations on a national level with majority (78 per cent) identifying as Black, followed by coloured (10 per cent), Asian/Indian (3 per cent) and white (9 per cent). For the comparison below, I will only include Black and white South Africans to match the reference groups of the evaluations. This is not to say groups excluded from the analysis are not equally important – it merely reflects a choice of consistency.

The promise of a re-making: success across the self and others

What patterns did I observe in the evaluations of young professionals in South Africa regarding the factors that contribute to success? I started by examining a general tendency: to what extent do merit-based criteria (talent, hard work, ambition and one's education) outweigh non-meritocratic or more circumstantial/ structural factors? To assess this, I developed a simple measure I refer to as "meritocratic tendency". This measure can be understood as the extent to which the four meritocratic criteria outweigh non-meritocratic ones in terms of their assigned importance.[1]

In Figure 2, I present three meritocratic tendencies: in red, the evaluations of one's own success; in pink, the evaluations of Black South Africans' success; and in green, the evaluations of white South Africans' success. The left set of bars represents the evaluations of Black respondents, while the right set corresponds to white respondents. The first noticeable difference is that all meritocratic tendencies are lower for Black respondents. They assign relatively less importance to meritocratic criteria. Across both groups, meritocratic tendencies decrease as the evaluations shift from oneself (red) to one's own racial group (pink for Black respondents and green for white respondents). Meritocratic tendencies decline even further when evaluating "the other" – white South Africans for Black respondents (green on the left) and Black South Africans for white respondents (pink on the right). More concretely, Black respondents assign 62 per cent importance to meritocratic criteria for their own success, which drops to 55 per cent for their own racial group and 46 per cent for white South Africans. In contrast, white respondents attribute 71 per cent of their success to meritocratic factors, 65 per cent for their own racial group, and 63 per cent for Black South Africans. Thus, white respondents show a more consistent emphasis on meritocratic criteria compared to Black respondents.

However, the lower meritocratic tendency among Black respondents does not reflect a reduced emphasis on meritocratic values per se. Instead, I propose that a form of "meritocratic double-consciousness" emerges. Black respondents place similar importance on meritocratic criteria as their white peers, while also recognizing non-meritocratic

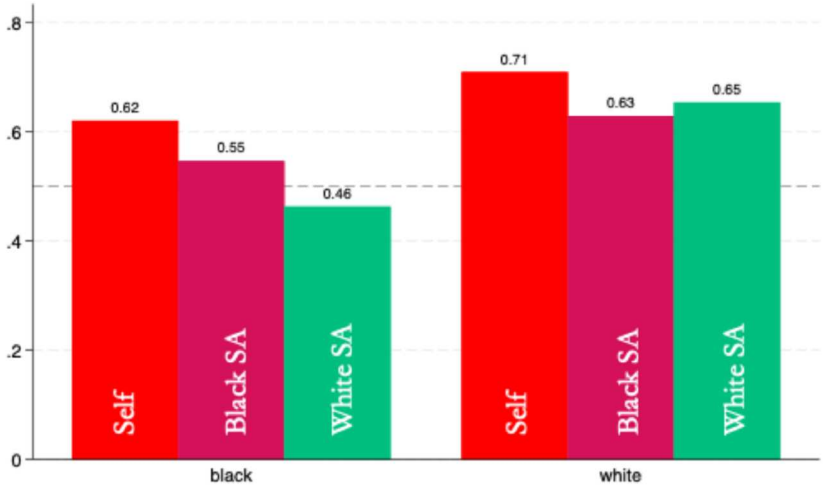

Figure 2. Meritocratic tendency across Black and white South Africans.

Table 1. Scoring of elements for self-evaluations of success.

