

THE "LIVES OF COLOUR" EXHIBITION. SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL GALLERY, SEPTEMBER 1999

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THE LIVES OF COLOUR EXHIBITION.¹ SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL GALLERY, SEPTEMBER 1999

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Lives of Colour formed part of the *Lines of Sight* photographic exhibition held in 1999 at the South African National Gallery (SANG). Under the theme, *Lines of Sight*, the SANG invited a range of curators to put on an exhibition to coincide with the conference, 'Encounters with Photography: Photographing People in Southern Africa, 1860-1999', held simultaneously at the South African Museum (SAM). After walking through several of the *Lines of Sight* exhibition rooms, one came to a small room where the *Lives of Colour* exhibition occupied its space in the SANG. Curated by Emile Maurice, *Lives of Colour* is a relatively small exhibition of approximately thirty personal photographs. The photographs are largely drawn from the family album of the curator, from personal friends and from various people who shared in his broader community. Maurice's project appears twofold: it is explicitly about making the personal, in photography, political as well as arguing for a critical revaluation of the use and status of personal photography in the public sphere.²

Lives of Colour shared the gallery space with much larger exhibitions such as Michael Godby's 'The Evolution of Documentary Photography in South Africa as shown in a Comparison between the Carnegie Inquiries into Poverty'.³ The former exhibition concerned the visual representation of coloured South Africans during the 1950s and 1960s, using personal photographs. The latter explored the visual representation of poor white South Africans or *armblankes*, using documentary photographs taken by the official 1929 Carnegie Commission into white poverty. The gallery audience therefore moved through several of the exhibitions which make up *Lines of Sight* before arriving at the smaller room where *Lives of Colour* was on display. It is important to stress that *Lives of Colour* was thus located within the structuring context of the gallery, and in a particular relation to the other exhibitions, as well as the gallery audience. It is within this triangular relationship that particular meanings about the images in the exhibition are produced and circulated.

To exhibit one's work in such a context means asking for or conferring status upon that work and such a process involves selectors, managers, funding bodies and administrators within the gallery system. A consideration of the rank of photographers and artists who themselves have faced many obstacles along the

1 This review is a condensed version of the chapter, 'The *Lives of Colour* Exhibition', in my MA mini-thesis entitled 'Collecting, Documenting and Exhibiting the Photograph' (University of the Western Cape, forthcoming 2001).

2 In conversation with Emile Maurice, SANG, 1999.

3 M. Godby, 'The Evolution of Documentary Photography in South Africa as shown in a Comparison between the Carnegie Inquiries into Poverty (1932 and 1984)' in J.-E. Lundstrom and K. Pierre, eds., *Democracy's Images: Photography and Visual Art after Apartheid* (Umea, 1998).

path to institutional, commercial or critical acclaim needs also to be taken into account. In such a process, Solomon-Godeau argues that the framing context within which exhibitions are produced influences photographic meaning, because this context goes beyond the obviousness of the gallery wall.⁴ The exhibitions that made up the *Lines of Sight* project as a whole are thus located within what Solomon-Godeau describes as ‘structured environments’.⁵ These environments are influenced by captions and text, sequenced images and physical spaces, as well as other competing images, and this impacts in various ways on how the *Lives of Colour* (and other) exhibition(s) will be read and interpreted. Therefore, to consider the SANG a public art institution is to take into account that it contains a number of external structuring relationships that influence that which it selects to hang on its walls, but these structuring relationships are seldom addressed.

In considering the context of the gallery space within which the *Lives of Colour* exhibition took place, Patricia Davidson’s article ‘Museums and the Reshaping of Memory’ is instructive. Davidson warns of the structured spaces within galleries and museums where particular concepts of democracy are at play that allow certain ‘voices’ to be heard more clearly than those of others.⁶ Emile Maurice agrees that a real problem arises when those who are producing work for very different reasons find their work (now stripped from its context and currency) hanging ‘randomly’ alongside work that has been produced in very different forms of struggle.⁷

Davidson’s concern is with the ways in which ‘museums institutionalize certain forms of knowledge, and perpetuate stereotypes in the name of scientific inquiry’.⁸ This is because the role of the museum is integrally connected to the role of memory. It means that like memory, the museum is perceived as a mediator between past, present, and future. Davidson emphasises however that ‘unlike personal memory, which is animated by an individual’s lived experience, museums give material form to authorized versions of the past, which in time become institutionalized as public memory’.⁹ It is this structuring characteristic of the museum that is also of concern to Solomon-Godeau in relation to the gallery. Galleries are powerful public institutions involved in the making of memory.

Photographs, like monuments and sites, connect the past and the present because they provide clues to remembering. The tangibility of photographs as objects are particularly salient in relation to memory. As time passes, these objects or material reminders accrue other varied meanings and in this process they accumulate different layers of memory. The importance we attach to the events of the past changes in relation to the politics of the present, and this change is most visible in the public sphere. However, within the images of the past a surplus or excess of meaning remains, waiting to be made and remade, and

4 A.Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock* (Minneapolis, 1991), 180.

5 *Ibid.*, 180.

6 P.Davidson, ‘Museums and the Reshaping of Memory’ in S.Nuttall and C.Coetzee, eds., *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1998).

7 In conversation with Emile Maurice, 1999.

8 Davidson, ‘Museums and the Reshaping of Memory’, 145.

9 *Ibid.*

while galleries or museums may control and configure memories in exhibitions and collections, they do not necessarily contain them.

