

BEAUTIFUL

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African and Diaspora Aesthetics
Sarah Nuttall, editor

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AFRICAN
AND
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Prince Claus
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Kwela BOOKS
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Mark Gevisser
Inheritance

Mark Gevisser is a writer, journalist and heritage consultant. He was born in Johannesburg in 1964 and educated at Yale University in the US. He co-edited *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa* (1994), and an anthology of his Mail & Guardian columns was published as *Portraits of Power: Profiles in a Changing South Africa* (1996). He wrote the documentary feature *The Man Who Drove With Mandela* (1998) and scripts for the drama series *Zero Tolerance*. He is currently Content Advisor to the Heritage, Education and Tourism program of Constitution Hill, and is completing his biography of Thabo Mbeki, which will be published in 2007.

INHERITANCE

In May 1962, as South Africa descended into the darkness that was the 1960s in this country, a beautiful young teacher was introduced, by one of her colleagues at Barnato Park High School, to a successful young businessman, a bachelor in his early thirties. Theirs was a passionate love, and in August that year he proposed marriage to her. When she became pregnant, they bought a suburban ranch house in the new suburb of Atholl, north of Johannesburg. The man was a follower of Alan Paton and had been involved in the production of Todd Matshikiza's *King Kong*. The woman's father, a furniture manufacturer, had been a self-taught intellectual of the 1930s and a member of the Left Book Club, and had bequeathed a voluminous orange-bound library to his only daughter: *The Road to Wigan Pier*; *Red Star over China*; *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism*.

By November 1964, when the woman was about to give birth to her child, Nelson Mandela and his Rivonia co-accused had been sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island. South Africa had become intolerable and many in the young couple's circle of white liberals were emigrating. On the brink of starting a family, the couple feared for the future but did not want to leave. A close friend was apprehended by the police; he had typed a "subversive" letter, but had managed to throw the incriminating typewriter into the Hartebeespoort Dam and so was not charged. A handyman working for the young couple turned out to be a moonlighting policeman, and they feared a raid. And so on one balmy summer's night, they lit a fire in the living room and fed her father's library, book by book, to the flames.

A few days later I was born. In 1964, the year of my birth:

- Nelson Mandela and seven others were sentenced to life imprisonment for sabotage and Communism.
- 48 people were placed under house arrest, 11 of whom fled the country.
- 173 people were placed under 90-day detention.
- 671 people were found guilty of political offences, five of whom were sentenced to death.
- 303 South Africans were banned, 22 of whom left the country.
- 175,099 "Bantus" were admitted to the main urban areas under Influx Control regulations, and 98,241 were endorsed out of them.
- 141 white men and 110 "Bantu" women were convicted of inter-racial carnal intercourse, as were one white woman and four "Bantu" men.
- 56 men were convicted of bigamy, 42 of them "Bantu".
- 21 women were found guilty of illegal abortions, 12 of them "Bantu".
- 13 people were convicted of keeping a brothel, five of them coloured women.
- 643 men were convicted of "public indecency", 309 of them "Bantu".
- 41 people were convicted of being in possession of "indecent publications", and
- 504 publications were banned.

- 216 people were convicted of “other indecent, immoral or sexual offences”.
- 57 people were convicted of bestiality, 42 of whom were “Bantu” men.
- 20 white men were convicted of the “unnatural act” of committing sodomy with other white men.
- 186 “non-white” men were convicted of committing sodomy with other “non-white” men.
- Two white men and two “Bantu” men were convicted of committing sodomy with each other.

II

There is a cupboard in my parents’ study, at the home in which I grew up, filled with the story of my family. It is a very South African record, a record of gardens and swimming pools, and of the growing white suburban family that filled them. There is a particularly lucent quality to the family photographs of white middle-class suburban South Africans in the 1960s and 1970s, not just because of the excess of Johannesburg’s sunlight but because of the ease of childhood too: that perfect balance between containment and freedom that comes, when you are a child, from being in a garden; the promise in so much firm, tan skin; the trays of lemon-barley squash and tennis biscuits; the unthinking certainty that there will always be people to look after you.

My entire childhood is documented in the garden, culminating in my Bar Mitzvah speech, delivered Juliet-like from a balcony to the appreciative masses on the grass below: I am wearing an inexplicable brown suit, silver teardrop spectacles and a hairstyle that my partner, looking at the photos now, calls a “Jew-fro”. Here are my first baby shots, in a dazzling white smock; here a later series, more playful, naked on a mohair rug clutching a carnation. Here I am, staring with palpable alarm at the future on my way to my first day at school, with a tiny brown case (empty) in one hand and an unthreading fluffy toy in the other. And there is my brother Antony done up for a fancy-dress party as Cupid, threaded with cardboard hearts and a bow and arrow spray-painted gold, while I am draped in my mother’s clunky 1960s jewelry and swathed in layers of her Indian-print scarves, bearing a bejewelled turban on my head. The caption beneath the photo notes that I was “The Maharajah”. Was it my idea, or hers, to raid her wardrobe?

