

**An important publication on a contested social label**

**Richard van der Ross, *In Our Own Skins: A Political History of the Coloured People***

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It goes without saying that the label “Coloured” is clouded in controversy. While some embrace it, others loathe it, and under the best of circumstances, it remains good advice to avoid the term altogether. While one is perhaps at liberty in 2016 to completely ignore this description of people of diverse backgrounds, it is impossible for a serious scholar of South African history to deny the political implications of the tag. Many South Africans were classified and administered under the apartheid government as Coloured persons. In this sense, Richard van der Ross delivers an important message about his book in its opening pages when he writes: “This book

deals with the people of South Africa. It concerns all the people of South Africa, although it deals more specifically with the Coloured people” (p 6).

While the classification of people into racial groups will always stir controversy, it is in particular the coloured construct that remains one of the most contested. According to Van der Ross, Coloureds are “a group of around five million people and they are a distinct anthropological – racial, if you like – group” (p 22). The author then proceeds to incorporate research by M.C. Botha, defining Coloured people as a group which developed after the colonisation of South African land in 1652 by Dutch officials. To his credit, Van der Ross foresaw criticism being levelled at his book. In the foreword to the publication, he predicts that critics of the work would argue that it “should not have been written at all, because there are no Coloured people” (p 9). To this, he warns, he has no answer.

On face value, *In Our Own Skins* might be perceived by some to entrench old stereotypes, but this does not happen in the book. Throughout its narrative, the work sticks firmly to what its title suggests. A rich picture emerges from its pages, a picture of a diverse group of people, administered as Coloured, deprived of the franchise, and the long history behind regaining the vote again. A great deal of this history might be known to those with a well-established and enduring interest in South African history. For example, the stories of Dr Abdul Abdurahman, long-time leader of the African People’s Organisation (APO), is well documented in South African historiography, but also forms an important theme in this publication.

*In Our Own Skins* does not employ comprehensive research into primary sources such as archival materials. The text is supported by a series of endnotes, with most of the research material being published books and some reports. The value of this work lies in the collection of the information into a single volume, as well as the insights and interpretation provided by the author. An important aspect of *In Our Own Skins* is a focus on the role of publication, in particular newspaper publication, in shaping Coloured identity. A whole chapter is dedicated to the reprinting of extracts from the newspaper *The APO* between the years 1909 and 1923. These provide valuable insights, as they align with the title of the book, focusing on the political developments and discourses of the time. The decades of South African apartheid policies naturally form an important focus of the work. Again, much of the history is well documented elsewhere in South African historiography. The Theron Commission (its recommendations ignored at the time), the role of the Labour Party, the tri-cameral parliament and the United Democratic Front are some of the themes covered. The history of the apartheid era is perhaps best summarised in the concluding remarks, where the author notes that “there was always an alternative to the government’s perspective on the colour question” (p 198).

On the subject of the political history of the Coloured people of South Africa, substantially more can still be documented. Geographically, *In Our Own Skins* can be said to have a very strong focus on what is today known as the Western Cape Province. According to Van der Ross, “... there is also a strong provincialism, which we

apply when we distinguish between a Capey, a Bolander, a Namaqualander, a Kimberleyite, a Transvaler, a Natalian or someone from the Eastern Cape” (p 8). However, in the political sense, the umbrella term Coloured, applied to people of diverse backgrounds who lived in the country during the apartheid era. In 2015, for example, the Free State Provincial Archives made an appraisal of what came to be known as a collection bearing the name Administration of Coloured Affairs. Oral history research conducted by the staff of the archive clarified the prominent role that people of Indian origin played in the Coloured community of the area. The research also revealed the rich histories of defiance in these communities to their oppression, which, if left undocumented, would leave South African historiography poorer.

The year 2016 marks 50 years since the declaration on 11 February 1966 of District Six in Cape Town as a “white” area by the government under Hendrik Verwoerd. In time, District Six became symbolic of the many injustices of forced removals elsewhere in South Africa such as those carried out in Sophiatown and Botshabelo. The Population Registration and Group Areas Acts, the cornerstones of the apartheid regime, dictated the lives of many South Africans for decades to come, and their influence still lingers in the South African present. While the coloured construct will continue to be as contested as the complex legacy left in its trail, this political history, as Van der Ross notes, is of concern to all South Africans. *In Our Own Skins* is particularly important for this reason.

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