

# Practices of Freedom: Representation and Identity in Families Classified ‘Coloured’ during Apartheid

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## Abstract

Historically ‘colouredness’ has been imbued with negative stereotypes that continue to be perpetuated in a post-1994 society along with concomitant feelings of shame. This paper examines the concept of shame as a primary source of identity for people who were classified ‘coloured’ during apartheid, by thinking through representation and attendant ideas of identity, race and colour. The paper suggests that the way that ‘coloureds’ presented themselves through dress, social manners and the maintenance of the home, was a way of challenging and resisting the dominant apartheid narrative that attempted to brand them as inferior. It further suggests that they defied apartheid’s ideological practices through the way that they ran their homes and raised their children, the only areas of their lives over which they had any control within the boundaries of apartheid’s draconian laws. They fought a daily battle to survive while constantly striving to ensure that their families were presented as decent, clean and respectable.

Shame, I contend, is intimately linked to institutional racism and socio-geographical forms of apartheid and it was women, as the moral compasses of their families and communities, who carried the burden of this shame and attempted to navigate the ambiguous spaces of not belonging. Shame is a principal source of identity for minorities, shaped against a background of historical, genetic, cultural, religious and social influences. Kaufman (1996) asserts that people who are relegated to an inferior position in a society tend to not only question their own self-worth but also the worth of the group to which they belong.

Issues of paternalism, exploitation and mental subjugation laid the foundation for feelings of inferiority well before apartheid was entered into law. I start from the premise that ‘colouredness’ is a cultural identity, created under ‘specific conditions of creolisation’, rather than simply an apartheid label, and trace its genealogy along the continuum of slavery, colonialism and apartheid (Erasmus 2001: 16). In the absence of recorded history, the paper is framed in narrative, drawing on the real-life experiences of ordinary women who were marginalised or oppressed and whose stories bear witness to a life under apartheid.

**Keywords:** ‘Coloured’, identity, representation, shame, stereotypes, miscegenation, slavery, colonialism, apartheid, women

## **Introduction**

This paper responds to a need to examine how ordinary people in South Africa navigated the ambiguous spaces of not belonging and seeks to humanise the experiences of those who lived, and continue to live, with fluid identities forced upon them under apartheid. The result of a larger narrative inquiry into issues of shame and respectability as experienced by families who were classified ‘coloured’ during apartheid, the paper critiques the experience of shame as the foundation upon which ‘coloured’ identities were constructed and the role that ordinary women played in resisting the narratives of subjugation.

Historically ‘colouredness’ has been imbued with negativity and shaped by the dominant representations and attempts to fix stereotypes of what a homogenous ‘coloured’ identity was meant to be. These stereotypes continue to be perpetuated in a post-1994 society along with the concomitant feelings of shame engendered by these negative depictions as evidenced in the work of Bowler & Vincent (2011). They identified the principal themes that emerged as those to do with ‘the idea of colouredness as a position of ‘mixture’ or ‘inbetweenity’ and say that ‘the role of stereotypes emerges both from ‘within’ and from ‘without’ colouredness’. They refer to the tension between, and implications of, the rejection and reification of the concept of ‘colouredness’. Their paper was prompted by the media storm following a column published in the *Sunday World* in 2011, where working class Cape ‘coloured’ women were portrayed as ‘cigarette smoking, beer swilling, drug-

abusing, street fighting, promiscuous drunks who wear hair curlers in public and have no front teeth’.

The sense of disgrace attached to those of ‘mixed’ descent, who are labelled with derogatory terms such as half-breed, bi-racial, non-people or leftovers<sup>1</sup>, has its roots in the colonial attitudes that the bodies of enslaved and indigenous women were available for abuse and exploitation. The negativity associated with being the product of miscegenation, without a distinctive culture or full ethnic integrity, became firmly entrenched and ‘coloured’ people internalised the racist values of the dominant society (Adhikari 2006).

Clinical psychologist, Dr. Gershen Kaufman, in his book, *The Psychology of Shame*, asserts that a sense of belonging grows through a positive identification with a group of people (Kaufman 1996). Identity, he says, is not formed in a vacuum but is shaped through how we define ourselves, how we are perceived by others and how we respond to that, against a background of historical, genetic, cultural, religious and social influences. Kaufman (1996) asserts that people who are relegated to an inferior position in a society tend to not only question their own self-worth but also the worth of the group that they belong to, resulting in feelings of shame, which, he concludes, is a principal source of identity for minorities.

As a creative writer, I am drawn to the untold stories of the ordinary women who navigated what Kaufman calls ‘the daily scenes of shame’ – the day-to-day reminders of their inferiority through inhabiting separate neighbourhoods, schools, hospitals; in fact, every space except public roads (Kaufman 1996: 274). In the absence of a recorded narrative, it is to oral history and family photographs that I must turn. My research was prompted by the photographs in my own family album, photographs that typically show us at our best, on special occasions such as Eid or Christmas, at weddings or 21<sup>st</sup> birthday parties, or with new possessions such as a car. We are usually formally dressed in our ‘Sunday best’ clothes as in figure 1. My father is seldom the subject of the photographs as he is the one that was always charged with recording us, posed and proper.

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<sup>1</sup> Marike de Klerk, wife of F.W. de Klerk, once described ‘coloured’ people as ‘left-overs’. ‘They are a negative group. They are not black, they are not white and they are not Indian. In other words, they are non-people. They are those who remained behind when the others had been sorted out’ (Pauw 2006: 25-26).

