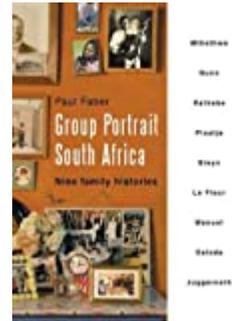




Paul Faber, ed. *Group Portrait South Africa: Nine Family Histories*. Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2003. 240 pp. \$59.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7957-0139-9.



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Seeing/Being Seen in Contemporary South Africa

Group Portrait South Africa is a compilation of life histories, photographs and images of household items of nine South African families collected for an exhibition held at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam from 4 October 2002 to 21 September 2003.[1] The book under review was published to create a long-lasting record of the event. The presentations trace the evolution of each family from the nineteenth century to the present focusing on one or two representatives per generation. The book and exhibition were compiled by Paul Faber, Africa curator of the Royal Topical Institute at the Tropenmuseum, assisted by a team of forty researchers, artists, writers and photographers in South Africa. The project was inspired by the “space” created by a free and democratic South Africa where an appreciation has arisen for the “cultural richness of this fascinating society” (p. 8).

The editors claim that in the new South Africa, there is “space again for the individual, for the personal dimension, for little stories” (p. 8). The goal of the book and exhibition was to “do justice to the complexities and contradictions inherent in South Africa” without “the burden of political correctness” (p. 8). The book seeks to high-

light the differences flattened by “official history,” presumably what they consider to be the ANC version of history. The editors tell us that cultural, economic, social and geographical diversity determined the selection of families (p. 8). This *diversity frame* is offered as an alternative to the *liberation frame* of the Left and comes with a strong dose of cultural relativism.

Group Portrait includes some remarkable stories that are accompanied by carefully selected images of homes, personal objects and old photographs from family albums. It presents stories of both victims and perpetrators. The accompanying website indicates that Paul Faber traveled to South Africa five times to select “suitable” families, writers, and photographers. Faber and his team in Amsterdam retained full editorial control. The purpose of the exhibition was to reach the Dutch public by giving them a diversity of perspectives and therefore the option to identify with individual stories or histories (p. 9).

How different was this exhibition from the famous 1883 World Exhibition in Amsterdam that reconstructed a village complete with birds, cows, dogs, and dozens of villagers from Surinam and “Dutch East Indies?” Thou-

sands of people from all over Europe attended the 1883 exhibition. Scholars took the opportunity to measure the skulls of the captives and make detailed studies of their bodies. Months before the *Group Portrait South Africa* exhibition in Amsterdam in 2002, human rights activists protested outside a museum in Belgium that brought a group of Mbuti families to give authenticity to their exhibition. More recently German anti-racism activists were outraged at an African Village installation at the Augsburg Zoo. Given the highly controversial nature of ethnographic exhibitions in Europe and the colonial history of the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, one must ask how different this particular exhibition is from the colonial exhibitions of the nineteenth century.

There are three broad themes that tie the nine family stories together: land, memory and identity. These themes are inseparable in many of the stories. Since 1994 the ANC-controlled government's Land Reform programs have encouraged groups to rethink their relationship with the land. Families that lost their property under the 1913 Natives' Land Act, the Group Areas Act of 1950 and other apartheid legislation are digging up historical records to prove land claims before the courts. This effort inevitably raises questions of identity. Attempts are made to police the boundaries of the group. The borders attempt to establish clear distinctions between insiders and outsiders. This identity politics is also related to spatial distribution of power. This process of identity reconstitution in and through historical ties with the land stands out as the core organizing principle of this book.

