

'The Spring Queen Pageant and the Postapartheid Archive'

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Abstract

This paper considers how an archive of the "Spring Queen" pageant of clothing and textile workers of the Cape Flats of Cape Town can be examined for insights into the past and present lives of those oppressed by apartheid. It considers further the idea of the ordinary archive and peripheral narratives as entrypoints into how we may yet understand self-representation and freedom in post-apartheid South Africa.

Keywords: Apartheid, archive, freedom, Cape Flats, representation, textile industry, fashion, performance

"The women in the factory become your family, they will look out for you. I wanted my dress to be all kinds of colours. I wanted to stand out, to be different. It is the most expensive thing I own! I was so excited when I saw the dress. I can't even explain how I felt. For that one night, I am not a factory worker, I am a winner!"

(Emmerentia Jones Miss Spring Queen 2014)

In this essay, I consider how an archive of the Spring Queen pageant of clothing and textile workers of the Cape Flats of Cape Town can be mined for insights into the past and present lives of those oppressed by apartheid. This project, which began when I found a photograph taken of my aunt as a clothing factory worker, has produced an exhibition, two documentary films and a digital archive of hundreds of hours of interviews and thousands of photographs. Perhaps more importantly, though, this research has allowed me to think about the construction and nature of

the apartheid archive in the postapartheid landscape. It has urged me to think about the work of the imagination and creativity, gesturing towards new possibilities and practices that are outside of conventional lenses. The study of this pageant places three seemingly distinct literatures in the same frame; that of representation, that of archive and that of freedom. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Spring Queen pageant, ca 1995. Photo courtesy of the Centre for Curating the Archive and the SACTWU (South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union) archive.

The Spring Queen pageant is an annual event in which female factory workers from the clothing and textile industry in the Western Cape strut their stuff on the ramp. The pageant began in the late 1970s and was at its height in the late 1980s. Today, there are still up to 7000 excited and jubilant supporters who attend the final event, which is hosted annually in November by the Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (SACTWU). The event was held at the Good Hope Centre on the edge of the city until 2014, and more recently at the Athlone Stadium on the Cape Flats. Spring Queen fever begins in June each year, when thousands of women participate in in-house factory pageants. Given the historical labour particularities of the Western Cape, these women are almost all “black” and hail from the Cape Flats and the West Coast township of Atlantis. (Figure 2)



Figure 2. News clipping, 1980. Photo courtesy of the Centre for Curating the Archive and the SACTWU (South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union) archive.

The Cape Flats is a relatively flat geographical plain between the Table Mountain chain, on its western end, and the Hottentots Holland chain, on its eastern end. It is a highly complex and contested space. Through the apartheid mechanism of the Group Areas Act of 1950, which saw thousands of citizens forcibly relocated from the city centre to these peripheral areas, the Cape Flats has come to denote that part of Cape Town where “black” and “coloured” people live, even though there are pockets that would have been classified as “white” areas during apartheid. Areas such as Bonteheuwel, Manenberg and Hanover Park are easily visible from key tourist areas such as Table Mountain and Rhodes Memorial, but to many of the inhabitants of these flat and dusty settlements the division between the wealthy suburbs of the city and their own is acute. Newspaper headlines draw continuous attention to the socio-economic ills that plague the hundreds of thousands of men, women and children who live in the Flats, reinforcing the division and isolation. These areas provide the backdrop to the Spring Queen pageant, a frame that on the one hand weighs heavily on the scripting of these “other” lives, but on the other

allows a group of women to take to the fashion ramp and perform a moment of freedom. (Figure 3)



Figure 3. Mareldia April, ca 1980s. Photo courtesy of the Centre for Curating the Archive and the SACTWU (South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union) archive.

The Spring Queen digital archive

In 2012, I approached SACTWU to suggest an exhibition of the pageant, and was struck by the absence of an inventory of any sort of documentation of the pageant since its inception. Through a series of workshops over the following three years that brought Spring Queen participants together, I began the process of video recording their recollections of the pageant and their experiences of being a factory worker. Workshops were always well attended, with women using the opportunity to catch up with each other as many of them had endured several retrenchments and moved from factory to factory. All of these workshops were advertised through shop stewards at the various factories and participants were asked to bring any piece of

memorabilia, photographs, dresses and winning sashes which were used as entry points into show and tell conversations. Photographs and clippings were digitally scanned and the originals returned to their owners. To date, the open access digital archive has been used by SACTWU, students, clothing and textile workers and researchers who are interested in, inter alia questions of labour, gender, fashion, archive and the urban. (Figure 4)



Figure 4. Farieda Ebrahim, 1994. Photo courtesy of the Centre for Curating the Archive and the SACTWU (South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union) archive.

Photographs that were shared were often badly composed, poorly lit and, more often than not, were held together by tape, evidence that these snapshots have passed through many hands. Notwithstanding the wear and tear, what is unmistakable is the subject who takes centre stage. She is a woman resplendent in a complicated hairstyle, wearing a dress that is bold, bright and accompanied by a winning smile. The women are of all ages and many are mothers, with several

having a long history with the pageant: many of *their* mothers and aunts participated when they were employed in the factories a generation before.