The photographs are stuck, with a somewhat insouciant hand, into the adhesive pages of mass-produced albums with garish plastic covers. One album, however, is different. Bound in red leather with a leather bow, and embossed in the bottom right-hand corner with a gold springbok, it has black cardboard pages onto which its holdings are secured with silver photo corners. It is, in the grammar of my childhood, the past perfect: before-I-came. It contains my parents’ wedding photographs, from January 1963, and the record of their first few years together.



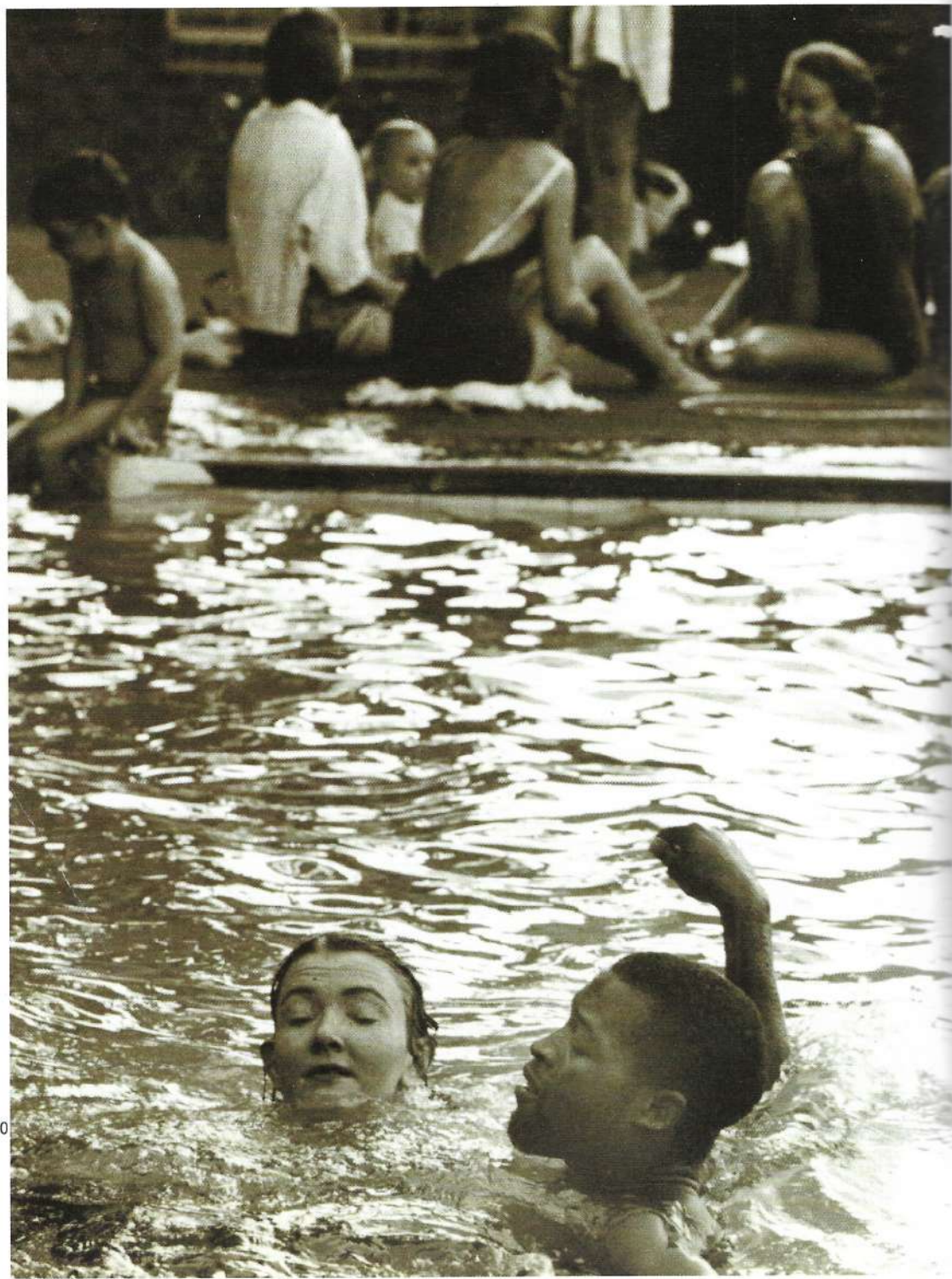
The photo that compels me is not from the wedding collection, but rather a bit further on in the red leather album – from their first holiday alone, after my birth, to what was then the Portuguese colony of Mozambique, and the favoured weekend getaway for people of their class and station. They are in Xai-Xai, suspended in the tepid and translucent tropical water, their legs entwined, clearly visible beneath the surface as they hold each other. They are a human conch; a heart drawn in the water: so beautiful are they that their son forgives them, immediately, their solipsism, as he imagines how he must have been abandoned to facilitate this moment (fig. 1).