The first full-page photograph in the collection shows Zizwezonke "Khekhekhe" Mthethwa in the classic "witchdoctor" pose with a leopard skin draped over his shoulder, a feather on his forehead and a green mamba snake's head gripped firmly in his uneven front teeth (p. 16). He seems to be playing the body of the serpent like a saxophone. He also has a shiny spear and the obligatory flywhisk tucked under his right elbow. The caption that accompanies the picture reads: "My ancestors come to me in dreams and tell me where the snakes are waiting for me. It is always different snakes, and they cooperate when I use them in ceremonies. I've been bitten many times, but my body is strong and the poison no longer affects me" (p. 17). Khekhekhe began performing for tourists and others in search of "old" Africa in the early 1950s. He traces his ascendance in the community to his performance before Dutch-born Hendrik Verwoerd in 1950 when he was Minister for Native Affairs. Verwoerd later formulated and imple-

mented "separate development" policies and became the prime minister of South Africa in 1958. Today, Zizwezonke "Khekhekhe" Mthethwa is described as KwaZulu Natal's preeminent traditional healer who combines attributes of both *inyanga* (doctor) and *isangoma* (diviner). His large compound is the first stop for hundreds of foreign tourists in search of "traditional" Zulu dances, storytellers and dwellings. Khekhekhe is rooted in Mthethwa land. "I was born here," he boasts, adding, "My father's home is where my maize plot is today, so I built mine just above his" (p. 15). His father does not appear in an ancestral shrine Khekhekhe built for his forbears; years ago, he disowned his father for abandoning the old ways and becoming a Christian. Those honored in the shrine include his grandfather and Dingiswayo, founder of the Zulu Kingdom and Shaka Zulu's mentor. Khekhekhe claims Shaka grew to manhood among the Mthethwa people. This "self-appointed upholder of 'ancient pre-Zulu traditions'" (p. 14) claims that it was the Mthethwa, Dingiswayo, not Shaka, who organized the Zulu armies that Shaka later led in resistance to colonialism. Khekhekhe's view is based on his knowledge of Mthethwa oral history and is supported by historians and Africanists. He is responsible for a quixotic revival of pre-Zulu traditions. His reconstruction, however, is accompanied by strange influences that reflect South Africa's eclectic history. Khekhekhe, for instance, takes great pride in his snake-handling skills that he attributes to a gift from his ancestors. He is "the country's sole snake diviner" and his talents as a snake handler, diviner and medicine man attract both local clients in need of *muti* and tourists in search of "traditional" Africa. The Mthethwa had no tradition of snake divining yet this has become a central feature of the ceremonies devised by Khekhekhe to honor his ancestors.

The Steyn family selection examines the journey of a prominent Afrikaner family that traces its roots to Martinus Steyn, the last president of the so-called Orange Free State. The life stories revolve around a farm that has remained in the family since the nineteenth century and has become something of a museum of Afrikaner nationalism. The Steyns are the only family in the collection that managed to keep their land through the twentieth century. In the Steyn stories recounted in this book, we are treated to family lore about their beloved farm and the time they were visited by a member of the English royal family. There is no discussion of their role in apartheid or their position on the current government. Instead, the family projects fantasies of power with images and stories of war, domination and privilege.

The dominant image in the book is a David Goldblatt two-page spread of border war veteran Colin Steyn and his son Colin in Boer uniforms dating from the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. In the background there is a nineteenth-century Boer army camp reconstructed by Colin Steyn, complete with flags, guns and lookout towers. Other images emphasize dominance and power. Colin Steyn sitting on a captured Angolan tank after the battle of Cuvelai, 7 January 1984. Colin Steyn in his courtroom looking menacing in his prosecutor's robes. President Martinus Steyn in an official portrait taken at his inauguration in 1897. Yvonne Steyn sitting under a gigantic tree that she planted herself. These images of dominance are accompanied by triumphant stories of presidents, generals, judges and wars. The war veteran Colin Steyn relates how participating in wars with South Africa's neighbors in the 1980s traumatized him. He returned from the border wars of the 1980s with terrible stories and souvenirs from the bodies of dead Africans. His eleven-year-old, Colin Steyn III, is "obsessed with the most morbid aspects of his father's war stories" (p. 126).