Criteria for one's own success	Black respondents	White respondents	Diff.	*p*-value
Talent	74.9	71.1	3.79	0.3653
Hard work	89.5	88.0	1.48	0.6038
Ambition	85.2**	76.6**	8.52	0.0126
Education	81.1***	70.3***	10.83	0.0080
Parent's education	49.0*	38.3*	10.78	0.0734
Family wealth	53.5***	36.4***	17.11	0.0099
Political connections	49.2***	21.8***	27.40	0.0000
Social networks	71.4***	53.8***	17.58	0.0018
Race	53***	34.7***	18.27	0.0059
Gender	51.5***	26.2***	25.3	0.0002

Source: Online survey collected April/March 2022, author's own calculation.
*$p < 0.1$.
**$p < 0.05$.
***$p < 0.01$.

elements of structural disadvantage. I will explore this further by discussing the criteria across both respondent groups in detail.

Talent and hard work show little variation in importance between Black and white respondents; whether evaluating their own success (Table 1) or that of their racial group (Tables 2 and 3). Differences arise mainly in the value placed on ambition and education. Black respondents assign higher importance to both when assessing their own success: 85 (Black) versus 77 (white) for ambition, and 81 (Black) versus 70 (white) for education (Table 1). This emphasis on education also extends to their evaluations of Black South Africans' success (75 for Black vs. 65 for white) (Table 2).

The most notable differences arise in cross-racial evaluations, particularly when Black respondents assess the success of white South Africans. Except for education, all meritocratic factors are rated significantly lower in this context (Table 3, scoring 66 and below). This suggests that Black respondents view white South Africans' success as less tied to meritocratic values compared to their own or other Black individuals. It also shows in comparison with white respondents' views. For white respondents, the importance of meritocratic factors also declines when shifting from self to other evaluations, but their attributions remain more consistent, indicating a more stable belief in merit across contexts. While hard work dominates their own success, hard work combined with ambition becomes more significant when evaluating their own racial group.

Table 2. Scoring of elements for Black South Africans' success.

Criteria for Black SA's success	Black respondents	White respondents	Diff.	*p*-value
Talent	68.3	64.3	3.98	0.4525
Hard work	77.6	73.6	4.07	0.4174
Ambition	76.5	74.2	2.24	0.6398
Education	74.9**	64.9**	10.1	0.0484
Parent's education	59.4***	34.9***	24.47	0.0001
Family wealth	64.7***	29.1***	35.63	0.0000
Political connections	67.2***	44.4***	22.81	0.0002
Social networks	76.7***	55.9***	20.67	0.0001
Race	59.4***	33.9***	25.55	0.0001
Gender	53.3***	31.2***	22.12	0.0005

Source: Online survey collected April/March 2022, author's own calculation.
*$p < 0.1$.
**$p < 0.05$.
***$p < 0.01$.

Table 3. Scoring of elements for White South Africans' success.

Criteria for White SA's success	Black respondents	White respondents	Diff.	*p*-value
Talent	56.6***	72.2***	−15.58	0.0079
Hard work	59.7***	79.4***	−19.71	0.0010
Ambition	65.5***	80.9***	−15.37	0.0066
Education	59.4	67.3	−7.94	0.1779
Parent's education	65.1***	38.6***	26.48	0.0000
Family wealth	73.2***	43.6***	29.61	0.0000
Political connections	61.3***	38.1***	23.63	0.0002
Social networks	75.4***	55.9***	19.44	0.0005
Race	70.0***	39.1***	30.91	0.0000
Gender	51.6**	35.67**	15.94	0.0135

Source: Online survey collected April/March 2022, author's own calculation.
*$p < 0.1$.
**$p < 0.05$.
***$p < 0.01$.

Non-meritocratic factors generally hold less importance than meritocratic ones, but Black respondents assign them greater significance in their evaluations. Except for parental education and political connections, Black respondents rate other non-meritocratic factors at 50 or higher when assessing their own success (Table 1). Social networks remain notably stable across all contexts, scoring around 71 for self, 76 for Black South Africans, and 75 for white South Africans. White respondents also value social networks highly, with scores above 50 in all three contexts.

