"I'm Comfortable in My Own Skin": Reflections on Mixed-Race Identities and Family-making in (Post)Apartheid Cape Town

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Introduction

How do South Africans of mixed-race parentage remember their childhoods during the immense political, economic, and social transformations of the 1990s? What do these recollections reveal about the social and cultural afterlives of the apartheid regime's draconian segregation policies, and how do these legacies continue to construct and reproduce ethnic and racial categories, boundaries, and identities in the "new" South Africa?

Throughout the twentieth century, marriages and sexual relationships between people categorized as "Europeans" and "non-Europeans"—i.e., Black, Coloured, or Indian—were considered taboo, and all intimate relations across racial boundaries were strictly forbidden under the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and Immorality Acts (1927, 1950, 1957) of White minority rule (Furlong 1994).[1] Children born from such illicit unions were—as Trevor Noah (2016) recounts in his autobiography—literally "born a crime." Under apartheid, mixed-race people were categorized as "Coloureds," and were associated with both moral and biological degeneracy. They were believed to "pollute" the imagined "blood purity" of the White minority community in southern Africa (Stoler 2002; Posel 2005; Steyn *et al*. 2018; Dalmage 2018). As such, mixed-race people were forced to live in the shadows of society, encumbered with the shame of their parents' sexual transgressions against the sacred boundaries of race (van den Berghe 1960; Wicomb 1998; Erasmus 2001; Adhikari 2008). While the Mixed Marriages and Immorality Laws were finally repealed in 1985, people entangled in interracial relationships continued to face extreme stigma in the late-1980s. Many were forced to live in separate residential areas and generally avoided appearing in public together as a family (Noah 2016). While apartheid formally ended in 1994, Jonathan Jansen (2016, 14) argues that the "mortal fear of loving together still drives many South Africans crazy."

In this article, I argue that mixed-race people's childhood memories offer invaluable insight into the ongoing legacies of apartheid's social engineering scheme, precisely because their own families resemble microcosms of a deeply segregated society, but one which is actively trying to reconcile its racialized communities, and to build a "Rainbow Nation" on the ruins of apartheid. The possibility for such a nascent multiracial nation is predicated on the ethical and epistemological principle of "ubuntu"—of being human *through* other humans (Tutu 2007;

Hawkins-Moore 2021). Mixed people's experiences of living and loving across racialized social boundaries bespeak how the principle of ubuntu is put into practice. They demonstrate how racial ideologies, structures, and mores are reproduced, but also how these colonial constructs can be contested, renegotiated—and perhaps even dismantled—through courageous acts of love for self and others.

Conceptually, this article builds on social constructivist theories in the anthropology and sociology of race and ethnicity. While interracial intimacies and romances are often believed to erase racial boundaries, scholars have demonstrated that people's perceptions of racial boundaries are often heightened when they encounter people in interracial relationships (Fernandez 2010; Osuji 2019, 3-4). Indeed, interracial relationships and mixed-race families are "hyperracialized" in segregated societies such as South Africa (Steyn *et al*. 2018). My ethnographic and archival research on mixed-race identities and family-making practices during South Africa's tumultuous transition from apartheid to democracy reveals some of the ways in which racial boundaries are reproduced to divide "us" from "them," how these divisions are externally and internally determined, but also how children learn to navigate and negotiate these boundaries in everyday life (Barth 1969; Osuji 2019).

Negotiating Mixedness After Apartheid

Methodologically, this article proceeds from my extended ethnographic, archival, and interview-based research, conducted in Stellenbosch and Cape Town, South Africa, over the course of sixteen months, between 2012 and 2020. I first arrived in Stellenbosch in 2012, when I studied at the university there as a visiting undergraduate student from the United States. As a native Dutch speaker, I chose to study in Stellenbosch because I wanted to learn Afrikaans. During these initial six months in Stellenbosch, I was continually confronted with the complicated and painful legacies of Apartheid. Indeed, Stellenbosch University was once regarded as the "intellectual home" of Apartheid, and it remains a deeply segregated place. As a Black American man, born to a Dutch mother and an African American father, I also felt deeply implicated in South Africa's racial history. Apartheid was constructed by White settlers of Dutch origins. However, as a social, political, and economic system of racial oppression, Apartheid most closely resembled American Jim Crow segregation. During my stay, I met several people who were involved in interracial marriages, or who were dating across the color line. Given my own mixed-race ancestry, I was able to connect with them on a personal level, and they felt comfortable sharing some of their experiences with me. These conversations left me with many unanswered questions, and these became the basis for my doctoral dissertation research.

In 2019, I returned to South Africa for ten months. I spent three months in Stellenbosch and then moved to the Gardens neighborhood in Cape Town. Cape Town is colloquially known as the "Mother City," and has been a site of cultural and ethnic mixing for centuries. I spent most of my time in Cape Town doing participant observation research in public spaces, such as shopping malls, gyms, restaurants, bars, and nightclubs. I wanted to observe how people interacted in public space, and with whom they interacted. I also interviewed twenty-four people who are or were involved in interracial marriages and had children, or who grew up in mixed-race families themselves. I began with my existing network of contacts and used snowball sampling techniques to recruit other interviewees.

