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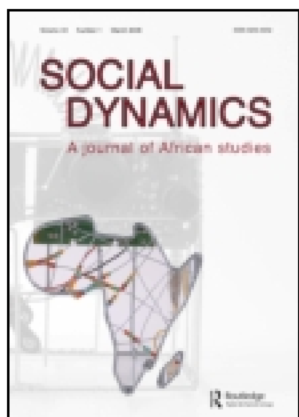

Social Dynamics: A journal of African studies
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsdy20

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Version of record first published: 13 Oct 2011

To cite this article: Sean Jacobs & Cedric Nunn (2011): Sean Jacobs in conversation with Cedric Nunn, Social Dynamics: A journal of African studies, 37:2, 278-288

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2011.603601

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Social Dynamics
Vol. 37, No. 2, June 2011, 278–288

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Sean Jacobs in conversation with Cedric Nunn

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Sean Jacobs: In confronting structural racism, class politics, the legacies of Apartheid and the chimera of new South African black empowerment, the images of photographer Cedric Nunn cover a range of familiar subjects. Nunn's work is consistent with his long-held politics. He spent the 1980s as charter member of a group of photographers associated with a second wave of 'social documentary photography' in South Africa, and continued to pursue the eighties emphasis on social engagement in the early 1990s and after the fall of legal Apartheid. At the same time, Nunn's work is also very personal. Most recently it took him back to rural Kwazulu-Natal, where he photographed the world of his childhood and that of his ailing mother who died in 2010.

Having been a long-time fan of Cedric's work, I was delighted to have the opportunity to interview him. I saw him last in March 2010 when he gave a talk at New York University's Museum Studies Department. I was keen to follow up on some of the arguments he made then. In this extended conversation, we thrashed out aspects of his oeuvre over various emails and in a Skype conversation. I began by asking Cedric what made him decide to be a photographer and who his greatest influences are.

Cedric Nunn: I was expelled from high school at the age of fifteen, and was working in a sugar factory soon after I turned sixteen. I spent the next eight years working in that factory, and the experience was a transformative one in which I was swept up in the upsurge of worker organisation and politics of the mid- to late seventies. The resultant politicisation led me to find a way in which I could contribute to the transformation of society, which I saw as of critical importance. I had also found myself as a factory worker by default and sought to change that. Given my lack of education and the job discrimination of the day, this wasn't easy. I found photography when I saw the portfolio of a third-year Technikon[1] student, Peter McKenzie (see Anon.), and recognised the medium as one I could attempt. With his help I set out to learn and soon found a mentor in Omar Badsha (see Anon.). I recognised with hindsight that I'd been exposed to the best of the Magnum photographers through the *Time Life* that my dad subscribed to. Subsequently, the Magnum photographers had an influence on me.

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ISSN 0253-3952 print/ISSN 1940-7874 online
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http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2011.603601
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Many South African photographers like Paul Weinberg, David Goldblatt, Santu Mofokeng and Guy Tillim, Peter McKenzie and Omar Badsha also influenced me.

Sean Jacobs: I know that you find the description 'social documentary' for the kinds of photographs you made in the 1980s limiting. Can you say something about that?

Cedric Nunn: I have never felt comfortable with the category of 'documentary photography', and half seriously say that I'm not 'a photographer's photographer'. I see photography as one of the most democratic mediums of the contemporary world, much as writing is, in that since the advent of Kodak and the Brownie camera, photography has been a potential medium of the masses. Quite untrained, I was able, with a little direction, to use the medium to express my view of the country and world I inhabited. So, I wasn't really trying to document neglected aspects of my society, as bringing witness to a view that was neglected by the mainstream media of the time. Naively, I thought I could record images of my familiar world, as well as the attempts to change the socially engineered world of the time, and this intuitive attempt was largely proved correct with time.

Sean Jacobs: I found this photograph (Figure 1) quite striking as it contrasts diametrically with the celebratory way in which young people, mostly black young people, are now often portrayed by the media and marketers, and by many academics, artists and photographers.

Figure 1. Nothando Ntsibande and her one year ten months daughter, Aphelele Mbonambi. Mangete, 2007 © Cedric Nunn.

Cedric Nunn: This image of the young mother and her baby was made as part of a series on learner-parents – that's an official term for young mothers still in school in South Africa – and Nothando was one of at least ten kids I was introduced to at a particular school in Mangete, in rural KwaZulu-Natal. The phenomenon of learner-parents is endemic to South Africa and the issue with regards to accessing these kids was ethical –both for me as photographer and the [heads] of the schools concerned; they identified the learners. The learners themselves had few qualms about being photographed though they knew full well it would be for publication in a book. Most lived in conditions of extreme poverty, though evidence of extreme poverty was less apparent in the Western Cape where about six such learners were also photographed. Some of the kids concerned had two or more children.