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As I search through the family album, I find that this theme recurs in photographs across generations.



Figure 1.

In figure 2, my maternal grandmother sits on her *stoep* in Woodstock, with her hands neatly folded on her lap, staring straight into the camera from under perfectly arched eyebrows, with every hair in place.



Figure 2

This is my favourite photograph of my grandmother, because of the olde-worlde glamour it conjures up for me. The satiny sheen of her dress is obvious, despite the faded black and white image, and her hands appear to be clutching a purse made of matching fabric. At the same time there seems to be an element of containment about them, suggesting that she is holding more than just the purse. This photograph records her at her best, and does not reveal the loss of her parents that forced her to come to Cape Town from Malmesbury, aged 14, with her three younger siblings, to work at a cigarette factory where she received part-payment of her wages in cigarettes. The image of the well-dressed, respectable woman that she has left behind provides my children with tangible proof that they have nothing of which to be ashamed.

Similarly, the portrait of my father and his sister, speaks to a deliberate attempt to signal respectability (figure 3).



Figure 3

I am intrigued that my working-class grandmother went to the trouble to not only have the photograph taken, but also that she spent money on a studio portrait where this was obviously taken. She later had this photograph made into an airbrushed portrait. The background obliterates the context, making where the subjects came from and how they were classified, irrelevant. The children in the portrait have been bestowed with dignity and stature, presenting an image that was important to my grandmother, for exact reasons that will remain hidden from me.

Portraiture has always had a link with wealth, power and stature and it occurred to me that this process of dressing up and sitting for photographs, though pointing to the ordinariness of life in spite of draconian laws under apartheid, was a way for ordinary people to resist and challenge the narrative of inferiority that the National Party (NP) sought to affix to them.

I suggest that this constant need to present our best selves arose out of a subconscious sense of shame that we were constantly trying to make amends for, in the way we dressed and behaved. I contend that ordinary women – mothers and wives – carried the burden of this shame and played a central role in challenging the dehumanising legislation and narratives of subjugation within the personal space of their homes.

Shame is reflected in the very word ‘coloured’, in the negative fashion in which the ‘coloured’ community was usually identified, forcing them into a borderline existence. The shame associated with being inferior or less-than, I contend, has its basis in the racial oppression that was a feature throughout the continuum of slavery, colonialism and apartheid. The impact of slavery and colonisation on South African society has receded behind the far more dominant history of apartheid. The portrayal of the enslavement of Asians and Africans in the Cape as a benign version of slavery in America has obscured its brutality and dehumanisation (Baderoon 2014). In order to understand this legacy, it is necessary to trace its genealogy along with the concomitant issues of paternalism, exploitation and mental subjugation which laid its foundation well before apartheid was entered into law.

## **Historical Background**

### ***Slavery and Colonisation***

The vague knowledge of slavery, reinforced by the absence of published slave

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narratives, has led to a disregard for its importance especially among the descendants of the enslaved and confirms the supposed inadequacy of the enslaved (Gqola 2010). Baderoon (2014) furthermore observes that this forgetting includes the ‘foundational notions of race and sex in South Africa’ generated by slavery, both because of the pain and shame of remembering, and as a result of the sustained system of propaganda that portrayed slavery as insignificant. Wicomb (1998) attributes the root of the shame that is associated with slavery, with being black and with miscegenation, to this benign depiction.

The practice of slavery at the Cape Colony, part of the international trade in human bodies, served to institutionalise a racial hierarchy that fundamentally shaped South Africa, laid the foundations for racial segregation and encouraged the idea of white supremacy (Snowden 1991). Racial slavery legitimated the colonial power over black bodies and, observes Bogues (2010), was about the degradation of the human being. As a system of ‘property in the person’, it represented the ultimate form of domination (Bogues 2010: 55). Even after emancipation the former enslaved continued to be subjected to different forms of controls and segregation, such as the Masters and Servants Act<sup>2</sup>, control by the church, and later, by apartheid legislation which continued to enforce this domination brutally and policed it vigorously (Viall *et al.* 2011). Throughout apartheid black bodies provided the labour in the mining and agricultural industries, as well as domestic labour. These attitudes continue to shape the position of black people in South Africa post-liberation.

Baderoon (2014) traces the imprint of slavery to the undervalued, and often violent, labour of farm and domestic workers in South Africa, and in the systemic violence that South Africa continues to experience today. She highlights the excessive use of force and punishment used to quell the intense fear of slave resistance and the regulations the enslaved were subjected to, such as limitations on the size of their gatherings, and the carrying of passes to control their movement – both of which later resurfaced as apartheid laws – the Riotous Assembly Act, No 17, of 1956, and the Pass Laws Act of 1952.

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<sup>2</sup> In 1841 the Masters and Servants Ordinance was passed on how to accommodate the former enslaved and ‘free-blacks’; legislation favoured employers who were allowed to use certain disciplinary measures to regulate the behaviour of labourers. When the Act was revised in 1856 it was harsher in its range of offences and the severity of penalties prescribed for servants (Viall *et al.* 2011).



Viall, James and Gerwel (2011) similarly comment that the *dop* system<sup>3</sup> introduced by farmers to stop the migration of the enslaved after emancipation, has fed into a cycle of poverty, abuse and dependency, that continues to dog farmworkers post-apartheid.

Almost 200 years of violent subjugation, both mental and physical, was bound to leave an indelible legacy on the descendants of the enslaved. This genealogy of racial oppression and dehumanisation, I contend, laid the foundation of the shame associated with ‘coloured’ identity and was the genesis of the daily struggle by women to prove that they and their families were good enough.