In an extensive discussion of the farm at Onze Rust, there are only two sentences about the farm workers. "Workers whose families moved here in the time of President Steyn also live on the farm. The effect of HIV/Aids in the past few years, however, has been devastating and the oldest black and Griqua families on Onze Rust have virtually been wiped out" (p. 115). On the book's website, however, we learn that there were some workers left alive on the farm and that the principal researcher of the research teams in South Africa, Bie Venter, was "revolted" with the way that the Steyn family treated their workers. "When I met the Steyn family in Bloemfontein, I was shocked by the way they treated their black personnel. I myself am from an Afrikaner background as well and felt immediate revulsion at that first meeting," Venter admits.[2] These details do not make it into the story. Some of the Steyn women seem uneasy about the exalted status of the family. Eliza Steyn, for instance, complained that she was being "swallowed up" by the reputation of the Steyns. "They were worshipped as heroes and sometimes it bothered me. I could not accept that the Steyns were everything and other people were nothing." She didn't want her children growing up "with the notion that being a Steyn was the alpha and the omega" (p. 119).

The Plaatje family selection is aptly titled "coming full circle." It symbolizes the journey of black South Africans from the margins to the country's centers of power. It focuses on the family of Boitumelo "Tumi" Plaatje, a descendant of Sol Plaatje, founding secretary of

the African National Congress. While Sol Plaatje fought white supremacy from the outside, Tumi Plaatje occupies the official residence of the premier of North West Province. The Plaatje story is symbolic of the response of Africans to the Natives' Land Act of 1913. Solomon "Sol" Plaatje, who was born in a sharecropper's family, came to symbolize African resistance to colonialism. He was a journalist and an intellectual who used his writing skill to mobilize resistance against colonialism. He was a founding member of the African National Congress and traveled widely in Europe and the United States to seek support for the African cause. While in the United States, he addressed many mass meetings and met African-American leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois serialized Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* in the NAACP journal *The Crisis*. Thus Plaatje brought the South Africa question to the global pan-African conversation about race and human rights.

Sol Plaatje's descendants finally fell victim to the hated Natives' Land Act when in 1967 the government terminated their sharecropping contract with the Lutheran mission station where Sol was born in 1876. This convenient relationship between the Lutheran mission station and African tenants had survived for another 50 years after the Natives' Land Act. The termination of the contract forced Joseph Plaatje, Sol's nephew, to relocate the family to a desolate reserve 120 miles from Kimberly. Today, however, the family has come full circle with Joseph Plaatje's granddaughter, Tumi, occupying the premier's mansion. Tumi's daughter attends Sol Plaatje Primary School.

The Natives' Land Act also dispossessed the other two African families featured in the book, the Rathebe and Galada families. The Rathebe family selection follows the career of Dolly Rathebe, a 1950s singer, actor and beauty queen in Sophiatown. Dolly Rathebe's singing and acting careers were influenced by African-American music. Stars such as Sarah Vaughn and Ella Fitzgerald and all-black musicals, *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* were her role models (p. 66). In October 1946 Dolly starred in *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* the first black film produced in South Africa. The film catapulted her to stardom as the first black film star in the country. In the 1950s, she appeared on many magazine covers and in advertisements, which are reproduced in the book. During the early apartheid years, Sophiatown was a vibrant, multiethnic African town in the center of Johannesburg. It was also an anomaly in segregation-mad South Africa. In 1955 Sophiatown was razed and the former residents resettled along ethnic lines far from the city

center in what is now known as Soweto. The destruction of Sophiatown and scattering of her friends and fans led to a slump in Dolly's showbiz career. She moved to Cape Town, changed her name to Dolly Smith, adopted a colored identity and opened a popular *shebeen* (bar). Since 1990, Dolly Rathebe has enjoyed a revival in her showbiz career. She has appeared in several films and television shows in South Africa and performed in Vancouver, Amsterdam, Miami, London and Montreal. Her most cherished memory, however, was meeting Nelson Mandela at his home in Houghton where they reminisced about the old days in Sophiatown.

The Galada chapter is about Cynthia Galada, a former domestic worker who became an entrepreneur, church leader and political activist after 1994. The Galadas were originally Xhosa farmers in the Eastern Cape who lost their land to the British in military campaigns of 1880-1881. In 1936, the Natives' Land Act was extended to the Eastern Cape, further disinheriting the Xhosa people. Cynthia's father spent a lifetime as an itinerant laborer on white farms. A stint as a mineworker in Johannesburg proved too much as he watched his friends get buried in repeated accidents. In 1991, at age 60, he finally landed a steady municipal job. In 1999, Cynthia moved the family into a small house in the formerly all-white suburb of Barkley East. By this time, Cynthia was becoming a leader in the community, which she traces to the sense of empowerment she felt after 1994. She started by opening a preschool in her home, which grew into a state sponsored school for 100 children. Today she is the head of the women's wing of the Methodist Church and a spiritual counselor, a position reserved for respected elders in the community. The Galada selection demonstrates the devastating impact that the land alienation acts had on African families and the growing presence of women in leadership positions in the country. It also shows the impact of the racial policies on five generations and the continuing disadvantage faced by those who have yet to reap the economic benefits of the collapse of the apartheid state.

