

Notes

1. Orr, *Poetry as Survival*.
2. Orr, *Richer Entanglement*, 15.
3. Eisner, "On the Difference"; Eisner, "Persistent Tensions."
4. Forché, "Twentieth Century Poetry"; Forché, "The Poetry of Witness."

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8.

Race and Identity in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Making Coloredness Visible through Poetic Inquiry

Heidi van Rooyen,

Human Sciences Research Council in South Africa, ZA

South Africa takes great pride in its vibrant and diverse democracy. But, there is much-unfinished work in the new South Africa. During Apartheid, the label "Colored" was applied to all people with mixed-race ancestry and with it varying degrees of privilege and misfortune. While the perspectives of the majority Blacks and minority Whites have dominated the country's reconciliation project, the story of coloredness, of those neither this nor that, suspended somewhere between white and black, has been largely invisible. In contemporary South Africa, some reject the racialized label in an attempt to move forward from this discriminatory past. Others believe a necessary part of moving on lies in unearthing the stories of this past that have shaped who we are and color what we bring to this new democracy. Using both found and generated poems, this chapter explores issues of race, class, identity, and belonging for those classified as Colored. It argues that in order to achieve social cohesion, this complex and contested identity needs to be unpacked, these stories must be told as they are an important part of the country's history.

Keywords: race, identity, coloredness, poetic inquiry, South Africa

Introduction and Background

In South Africa, the term colored has a particular meaning. It does not refer to Black people in general as it does in many other contexts, as in Britain

and the United States. Since 1927, Coloreds were one of four classified ethnic groups identified during the period of white rule in South Africa alongside Whites, Blacks, and Indians.¹ This system of classification remained post-democracy in 1994, even though much of the apartheid legislation was abolished. Apartheid constructed a hierarchical society in which race functioned as the most salient category of identity. It defined how resources were allocated, where people lived and went to school, and who they married and had sex with. Bound to the political system, race became inextricably tied to social life through its entrenchment in law and policy. Coloreds held an intermediate status in the South African racial hierarchy, distinct from the historically dominant white minority and the majority black population. This in-between status, of being close to whiteness, yet seeing blackness as other, of privilege and oppression is an enduring feature of colored identity.

Coloreds are descendants of the sexual liaisons between colonialists, slaves, the indigenous Khoisan, and other groups who settled in the country.² Coloreds are often stereotyped as being "mixed breed," of being without identity, land, or culture. This stereotype is contrasted with the image of Black people as proud, "pure breeds" with history, culture, and identity going back centuries.³ These ideas were informed by social Darwinism, which implied that people born as a result of miscegenation lacked the positive characteristics of the "pure races" they combined, but embodied all the negative ones.⁴ Coloredness has often been tainted with notions of negativity, deviance, and illegitimacy.⁵

While the perspectives of the majority blacks and minority whites have dominated the country's reconciliation project, the story of coloredness has been largely invisible.⁶ A necessary part of the South African story lies in uncovering the social meanings and consequences of this bureaucratically constructed identity. Poetry and poetry inquiry offer a creative avenue for doing some of this work, for unpacking the story of colored identity in the new South Africa.⁷ While I identify as colored, and had been writing poetry for a few years, I had not written on issues of race and identity for academic purposes. I had also not used poetry in my research work. Poetic inquiry provided a useful opportunity for bringing the personal and political together.

Methodology

I used found and generated poems⁸ to capture insights into the contextual, emotional, and psychological experience of coloredness. Found poems were developed through my reading of South African literature addressing issues of identity and belonging among coloreds during the Apartheid period and

post-democracy. Following Glesne; Richardson; Sullivan, Butler-Kisber, Commeyras, and Stewart, in reading I noted recurring themes.⁹ The following four themes seemed to characterize coloredness: a negatively defined identity, a sense of marginalization, assimilation with whiteness, and an intermediate status. In each theme, I noted words, images, and phrases that seemed to capture the essence of the theme. In staying true to the texts, the writer's unique rhythm, pauses, emphasis, syntax, and diction were replicated in creating the poems. Although no words were altered, "poetic license"¹⁰ was used to rearrange the words in a different order than in the original text, and in some cases, repetition was used for emphasis. In addition to the found poems, in engaging with the literature on coloredness, I also generated a poem capturing my experience of living this identity.

Coloredness Negatively Defined

Coloreds were defined in a negative fashion, as an artificial category imposed from above by the White elite for political purposes. Wicomb, in her analysis of colored identity, traces links of shame with lack of visibility and recognition from the ways the group was described in the Population Registration Act of 1950.¹¹

The definition of a colored
is someone that is not black
and is not white
and is also not an Indian.
In other words
a non-person.
They are the leftovers.
They are the people that were left after the
nations were sorted out.
They are the rest.