### ***The Genesis of ‘Coloured’***

The concept of colouredness in South Africa is a complicated and nuanced concept culturally, socially and politically. According to Heese (2013) the ethnic and genetic mixing that took place in the Cape until 1795 cannot be easily equalled. Marriages<sup>4</sup> between colonisers and indigenous people fostered good relations with the indigenous people and were therefore of diplomatic benefit to the colonisers. Both McKinnon (2004) and Heese (2013) draw attention to the fact that many enslaved women married European men, produced large families and became matriarchs of ‘white’ South African families. The descendants of these marriages were all accepted into the ‘white’ community and European surnames masked the slave woman’s origins. Unions between Europeans and the enslaved were followed by relationships between their offspring and Khoikhoi, producing a mixed population of ‘coloured’ people who were to occupy the interstitial zone between ‘white’ and ‘black’ (Bowler & Vincent 2011). It was these descendants who were destined to ‘represent the terrain upon which classificatory boundary disputes would most starkly come to play themselves out’ (Bowler & Vincent 2011). I argue that this deliberate creation of a buffer zone between Europeans and indigenous people became the in-between space that ‘coloured’ people occupied after emancipation and during apartheid, and which they continue to occupy post-1994.

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<sup>3</sup> Or tot system, referring to the part-payment of workers’ wages in daily rations of cheap liquor.

<sup>4</sup> Between 1652 and 1795 there were 1 273 (mixed unions) and 147 cases of marriage and other unions between ‘coloured’ and European people.

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Hendricks (2001) and Adhikari (2006) echo similar sentiments when they refer to the intermediary space occupied by people of ‘mixed descent, which was valued for its proximity to ‘whiteness’ but despised for its association with ‘bastardization/hybridity’. The ‘visibility of their body politic’ carried the shame and embarrassment with which Europeans viewed the liaisons. Those of ‘mixed’ descent, the signifier of ‘colouredness’, were proof of the encounter between Europeans and those they considered inferior, the unwanted and unfortunate consequence of the colonisation of Southern Africa (Adhikari 2006: 482; Hendricks 2001).

The desire for a distinct national identity after the war between the English and the Afrikaners (1899-1902) demanded that Afrikaners distance themselves and their history, from the ‘coloured’ people with whom they shared blood, language and religion. Power and European descent became very important; maintaining racial distinctions became a compelling necessity and the colour bar became the trademark of the South African way of life (Viall *et al.* 2011). Adhikari (2006) asserts that ‘coloured’ people ‘tended to accept their ‘identity’ with resignation and often a sense of shame’, becoming obsessed with acting ‘civilized’ to prove that they were capable of living up to the standards set by the dominant society and therefore entitled to the same rights and privileges as ‘white’ people (Adhikari 2006: 481).

Those ‘coloureds’ who had some European blood, were elevated to a status above the native, but below the European, producing a double contempt – held in contempt by their ‘superiors’ and by their ‘inferiors’ (Pillay 2018). Fanon (2008) describes the two dimensions of ‘black’ men where they behave differently with other ‘black’ people compared to how they would behave with the ‘white’ man; he attributed this to a direct result of colonial subjugation. This is akin to W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness – the sensation of having your identity split into different parts – and of having to constantly view yourself through the eyes of different people, creating internal conflict and an impaired self-image (Du Bois 2007).

Fanon gives a very graphic description of what it feels like to be trapped within his ‘black’ body, trying to make sense of his body image within a ‘white’ world (France) and trying to remain rational in the face of the irrationality of racism. He emphasises the incidences of comparison, of being a man, a physician, a teacher, qualified by the word ‘Negro’. As a psychiatrist, Fanon refers to the schizophrenic-like quality of occupying two places as a man and as a ‘black’ man in relation to a ‘white’ man:

Shame. Shame and self-contempt. Nausea. When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle (Fanon 2008: 88).

Bowler & Vincent (2011) take this concept a step further, describing a ‘triple consciousness’ experienced by ‘coloured’ people whereby the ‘coloured’ person must construct him/herself from within, as well as in relation to ‘black’ and to ‘white’. I postulate that the shame of whether one is good enough is constantly measured against being equal to ‘whites’, any failure is seen as a measure of inferiority and any success is tempered by being ‘black’. The feeling of inferiority is in direct correlation to the European’s feeling of superiority. Kaufman (1996) observes that when minorities compare themselves to the dominant members of a culture, they inevitably find themselves lacking. Sardar (2008) concurs, saying that if everything that you represent is seen only in negative terms, it follows that that is how you will eventually see and believe yourself to be. These feelings of inferiority were deliberately engendered through slavery, colonialism and apartheid and laid the foundation for the kind of society which was to develop.

### ***Socialisation into Inferiority***

The enslaved were forced into submissive labour, brutalised and dehumanised and treated as ‘a sort of child in the family’. Although they were ‘part of the family’ they were never equal and remained ‘boys’ or ‘girls’ in the eyes of their owners and later employers. The farmer could be like a father to his workers because they were considered to be childlike and lacking in moral maturity. Further socialisation into their positions as children was ensured by the enslaved only being known by their first names or being given new names when they were sold or transferred from one owner to another (Giliomee & Mbenga 2007). The treatment of the enslaved as children meant that they were denied opportunities to exercise social and political autonomy and, being property in person, subject to restrictions and punishment by their masters.