III

It is 1999. I am 35, exactly the age my father was when he met my mother. To find the Johannesburg into which I was born I drive northwards, out of the city, through the endless boomed suburbs and cluster-home developments and neoclassical office parks, along thoroughfares named for Afrikaner leaders through suburbs that evoke bucolic idylls. I pass the obscenity of a gargantuan casino housed in a Hollywood impression of a Tuscan hillside village, its ramparts leering over Johannesburg in a nightmarish reincarnation of the mining town's bawdy-house past, and drive through the peri-urban sprawl of light industry and squatter camps, out onto what is known as the mink-and-murder belt, where the descendants of the mining magnates build their follies, keep their horses, hoard their treasures.

At Lanseria aerodrome I bump down a crenellated dirt road, past cows and gum-trees and labourers' children coming home from school in their gymslips until, my car encased in the fine ochre dust of the Highveld, I arrive at the Bailey's African Photographic Archives, on the eccentric country estate of the recently deceased founder-publisher of the *Drum*² empire, Jim Bailey. Here, in rooms filled in equal measure with dust and whimsy, are housed those images that have come to define black urban Johannesburg life: Nelson Mandela sparring with Jerry Moloi on a city rooftop; Dolly Rathebe in a bikini up a minedump; Hugh Masekela and Satchmo's trumpet.

Buried deep in the filing cabinets, I come across a folder entitled "No Colour Bar: 1961". I pour its contents out onto a table, and they are a genie unbottled, the stardust of what might have been: dozens of prints of blacks and whites boxing together, playing tennis together, acting on stage together, swimming together, helping each other across the street, arguing at art openings together, jamming together in late-night jazz clubs. Cross-referencing the photographs to a bound volume of *Drum*, I see that they were collected for a six-page pullout, written by the magazine's *enfant terrible*, Nat Nakasa, in the March 1961 issue, entitled "Fringe Country, Where There is No Colour Bar". Fringe Country, declares Nakasa, is "that social no-man's-land, where energetic, defiant, young people of all races live and play together as humans ... where anybody meets anybody, to hell with the price of their false teeth, or any-