In addition to being defined in a negative fashion, or as an artificial category imposed by the white government, coloreds were believed to carry a number of inbred characteristics resulting from miscegenation.¹² As a group, coloreds often struggled to represent themselves as a genuine people with their own peculiar history, customs, and identity.

No matter how respectable you become
or your level of personal achievement
the taint of that original sin
remains entrenched.

You will be reminded
how early colonists
plucked vagrant colored women off the beach
put them in their kitchens as slaves
and fucked them like beasts
to produce
you—
half-caste
bastard.

You will be reminded
you were
conceived in sin.
That you are defective
a special breed
physically stunted
lacking in endurance
prone to dishonesty
licentiousness and drink.

You will be reminded
you are
God's step-children.

Assimilation

To survive in this hierarchical society that pitted ethnic groups against each other and made white privilege the ultimate goal, coloreds opted to assimilate with white.¹³ The hope was that assimilation of whiteness and promotion of its interests would lead to acceptance. Acceptance was viewed as the best possible chance for colored people to maintain a status of relative privilege.¹⁴

Coloreds strove to demonstrate
their white-mindedness.
White man's culture represented achievement.
Conformity with its values and practices,
a measure of social development
and individual accomplishment.
Their advanced levels of culture and civilization,
the ultimate ticket for inclusion
into the body politic.

Assimilation was also more intimately expressed and felt, informing hierarchies in families and communities governed by degrees of lightness of skin color and straightness of hair.¹⁵ For some, assimilation required disowning your colored identity, your roots, your family, your community. Those with light skin could cross the racial barrier and obtain better housing, education, and job opportunities, and were able to marry white people.

The surest route for social advancement
was by being white in mind, spirit, and achievement.
This desire for assimilation
evident amongst those
willing to disown their identity,
turn their backs on friends,
family, and former lives.
Prepared to take the risk of exposure
in an attempt to pass for white.

Intermediate Status

Coloreds have an in-between status, of being close to whiteness, yet seeing blackness as other. This intermediate status of coloreds was experienced in several conflicting ways. One way to navigate this was to assimilate.¹⁶ While coloreds tried to hold onto privilege, they also feared being demoted and subordinated in the hierarchy like Blacks. But, no matter how well you assimilated, you always knew that you were "not quite white" enough.

Erasmus has written of her personal experience of being steeped in this way of thinking: "knowing that I was not only not white, but less than white; not only not black, but better than black."¹⁷ This sense of feeling less than white, but better than black continues to shape relations between coloreds and Blacks. Black people view coloreds with suspicion and resentment because overall they benefited more from the social system than Blacks located at the bottom of the hierarchy. Similarly, coloreds were wary of the Black group that could vent its frustrations and displaced aggression toward Whites onto them.¹⁸ Magardie also shows how less than white, better than black emerges within coloredness, too, not just in relation to Blacks. She points to a prejudice—not just directed at "the Blacks" but at other coloreds who look and act "too black."¹⁹ Light-skinned-person-of-color privilege existed under Apartheid, and it exists today. Instead of checking this privilege in terms of how they locate themselves in relation to the majority in this country, far too many coloreds either see themselves as victims of the national democratic project, or as superior to other Blacks. This

intermediate status also expresses itself as a sense of marginalization in relation to both Blacks and Whites. The lament that "first we were not white enough and now we are not black enough" has become a common refrain amongst colored people who feel alienated from the post-apartheid order.²⁰ Many coloreds feel marginalized in the post-apartheid dispensation, and are especially resentful at what they perceive to be a preferential allocation of resources to Blacks, especially in the Western Cape, where their needs are just as great.²¹

Engaging with other writers on this topic was instructive in reflecting on aspects of my identity. In response, I generated the following poem.

I looked different.
In a family from charcoal black
to breadcrust brown
sallow yellow and
off-white cream
I could pass for white.
I talked different.
I didn't talk colored.
I twanged.
Words spilled out
careful and clipped
stripped of blackness
and of home.
That accent helped me
navigate a path
away from the stench
of the oil refinery
that made grannies sick
and left children
with permanent colds.
That twang
gave me safe passage
past the gangsters
shoring up their despair
and sagging jeans
with knives and needles.
But a twang
doesn't cover all your holes.
You can talk like them

move in their circles
buy their homes
drive their cars
but you still leave your family
coughing against pollution
dodging gangsters
running out of hankies
to wipe the kids' snotty noses.²²

Conclusion

While legalized racial discrimination no longer exists in South Africa, race continues to play a powerful role in social and political life insofar as people continue to use apartheid-manufactured racial categories to identify themselves and others.²³ The experience of coloredness in contemporary South Africa's race politics is complex and contradictory.²⁴ While there was a strong tendency for people to accept a separate identity for colored people under the apartheid system of government, many argue that this offensive creation of apartheid or of racist mindsets should simply be dismissed.²⁵