In South Africa, change in all spheres of society has become prescribed by the new political dispensation and the project of memory of the past, and of history, has taken on immense proportions. In this context, how the past is represented 'officially', in museums especially, galleries, and the heritage industry, has been re-examined and remade according to the new national intention which reflects a post-apartheid change in the priorities of the SANG and the SAM.¹⁰ However, pertinent to my discussion is Davidson's warning (in thinking about museum practice as well as new exhibition projects) that within this context of transformation, previous structures of power and domination continue to exist within these institutions.¹¹

Within the reconfiguration of institutional practices the old power relations continue to naturalize and render invisible as *practice* the institutional authority in collecting and exhibiting objects. When exhibitions take their place in the gallery and objects become collections in museums, they inevitably become caught within the general intellectual trends and discourses of such institutions.¹² That *Lives of Colour* occupied a small space at the rear end of the gallery is thus significant. It is perhaps suggestive of the marginalisation of personal photography within the gallery system as a whole, or of the division between the private and the public, where official and documentary photographs are privileged as more 'truthful' and thus more firmly located in the public sphere. In order to subvert and challenge such hegemonic practices, Davidson suggests that 'If public memory is to be more than a dominant mythology, new ways of evoking multiple memories will have to be found'.¹³ The *Lives of Colour* exhibition set out to do exactly this and Maurice's use of personal photographs is crucial to this challenge.

In light of this, the use of personal photographs from family albums, unlike the rest of the *Lines of Sight* exhibition, disrupts the space of the gallery by pushing the boundaries of the documentary form, as conventionally understood, within the gallery system. This has to be emphasized because personal photographs only become placed within social reality when the images define a particular historical moment, or 'event' or personality.¹⁴ The idea that personal photographs have a limited documentary currency within historical and documentary practice is linked to the idea that only history and the documentary occur within the public domain. This idea does not explore or raise questions about the counter-histories that personal photographs offer and how these 'may be seen in terms which are simultaneously personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday and historic'.¹⁵ A critical question is thus, what meaning is then to be made of a small exhibition of personal photographs located within a huge public institution, like the SANG, alongside larger exhibitions of more 'official' or documentary images?

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, 151–2.

12 L. Wells, ed., *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London, 1997).

13 Davidson, 'Museums and the Reshaping of Memory', 153.

14 J. Spence, *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression* (London, 1995); A. Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London, 1995) and P. Holland, *Family Snaps: The Meaning of Domestic Photography* (London, 1991).

15 Kuhn (quoting John Berger), *Family Secrets*, 7.

The *Lives of Colour* Exhibition in the South African National Gallery, 1999

My review of the exhibition is guided by a feeling of uneasiness, sensed in viewing this representation and interpretation of coloured social history and identity. This uneasiness may also be the result of a particular sensitivity I feel to this period in my – South African – history, culture and identity. In critically viewing the exhibition and its concerns, I am forced to ask: what is the narrative of *Lives of Colour*? What are its components? And to whom does this narrative speak? In light of my own position in relation to this exhibition, I question whether I accept and keep, or reject and remake, this visual record of my past.

The photographs in the *Lives of Colour* exhibition were arranged to display a thematic progression from photographs of childhood, adolescence, love, to courtship, marriage, and adulthood. Aspects of coloured social life such as religion, music, sport, politics and feelings such as joy, pride, sadness, and loneliness were also included. Captions accompanied each photograph to indicate the theme within which the image is located. The curator also placed the images within contexts by adding a narrative text beneath the image to anchor it. As such the exhibition literally reads, both visually and textually, like a semi-autobiographical novel.

The exhibition begins with a series of personal photographs under the theme ‘Offspring’.¹⁶ Figure 1 is included within this theme and is captioned ‘Squeaky Clean!’ Like many of the photographs included in this theme, it is a studio portrait taken by the infamous Van Kalker Studio photographer, located in central Cape Town. Van Kalker was established in 1938 by J.G. van Kalker, a Dutch immigrant trained in photography in Europe. He proved to be the most popular studio photographer amongst his specifically coloured clientele.¹⁷ His popularity is evident not only in the longevity of his studio (which still exists today), but also in the huge photographic archive amassed since its establishment. Van Kalker’s popularity was the result of his studio’s accessibility to main transport routes, which even with the imposition of the Group Areas Act of 1950 remained popular and accessible. Secondly, he was relatively inexpensive yet offered a good quality print. Thirdly, he was skilled at recognizing and capturing the ‘essence’ of the subject’s personality and sense of self.¹⁸

The exhibition provides no clues to Van Kalker’s European origins or to how this may have influenced his work or his mixed (coloured, white and African) clientele. Instead, it appears that Van Kalker’s portraits are ‘read’ as an exploration of his clientele’s private and collective histories. My concern is with the ways in which these photographs represented coloured people, to themselves, to their communities, to their broader society. Useful to my analysis is the

16 I prefer to use the term personal photographs above that of family photographs because our personal lives include so much more than our family lives. Personal photographs thus refer to all photographs intended for personal use, this includes professional studio photographs, postcards, those taken by clubs and societies, photographs of special events, special places or famous people.

17 Thanks to K. Blair for allowing me to cite her unpublished Honours research paper, ‘“A Featherweight Portable Museum”. The Portrait Photography of the Van Kalker Studio, Woodstock, 1949–1979’ (University of Cape Town, 1999).

18 *Ibid.*, 6–7.



Figure 1. Squeaky Clean!