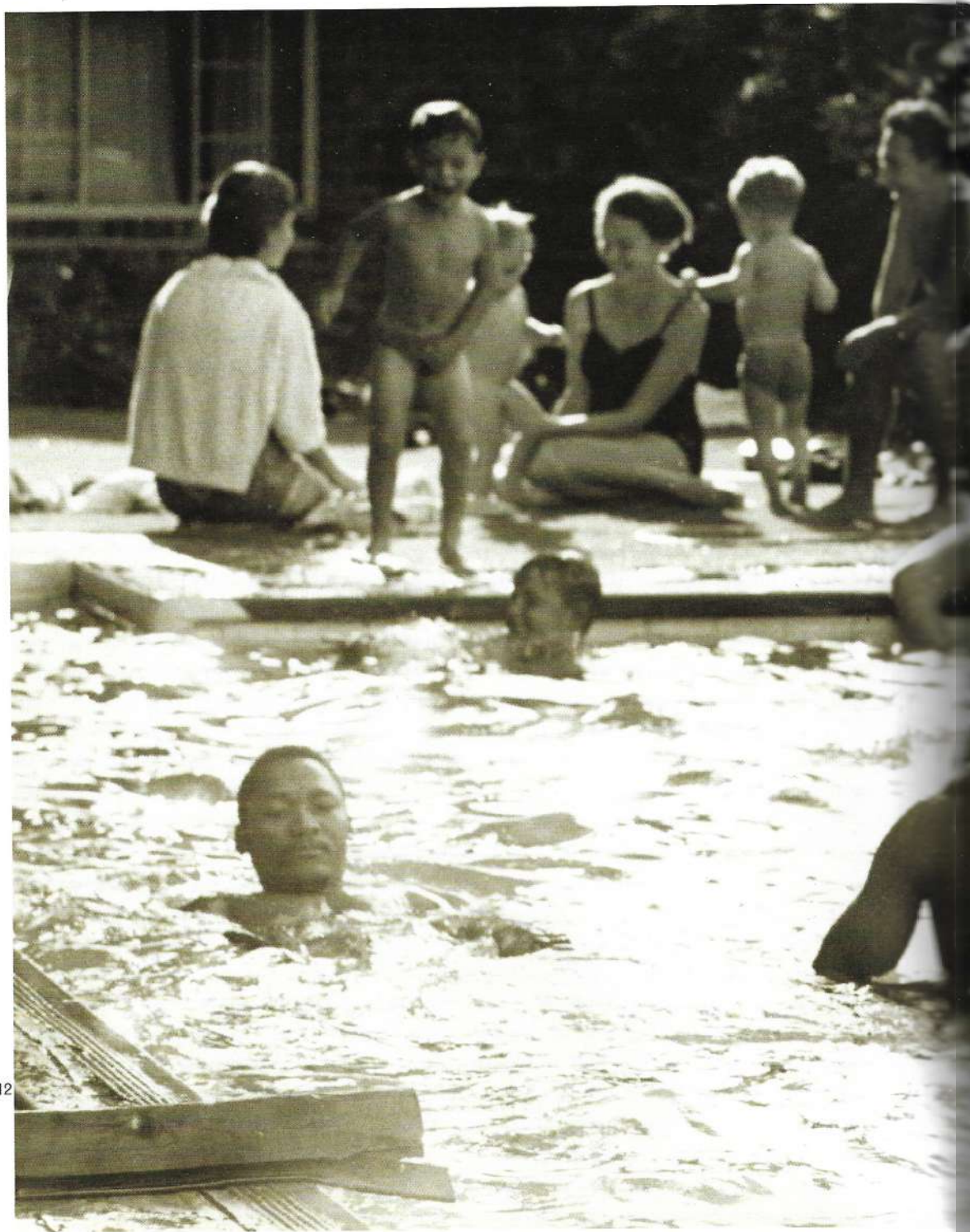


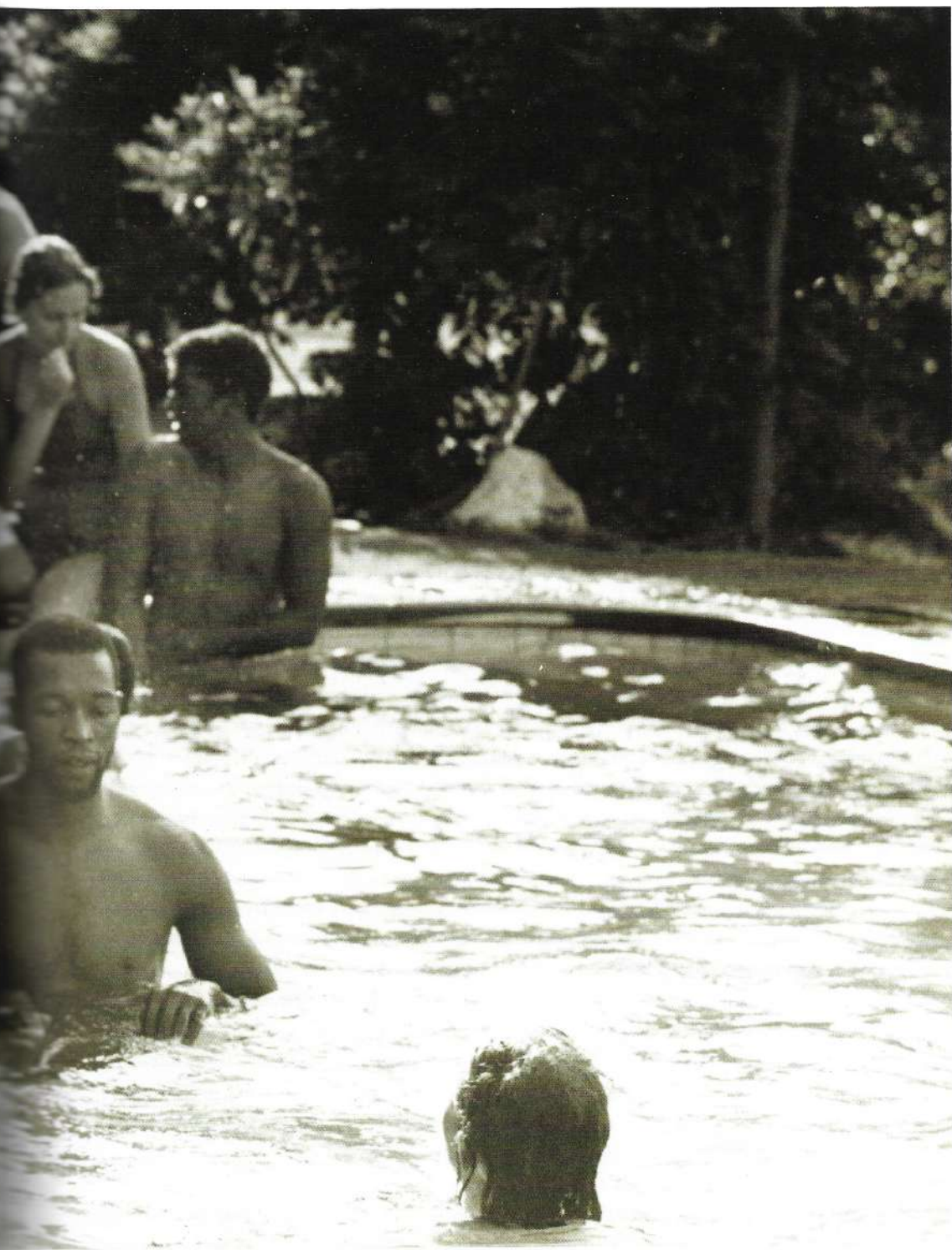
thing else . . . Some people call it 'crossing the colour line'. You may call it jumping the line or wiping it clean off. Whatever you please. Those who live on the fringe have no special labels. They see it simply as LIVING. Dating a girl. Inviting a friend to lunch. Arranging a party for people who are interested in writing or painting, jazz or boxing, or even apartheid, for that matter."