The enslaved were also materially dependent on their masters and were fearful of what would become of them if they died; they lacked the freedom of choice and movement and this, coupled with the insecurity of their positions, inhibited the development of adult and responsible personalities within a social

and political context from which they were excluded. This paternalism was a form of control since the enslaved were prevented from developing independence from the master. After emancipation the formerly enslaved had nowhere to go and had few possessions, if any. The dependency thus created served to tie many of the previously enslaved to their masters and the refuge offered to them by mission stations is thought to have ensured a close and steady supply of compliant workers to the surrounding farms at which they were generally forced to continue working. The paternalism of the slave-owner was replaced with that of the church and farmer. There was neither incentive nor opportunity to break the cycle of dependency in which workers were caught up.

It is unlikely that their generally unskilled work would have earned positive feedback; this would have led to doubt about their worth and possibly inhibited the establishment of a positive identity. Furthermore, the circumstances under which the enslaved were forced to live made it difficult to pass on their customs and traditions and to develop a sense of identity. I contend then, that the mental and physical subjugation of the enslaved and their descendants inhibited the formation of an independent personality and a sense of identity, and reinforced feelings of shame, worthlessness, inferiority and inadequacy. I further argue that the systematic infantilisation of the enslaved over centuries of oppression and paternalism, was a kind of violence enacted against 'coloured' people through which attempts were made to curtail their maturity and competence so that they could be deemed inferior and be prevented from developing into independent adults. This is supported by the theories of psychoanalyst, Erik Erikson, who argues that the development of a healthy personal identity forms the connection between childhood and adulthood and depends on the child receiving meaningful and consistent feedback regarding his/her achievements and accomplishments (Erikson 1968). The failure to establish a sense of identity within society leads to people's confusion about themselves or their place in society which is of significant relevance in South Africa as we transition from oppression to democracy (McLeod 2013).

Kaufman (1996) agrees that identity and culture are reciprocal and that they impact each other, within a broader ideological background. Identity, culture and ideology, he says, are three phenomena that link individuals and families with society at large. Questions of identity – 'Who am I?' and 'Where do I belong?' – are shaped by the encounters we have with shame as a minority

group and by employing contempt as a strategy to counteract shame (Kaufman 1996). Mountain (2003) observes that the long history of master-slave and master-servant relationships, combined with the racially-based class structure, manifested in feelings of personal and community inferiority. The chance for 'coloured' people then to become successful and achieve a sense of accomplishment and recognition, was strictly controlled and policed, creating the foundation for feelings of uselessness, inadequacy and inferiority and a belief that they would not amount to much. The resultant pervasive sense of shame and inferiority presents a serious social problem and is a hindrance to the descendants of the enslaved seeking to take their place in a post-apartheid society. This is what Fanon refers to when he describes how colonialism inculcated a sense of inferiority which was internalised by the colonised, who then becomes obsessed with emulating the 'white' man, to become like him and to be accepted by him (Fanon 2008).

### ***Stereotypes and Representation***

In his examination of the portrayal of 'Hottentot' characters in early 19<sup>th</sup> century theatre, February (1981) finds that the basic elements are clear: their love of liquor, their irascibility (which inevitably leads to a fight), their moral looseness, and linguistic incomprehension. February remarks that by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, 'coloureds' were limited to certain roles in Afrikaner mythology based on the same characteristics that had been attributed to the 'Hottentots'. He notes that, in spite of evidence that they resisted the appropriation of their land by foreigners, 'the image of the docile, spineless 'Hottentot'' and 'the stereotype of the lazy, weak 'Hottentot' who was wiped out by the smallpox epidemics in the 18th century, or who drank himself to death' continues to exist (February 1981: 19).

Adhikari (2005) refers to the alleged inherent characteristics of 'coloured' people – such as 'being physically stunted, lacking in endurance, and naturally prone to dishonesty, licentiousness, and drink' with 'supposed propensities for criminality, gangsterism, drug and alcohol abuse, and vulgar behaviour' that have often been blamed on the idea that 'colouredness' was the product of miscegenation (Adhikari, 2005: 14). Because the 'coloured' community was 'conceived in a negative fashion with reference to other groups, in terms of what it was not, it has usually not been identified in a positive manner, nor does it have a set of distinctive characteristics' (Adhikari 2005: 26).

February (1981) and Hall (1997) agree that stereotypes function as a means of social control and repression, whereby the power-holders (i.e. the 'whites') justify their dominant position in society. By dictating what it means and what to think whenever we see a certain image, stereotypes circulate a limited range of who people can be or become. The reason for wanting to fix an image and its meaning is to ultimately change the relationship between the viewer and the image, to intervene in the relationship between the two and to control the perceptions of the viewer (Hall 1997). Hall (1997) urges the need for ordinary people to regain control of an image-dominated world and to challenge the stereotypes in order to keep representation open by introducing new ideas, new knowledge, and new dimensions of meaning (Hall 1997). This need to present alternative images to challenge the dominant negative stereotypes of 'coloured' people, I argue, is what motivated women, often despite poverty, to insist on the 'proper' presentation of their homes and families.