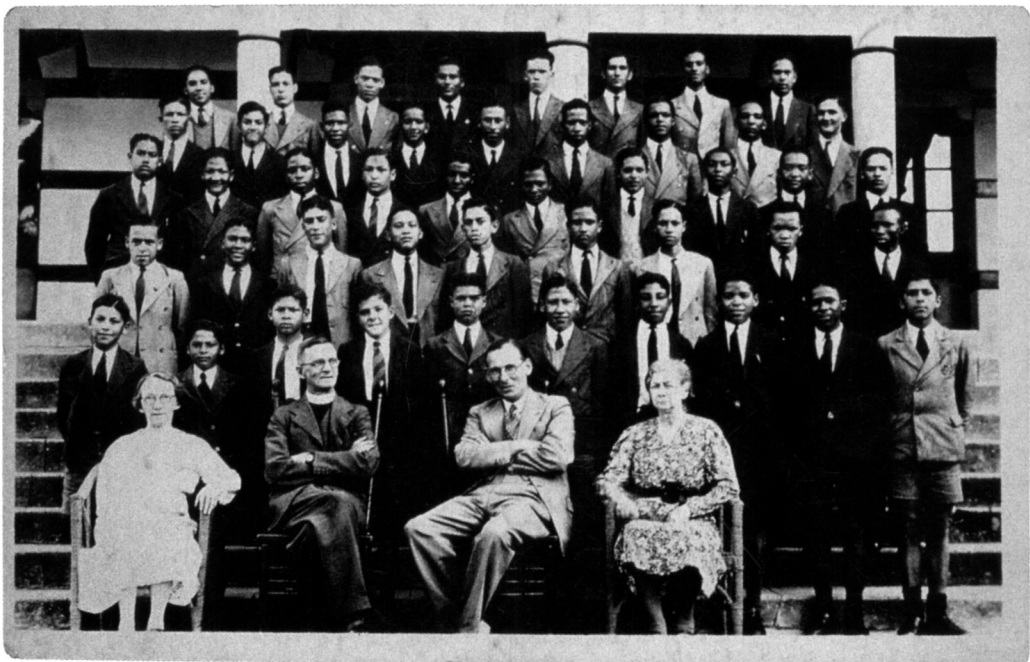
*Figure 1.2. Abdullah Kamar, his wife,
and seven of his nine children.*





Figure 2. The Magic Rose school play.

Figure 2.1. School Days: English Only Please!



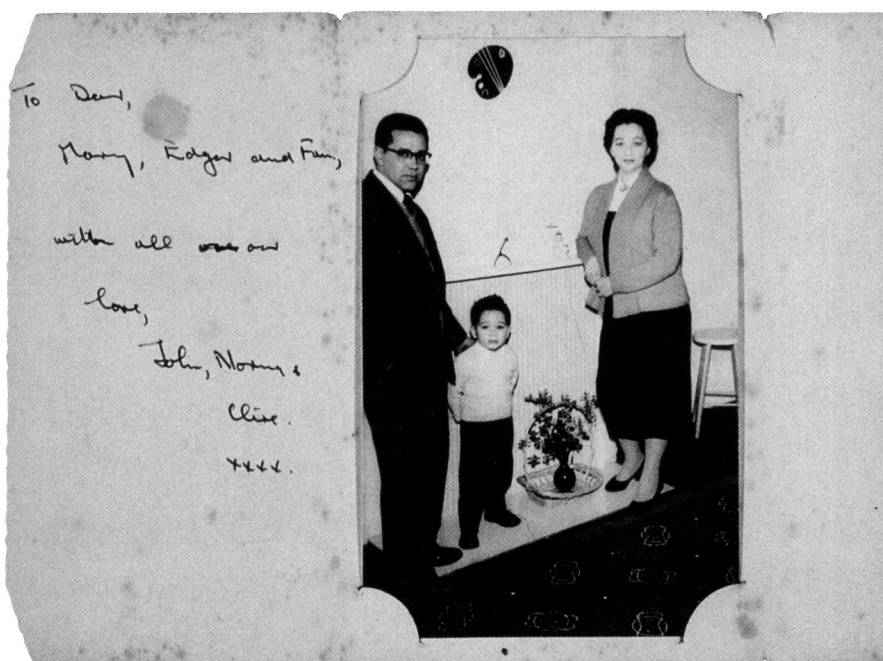


Figure 3. Emigration.



Figure 4. The Great Outdoors.

Figure 4.1. Edgar Maurice CA 84061.





Figure 5. Bride of the Month.

Figure 5.1. In-laws prefer Gentlemen.





Figure 6. Front Door with Shadows.

Figure 6.1. Front Door, Daughter and Stoep.



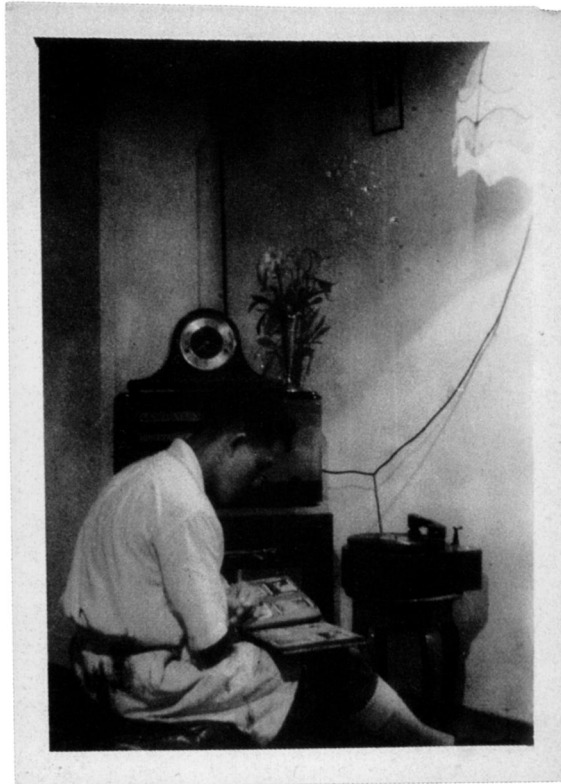


Figure 7. Taking Care of Memories.