One of the photographs accompanying the text is that of a white woman and a black man horsing around in a swimming pool, above the caption, "Where's this? Surely not South Africa, with white and black in the same swimming pool? If that's what you thought, you are wrong, this picture was taken in one of [the] smartest suburbs of white Johannesburg." The eyes of both man and woman are closed: as in the photograph of my parents at Xai-Xai, they are in a whirlpool of their own making, utterly contained, held by the corruscations of the late-afternoon sun on the rippling water. What makes this photograph so brilliant an analogue of its subject material is that – unlike that photograph of my parents – there is no visible physical contact between the man and the woman and yet we *know*, by the positions of their bodies and the expressions on their faces, that beneath the surface of the water they are intertwined (fig. 2).

In the folder of photographs there is another image of the same scene taken from a wider angle, shot just moments before the above clinch. Standing in the shallow end is a coloured man, locked in intimacy with a white woman who is sitting at the pool's edge dangling her feet in the water. Behind them, receding back to a house and a row of old sun-dappled trees, are untidy clusters of seminaked white families, doing what white families do on a Sunday afternoon in suburban Johannesburg. All form a halo of human activity around the focal point of the photograph: a powerfully built, strikingly handsome black man, wading through the pool at nipple-level towards the white woman who will – we know, from the following photo – pull him down into the water with her (fig. 3).

I am a child of suburban Johannesburg. I look at this photo and I feel unutterable loss. I feel a hunger that ripples down the sides of my tongue and gathers in my throat, for the sycamore berries and the bluegum pods beneath bare feet, caught in the grooves between the slasto paving; for that tray of lemon-barley squash and tennis biscuits on a glass-topped iron table; for the sun reflected off a zinc roof onto beds of Namaqualand daisies; for the insane, prehistoric shriek of hadeda ibises piercing the sky, the purple violence of a cloudburst, the lengthening shadows, the inevitable nightfall quick as a gangster's knife. I was born three years after these photographs were taken, just as the Rivonia Trialists were beginning their life sentences on Robben Island. There were no such poolside gatherings any more. I look at these photographs and see my childhood, blanched, with the focal point – that black man advancing through the water – removed. I see what might have been.





My friend Pam was a denizen of “Fringe Country”, one of its poster girls. And so I take the poolside photographs from the “No Colour Bar: 1961” file to show her, in the hope that she will be able to identify some of the people. She does, immediately: “That’s me,” she says, pointing to the white woman sitting on the edge of the pool, flirting with the coloured man. “And that’s Joe.”

My parents were already courting, in May 1962, when the Johannesburg newspapers blared the headline, “19-Year-Old Typist in Skin-Tight Red Jeans Held on Morals Charge With Coloured!” Pam – Pamela Beira – was the typist in question, and her lover was Joe Louw, a photo-journalist who told their story in *Drum*. Joe worked for *New Age* and had captured the first photographs of the slave-labour potato farms in Bethel; Pam, a rebellious Jewish teenager, had found a way out of suburbia by striking up friendships with the musicians who would play at venues like the Nightbeat or the Barclay Hotel in town. “First we white girls met the musicians,” she tells me, “and through them the journalists, and through them the activists.” She left home, in mid-1961, to move in with Joe. In November of that year they were staying at an acquaintance’s flat in Hillbrow when the police, informed by the caretaker’s wife, burst down their door. They found a woman draped in a red towel, in bed behind a beaded curtain, and a man sitting at the table, fully clothed, his arm in a sling. She threw on some bright red jeans and a red, green and white top, and the two were taken down to Hillbrow police station, where she was subjected to a complete medical examination.

The police medical officer found, as he was later to testify, that “one would tend to think there was no intercourse”, and so the couple was finally found guilty of having “conspired to commit immorality” rather than the perpetration of the act itself. This verdict hinged on two key items missing from Pam’s person at the time of the arrest: her hymen and her underwear. The magistrate asked: why would a woman, no longer a virgin, be wearing nothing but a red towel in the presence of a coloured man at 15 minutes to midnight if she didn’t have immoral intentions? The arresting officer testified that he watched her “put on panties . . . She looked half asleep, but I couldn’t say with accused number two because he is a Coloured and it is more difficult.”