## **Methodology and Data Collection**

In my research from which I cite the following examples, I investigated the notion of 'colouredness' and the attendant idea of shame through a framework of personal interviews, oral history and family photographs. Narrative inquiry was used to gather information from individuals who were asked to share a photograph of themselves or their friends or family. Participants were encouraged to give an authentic account of their lives, to which end the interviews were as unstructured as possible. The photograph was used as an *aide-memoire* to explore the experiences of the previously marginalised with the aim of accessing the past and situating it in the present. The interviews conducted over a period of two years, generated conversations around issues of race, colour and identity. Participants had either been born in Cape Town and its surrounds or had spent a significant period of their lives there; most were female, ages ranging from mid-30s to mid-80s, and had all been classified 'coloured' during apartheid. However, the subjects were heterogenous in terms of age, religion, culture, language and class.

Narrative research raises questions of objectivity and accuracy because stories must be viewed in their socio-cultural context and are personally meaningful. It is difficult to apply a standard set of procedures in the analysis thereof. Field (2001), also cautions on the limitations of the interview process

and how it is shaped by researcher and interviewee identities and power relations which govern retention and telling of memories. However, I assert that these stories can be validated by corroboration from different narratives. As a creative writer and a story-teller, I believe strongly that it is through telling our stories in a multiplicity of voices that we can hope to transcend the racist boxes that we were forced into in order to learn how to be human.

I am aware of the difficulty of being an objective researcher while examining these issues. The discussion is accessed through my personal apartheid classification of 'Cape Malay/Cape Coloured'. This situating of 'coloured' identity frames my own social experience of the attendant ideas of shame and respectability as reflected within an everyday archive of family photographs, oral history and cultural practices. The photographs, the stories, the memories are all filtered by the lens through which I am looking at them. As Hirsch (1999: xv), author of *The Familial Gaze*, reminds us, 'those who analyse the familial gaze ... must be aware that to look is also, always, to be seen'.

The study was not meant to be a comprehensive one, but rather a contribution to existing and future narratives to achieve a multiplicity of voices, which I hope will contribute to the dismantling of racial identities so that we may transcend race and view each other as human. I envision that further research is conducted with a larger body of participants, across the country, to tap into the very diverse experiences of a group of people who were labelled 'coloured' but who are by no means homogenous, to examine the erasures of history and the legacy of shame which persists into the contemporary era.

## Expressions of Resistance

The desire to prove cleanliness and good order as a way of controlling representation surfaced in all the interviews I conducted and was reflected in the performance, dress and setting of the photographs and stories shared with me. Our mothers and grandmothers exerted 'exquisite control' over the areas that they could. This usually meant that they insisted on doing the cleaning with their own hands. Rushin (2018) recalls her mother cleaning the floor on her hands and knees *before* the domestic worker arrived, as if there were even more shame attached to her having to hire someone to do the cleaning.

Hardisty (2018) described how preparations for the weekend would start with personal grooming on Thursdays, followed by 'turning out' the house

on Fridays and then baking, *in case anyone came to visit*. Fisher (2016) who grew up in Mafikeng, similarly described everyone's hair being styled and clean doilies being put out every weekend for visitors who *might* come. Petersen, a resident of Pniël<sup>5</sup> and the youngest person I interviewed, described her mother as the home-maker, the one who cleaned, who sewed the clothes her children wore, and who kept the house in an almost 'museum-like' state. She laughingly wondered if her mother may have been a '*skoonmaker*' (a cleaner) in a previous life (Petersen 2018). As Petersen commented in her interview:

My hair may not be straight, my skin may not be white, *maar kom kyk ons huise!* (but come and have a look at our houses).

Petersen's interpretation of her mother's actions is clear – we may be 'coloured' but our houses are impeccable. Pniël is an insular town, where residents inter-marry and generally live as they have for generations, with life centred around the church. As such, I would contend that the description of how her mother raised them and continues to live, is a significant representation of the community and can be extrapolated to broader communities.

During my research I visited two friends in Australia and was struck by their initial responses to the news of my impending visit. Both expressed the urgency to clean and prepare for my visit, directly referencing shame in connection with how I might view their homes. Although I could not see any reason why either of them should make special arrangements to prepare for my visit, I was familiar with this need for presentation of a perfect front. Rhode and Fisher had left South Africa 15 and 30 years previously, respectively, and lived on opposite coasts of Australia. I found it noteworthy that both slipped into Afrikaans when they referenced the need to be clean and presentable, since our medium of communication had always been English and because neither of them spoke Afrikaans on a daily basis. I was intrigued by this lapse into a language that may have been triggered by my visit, a simple reminder of their connection to South Africa; or perhaps a reminder of a way of life under apartheid when representation could be understood to be deeply political? For

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<sup>5</sup> Set up as a mission station in 1843 for former enslaved by the Congregational Church, on land donated by two farmers.



these reasons, I took the opportunity to interview them and have chosen to highlight their experiences in this paper.

Fisher, whose sons were born in Australia, was at great pains to prepare for my visit. She could see nothing remarkable about this when I interviewed her, saying that where she comes from there is ‘scandal’ attached to ‘not being clean or polite’. When I pressed her further, she replied that she would be judged:

... *Kyk die Kleurlinge. Kyk hulle hare is nie gekam nie (Look at the ‘coloureds’. Look their hair isn’t combed).* I can’t go to work if my house isn’t cleaned. *Kyk die skande (Look, the scandal.).* I feel guilty (Fisher 2016).

She could not articulate what the source of her guilt was, but I postulate that it was the sense of having done something wrong which is part of the experience of shame. She emphasised how important presentation was, saying that she refused to go anywhere with her husband if he was not dressed ‘properly’, ‘even if he’s working around the house and needs to pop out to the hardware store to get something quickly’ (Fisher 2016).