description by an interviewee about Van Kalker's popularity, that '[he] provided a very high quality of work and that his customers were in fact more "quality minded" than their white counterparts.'¹⁹

The photograph in Figure 1 was taken around 1950 and belongs to Mary Maurice, who is seated in the middle of her young daughter and son. The narration beneath the caption explains that having a [Van Kalker] studio portrait taken was considered a tradition for many coloured families. The narrative concludes with the statement, 'If you were "coloured" and wanted squeaky clean for your children, Van Kalker was your man!'²⁰ The family in the photograph, as well as the other families included under the theme 'Offspring', certainly look 'squeaky clean'. This is evident in the neat clothes they are wearing and their clean physical appearance. This description also extends to the poses they assume, the upright body posture, neatly folded hands and legs, which convey an image of respectability.

It is perhaps the daughter on the left of the photograph who resists being framed as 'Squeaky Clean'.²¹ Her shoulders are slightly slouched, her legs unfolded and the ribbons at the end of her plaits appear uneven and clumsy. This is not insignificant. It hints at a sub-text within the meta-narrative of cleanliness and respectability of the civilised family, within the images of the coloured community. A sub-text suggesting that not everyone participated in and shared in the rituals of bourgeois social reality and the Van Kalker tradition.

Portraits were very popular when the camera was first invented and photography in turn has come to shape not only what we now understand as portraiture, but also the individual and his or her relation to consciousness, to memory and embodiment.²² John Tagg notes that in nineteenth century Europe, 'To "have one's portrait done" was one of the symbolic acts by which individuals from the rising social classes made their ascent visible to themselves and others, and classed themselves among those who enjoyed social status'.²³ Portraiture was rooted in the rise of lower and middle classes in nineteenth century Europe, because of the way in which portraits allowed various social classes access to the social value offered by photography.

In the South African context this access to the social value of photography occurred much later – the early twentieth century for the black population. Whites were already having their portraits done a few decades earlier.²⁴ However, the conventions in portraiture hardly changed since photography's permeation into family life in South Africa as elsewhere in the world. The Van Kalker portraits reveal how these photographs undermined the indelible privilege historically connected to portraiture because they allowed coloured communities to renegotiate their social relationships within the broader social and political environment.²⁵ The photographs under the theme 'Offspring' do not simply suggest an

18 *Ibid.*, 10.

20 *The Lives of Colour* Exhibition, SANG 1999.

21 Thanks to A.Bank for alerting my attention to this point during editorial discussions.

22 G.Clarke, ed., *The Portrait in Photography* (London, 1992).

23 J.Tagg, *The Burden of Representation* (Minneapolis, 1988), 37.

24 K.Schoeman, *The Face of The Country* (Cape Town, 1996), 13–17.

imagining of the self in bourgeois terms, although it is this also. Rather, it integrally links the complexity of coloured identity and social relationships within the South African social and economic landscape.

In the period between 1948 and 1960, in South Africa, coloureds constantly deliberated over their identity. Indeed, in this period of change, a history of economic depression and intensified racial ideology at the start of the twentieth century saw the progressive exclusion of coloureds from social, political and economic sectors. The invocation of a coloured identity became a defense in a period where voting rights were being erased, and racism increasingly informed the apartheid government's social structuring.²⁶ The state actively pursued the division of African and coloured communities. This was further substantiated by non-Bantu-speaking coloureds differentiating themselves from Bantu-speakers, by virtue of practices like the Islamic religion and speaking the Afrikaans language.²⁷ On the one hand, coloured economic interests were better protected than those of Bantu-speaking Africans, but on the other hand their own economic advancement was continually undermined.

I suggest that the Van Kalker studio – his 'squeaky clean' portraiture – was part of a political strategy utilised by many coloureds to obscure the 'transgressive' elements of their Africanness and secondly, to visually demonstrate their equality with white people. Van Kalker promised coloured communities an image of the civilised, respectable, light-skinned, middle class coloured family and herein lies the popularity of Van Kalker. His images challenged the hegemony of the racialised white imagination. Therefore, the photographs under the theme 'Offspring', and the exhibition on the whole, do not simply suggest an imaging of coloured people in bourgeois terms. Instead, they also highlight the tensions within the broader coloured community around their collective and individual identity and history, within itself as well as within an unjust, racialised society.

In Figure 1 and Figure 1.2, the positioning of the mother is central in achieving the 'Squeaky Clean' image because she represents that universal notion of motherhood: the love of a mother for her children and the evidence and guarantee of that love in the appearance and care of her children. In Figure 1, the mother is centrally positioned in order to achieve this image of well-cared for children. In Figure 1.2, the mother figure is standing in the left-hand side of the photograph and is positioned above that of the father (who is seated somewhat off centre) and the younger children. This is a photograph of Abdullah Kamaar, his wife, and seven of his nine children. The image and narration collude in the notion that caring for one's family is a labour of love.

In the narration, beneath the captioned photograph, the curator explains that regardless of the expenses involved in raising this many children, for Kamaar, lots of children were seen to be a poor man's riches. Again the image and narrative collude in the idea of familial pride and pleasure by showing that even poorer families could afford 'Squeaky Clean' and so there is no real difference between the family in Figures 1 and Figure 1.2, and coloured families in general.

