

Introduction

The nature of Coloured identity, its history, and the implications it holds for South African society have evoked considerable interest in recent times. Debates around these issues have generated much controversy, yet there has been no systematic study of Coloured identity. At best, the current literature offers superficial attempts at analyzing its character or the social and political dynamic that informed Coloured exclusivism.

More recent studies on the history of the Coloured community focus narrowly on the racial oppression Coloured people suffered under white supremacy and on Coloured protest politics.¹ They largely ignore crucial questions relating to the nature of Coloured identity and the way in which it operated as a social identity. By either taking Coloured identity for granted—as something inherent that needs no explanation because it is the automatic product of miscegenation—or by portraying it as a false identity imposed on weak and vulnerable people by the ruling white minority, the existing literature minimizes the role that Coloured people played in the making of their own identity and presents an oversimplified image of the phenomenon. The most recent scholarly volume on the subject, a collection of essays edited by Zimitri Erasmus, a sociologist at the University of Cape Town, breaks with this pattern in that parts of it attempt an analysis of aspects of Coloured identity; further, it does not suffer the usual coyness about broaching sensitive issues such as racial hostility toward Africans within the Coloured community or the sense of shame that suffuses the identity. This work, however, consists of tightly focused contributions that collectively fail to provide a sustained narrative or consistent interpretation of the history or character of Coloured identity.²

This book aims to redress these imbalances and to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the manner in which Colouredness functioned as a social identity from the time the South African state was formed in 1910 to the present. It analyzes the fundamental social and political impulses behind the assertion of a separate Coloured identity and explains processes of continuity and change in its expression throughout that period. This is achieved through close analysis of a range of key texts written by Coloured people in which they give expression to their identity as Coloured and reflect on the nature of their community, its past, and its place in the broader society. In addition to broad thematic analyses of Coloured identity, a series of chronologically arranged case studies are used to demonstrate the book's thesis.

The central argument of this study is that Coloured identity is better understood not as having undergone a process of continuous transformation during the era of white rule, as conventional historical thinking would have it, but as having remained essentially stable throughout that period. This is not to contend that Coloured identity was static or that it lacked fluidity but that the continuities during the period were more fundamental to the way in which it operated as a social identity and a more consistent part of its functioning than the changes it experienced. I argue that this stability was derived from a central core of enduring characteristics rooted in the historical experience and social situation of the Coloured community that regulated the way in which Colouredness functioned as a social identity under white domination. The principal constituents of this stable core are the Coloured people's assimilationism, which spurred hopes of future acceptance into the dominant society; their intermediate status in the racial hierarchy, which generated fears that they might lose their position of relative privilege and be relegated to the status of Africans; the negative connotations with which Coloured identity was imbued, especially the shame attached to their supposed racial hybridity; and finally, the marginality of the Coloured people, which caused them a great deal of frustration. Their marginality is the most important of these attributes, as it placed severe limitations on possibilities for social and political action. That marginality also put members of the Coloured community at the mercy of a ruling establishment that was generally unsympathetic to their needs and aspirations and that usually acted in prejudicial and sometimes even malicious ways toward them. The marked creativity in the way the identity is finding expres-

sion in the postapartheid environment accentuates its relative stability in the preceding period.

My initial intent was to provide a history of Coloured identity through the twentieth century and to show how it changed and developed during that period. The original assumption was that after its late nineteenth-century genesis, Coloured identity continually evolved through the twentieth century, with new departures such as the rise of the radical movement in the 1930s, the emergence of Black Consciousness thinking in the 1970s, and Coloured rejectionism in the 1980s representing periods of accelerated transformation. Faced with the empirical evidence and the actual task of explaining the evolution of Coloured identity, I was instead struck by how stable that identity had been throughout the era of white domination and how superficial the influences of earlier radical politics, Black Consciousness, and the rejectionist movement were. With the evidence failing to confirm my initial hypotheses, based on orthodox approaches within the discipline and assumptions in existing writing on the subject, a reconceptualization of Coloured identity and its history was clearly necessary. The result is a counterintuitive argument that through the era of white supremacy, Coloured identity is better understood as having been stable rather than as continually changing.³