Where then does the perspective of Black and white respondents differ most concerning non-meritocratic criteria? For self-evaluations (see Table 1), Black respondents value political connections (49 versus 22) and gender (52 versus 26) considerably more than white respondents. Race and family wealth also matter more to Black respondents. In evaluating the success of Black South Africans (Table 2), Black respondents place more importance on race (59 versus 34) and family wealth (65 versus 29). With regard to the success of white South Africans, respondent groups differ most prominently on matters of race and family wealth. Regarding white South Africans, race (70 versus 39) and family wealth (73 versus 44) are most strongly emphasized by Black respondents.

Differences in non-meritocratic factors when evaluating the success of others are also telling. On average, Black respondents assign 20 more points to non-meritocratic factors than white respondents, except for gender and social networks in relation to white South Africans' success. As noted earlier, most non-meritocratic factors receive a score of 50 or above in Black respondents' evaluations of their own success. In contrast, among the non-meritocratic factors only social networks are rated above 50 by white respondents. Overall, both groups agree on the importance of talent and hard work, except when Black respondents assess "white success", where the importance of merit-based factors drop. Social networks are also consistently valued across both groups. Major differences appear in the perceived importance of ambition, education, political connections, race, and family wealth, with notable divergences in evaluations of success across racial groups.

Respondents in the sample are people born after or just before the Bantu Education Act ended in 1994 (now aged 31). Yet, they are also the children of parents who were still receiving education regulated under the Act. Tambu's narrative in Dangarembga's books shows the transformative "promise" of accessing white education. With the end

of apartheid in South Africa, this orientation towards formerly inaccessible education for Black South Africans has likely created a strong narrative among Black parents emphasizing a successful education as the key to economic betterment.

Family wealth is also perceived differently by Black and white respondents. White respondents assign little importance to wealth in their own success and even less in the success of Black South Africans – yet slightly more concerning other white South Africans. Now while this signifies a sentiment of "matters less for myself but for other white South Africans", the low value for the success of Black South Africans could also hold a recognition of the racial wealth gap. However, this acknowledgment does not extend to evaluations of race, scored consistently lower by white respondents. While Black respondents recognize race as a significant factor, they may view it as both a structural disadvantage (for themselves) and an advantage (for white South Africans).

Double-conscious merits

In this exploration, I looked at a comparison across Blackness and whiteness in success evaluations. While this speaks to one form of distinction that comes out in Dangarembga's books as well as in many lived experiences in the present day, I do not seek to stage it as the "only one". Not having the nuance to distinguish different experiences of discrimination, e.g. along lines of indigeneity, gender, religion, or other forms of colourism, presents a limitation to the debate. I subsequently remain within the two-fold perspective I drew out at the outset without generalizing the observed patterns. In addition, it is important to recall that I discuss "double-conscious merits" of the meritorious – being drawn from a sample that reflects high levels of tertiary degree holders and private sector employment.

I propose that "two-fold" interpretations of success reveal the construction of meritocratic masks. A two-fold view is more present among Black respondents. It shows in a subtle shift from perceptions to preferences when navigating between evaluating "the self" and "others". This shift aligns with the concept of a social desirability bias. Here respondents adjust their answers to appear more favourable, particularly on sensitive topics like race and gender (for example, see Chou, Moffitt, and Bryant 2019; Gower et al. 2022; Latkin et al. 2017). While a social desirability bias is often seen as a limitation to empirical inquiry, I propose that it can reveal an important dynamic here. It highlights the desire for a positive view of "the self", which I can observe in a comparatively higher attribution of merit when respondents evaluate their own success. Here, assigning a high value to talent and hard work seen in both, Black and white respondents, might show a "performance" of meritocracy; particularly for Black South Africans. Meritocratic attributes are valued highly while simultaneously recognizing ongoing structural disadvantages as shown in Black respondents' higher emphasis of non-meritocratic factors. This "double importance" returns to Tambu's torturous efforts of performance, clouded awareness of otherness, and her struggle to outperform her white peers in an effort to "be" and "belong".