In Figure 2, a young ballerina gracefully sails through the air in front

of a magical backdrop in a photograph captioned ‘The Magic Rose school play’. No doubt, the production of this play involved hard work, months of planning and costly preparation. The photograph in Figure 2 attests to this achievement. There is nothing in the photograph itself which reveals the banning of the school from sporting events organised by the Western Province Primary School Sports Board. The narration explains that the school principal staged this play in the Joseph Stone Auditorium, considered a ‘no-go venue’ by anti-apartheid activists. Anti-apartheid activists boycotted the designation of separate civic and community spaces as ‘coloureds only’ by the state and such venues were blacklisted in the communities. In considering the image and its narrative, I am left wondering: what makes the Acting Principal of Silverlea Primary School go against anti-apartheid sentiment and stage his school play regardless of the fact that in the long run, his pupils were banned from participating in Western Province sports? Perhaps the answer lies in the cultural moment when the photographs were taken for it appears that there exists a familial ideology, an image to live up to, an image shaping the desire of an individual living in a social group that surpasses the context of apartheid. Hirsch argues that ‘photographs locate themselves precisely in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of family life’.²⁸ Photography is able to tap into precisely this narrative and imaginary power of the ideal family.²⁹

It is also possible to consider ‘the school’ as a particular type of family. Judith Williams, in a chapter titled ‘Family, Education, Photography’, argues that the rise of family photography – both photographs of the family and the situating of photography within the family – is not an innocent event, but part of the powerful production and reproduction of the bourgeois family form.³⁰ Williamson explores the crucial functions of the family as institution, and emphasises its documentation by feminist and Marxist writers on the direct ideological role the family plays in the socialisation of children, and thus in maintaining the status quo of the family unit.

For Williamson, education works alongside the family in repressing children and guiding them towards their proper role in society – school and college photographs depict this with their family-like groupings. The use of family photograph formats in school photography, Williamson suggests, enables family values to be more easily accessed.³¹ This kind of photography (see Figures 2 and 2.1), is

25 K.Blair, ‘“A Featherweight Portable Museum”, 14.

26 I.Goldin, ‘The Reconstruction of Coloured Identity in the Western Cape’, in S.Marks and S.Trapido, eds., *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa* (London and New York, 1987), 95.

27 *Ibid.*, 101.

28 Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 8.

29 Photography has to be analyzed with the constructed nature of the photograph as object in mind because it has implications for the way in which the exhibition is to be interpreted. The history of the photograph is largely shaped by the characteristic ways in which photographs have been collected, stored, used and displayed. As time passes the original motive for making the photograph may become unclear, facilitating the framing of the photograph in new contexts. However, in this review, I emphasise that the interpretation and decoding of images are not more important than the context within which that image occurs. Images are historically based and one cannot avoid the fact that the past has attached certain meanings and symbolism to them, even though their meanings may change in various contexts.

30 J.Williamson, ‘Family, Education, Photography’ in N.Dirks, G.Eley and S.Ortner, eds., *Culture/Power/History* (Princeton NJ, 1994), 236.

31 *Ibid.*, 243.

especially important in the public sphere where it is used to guarantee the identification of the audience and the subject. Therefore, we are able to identify with and feel proud of the subjects of these photographs, because we (regardless of who 'we' are) are able to participate in the memory of social life offered by these photographs.

Hence, if having a well staged play – with children in lively costume, colourful props and competent staff who put it all together and a proud audience of parents and relatives – defines one as 'coloured', then how could one not want to be coloured? The broader anti-apartheid movement may object to separate government-sanctioned cultural institutions, but for the principal and community of Silverlea Primary School, this play is an affirmation of the cultural and educational potential of the coloured community in the face of arduous circumstances.

The family-format school photograph in Figure 2.1 is of Cyril Smith's senior class. The narrative explains that Cyril's parents decided to send him to an English-medium school in Cape Town, as opposed to a school in Johannesburg where coloured pupils were taught in Afrikaans. The text also informs us that Cyril left South Africa in 1950, 'when the Communist Party was banned' and later 'died in England, where he lived happily among English-speakers for two decades or so'.³² Cyril Smith's school photograph tells a story which goes deep into the political realities of living in apartheid South Africa as an English-speaking coloured person. Thus it is also a story that is intimately connected to language and coloured identity. That Cyril defines himself as a first language English-speaker and not as an Afrikaans-speaking coloured person in South Africa is instructive of the complexity of coloured identity.

Figure 2.1 attests to how 'The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves'.³³ The narrative text accompanying the photograph is instructive. Its suggestion that Cyril 'died happily amongst English-speakers in England' is a painful indictment of white South African society which denied him full citizenship rights on the basis of his race, and ironically it is in white British society that he finds 'acceptance'. By universalising human experience, and embracing the myth of the global human family and the universal language of English, Cyril Smith and photographs of 'Emigration', 'England Calling'/'Last Look', can cross the ocean and join in the idea of the global human family, regardless of his race, class or gender. It did not matter where one lived, the 'pervasiveness of these conventions opens the family image and album to the possibility of broad-based identifications and affiliations'.³⁴ But the narrative also highlights the role Cyril's parents played in helping him along the 'path to becoming a "civilised man"' and thus implicates 'the family' in the construction of individual and collective identity.³⁵

In Figure 3, a photograph is inserted into a greeting card sent to the Maurice family by John and Norma Warries. The narration informs us that the

32 The *Lives of Colour* Exhibition, SANG, 1999.

33 Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 7.

34 *Ibid.*, 47.

35 The *Lives of Colour* Exhibition, SANG, 1999.

couple emigrated from Cape Town to London during the 1950s because Norma's family was unhappy with her decision to marry John on the basis of his race. The text does not explicitly state that John is coloured but leaves one to assume that Norma is white. The text also omits any reference to the question of the government's racialised sexual politics in relation to Cape Town's black and white population at the time, yet this context is implicit in the narrative and the image.