Although it is recognized that broad parameters for the production and reproduction of Coloured identity were set by an authoritarian, white ruling establishment in control of an increasingly prescriptive state and that Coloured perceptions of the world were framed within a hegemonic racist ideology, this study is emphatic about Coloured identity being primarily and in the first instance a product of its bearers. The analysis focuses mainly on the manner in which processes of Coloured self-definition were influenced by the marginality of the Coloured people, their intermediate status in the South African racial hierarchy, class differences, ideological and political conflict, cultural affinities, and popular stereotyping. It is argued that their marginality was central to the relative stability of Coloured identity because of the limitations it placed on their possibilities for independent action. Their status of relative privilege was also critical in maintaining this equilibrium because it rewarded Coloured exclusivism and conformity with white racist expectations while discouraging alternative strategies, particularly association with a broader black identity. Their resultant assimilationism and fear of being cast down to the status of Africans were further incentives for maintaining the status quo. By concentrating

on the role that Coloured people themselves played in the making of their identity and by exploring the ways in which ambiguities and contradictions within their group identity shaped their consciousness, this volume seeks to elucidate complexities in Coloured social experience hitherto neglected by historians and social scientists.

My main criticism of nearly all of the extant literature centers on its effective denial or underplaying of the role Coloured people have had in making their own identity, and in the pages ahead, I attempt to redress that shortcoming. Prominence is thus given to the utterances, actions, and writings of Coloured people in which they evince their primary social identity. The inquiry is anchored in analyses of key texts produced by some of the most prominent organic intellectuals in the community, in which they give expression to their identity as Coloured people and reflect on its essence, qualities, and history. Emphasis is placed on serial publications, especially newspapers, written by Coloured people for a largely Coloured readership. The great advantage of this type of source material is that it addresses a specific constituency and needs to communicate in language that is broadly accessible and through ideas that resonate with its intended readers. Serial publications also allow one to track changing manifestations of the identity within a specific sector of the population over time.

A word about the terminology used in this study is necessary. For want of better alternatives and for the sake of adding some variety to the text, I use the terms *petite bourgeoisie* and *elite* interchangeably when referring to the upper strata of the Coloured community. Though the individuals in these strata did not comprise a *petite bourgeoisie* or an elite as conventionally understood, they can nevertheless be distinguished from the Coloured proletariat by their relative affluence, literacy, and adherence to the norms and values of white middle-class respectability. A general consciousness of their superior status within the Coloured community also set them apart from the Coloured laboring poor. Having an elite status only within the context of the Coloured community, this group in reality consisted of a combination of *petite bourgeois* and “respectable” working-class elements and would perhaps be more accurately referred to as an emergent *petite bourgeoisie* for much of the twentieth century. It is only toward the close of the period under discussion that a substantive *petite bourgeoisie* in the usual sense of the term can be observed within the Coloured community.⁴

The advent of the new South Africa has complicated the use of racial terminology, as both the racist and the politically correct con-

ventions of the apartheid era break down. Old terms have taken on new meanings and are invested with changing values as people have greater freedom to give expression to social identities and ethnopolitical preferences. Thus, for example, it has become much more fashionable for whites to identify as African, if not *de rigueur* for those with high public profiles, and the term *Coloured* has been rehabilitated in public discourse since the rejectionist tide receded after 1990. In this study, the term *black* is used in its inclusive sense to refer to Coloured, Indian, and African people collectively, and *African* is used to refer to the indigenous Bantu-speaking peoples of South Africa. The use of the term *Coloured* is still complicated by a residual politically correct lobby that rejects this practice and argues for a broader black or South African identity.⁵ The emergence of a rejectionist voice within the Khoisan revivalist movement indicates that negative associations attached to Coloured identity still rankle with many. Given these and other sensitivities around the issue, I am driven to the tautology of stating that in this study, the term *Coloured* is used to refer to those people who regard themselves as Coloured. And wherever it is necessary to mention people who are generally regarded as being Coloured but who are known to reject the identity, this is indicated by placing the word between quotation marks if this is not apparent from the context of the discussion.

During the apartheid period and after, some scholars, myself included, refused to capitalize the first letter of the term *Coloured* in order to indicate both opposition to the enforced classification of people into racial and ethnic categories and distaste for ethnocentric values. The practice was further justified by the assertion that since the word was not derived from a proper noun, there was no need to capitalize it. In this study, however, I resort to the more normal practice of capitalizing the "C word," except for quotations using the lower case. This is partly a response to the gradual normalization of South African society in the postapartheid period and partly in recognition of a growing grass-roots sentiment neatly expressed by journalist Paul Stober: "As a distinct ethnic group with over three million members, we deserve a capital letter."⁶ It is also an indication of the rapid change the identity is experiencing in the postapartheid environment, as old sensitivities die down and as new concerns and agendas impinge on people's consciousness.