A double consciousness with regards to meritocracy also shows in the strong adoption of a belief system somewhat incompatible with one's lived experience. While it seems easier to acknowledge structural disadvantages for one's own racial group and especially across race, there seems to be a downplaying or undermining effect for oneself. A masking of sorts happens in the adherence to the meritocratic ideal of objective fairness and the promise of a positive remaking of oneself. Even when it masks and obscures the

reality of systemic inequalities. At the same time, meritocratic standards largely continue to be cultivated, defined and conveyed in spaces where its initial formulation and creation happened through a purposeful absence of Blackness. This leaves Black individuals in a position of "catching up". It may thus carry forward what Toni Morrison has labelled as "the very serious function of racism" being distraction – through an orientation towards the dominant:

> … to know the function, the very serious function of racism, which is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language, and you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is […] None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing. (Morrison 1975)

It is not a stretch to see how meritocracy creates a cycle of "there's always one more thing" – a constant striving for merit that reproduces distinction. The predisposition of lacking merit has long been used to justify the exclusion of Black individuals from opportunity, relegating them to exploitative or low-status labour. Today, even with new narratives and broader access, meritocratic double consciousness may celebrate the occasional rise to the top, signalling belief in meritocracy – yet while embodying the structural constraints that shape access to success.

In sum, I argue that meritocracy, both in its historical construction and its ongoing individual and collective performance, is not a genuine pathway to success beyond distinction. Instead, it facilitates the inclusion of previously excluded individuals into existing hierarchies, while sustaining principles of scarcity, individualism, and exceptionalism. In doing so, it continues to reinforce inequality (Bhattacharyya 2018). For Black individuals, this can manifest as a double conscious merit being an embrace of meritocracy that coexists with a clear awareness of structural barriers. In Tambu's story, this tension emerges in her self-doubt and internalized failure, self-hatred and violence (Dangarembga 2004; 2021; 2020).

Overall, meritocracy needs to be considered differently in former colonial contexts. An utopian appeal of meritocracy, as both remedy and promise, serves as a distraction from alternative ways of imagining success. Many thinkers like Federici (2020), Kaba (2021) and Hooks (2016; 2018) have pointed towards models grounded in care, interdependence, and process rather than status or distinction. These alternatives don't erase difference, but they resist the urge to rank it. They can shift the focus from individual achievement to collective responsibility. Ultimately, letting go of meritocracy could open space for new and more expansive ways of understanding talent and hard work rooted in connection. Tambu's narrative could become one of history where the echoes in present days have been embraced as an important learning and thus letting go of principles that created her suffering. More broadly, for as long as our ideas of success remain rooted in distinction, hierarchy and competition, there remains a lure of attaching one's worth to an authority of knowing and a status of being. The stillness in conformity, towards the top often subtly merged with justifications of necessary material comfort, can tilt our presence towards apathy concerning our collective responsibility of reform under a rather individualist narrative of self preservation. Like Tambus story, this preservation may equally come at the expense of wholeness. Standing on one's own in loving interdependence with others cannot just rebuild a meaning of success in our interpersonal relationships but also within the collective systems that arise as a consequence of such.

AI policy

In the process of writing this paper, I used the following artificial intelligence (AI) technologies: Perplexity (Free version) was used to correct errors in wording, spelling and grammar.

Note

1. I constructed this measure by first creating the average score of the four elements that were classified as meritocratic (see Figure 1) as well as the average of the six non-meritocratic elements. Meritocratic tendency thus expresses the importance given to meritocratic elements as a relative share of a total score. To explain this further: Merit average score of (talent + hard work + ambition + education)/4, non-merit average score of (education parents = family wealth + race + gender + social networks + political connections)/6. Meritocratic tendency then is Merit average score/ (Merit average score + non-merit average score).

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Ethical guidelines

This project has been reviewed and approved by the London School of Economics and Political Science ethics committee, Reference 66303, approved 02.11.2022.

Data availability statement

The data used in this study are not publicly available. They will be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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