These images, the narrations and recollections of the pageant queen appears to be at odds with that of the factory worker in the overalls, as the former shows a woman in a moment of self-representation that argues against everything that a factory worker from the wrong side of the tracks is supposed to be. The snapshots of the Spring Queen weave a story of resilience and imagination that draws our attention to a brief moment grabbed on the ramp—a moment that argues for liberation of a different sort, beyond emancipation at the polls. The performance of the ramp, manifested in the careful dress design, the hairstyles, the arresting confidence of stride and gaze, the group efforts of the factory workers in raising funds for their queen, urges us to consider these fleeting moments of profound self- and re-representation. (Figure 5)



Figure 5. Mareldia April, ca 1980s. Photo courtesy of the Centre for Curating the Archive and the SACTWU (South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union) archive.

The Spring Queen archive, constituted through pageant dresses, trophies, certificates, pageant programmes, tiaras, sashes, oral interviews, family photographs and newspaper clippings, illuminates some of the questions raised by scholar Anthony Bogues (2011) in a lecture at the University of Cape Town, where he asked, “What kind of human beings are we and what questions do we want to put to the

legacies of trauma?”¹ Spring Queen responds to Bogues’s questions, for as an archive that speaks to us about apartheid afterlives, it provides an entry point to think about erasures and absences in this moment and across other spaces and times. A study of a pageant of women of the clothing and textile trade demands a radical look into ways of life and sets of practices, a look that asks whether we are really free. (Figure 6)



Figure 6. Mareldia April, ca 1980s. Photo courtesy of the Centre for Curating the Archive and the SACTWU (South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union) archive.

The archive of the factory worker on the pageant ramp welcomes a series of questions, including those of ideologies of race, meanings of history, and public and private representation. By looking at this previously un-constituted archive and embedding it in comparative and theoretical discourse, we are offered the chance to interrogate meanings of the oppressed and how this particular representation

¹ Bogues, “Trauma”.

disrupts or disturbs conventional tropes of knowing and being. This looking will therefore depend on a re-reading of the archive of the oppressed, which may necessitate a re-imagination of specific historical and cultural contexts. It demands a journey into disavowed archives and lives that will offer a way of living after “historical catastrophe.”² This is an archive of the living, where silenced memories become histories of lives that are yet lived. These dresses, snapshots and newspaper clippings offer a glimpse into “other” ordinary archives that have not been recognised or acknowledged by history and thus point to silences and omissions in the historical narrative. They remind us that in conjuring up memories that had been denied, other archives deserve to be afforded their place. What can we learn from this archive of the oppressed? What silenced stories do they whisper and what do they themselves silence? What do the photographs, conversations and memorabilia of factory workers of the Cape Flats represent and how does this representation contradict or reinforce notions of subjectivity?

The Archive of the Oppressed

An archive of the oppressed compels us to consider modes of survival by those who were dominated and to consider how they reconstructed a world for themselves in which they were human. These archives provide apertures through which to peer at habits, gestures, movements, moments and sounds, which whilst at times elusive, transform the idea of archive as a place to enshrine a dead past into something that speaks of being alive. This is particularly evident in those images conventionally considered to be poor in composition, which show perhaps a random hand moving across the frame – photographs that depict natural motion and unguarded moments. Spring Queen speaks to us about the factory floor, metaphorical and otherwise. The pageant tells us about the disposability of certain bodies and certain lives, and asks us to reflect on just which lives are deemed human, and which are not. It argues for a re-thinking of a system that constructs lives in this way. (Figure 7)

² Bogues, *Empire of Liberty*, 43.



Figure 7. Spring Queen pageant, ca 1995. Photo courtesy of the Centre for Curating the Archive and the SACTWU (South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union) archive.

We must conceive of the archive beyond our understanding of it as merely a storeroom, instead imagining it as multiple, with an infinite number of archivists. It is in looking at the black body – the site of injury and differentiation – as an archive that we may begin to make some inroads into how a postapartheid archive (as problematic as the word may be), a markedly different kind of archive, may emerge. In so doing, we leap beyond archives as mere repositories of information. Moreover, it is in looking to the lived realities of the oppressed that the archive will be able to redeem itself and become a constantly shifting text – at times elusive and ambiguous, but within these uncertainties a reminder that there are multiple pasts, presents, and points of view.

As Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris and Graeme Reid astutely comment, “the archive – all archive – is figured.”³ Crucially, I believe that these “new archives” of disavowed bodies will challenge our long held ideas of the meanings of life and death, of pasts and futures. To do so the archive must look beyond itself, escape its gatekeeper and locate those texts, experiences and sounds that belong to the bodies so recently deemed inferior.

³ Hamilton et al., *Refiguring*, 7.

The pageant archive offers an opportunity not only to present alternate histories but to theorise such histories as well. The questions of the past become valuable only when we think of them as an effective critical history, unearthed through excavation and interpretation—when we create room for the previously silenced archives that will allow a new writing of the history of South Africa. It demands that we think through the borders between emancipation, liberty and freedom, that we begin to conceptualise freedom as something not necessarily separate from the living of ordinary lives. This archive forces us as scholars to think about what it means to engage with the ordinary, the banal and the everyday. It probes us into thinking about our responsibilities and about how we are to access and theorise the experiences of thousands of South Africans who continue to live lives that are marked by an oppressive and racialised past. Critically, it requires that we include in our imagining of these lives the radical re-representations and performances of freedom that are embodied each November in a fleeting and exuberant moment on the ramp.

References

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