Coloured people had, before apartheid, been constructed as the historical product of miscegenation between the settler and indigenous populations at the Cape, but when the National Party took power in 1948 coloured people became subjected to a kind of metaphorical death under its apartheid legislation.³⁶ The apartheid government forcibly conveyed the attitude that the products of such an act should not exist, by obsessively banning and hunting down those who transgressed the interracial sexual boundary. In the eyes of the puritanical apartheid government, coloureds were seen to be a grievous accident, a violation of God's will. The state reasoned that Africans may have been born barbaric, but coloureds should inherently not have been born at all.³⁷ Underlying the representation of the happy family living in London is the reality of a racialised sexual politics in South Africa. Ironically, the couple's race and the reality of interracial sexual relations is effaced by the 'non-racist' image offered in the photograph. Interwoven in the image are the sensitive issues of dislocation and migration in relation to family and national identity in the context of apartheid South Africa and the historical complexity inherent in the ways in which people of mixed ancestry represent themselves to themselves and their society.

Viewing personal photographs can be a fairly mundane activity, yet in this everyday visual catalogue there is an instant when a frame opens onto a scene of fascination that captures the eye and grabs the mind, filling it with strange questions or simple enjoyment. In the entire exhibition there are four photographs which most forcibly open up a questioning of meanings for me. These photographs are drawn from the family album belonging to the curator's family and thus the relationship between the photograph and the narrative text is semi-autobiographical of the curator's childhood.

The photograph 'The Great Outdoors' (Figure 4), taken in 1956 at a popular camping site in Kommetjie by Edgar Maurice, depicts his children seated on the bonnet of their family car parked alongside their canvas tent. It is followed by another camping picture (Figure 4.1) captioned 'Edgar Maurice CA 84061'. In Figure 4.1 the mother, father and youngest sibling are included in the photograph. The narrative beneath these photographs informs us that the Maurice family took camping very seriously and continued these family outings even after their eviction from their family home under the Group Areas Act of 1964.

36 AbdouMalik Simone, 'In The Mix: Remaking Coloured Identities' in *Africa Insight*, Vol 24, No 3 (1994), 166.

37 Simone, 'In The Mix: Remaking Coloured Identities', 166–7

Figures 4 and 4.1 convey the idea that most coloured families enjoyed a holiday at the beach, owned a car, and consisted of a small, happy nuclear family. This representation of coloured social life masks the very real social and economic differences existing between coloured communities that affected decisions about how leisure time would be spent. Jo Spence argues, in relation to photographs of working class communities, that: 'As a generic term it [working class] is perhaps misleading because within the working class itself there are many hierarchies of power and earning capacity, as well as sexual and racial oppression'.³⁸ Therefore such representations form part of a totalising narrative in which a particular class unity is concentrated upon, as opposed to the other unseen or unrecognised elements which constitute class experience.

Despite the fact that apartheid had produced a layer of middle class coloureds made up of state employees, professionals, business people and teachers, the system had done very little for the majority of coloureds whose experience of everyday life conditions was no better than that of many urban blacks.³⁹ In my own family, differences existed between my immediate lower working class family, my middle class paternal grandparents, my single-parent lower working class maternal grandmother and my mother's upper working class adoptive parents.

To the audience of gallery-goers the images represent certain coloured social customs codified as 'the reality' of the entire group so defined. Photographic practice lends itself precisely to the assumption that this is simply a record of the day-to-day world of the ordinary coloured family, when in fact it attests to a much deeper tragedy of social, cultural, political and economic displacement. For me, these photographs convey a great deal of the poignancy of loss of class status and family values, and the trauma of dislocation through apartheid's forced removals, coupled with deliberate regression and racialisation to stunt any chance of black upward social or political mobility.

For ideological and economic reasons this narrative romanticises the experiences of the coloured middle class in the construction of the story of the Maurice family and other coloured families like them. In Figure 4 the narrative reminds us that the 'canvas tent made for some of the most cherished memories of childhood' and 'so, thanks to the *adventurous* and *exploratory* spirit of their parents, a love of nature was *cultivated* at an early age in the son and two daughters of the family' (my emphasis).⁴⁰

It is no coincidence that the technology of the hand-held camera contributes to the 'adventurous' and 'exploratory' spirit of the parents. As a result of the booming photographic mass market, the means for self-representation became available to many black families in South Africa during the 1900s.⁴¹ Personal photographs became defined by these markets as amateur, and are meant to illustrate exciting holidays, days at the beach and happy family events (such as christenings, birthdays and weddings).⁴² Despite the ideology of home as the heart of the family, most personal pictures are in fact, of time spent away

38 Spence, *Cultural Sniping*, 39.

39 Goldin, 'The Reconstruction of Coloured Identity', 93.

40 *The Lives of Colour* Exhibition, SANG, 1999

41 Williamson, 'Family, Education, Photography', 238.

42 Holland, "'Sweet it is to scan ...'", 133.

from the home. This coincides with the increased mobility and social status of families. The inclusion of the family car and canvas tent in Figures 4 and 4.1 is indicative of this shift.

The development of such informal picture-taking welcomed the arrival of the element of 'instant fun' offered by camera advertising.⁴³ The fun in taking the picture, that process which takes place 'before your eyes' and the fun within the picture, smiles and happy moments frozen into an object, creates yet another systematic representation of childhood and family life. In earlier family images it seemed enough for the family members to be presented to the camera, as in portrait photographs, 'to be *externally* documented; but now this is not enough, and *internal* states of constant delight are to be revealed on film. Fun must not only be had, it must be *seen* to have been had'.⁴⁴ Another look at Figure 4 is instructive.