Pam fled into exile before sentencing, and Joe spent six months in jail, where he underwent severe harassment from the wardens for having sullied the honour of a white woman. After his release, he joined her in exile, and wrote “My Flight To Love” for *Drum* in June 1962, alongside a photograph of the two of them walking along the palm-fringed shore of Dar-es-Salaam, in Julius Nyerere’s newly liberated Tanganyika. Even by *Drum*’s standards, Mohammed Amin’s rear-view photograph of them on the beach at Dar is racy: a black man and a white woman, on a beach, together, holding hands. The straps of Beira’s bathing suit have fallen suggestively off her shoulders, and her hand assertively clasps that of Louw, who is clad in a scant

pair of bathing trunks. There is something unmistakably victorious about it all: their clasped, outstretched arms actually form a triumphant “V” at the centre of the image, beneath the headline, “Journey’s End in Lovers’ Meeting” (fig. 4).

V

I am sitting in the home of Mrs Norah Moerane, high up on the Inanda Hills over Durban. When she and her husband moved here in the 1950s, there was no better address for a black South African. Elsewhere, people were being forcibly removed from land their families had owned for generations and were only allowed to rent property in the new townships, but the missionaries who had founded Inanda managed to prevail over the new apartheid authorities, and this was one of the only places outside of the Bantustans where you could buy your own stand and build your own house.

Mrs Moerane had class and she had style: when her husband was appointed principal of the famous Ohlange Training Institute at Inanda, she chose a plot that looked down, through the sugar cane fields, to the port of Durban below, glistening alongside the Indian Ocean. She built and furnished the home she built in perfect 1950s style – pastel walls, modular furniture, a funky lounge suite with wooden coasters that slide out from beneath the chair arms for you to put your cocktail glass on. Now, at the turn of the 21st century, the hills that roll down from Inanda to the sea are covered in shanties, and, from the *stoep* of Mrs Moerane’s home, you see corrugated iron, rather than sugar cane, glinting in the sunlight. A widow now, she lives alone, slap-bang in the middle of one of South Africa’s largest squatter communities. There might be a layer of urban dust over everything now, and the doilies on the dining-room table might be a little frayed, and she might need to fetch water from the pump outside when you need the toilet because her water supply has been cut off, but the walls are still pastel, and she still slides out those coasters from under the chair arms when she serves you a High Tea of little cucumber sandwiches with the crusts cut off, at four o’clock sharp.

I am visiting Mrs Norah Moerane because I am writing a biography of Thabo Mbeki, and she is his aunt. Her husband, Manasseh “MT” Moerane, was the brother of Mbeki’s mother, Epainette Mbeki; after he died and her children left, she filled the rooms of her home with memories. She has become the custodian of the family history. She pulls out dozens of photo albums, but while I am supposed to be looking at the images of the prosperous Moerane gentry gathered around their schoolmaster-farmer patriarch at the family seat in the Transkei in their Edwardian finery, I find myself drawn to another image, a photograph taken on the beach at Durban in the late 1960s, at about the time my own family albums reveal boisterous and crowded seaside holidays at Clifton or Plettenberg Bay.