One of the photographs she chose to share with me is of her, aged about four years old, circa 1965 (figure 4). The little girl in the formal dress with short socks and black baby doll shoes is seated on a cushion on a wrought iron chair, the curlicues on the back of the chair fanning out behind her like a peacock’s tail. Her gaze is slightly off camera, probably focussed on her mother who is telling her to smile. Her hair is neatly combed, her light eyes twinkle. She looks posed, her dress neatly fanned out over her legs. Fisher did not think that it was any special occasion despite the formal dress. She thinks that ‘someone with a camera’ was probably visiting and so her mother dressed her up. She cannot recall her parents ever owning a camera. Her father was a teacher but did not earn much and would not have been able to afford one. There is no evidence of this struggle to survive in her photograph. On the contrary, this photograph depicts a well-dressed, perfectly groomed little girl, frozen in middle-class respectability and challenging the apartheid discourse that would have her family depicted as uncivilised. Despite their poverty, an effort was made to take photographs, to document the image they wished to present to the world and to preserve the photograph for later generations.

Fisher had tried to pass on the same values to her sons, saying that:

... even though my boys don't have the same background that I do, I taught them they can't put us to shame by not respecting you (Fisher 2016).

However, her sons, having been raised without the burden of proving to their parents' visitors that they were good enough, were more assertive in exercising their rights over their bedrooms. She urged me to excuse their rooms. Ironically, her elder son lived by the words of Irish poet and playwright, Oscar Wilde, who said that you can never be too well-dressed or too educated. He had it printed on his business card for the men's clothing shop he ran, while he was completing his third degree. I suggest that he had imbibed some of the values by which his mother had been raised, and which she had passed on to him.



Figure 4

The second interview was with Rhode (2016) who had grown up in Port Elizabeth but had come to Cape Town as a student, where she married and raised a family; she had first emigrated to New Zealand then moved to Australia. She was much more direct about her need to avoid the shame, responding to the news of my visit with, ‘Of course, you will stay with us’, followed shortly by a lapse into Afrikaans:

*‘Ek gaan sommer nou begin skoonmaak. Ek kannie vir jou in die skanne steek nie’* (I am going to start cleaning immediately. I cannot put you to shame.) (Rhode 2016).

She, similarly, described growing up in extreme poverty, in a wood-and-iron shack, servants’ quarters or someone’s garage, ‘always last on the city council’s housing list’. They had lived in the city centre in Port Elizabeth, in an area which she describes as being ‘much like District Six’, when they were forcibly removed to Korsten. Rhode was the youngest of five; her four older siblings were born of her mother’s marriage to an Indian man, which had ended in divorce. Rhode’s father had been classified ‘white’ and her parents were not able to marry and live together as a family with her older siblings who were darker in complexion (Rhode 2016).

The photograph that Rhode showed me, the only photograph she had of her childhood, had the edges torn off and she told me that she only knew where it was because she had recently taken it out to photocopy to give to her brother-in-law on whose moped they are sitting. She joked about the fact that there were few photographs of her, wondering if she had been too ugly to photograph, but admitted that she could not remember her family ever owning a camera. This photograph (figure 5) was probably taken by a friend of her sister’s when he visited. The wood-and-iron dwelling in the background, is typical of the poor neighbourhood where she lived. This poverty seems deliberately offset by the moped on which the three children are arranged. I contend that their association with this possession, even though it did not belong to them, endowed them with a sense of relative fortune which is preserved in the photograph, and contributed to why it has been kept for so long.

Both Fisher and Rhode shared stories of growing up in extreme poverty, without running water or electricity, and described experiences of forced removals and the effects of having parents and grandparents from

different population groups. Despite their poverty, an effort was made to take photographs, to document the images they wished to present to the world and to preserve the photograph for later generations. The photographs, I argue, record them in situations that challenge the apartheid discourse that would have them depicted as uncivilised.