The selections on the Nunn, Manuel and Le Fleur families demonstrate the diversity of the erstwhile colored category and raise important questions about the future of colored or mixed race identities. All three families were forced to leave their homes and relocate to "colored" locations after the passage of the Group Areas Act in 1950. The Le Fleur family traces its origins to Andries Le Fleur, a charismatic leader of the Griqua Independent Church, who led several Griqua treks in search of land and the opportunity for nation building. The Griqua lost

their grazing lands in the Southwestern Cape to Dutch colonists in the early eighteenth century. Many had become refugees or farm workers for the colonists. The colonists also took Griqua women as concubines forming the basis of the "Cape Colored" population. Since the 1990s, the Griqua have demonstrated a growing interest in their history. This Griqua and, by extension, Khoisan revivalism in post-apartheid South Africa is partly related to the land claims and spatial distribution of political power. The Griqua National Council (GNC), led by Andries Le Fleur's great-grandson, is seeking land restitution and political recognition from the ANC-controlled government. In 2000, the GNC received forty hectares of land for agricultural development. The parcel includes a farm where Andries Le Fleur was buried. Thus the Griqua are in the process of fulfilling their patriarch's vow to "gather the dead bones" of their leader Adam Kok.

The Manuel family, also classified as colored by the apartheid state, makes a similar journey in search of its origins. The family traces its ancestry to one of the first Malay slaves brought to the Cape by the Dutch. Although the Manuels had lived in Simon's Town since the seventeenth century, they were relocated in 1969 when the government declared the area an all-white zone. They were devastated by the loss of their land and home in Simon's Town, which the family continues to struggle to reclaim. While researching his family history, Ebrahim Manuel, a seaman turned popular historian, was able to retrace his ancestors' origins to a village in Indonesia. Manuel's reconstruction of his family's history was greatly aided by his ancestors' habit of keeping records and diaries. A passing reference to the origin of one of his ancestors in a place called Sumbawa leads Manuel on an investigative journey to Indonesia where he traces this term to a small village in Indonesia where he apparently discovers that his great-grandfather was of royal descent.

The Nunn family selection follows the lives of five generations of the family of Cedric Nunn, a Johannesburg photographer who traces his family history to four hunters and traders who set up trading posts among the Zulu, aligned themselves with Zulu kings and married numerous Zulu wives. The offspring of these traders and their Zulu wives formed a mixed-race community that survived despite the ravages of apartheid in the twentieth century. Through an oral history of the family the authors are able to trace the evolution of apartheid legislation and its impact on individuals and families. This is evident in the confiscation of Nunn land and the forceful removal of the family to a designated colored location after the passage of the Group Areas Act. Yet we see the

banality of race and identity in South Africa within the Nunn family itself where Catherine Nunn's white children were the sole heirs of the Nunn land. We are still able to see this caste behavior in a powerful photograph from the late twentieth century of a Zulu woman kneeling before Amy Louw. Despite speaking the same language, eating the same food and living in the same circumstances as her Zulu neighbors, Nunn continues to insist on a racial and status difference. This difference and the economic consequences of inheritance led to serious problems among Nunn's descendants.

Mixed-race identities emerged long before the ghettoization of mixed-race people imposed by the Group Areas Act but the apartheid years fostered a pan-African political identity in opposition to the apartheid state. During the anti-apartheid struggle the term "colored" was prefixed with the term "so-called" as an expression of solidarity with the black majority. Today, however, there is a new effort at self-exploration. Cedric Nunn worries that large numbers of coloreds voted for the National Party in Western Cape Province.