What was also apparent is that the more working-class (or more likely unemployed) the family from which the learner-parent emerged, the more likely they were to have carried the pregnancy to term, becoming parents while still at school in the process. There seemed to be little stigma attached to their new status as parents from their peers.

Nothando lives with her child, one year ten months old Aphelele Mbonambi, her mother Mpho Mabaso and grandmother Goodness Mabaso, and a few other relatives. It seems that her grandmother is the breadwinner, through her pension. The family seemed somewhat dysfunctional, I thought, judging from their outlandish behaviour and very neglected and disorderly yard. Nothando's child seemed to have physical and mental defects. There was no coherent answer to my queries as the whereabouts of the child's father, and whether there was a financial contribution forthcoming. I must also say that in all the examples I saw, this was the exception in regards to the extreme evidence of poverty and neglect. Poverty affected most of the subjects, but their response to it was different, most overcoming it by diligent application and support through *stokvels* (saving clubs) and family.

South Africa is gripped by a need to reinvent itself as a 'world-class African country', and to do this in the context of the paradigm it has embraced, namely the capitalism model, hence the major drive to promote entrepreneurs and business. In keeping with this model, even government departments and many NGOs [non-governmental organisations] have adopted the concept of public relations and advertising wholeheartedly. So it has become rare to see the use of 'reality' images, unless in the pages of a newspaper, which of course is a medium for all that is bad in the country, as largely the mainstream media approach is sensationalist in its quest for circulation and advertising revenue. Young people are meant to reconstruct themselves as shining stars of this 'new paradigm', and the majority who fail to do so are seen as failures, fit only to labour in the workplace and be happy that they at least have a job. It's common to hear social commentators of all sorts deride workers who are on strike for better working conditions and express fatigue at the temerity of workers who really should be grateful to be employed. The attempts at bringing government back to its mandated position of protecting the interests of the poor and marginalised is a slow one that bears little fruit presently.

Sean Jacobs: I'm intrigued by how your views about the nexus of capitalism, advertising and public relations filter into your photographs of what seems unremarkable, neutral or not really 'political'. This image (Figure 2) of cyclists could be anywhere in the world where you don't see lots of black people, except this in a

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Figure 2. Sport and recreation activities such as these, sponsored by corporates such as Mr. Price in this instance, largely exclude the majority by the costs associated with entering and maintaining the activity. Karkloof Bike Challenge, KwaZulu Natal 2009. © Cedric Nunn.

country where whites are less than 10% of the population. Yet this is also true for leisure in general in South Africa?

Cedric Nunn: Mountain bikes such as these would cost probably no less than R10,000,[2] [more than] five or six months income for the lowest paid workers, who are the majority of employees in South Africa. Then there's the cost of associated gear, fees for entering such competitions, the transport to events around the country, accommodation, meals, refreshment and entertainment. This clearly makes for a high cost, which would preclude most South Africans. These sports are the new segregated barriers that prohibit much mixing of the classes. At this event I saw only one person of color. While there are many black people that cycle, probably only those in corporates could afford to enter such events. Then again it seemed to me that these events are tailor-made as networking opportunities. They are also designed to ensure the fitness of employees, sharpening the competitive skills vital for survival and success in the race to the top.

I suppose we have to remember that leisure for the masses is a recent construct, associated with the fruits of capitalism for the western world. Black people would be involved in stereotypical 'cultural activities' such as those associated with choirs, dance ensembles or theatre – often group activities that didn't leave much scope for independent leisure. Activities such as those pictured here are very focused on the individual, even though they are ideal for honing the competitive edge in commerce and industry, and provide a networking opportunity.

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Figure 3. Workers converge on the taxi rank for their commute home. Ballito, KwaZulu Natal, 2009. © Cedric Nunn.

Sean Jacobs: There's a similar configuration of comments and analysis around body image, the corporate world and commodity consumption, it seems, in the photograph (Figure 3) of the workers approaching a taxi rank.

Cedric Nunn: Ballito, on the KwaZulu-Natal north coast, is home to ostentatious wealth and attendant workers and servants. The obvious comment here is on the illusory world created and sold through the billboard in view. Its primary function, apart from the panacea of a distracting entertainment, is to create good consumers. And here we see the consumables of the poor and working class: bulk goods and cooking oil. The taxi rank pictured in the background is actually occupying illegal ground, an island between a shopping complex and a main road, simply because no provision had been made for the vital task of ensuring that adequate space be made for the transportation of workers, let alone consumers without their own vehicles.

Sean Jacobs: So this is also a comment on the absence of an affordable, reliable, safe, public transport system that restricts people's mobility?

Cedric Nunn: Absolutely. It's an indication of the degree of neglect of the labouring classes. A continuation of the lack of ethical consideration the West has always had for the poor and one which our new order [in South Africa] has taken on without much critical thought.