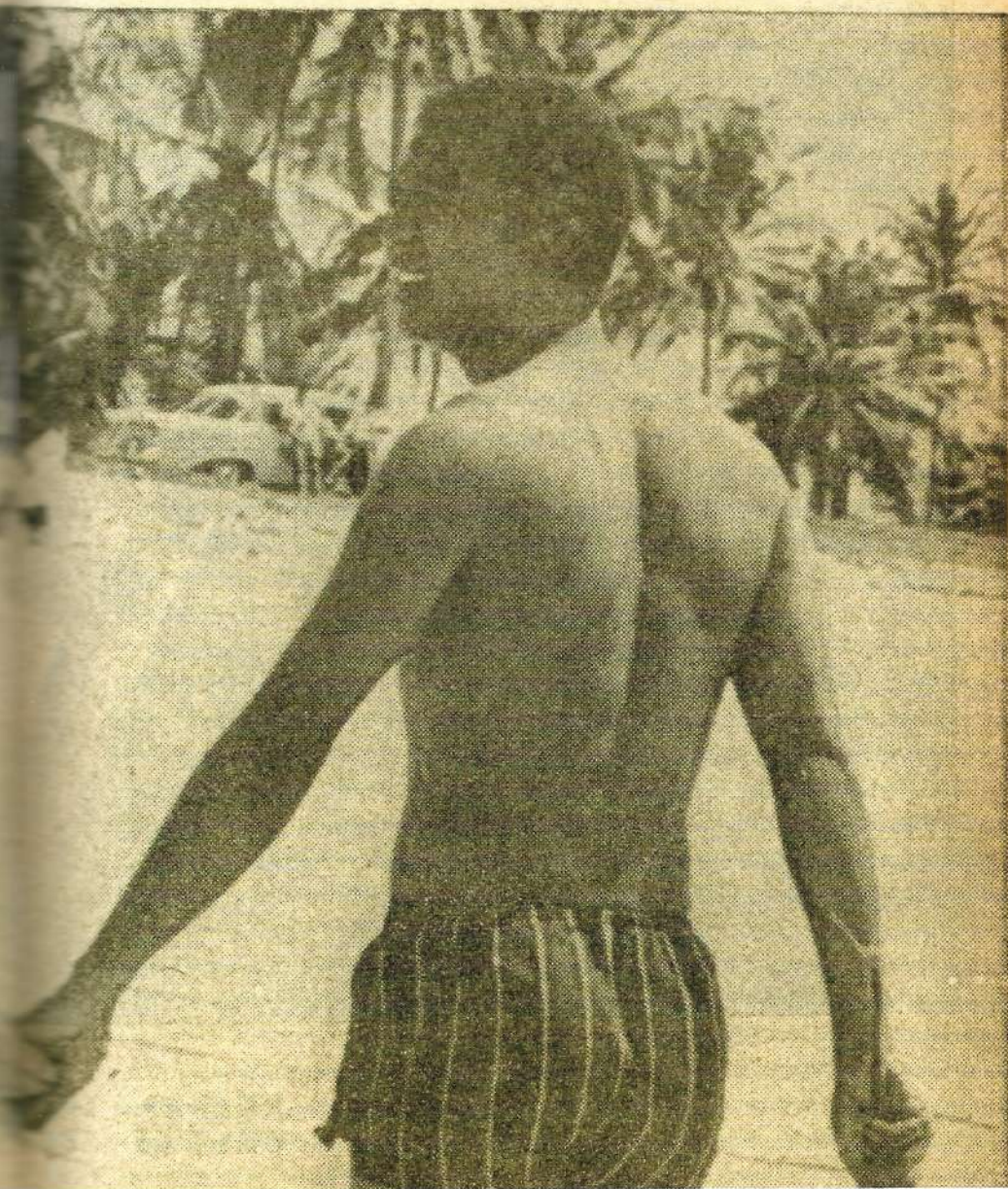
To an eye not lidded with the colour filter that comes of growing up in apartheid

MUM: JUNE 1962

...JOURNEY'S END IN



LOVERS' MEETING





South Africa, the photograph would appear mundane, barely worthy of comment. A party consisting of two women, a teenage girl and a child pose on the beach for the photographer. Their shadows – elongated eastwards away from the setting sun – tell us this is at the end of a long and lovely beach day. One of the women sports a rather stylish psychedelic bathing suit; the other is more homely in a chequered housedress. The women have gathered in their arms the paraphernalia of a day on the beach: blankets, shoes, lunch box, transistor radio. The stylish woman is Norah Moerane; the other is Thabo Mbeki's sister Linda; the child is Linda's daughter and the teenage girl her minder. The photographer, Mrs Moerane tells me, is her husband, "a real shutterbug". I look at the photograph and imagine Mrs Moerane piling her family in the car and motoring down through the canefields to take the waters, during a time when blacks were being thrown off beaches and corralled into "non-whites only" enclosures, usually where the swimming was most dangerous (fig. 5).

VI

In the early 1990s, while I was writing a history of gay and lesbian life in South Africa, I came across a huge scrapbook, with the hand-printed title "Special Projects" across its cover, in Johannesburg's small Gay Lending Library. The euphemistic title reflected beautifully what was within it: a decade's worth of meticulous clipping and pasting of newspaper articles, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, without anything in common save that the maker of the scrapbook had collected them together. Some of the articles are explicitly about homosexuality – particularly those dealing with police raids on parks or "cottages" – but a great many can only be identifiable as "gay" because of their context in the scrapbook: society page photos, articles about suicides, even a clip of a young man winning a prize at a local supermarket.

The scrapbook is an obsessive endeavour; its author's "Special Project" a determined attempt to find the homosexual subtext in South Africa's mass media. I spent hours poring over it, and eventually tracked down its creator: his name was Joe Garmeson; he was a great fulsome bear of a man, a banker and a toastmaster, given to grand proclamations and florid stories. Like Mrs Norah Moerane he was a hoarder, a historian's dream, with cupboards full of photographs, notebooks and journals. These items are now the foundation collection of the Gay and Lesbian Archives at Wits University; an extraordinarily detailed account of white male homosexual life in South Africa through the 20th century.