The family in the 'Great Outdoors' photographs definitely 'look' like they are having 'fun'. However fraught with anxiety and ambivalence the politics of coloured identity may have been, in certain aspects of coloured life 'Personal pictures are made specifically to portray the individual or the group to which they belong as *they would wish to be seen* and as they have chosen to show themselves to one another'.⁴⁵

Figures 5 and 5.1 are exhibited under the theme 'Love and Marriage' with Figure 5.1 captioned, 'In-laws Prefer Gentlemen'.⁴⁶ These photographs were taken in 1962 in Rondebosch, Cape Town. The narration tells the story of Lionel Smith who returns to Cape Town after World War 2, where he was an officer in the English army. He marries Anne Fisher, formerly from 'the Frenchmans of Walmer Estate' in what appears to be a lavish affair. The photographs are of a high quality, they are well-composed and aesthetically pleasing. But it is not clear whether the curator had them copied from the originals or whether they may in fact be the original copies (like many of the other photographs in the exhibition).

At this time, Figure 5 was entered into the 'Bride of the Month competition in the *Cape Times*'.⁴⁷ The narration is punctuated by phrases such as, 'picture of the eligible bachelor', 'big catch for any young woman', and 'civilised gentleman who spoke the Queen's English'. The curator provides the context, gathered from the owners of the photographs, in the explanatory text beneath the captions. In so doing he reveals the dominant mythology and preconceptions shaping the images. The ideas conveyed by the text and image are not hard to miss, and form part of the naturalised order of gender, class and race difference. Therefore the family encourages girls/women to 'see' themselves as potentially socially mobile, 'beauty and passivity being the path to romance with the "right" man who would offer us the ability to "transcend" our class backgrounds' through love and marriage.⁴⁸ This model idea of what 'woman' and hence 'femininity' ought to be is not confined to the cultural context of coloured families in the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed these ideas exist today also, and continue to find

43 Williamson, 'Family, Education, Photography', 238–9.

44 *Ibid.*, 239.

45 Holland, "'Sweet it is to scan ...'", 107.

46 *The Lives of Colour* Exhibition, SANG, 1999.

47 *The Lives of Colour* Exhibition, SANG, 1999.

48 Spence, *Cultural Sniping*, 154.

their visualisation in personal photographs because the latter are 'those partial mirrors where the masquerade of appearing to be something which you know you are not is viewed as a high achievement'.⁴⁹ Thus the marriage of Lionel Smith to Anne Fisher is one such celebrated achievement.

The photograph and narration also implicate the various phases of the Group Areas Act (1950, 1957, 1966 respectively) as it applied to coloured people in the construction and stratification of the black population, not only along race but class lines as well. The coloured population which was more well-off and in stable employment secured better housing in Rylands, Surrey Estate, Bellville, Strand and Walmer Estate (such as 'the Frenchmans'). No doubt the separation and ghettoization of coloured people from African and white communities along race and class boundaries had a profound impact on coloured identity; but even greater was the separation and ghettoization of the coloured people, along the same divisions, from other coloured people within their own communities.

Hirsch's concept of the familial gaze reminds us that 'the familial gaze situates human subjects in the ideology, the mythology, of the family as institution and projects a screen of familial myths between camera and subject'.⁵⁰ This familial gaze, even though I do not belong to any of these families in the exhibition, acts as a screen which allows me to recognise and attempt to contest my embeddedness in familiarity, in coloured identity and coloured history.⁵¹

Among the last few photographs I want to consider are those of Mary Maurice. In Figure 6 she is photographed standing in the doorway of her home in Plumstead, before the family was evicted to Wynberg under the Group Areas Act. The caption beneath the photograph reads 'Front Door with Shadows' and takes us back to the 'days when milk in glass bottles was delivered to your house'.⁵² There are more photographs of this family, in the same setting, respectively captioned 'Front Door with Hydrangeas' and 'Front Door, Daughter and Stoep' (Figure 6.1). Her father is nowhere to be seen in these 'Front Door' images, presumably he is the photographer.

Unlike the formal portraits of the Van Kalker studio, these photographs (Figures 6 and 6.1) are taken outside the studio. The family standing outside the house is a dominant theme in personal 'amateur' photography. 'Whether the house was a cottage, one of a terraced row, or stood alone in varying degrees of detached splendor, the front door became a point of congregation when its inhabitants were photographed'.⁵³ The popularity of the front door photograph in family albums is partly due to the identification of the individual with his/her material possessions. More importantly, front door photographs associate the individual and an important social space, 'the home'.⁵⁴

In Figure 6 the individual is a woman, 'the woman of the house' so to speak. Implicit in the image and caption, 'days when milk in glass bottles was delivered to your house' are racist, sexist and class assumptions about women's sexuality and labor within the domestic space. These assumptions also point toward an absent black 'other', that of the milkman – who was often male, African, and part of the underpaid black urban workforce. Perhaps the front door images argue for a metaphor of passage between spaces, given the context

of the impending Group Areas Act. Perhaps they show that families liked asserting the importance of their property by indicating that it could be divided into more than one space: leisure (gardening as the ‘Hydrangeas’ suggest) and work (that of gendered domestic labor). It may also be the attempts of parents to record their children, who were after all the family’s centre (much like the home) and its future.⁵⁵

The deeper truth may be that the photographs in Figures 6 and 6.1 attest to the plurality of agendas within the representations. As clichéd as these representations may be, ‘what is represented is an archetype of visual memory, that is, the key data needed to summarise an entire [coloured family] experience’.⁵⁶ Therefore, photography demonstrates a powerful quality in its ability to actualise the typical appearance of those sample slices of time, which make up individual and collective memories.