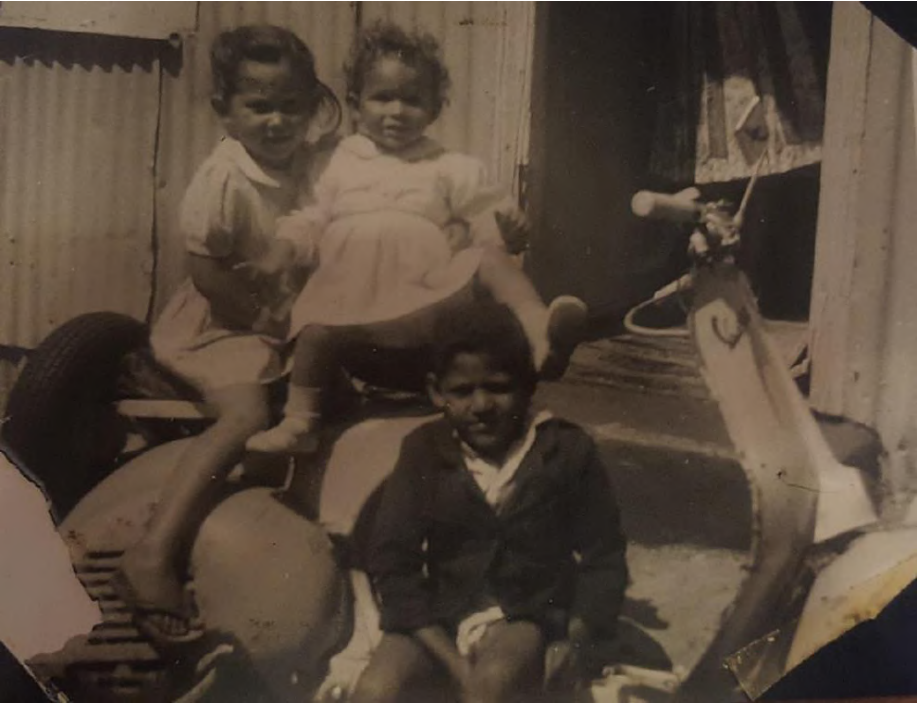


Figure 5

I believe that the concept of shame is fundamental to the experience of living ‘coloured’ lives in South Africa continues to influence how Fisher and Rhode live their lives despite the fact that they have not lived in South Africa for decades; the long reach of an oppressive past continues to inform the present. How deep-seated is this feeling of shame that needs to be cleaned away for us to present our best even with our friends and family, and, not to mention our own children?

### ***Women and the Burden of Shame***

The thread of shame runs through literature such as Sarah Millin's novel, *God's Stepchildren*, and Regina Naser's *Kinders van Ishmaël* which both deal with mixtures as tragic and sinful products of 'white' and 'black', and by implication, preached purity of the tribe (February 1981). This thread was further substantiated with the biblical reference to the curse of Ham in the Old Testament. As in the story of Ham, Millin's novel, which follows four generations of 'coloured' people, shows how the sins of the father are visited upon the son. There is no escape from the curse, the implication being that oppression was something that 'coloured' people deserved for past wrongdoings. The thread of shame extends to the implementation of the Immorality Act as demonstrated by Vernon February in his book, *Mind Your Colour* (1981). February (1981) contends that there is irrefutable proof that Afrikaner political ideas were shaped by the stereotypes as found in these texts. He offers as an example cabinet minister, Eben Dönges, quoting from the novels of Millin and Naser, to support his proposal of the law prohibiting sexual relations between 'blacks' and 'whites' in 1948. The Immorality Act of 1927, which prohibited intercourse between Europeans and natives, was amended in 1950 and 1957 to prohibit sex between 'whites' and 'non-whites'. The Act, says Sparks (2003), was the 'ultimate in human insults' inflicted on the 'coloured' people, 'a statutory declaration that the coloured people should never have existed, that their procreation was a sin and a crime which should have been prevented' (Sparks 2003: 86).

I assert that women were more likely to carry the burden of the shame that is entwined with the objectification of 'black' bodies as possessions, as sexual objects and as a source of labour. Sexual violence was fundamental to the colonisation of the Cape, when the Slave Lodge served as a *de facto* brothel to satisfy the sexual needs of garrison soldiers and passing sailors. Double standards existed from the beginning — 'white' colonists were granted sexual license to 'black' women's bodies, while 'black' men's access to 'white' women's bodies was violently policed (Baderoon 2014; McKinnon 2004). Baderoon (2014) observes that, since indigenous and enslaved women were regarded as promiscuous and inferior to their colonial masters, 'it is unsurprising that black bodies in South Africa have been imbued with unsettling sexualised meanings since colonial times' (Baderoon 2014: 86). The colonial exploitation and violation of 'black' women's bodies as perverse sexual objects and the 'construction of woman as racialized and sexualized

other' is most clearly illustrated by the case of Sarah Baartman, the Khoi woman who was paraded around London and Paris between 1810 and 1815 (Wicomb 1998). Even after her death her body was dissected and displayed in a French museum where her pronounced buttocks and genitalia continued to be held up as an example of both racial difference and inferiority (Mountain 2003).

After emancipation, the missions encouraged the European ideas of men working, women running the home and children attending school. The role of the man soon became that of an economic one while women took on the responsibility for maintaining the cultural values and ethics of the mission community (Viall *et al.* 2011: 71-72). This correlated with the past roles the enslaved played, the women in charge of running the farm household while the men laboured outside. Because of the socialisation of women into the role of homemaker, the establishment of respectability in 'coloured' communities generally fell onto their shoulders, since 'coloured' men were stereotyped as problematic and 'coloured' families as dysfunctional. Later, the state and religious structures intervened in family life, granting housing allowances to women so that they could become 'respectable' homeowners and community leaders (Ross 2015: S98).

I contend that it follows then that 'coloured' women would subject their homes and their families to rigorous practices in order to be seen as decent and respectable. Taking control over how they were represented was a way to challenge their designation as inferior and was a form of resistance to counter the dominant narrative of negativity. Since their homes and children were all they had control over, I posit that this became their site of struggle.

Both material possessions and clothing became significant markers of status during and after slavery since they had been subjected to such tight regulations. Attire for slaves was strictly controlled, down to the type and colour of fabric which were acceptable to wear<sup>6</sup>. A blanket rule in the colonial

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<sup>6</sup> The first distinction would have been between the clothed and the unclothed – respectable people had most of their bodies covered while savages (indigenous people as well as the poor) exposed their torsos and limbs; distinctions also developed between 'slave and free, Christian and Muslim, young and adult, man and woman, town and country, military and civilian, Dutch-speaker and English-speaker, the mourning and the celebrating, clergy and laity' (Ross 2004: 86).

world was that the enslaved could not wear shoes, making barefoot the mark of the enslaved. Hats were banned and women wore mostly castoffs from the slave-owners' wives (Schoeman 2012; Ross 2004). These restrictions not only prevented them from expressing individuality and culture, but also from demonstrating any signs of upward mobility, no matter how small. Apart from dress designating their inferior status, related misdemeanours presented opportunities for punishment.