In one of Joe Garmeson's albums is a series of young men on the beach, some time in the 1950s. The photographs are taken at Bachelors Cove in Cape Town – a pile of smooth rocks at the extreme west end of Clifton Beach which was the gathering point for "queer society" in the city. According to Joe and other regulars, men would gather on the rocks at the end of the day to swim, talk, cruise, bathe naked beneath the dying sun. In one of his photographs, we see him at Bachelors Cove, looking with





Fig. 7

his matinee-idol smile directly at the camera, as he poses with four friends. Their bodies fold into each other as they sit on the rocks, as if they were sirens, or beached sylphs from a water ballet. Such is their intimacy that you would not need to find their photo in a big scrapbook labelled "Special Projects" to know they were homosexuals (fig. 6).

In another photograph we see the matinee idol sitting on the rocks and looking, once more, straight at the camera. But this time he has composed an almost classical triptych: his arm is around a blonde friend, and both of them have a hand on the shoulder of a mixed-race or Malay man who sits beneath them, caressing their legs. In the background, oblivious to this flagrant transgression of the laws forbidding both racial mixing and public indecency, three coloured fishermen carry on their task of catching dinner (fig. 7).

The photograph is taken on the rocky promontory between Bachelors Cove and Maidens Cove, one of the only coloured beaches on the entire Atlantic seaboard, and one of those gaps in the stitching of apartheid. Here white and coloured men cruised and courted; here, between Bachelors and Maidens, they developed networks of desire, affection and even just friendship.

VII

On the 22nd of January 1966, when I was one year old, the *Rand Daily Mail* that landed on the door of our Atholl home had an unusually large banner headline: "350 IN MASS SEX ORGY!" A "queer" party had been raided in Wychwood Rd, in the Johannesburg suburb of Forest Town; nine men had been arrested for "masquerading as women" and one for "indecent assault on a minor". It was, of course, a garden party; it took place, of course, around a swimming pool. Although my parents do not recall the incident, they must have pored over the article, for they had several homosexual friends, and many names were printed.

The raid provoked a massive public outcry, and a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry was launched. According to the official police report, officers had found "a party in progress, the like of which has never been seen in this country. Males were dancing with males to the strains of music, kissing and cuddling each other in the most vulgar fashion imaginable". In Parliament the following year, the Minister of Justice proclaimed that "we should not allow ourselves to be deceived into thinking that we may casually dispose of this viper in our midst by regarding it as innocent fun. It is a proven fact that sooner or later homosexual instincts make their effects felt on a community if they are permitted to run riot."

222 "Queers" were as threatening to the white civilisation as Communists or miscegenating heterosexuals, and the state proposed legislation that would make it illegal to be homosexual. A spirited defence by a "Law Reform" movement grew within the gay community; one of its leaders was Joe Garmeson. The current South

African Chief Justice, Arthur Chaskalson, was then just setting out in his legal career, and he was hired to represent the movement, whose meticulous submissions managed to temper this legislation. Nonetheless, three amendments were finally made to the very same Immorality Act under which Pam Beira and Joe Louw had been arrested: the first was to raise the age of consent for male homosexual acts from 16 to 19; the second was to outlaw dildoes (which, police reported, were the primary tools of the trade of lesbianism), and the third was the infamous “men at a party clause”, which criminalised any “male person who commits with another male person at a party any act which is calculated to stimulate sexual passion or give sexual gratification”. Most absurd was the definition of a “party”: “any occasion where more than two persons are present”.

But it wasn't only this new legislation that broke up the “party” on that rocky promontory between Bachelors and Maidens. In the early 1970s, at about the same time our family was taking summer holidays at Clifton, there were complaints about housebreaking from white householders, and so the authorities erected a ten-foot-high fence right across the promontory. So determined were the authorities to prevent the coloureds from Maidens from crossing Bachelors into Clifton that the fence was actually extended, for about 20 feet, into the icy Atlantic Ocean. The stated reason was to stop vagrancy and crime, but the net effect was to shut down one of Cape Town's last and most enduring spaces for cross-racial intimacy.

Now, at the turn of the millenium, I have full constitutional rights to equality. I am involved in a long-term relationship with a man of a different race group to my own; we live together, sleep together, holiday together, socialise together with other mixed-race couples, gay and straight, with none of the strictures that homosexuals or mixed-race couples experienced at the time I was born, nearly 40 years ago. I have held my partner in the water just as my parents held each other in the water in that beautiful Xai-Xai shot, our legs intertwined.

But after hearing the stories of Bachelors Cove and Maidens Cove, I went there for the first time a short while ago and saw that ten-foot-high barrier for myself. It was a summer evening, and the astonishing Atlantic sun, all fiery and swaggering, was bisected by the diamond mesh. I felt, like a blow to the stomach, the history of pain in beauty, and I reflected that while I might have been denied the bequest of my grandfather's handsome orange-bound Left Book Club library, I – like all South Africans – am the beneficiary of another inheritance: a fence, between Bachelors and Maidens, that still stands.