Figure 7 is captioned ‘Taking Care of Memories’ and the text notes that it was taken in 1916, Colombe, Ceylon. This photograph is mounted close to the end of the exhibition space. Taken in Ceylon, the young man pictured sent it to his family during his time away. The photograph reminds the viewer of the value of memories and *photographs as memory*. The *Lives of Colour* exhibition is not simply an exhibition of family photographs. The content of this family album as it is disclosed to inspection reveals a plurality of meanings. In this representation of coloured personal photographs, the more complicated arena of photographic representation and organised cultural evidence coincide to produce witnesses to a period in history inflected with repressive state politics and enormous familial, social, cultural, and economic upheaval and dislocation.

Identity in the exhibition is certainly familial in the sense of the family as the site of ambiguity and anxiety surrounding coloured identity in South Africa. The exhibition invites the audience, through reading the photographs, to recognise themselves in it, in an act of identity as familiarity. Stuart Hall suggests that ‘identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past’.⁵⁷ The *Lives of Colour* photographs can be ‘read’ collectively on similar terms.

Most importantly, the exhibition places personal photographs into a narrative context and thus they become meta-photographic texts open to the work of contestation. The images both expose (think of Anne Fisher’s wedding photographs) and resist (as in the photograph of Norma and Anne Warriess) the conventions of personal and family photography and hegemonic family ideology. Therefore my discussion has focused, in similar terms, on how these images are embedded within narrative contexts. This has allowed me to demonstrate, in the

49 *Ibid.*, 156.

50 Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 11.

51 *Ibid.*

52 The *Lives of Colour* Exhibition, SANG, 1999.

53 P.Stokes, ‘The Family Photograph Album’ in Clarke, ed., *The Portrait in Photography*, 196.

54 *Ibid.*

55 *Ibid.*, 198.

56 *Ibid.*, 200.

57 S.Hall cited in A.Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London, 1995), 1.

context of meta-photographic textuality, that photographs are able to disrupt the familiar narratives about family life and its representations, thereby fragmenting the hold of a conventional and monolithic reading of coloured experience and reality.

Central to my understanding of the exhibition is a notion of the photograph as metaphor. The use of personal photographs in the *Lives of Colour* exhibition is perhaps also metaphoric of the framing of coloured identity and history. Thus it hints at the complex relationship between history, photography and representation. How has the past been, and continues to be, framed? What role does social remembering and forgetting play? What has been rendered romantic, included and excluded? Whose memories are these? Will this account and representation of the coloured past take center stage in the history of coloured South Africans? In short, we are forced to look deeply and critically into the images that have shaped our ideas of 'colouredness' and the possibilities of viewing this identity from other angles.

In the context of coloured identity and representation during the 1950s, the personal photographs of the *Lives of Colour* exhibition reverberate with the history of a community wrestling with its own identity and social reality. Within this oppressive and tense apartheid reality, these images ask to be regarded as anyone, as equal; images of smiling families on holiday, children in school concerts, young people making music, weddings pictures of a bride and groom, a proud sports team, a lonely soldier in Egypt during World War 2. What could be more ordinary and familiar to human experience than this? Yet these photographs belie a tension between the images of 'ordinariness', of assimilation into the 'civilised world', and the broader politics of 'difference', of 'Othering', within which this community is photographed.

The invocation of some common humanity by coloured communities is not an abstract notion, but is specifically demonstrated in what people do, what they say and how they organise their lives, so that equality and freedom is demonstrated in the usefulness of their lives for the lives of everyone else. This is most powerfully demonstrated in their family albums where identity and familiarity are the particular locus through which equality is to be demonstrated and proved. In other words, equality is the purpose of repetition, repeated again and again, able to prove itself in a variety of representational tasks. In the face of cruel and concrete political and cultural circumstances, 'The hunt for difference thus becomes the affirmation of universality able to relocate itself everywhere, without exclusiveness or exclusion'.⁵⁸ As a result photography and the photographic image became useful tools in representing the universality of human experience and locating coloured experience firmly within it. I argue that the invocation of the concept of a common humanity (in the face of apartheid oppression and a national liberation movement) by certain groups within the coloured community was used as a powerful political tool for socio-political equality at this time rather than as a basis for an essential coloured identity or coloured experience (although it later became this).

58 Simone, 'In The Mix', 164.

Visualising, in personal photographs, and demonstrating, in one's day-to-day life, an overriding human equality was to invoke enlightenment ideas of a universal brotherhood that directly contradicted the prevailing apartheid ideologies of racial inferiority that denied humanity to the black population. Here, it is crucial to remember the political context of the 1950s where difference was used to justify oppression and exploitation by naively erasing particularities and differences amongst black people.

My review of the exhibition has attempted to show that the photographs, and their subjects, are subject to changes in particular historical, cultural, social and economic circumstances as is the lived reality of family life. What appears to remain constant, at least in the cultural moment of the exhibition, is the existence of a family ideology, an image to live up to, an image shaping the desire of the individual living in a tense, ambiguous social group, defined as coloured. This myth or ideal of the image dominated middle class coloured lived reality, even though it existed in conflict with that very lived reality and was ruled by different interests.

This aspiration to an ideal of the image is not particular to the personal photographs of the coloured families in Cape Town during this time. But this particular representation, the myth of the image of the ideal family, survives by means of its narrative and imaginary power, as re-presented by the curator in his exhibition of personal photographs. Thus the *Lives of Colour* exhibition is, on the whole, a realisation of the narrative and imaginary power that personal photographs have a particular capacity to tap in order to tell the story of a particular coloured class experience.