Given these regulations and the markers attached to dress, I contend that it is likely to have led to the over-emphasis of dress post-emancipation, when those who were free could exercise more control over how they wished to present themselves. I further assert that dress became a more permanent marker of status and respectability among the descendants of the enslaved, as evidenced in many of the photographs that were shared with me. Jefferson (2016: 222), in her memoir, *Negroland*, in which she chronicles the rise of America's 'black' upper class from a personal perspective, refers to her mother's clothes — 'suits and furs, gloves and well-fixed hats – the cloche, toque, beret and turban, the pillbox, the angled brim' – as armour that protected her against 'exclusion and inferiority'. All the participants in my study described the importance of keeping up appearances through the way they dressed and conducted themselves, many of them despite the difficult conditions in which they lived. Hardisty (2018) said they were '*brandarm* (extremely poor) but I had beautiful clothes that my mother knitted and sewed, because you had to dress a certain way'.

Paulse (2002) points out that 'coloured' residents in Tramway Road and Ilford Street, Sea Point, compensated for the general working-class (because of tenancy conditions and landlord neglect) conditions of their homes, by signalling the distinctions in class and status through language and respectability and through the ownership of material possessions such as a telephone or a car, both of which indicated an elevated status. Photographs taken on special occasions often record an inventory of possessions – such as that of a new car, or on birthdays that show tables laden with food, set out on tableware reserved for special occasions. They defy the official apartheid narrative of what it meant to be 'coloured' and prove that people dressed a certain way or owned certain things. The images convey a negotiation of respectability, creating a sense of self-worth, as Smith (1999) and Willis (1999) observe in reference to photographs black people took during the pre-civil rights era in America.

## **Conclusion**

Social worker and researcher, Brené Brown (2008: 30) defines shame as 'the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging ... shame creates feelings of fear, blame and disconnection' and is the source of destructive behaviour. Shame, she says, is used variously as a tool to teach, to discipline and to humiliate us and, is a serious social problem. Shame is about perfectionism and inadequacy, about belonging and acceptance. It permeates our personal and public lives because we are unable or unwilling to talk about it (Brown 2008). I agree with Brown's assertion that shame is an effective tool in silencing us and the less we engage with it, the more power it exerts over our lives. It reinforces the importance of initiating dialogue about the experience of shame related to living through apartheid.

As we celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first democratic elections, racial stereotypes remain firmly fixed in the psyche of the majority of South Africans. If slavery, colonialism and apartheid were about dehumanising the body, then how do we look at transformation as re-humanising the body? More than simply the dismantling of apartheid legislation needs to be done in order that we may construct ways of life in which we acknowledge our human-ness rather than other-ness. In a paper titled, *And What About the Human?* Bogues (2012) explores practices of freedom from the perspective of the oppressed and within the framework of new archives. He questions the use of alternative archives in the landscape where record keeping is oral and the work of memory and suggests the possibility of a different set of archives which includes music, art and religious practices. Practices of freedom are intended to construct new ways of human association, new ways for us to live as humans, and, in order to achieve that, we 'need to write an alternative history of thought' (Bogues 2012: 46).

The incredulity of the apartheid laws and repercussions stand in stark contrast to the normalcy of our lives. The subjugation that was marked on our bodies, on our skin, hair, bone and facial features, was a visual representation of difference. I propose therefore, that a visual counter was required to resist and subvert this oppression, and this subversion is evident in the efforts towards the self-representation of the oppressed women. The personal body and home of the oppressed became the canvas on which to write a counter-narrative to that propagated by those in power.



Ross (2015) uses the word *ordentlikheid* (decency and respectability) to describe the process whereby women (usually) can mould people with morality, people who know their place in the hierarchy and respect and conform to the dictates of authority. Through respectability, people, particularly women, can produce decent people even in immoral conditions (Ross 2015). Ross (2015) found that women gravitated towards roles as community leaders and were the core around which households were formed. Often, they were also the breadwinners, while ensuring that respectability was established not only in the family but also within the community. ‘Anybody’s mother or aunt could discipline you or go to your parents to complain about your behaviour’ (Wentzel 2018). The efforts of our mothers and grandmothers remain in the background and are ignored when history is written. However, despite the conditions under which they were forced to live, they strove to be *ordentlik*, to live with dignity and to establish and maintain the household’s social status. Through the practices of dress, social manners and home-keeping, ‘coloured’ women were able to take control over how they were perceived and, in so doing, resist the apartheid regime by reconstituting an affirmative sense of self.

Through this study which is in part auto-ethnographic, my own attempts to find meaning for what it means to be named and understood as ‘coloured’ in a democratic South Africa, I hope to have offered others a platform for the expression of narratives through which we may come to terms with the past. By connecting the lines between all our stories, we recognise our common humanity; we move beyond only seeing the other, and towards freedom and equality so that we may think about how we may live. Only then may we learn how to be human.

## **Note on Terminology**

I believe that the concept of ‘colouredness’ is neither a biological nor an ethnic identity, but rather a result of apartheid social engineering. I reject this label and race as a concept and consider myself a South African. The term ‘coloured’ refers to people of mixed descent, previously classified as such under the apartheid government. I am mindful that ‘coloured’ has different connotations in Britain and the United States of America, but my use of the word is specific to the South African context. Since it is impossible to move away from race markers in this discussion, I have chosen to write ‘coloured’, ‘black’ and ‘white’ with small letters and in single quotation marks.

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