In both formal interviews and informal conversations, many of my interlocutors revealed that growing up in mixed-race families during South Africa's transition from Apartheid to democracy in the mid-1990s came with a host of difficulties. Several informants expressed that they had difficulties fitting in among their peers, for they were perceived as being neither White enough, nor Black enough (Erasmus 2001; Adhikari 2005; Noah 2016). However, they also told me that that the ambiguous status of their mixed-race identities sometimes permitted them to creatively re-imagine and renegotiate their personal identities and subjectivities vis-à-vis their own communities and a globalizing world. Consider, for instance, Sara's memories of her childhood in Cape Town. While her story is unique, it also exemplifies the experiences of many mixed-race people grew up in the 1990s, and how they learned to navigate racial boundaries as children.

I met with up with Sara, a South African woman in her early thirties, at a cafe on Bree Street in downtown Cape Town. While many of my informants asked to be identified with pseudonyms, Sara preferred that I use her actual name in my research. She told me that her mother is Cape Malay, and that her maternal family members were legally categorized as "Coloured" under Apartheid's Population Registration Act (1950). The Cape Malay (or Cape Muslims) community has resided in Cape Town since the late 17th century, when the Dutch East India Company (VOC) first imported slaves and indentured servants from Southeast Asia to provide free labor in the Dutch's colonial settlement (Adhikari 2008). Sara's father was a White man from Leipzig, East Germany, who was, himself, born to a German mother and an American G.I. father, shortly after World War 2. He immigrated to South Africa in the 1970s and met Sara's mother shortly after his arrival. They fell in love and proceeded to live together in the predominately White and wealthy neighborhood of Sea Point—in contravention of the Immorality Act. Sara recalls that her parents were frequently harassed by the "immorality police," who were alerted by prejudiced neighbors. However, her father leveraged his American citizenship to avert being arrested and imprisoned. They were debarred from getting married in South Africa, so they relocated to West Germany to solemnize their union, before returning to South Africa in the late 1970s. Sara's maternal family did not approve of the marriage at first, but her father was able to ease some tensions with his Cape Malay in-laws by converting to Islam.

Sara told me that she has one older brother who was born in the early 1980s. He spent most of his childhood living under Apartheid rule. However, she was born in 1990, and most of her childhood took place after Nelson Mandela became South Africa's first democratically elected president in 1994. Sara shared that her brother had a lot of "hang ups" about race. He was one of the first children of color at his private school, and he also experienced discrimination from his own White cousins, who often made derisive comments about the darkness of his skin. As a result of this harassment, her brother became deeply self-conscious about his physical appearance, his sense of belonging, and he continued to harbor a great deal of pain and resentment. Sara, on the other hand, assured me that she was not bothered by racist bullies: "I know who I am, I'm comfortable in my own skin."

In addition to her parents and older brother, Sara informed me that she was largely raised by her Xhosa-speaking nanny. Employing comparatively cheaper African domestic workers was "the norm" at that time, particularly in affluent White communities. Sara's mother insisted that the racialized class and status distinction between their nuclear family and their domestic worker be actively enforced. Her nanny was forced to use a separate bathroom in the house, and to eat from separate dishes in a separate room. Sara spoke openly about her love for her nanny, who had since passed: "She was like my second mother…she was my everything. She was the first person I saw when I woke up…she would make my food, she put me to bed, like everything." Sara told me that she had developed such a strong emotional bond with her nanny that her biological mother became envious: "My mother was actually very jealous of our relationship." This jealousy, Sara recounted, gave rise to "weird dynamics" in their home.

In terms of her own identity, Sara told me that she is a practicing Muslim and continues to maintain strong ties to her mother's community. Yet, she also cherishes her German heritage. Most of her close friends are Jewish, and she admitted that her appearance, her upper-middle class milieu, and her educational background allowed her to "pass-for-White" (see Watson 1970). She told me that she identifies as White, but also as mixed. She had previously dated White and Coloured men, but now favored Black men. At the time of the interview, she was secretly dating a Zulu man from Durban. She fantasized about of having a family with him someday, but she also feared her mother's wrath: "We are gonna have little Cappuccino babies…but I don't think it's gonna get there because my mother will disown me…."

Conclusion

While Sara's story is unique, it is also indicative of how mixed-race children experience both social change and continuity in contemporary South Africa. While Apartheid's racial categorization scheme no longer has a legal basis, these categories continue to be reproduced informally in all matters of everyday life. Unlike her older brother, Sara was able to renegotiate the racial category

assigned to her at birth. As a light-skinned woman, Sara leveraged her father's status as an upper-middle-class White man with German and American citizenship to live and thrive in predominately White public spaces, and to identify herself as White. While her intimate relationship with her Xhosa nanny shaped her cosmopolitan worldview, her mother's anti-Black prejudice constituted a serious obstacle in her romantic life. Sara's childhood experiences indicate how ethnoracial categories and boundaries are made and unmade in everyday life, and how mixed children learn to navigate them. However, childhood stories such as these also demonstrate just how entrenched and resilient racialized social boundaries remain in post-Apartheid society.

Notes

[1] As in the United States and elsewhere, the use of racial categories is extremely controversial in South Africa. Since the categories "White" and "Black" are both constructs of colonial culture, I have chosen to capitalize both in order to draw attention to their mutually constructed artificiality (see Appiah 2020; Rouse 2021).

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