Others hold the view that as offensive as the term colored was, people continue to resort to it lacking any other word that would demarcate this particular racial identity created and then reified by recent apartheid legislation.²⁶ There remains for many a need to assert and to acknowledge this ethnic, cultural, and/or racial identity as it evokes a sense of self, community, and belonging.²⁷ If shame defined colored identity from the start, reclaiming coloredness can be viewed as an attempt to project a positive self-image in the face of pervasive negative racial stereotyping, and perhaps as a way to finally negate shame.²⁸ The complexities of colored identity need to be unpacked further. This paper has shown that it is possible to use arts-based approaches such as poetry to provide new avenues for acknowledgement and articulation of Coloredness in post-apartheid South Africa. Creative methods such as poetic inquiry, narratives, spoken portraits, and art give voice to the speaker rather than the researcher, privilege narrative, and capture depth of experiences.²⁹ All of these are critical ingredients for a reimagining of the race and identity project in this country.

The underlying assumption is that there is something fundamentally wrong with this identity and that some ideological transformation of the bearers of the identity will resolve the problems.³⁰ But this work needs to be done within the larger context of identity constructions in South Africa.

Rather than being merely human or South African citizens, South Africans continue to identify themselves as racial subjects. The deep infiltration of apartheid's racial menu into the everyday race thinking of South Africans plays itself out in myriad daily social interactions, and reproduces in social life that which has been declared statutorily obsolete.³¹ Membership of these races is based on physical characteristics and the attribution of distinct characteristics to each group. Associated with each of these are sets of social scripts that operate as a resource that continues to be drawn on in the performance of raced identities.³² The fact that in contemporary South Africa, debate continues about whether coloreds are "real blacks" speaks to the continuity of these raced identities, as well as the deep-seated and uncomfortable issues that haven't been resolved by the rainbow nation project.³³ Unless these issues are addressed, they will continue to fester in a cauldron of bitterness that could boil over. Evidence of this appeared during sporadic service delivery protests in parts of Gauteng and the Western Cape where coloreds have gone on the rampage and things have taken an ugly, racial twist.³⁴

A reimagining and re-representation of coloredness may locate the community as a subgroup of a larger African identity. Magardie argues that doing this will negate the sense of non-belonging that remains an undercurrent of the identity.³⁵ This re-representation need not mean that coloreds lose the specificities of their own identity as there are a multitude of ethnicities in the broader African identity. However, this reconstruction is not something that is entirely dependent on coloreds themselves, it requires all South Africans to change their perceptions and ways of interaction.

Notes

1. Christopher, "To Define the Indefinable."
2. Adhikari, "Contending Approaches"; Adhikari, "Hope, Fear, Shame, Frustration."
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Hendricks, "Debating Coloured Identity"; Adhikari, "Contending Approaches."
6. Hendricks, "Debating Coloured Identity"; Bornman, "Emerging Patterns."
7. Butler-Kisber, "Poetic Inquiry."
8. Faulkner, "Concern with Craft."

9. Glesne, "That Rare Feeling"; Richardson, "Poetic Representation"; Sullivan, Butler-Kisber, Commeyas, and Stewart, "Constructing Data Poems."
10. Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 87.
11. Wicomb, "Miskien."
12. Adhikari, "Contending Approaches"; Adhikari, "Hope, Fear, Shame, Frustration."
13. Ibid.
14. Adhikari, "Contending Approaches."
15. Erasmus, "Oe"; Erasmus, "Contact Theory."
16. Adhikari, "Contending Approaches"; Adhikari, "Hope, Fear, Shame, Frustration."
17. Erasmus, "Introduction," 13.
18. Bowler and Vincent, "Contested Constructions."
19. Magardie, "It's Time to Talk."
20. Adhikari, "Not Black Enough"; Hendricks, "Debating Coloured Identity"; Bowler and Vincent, "Contested Constructions."
21. Magardie, "It's Time to Talk."
22. Adhikari, "Hope, Fear, Shame, Frustration." Refers to Kole Omotoso's description of the phenotypical features of coloreds as ranging "from charcoal black to breadcrust brown, sallow yellow and finally off-white cream that wants to pass for white."
23. Dolby, "The Shifting Ground"; Zack, "The Fluid Symbol."
24. Bowler and Vincent, "Contested Constructions."
25. Bornman, "Emerging Patterns"; Bowler and Vincent, "Contested Constructions"; Magardie, "It's Time to Talk."
26. Wicomb, "Miskien"; Bornman, "Emerging Patterns."
27. Zegeye, "A Matter of Colour."
28. Wicomb, "Miskien."
29. Faulkner, "Concern with Craft."
30. Hendricks, "Debating Coloured Identity."
31. Bowler and Vincent, "Contested Constructions."
32. Ibid.
33. Magardie, "It's Time to Talk."
34. Hendricks, "Debating Coloured Identity"; Magardie, "It's Time to Talk."
35. Magardie, "It's Time to Talk."

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