The chapter on the Juggernaths tells the story of the family through the eyes of Balbhadur, a descendant of Dhani, who signed up as an indentured servant with a labor recruiter in Calcutta in 1889 to escape extreme hardship in his North India village. He was put on a ship heading to Natal where plantation owners were desperate for cheap labor. Slavery had been abolished in the 1830s and Zulu communities in the surrounding area were not interested in working for the Europeans; the Zulu economy was self-sufficient and the Zulu army was strong. The farmers, therefore, were forced to import labor from India, the principal source of indentured servants for Britain's colonies in the Indian Ocean. After working for five years as field hands, Dhani and his wife Sundari became sharecroppers on the Johnson farm along with other former indentured servants. They lived on this farm for seventeen years, recreating family and community life that approximated village life in India. They built temples, schools and grew vegetables for sale in Durban. In 1911 they moved to the Merebank area, where three generations of the family have lived since. Thus we see a pattern in which the Indian families seek homeland on which to recreate what they remembered of village life in India. Like the other black and colored families in this collection, the Juggernaths were also displaced by the vagaries of the white power structure. The Durban City Council declared Merebank a slum as early as 1938 in what Balbhadur called "a ploy to expropriate land from Indian landowners" (p. 216). After the pas-

sage of the Group Areas Act of 1950, twenty-three Indian landowners were ordered to vacate the land. The community organized demonstrations and filed a legal challenge but lost the case. Former residents were given options of either buying plots or renting houses from the city. Although Balbhadur and his family bought a plot, the 1960s were difficult. Outraged by the treatment faced by his people, Balbhadur became a political activist helping revive the Natal Indian National Congress and later working with the African National Congress. His daughter Janey and son Spider also became political activists. The Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s heavily influenced the siblings. According to Janey: "We always referred to ourselves as black. We shied away from an Indian identity. We were South Africans. So wearing a sari or speaking Punjabi was an issue. You do not want to wear a sari because you are not an Indian" (p. 220). After 1994, Janey and her family moved from Merebank to a mixed middle-class neighborhood. Her daughter Nikita appreciated the move: "At first I was quite intimidated, as I had never interacted with a white person before. Because they were so nice and friendly ... I started feeling more like a South African and not a secluded Indian" (p. 222).

Does *Group Portrait* succeed in "writing" a different kind of history? How different was the exhibition from the 1883 World Exhibition in Amsterdam? Clearly there is a more sensitive portrayal of Africans in the 2003-2004 exhibition and the book. The families, for instance, were not invited to pose in the exhibition after a controversy over the inclusion of Mbuti families in an exhibition in Belgium.[3] Instead they were represented in narratives, personal objects, photographs and artwork. In addition, we can assume that no scholars were measuring skulls at this exhibition. Yet, despite the project's value as a journey into South Africa through family histories, the data collection and presentation reproduce familiar patterns established by uneven distribution of power and resources. Paul Faber and his team in Amsterdam maintained conceptual control of the project. The forty researchers, writers, artists and writers who assisted them in the collection of stories, images and objects for the exhibit and subsequent book can be compared to newspaper reporters assigned to write specific stories on pre-selected families with strict guidelines about framework and style of presentation. Once gathered, the data was sent to Amsterdam where it was processed and packaged as new "knowledge" about South Africa. Thus the role of the African researcher, photographer, etc., seems to be that of the native informant, interpreter or data collec-

tor rather than the producer of knowledge. The South African researchers and public are also the consumers of knowledge and paradigms created elsewhere. In this case, for instance, the editors in Amsterdam selected the families according to their postmodern “diversity” framework. The diversity frame, minus the political context, seems to reinforce racial, ethnic and cultural boundaries that were emphasized by apartheid. The selection on the Steyn family, for instance, raises serious questions about the complicity of intellectuals in whitewashing crimes against humanity.

Notes

[1]. *Group Portrait South Africa: Nine Family Histories*, http://www.see.org.za/group_portrait.htm

[2]. Peter van den Akker and Bart Luirink, “The Dilemmas of Family History, The Making of an Exhibition.” Retrieved 7 July 2005 from http://www.see.org.za/look_exhib.htm

[3]. Ibid.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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