Sean Jacobs: This is a recurring theme in your work, of the coexistence of the 'two worlds' of South Africa, one of poverty alongside an ethos of conspicuous

consumption, the fantasy of the new South Africa. But we know of course that the system only works in this way in its present form – that is the stark inequalities, the cheap labour, make possible the kinds of super profits the wealthy enjoy – even after the 'end' of Apartheid. The billboard is of course for satellite television provider, DSTV, which few can afford (although DSTV offers a cheaper package to lower middle class customers).

Cedric Nunn: Yes, DSTV is being packaged and promoted to the working classes, as of course their 'buy-in' to consumerism is vital, they are to be both producers and consumers, and of course aspirants to the ideal life promoted (as the carrot) by the system of capitalism.

Sean Jacobs: This brings up a general observation: to what extent do you still feel the urge to photograph subjects that directly contradict the myth of rainbowism, illustrate entrenched racial inequalities and point out the shortcomings of a government policy that effectively enriches only a small section of the black community alongside whites at the expense of the majority?

Cedric Nunn: I'm not totally opposed to either 'Rainbowism' or BEE,[3] but obviously find their present manifestation problematic. I find it necessary to mediate the aspiration and the reality, lest we start to believe our own propaganda, or in these days more likely public relations exercises and bumpf. I am appalled by the continued exploitation of the poor, and the cycles created above, of the poor consuming the worst of nutrients and subsequently feeding into the medical and pharmaceutical industries as poor health kicks in, are again extreme manifestations of what we are all subjected to in our diets, middle-class aspirations and lifestyles.

Cedric Nunn: I lived on and off in the inner city Johannesburg suburb of Yeoville over many years, and saw it through the vibrant years of 1990 and the difficult transition years of around 2000. Yeoville has always elicited strong passions and been a suburb on the 'edge'. It has attracted migrants through the ages, starting with Afrikaners coming off the land, Lithuanian Jews escaping persecution, South African blacks seeking sanctuary from racial bigotry and recently is a favored destination for Africans from all over the continent. This image was part of a series published in the volume *Voices of the Transition: The Politics, Poetics and Practices of Social Change in South Africa*, published by Heinemann, on the occasion of ten years of democratic rule in South Africa. This image typified the kind of bohemian energy that Yeoville has always attracted.

Sean Jacobs: I was struck by how 'old' the man looks – worn face, tired eyes of the figure in Image 4. In a school uniform? Or is he a security guard? But he rocks the *pantsula*/township style with the upturned 'Cerani' brand hat?

Cedric Nunn: Yes, I suppose that beyond the hype of the image of *Pantsula* or the many other styles and trends that emerge is the fact that the many adherents are in fact working-class at best or more probably unemployed. In many instances, desperate people, such as this man, who do still try to hold on to attempts to make meaning of their lives. So the resultant image is a poignant one.

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Figure 4. Yeoville, an inner city suburb that has been at the forefront of transformation to a truly African demographic residential area. Johannesburg. 2003 © Cedric Nunn.

Sean Jacobs: And this is the poignancy you convey in many of your photographs – an acute sense of what the body struggles to achieve, to aspire to, confronted by the circumstances that limit these aspirations?

Cedric Nunn: This image (Figure 5), of my mother in about 1986 or so, captures the conditions and weariness of her life at the time. Thankfully, conditions did

Figure 5. Blood Relatives.

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improve. Mother was born in the heart of Zululand in 1924, and until she began school at the age of about ten, she spoke mainly Zulu. She attended a missionary run school for orphans in Durban, about 350 km from her home, going home once a year for holidays. Her only formal job was as a domestic servant for wealthy whites in Durban.

Sean Jacobs: I can recognise that world of domestic work. My mother, born in 1945 in the Small Karoo, worked as a domestic servant all her working life in Cape Town, first living 'in service' and then, once her children were born, working as a 'char'.

Cedric Nunn: This photograph was taken when I returned from Johannesburg to assist in turning around the family fortunes. My parents were starting a new business and through a forced removal had lost all of their clientele. The photo was taken at about 7pm when mom was preparing supper and ironing after a full day in the family shop. Conditions were bleak. We had no electricity, portable water and a house that was far from completion. Mom, who died in August 2010 at the age of 86, did enjoy many years in a completed home and had a sense of accomplishment in her life.

Sean Jacobs: So in large parts of your recent work, much of what you photograph is deeply personal in the sense that your family background is reflected in the subjects you photograph and how you see them?

Cedric Nunn: I made a decision in the early eighties to photograph family (my large extended family which originate from the trans-frontier ancestors who married

many wives, as was the case with John Dunn who had 49 wives) in an attempt to understand my identity within the South African racialised context. There were then of course many other spin-offs from this initial study. For example, it was a photographic project in the early eighties that led me back to reconnect with my maternal grandmother, Amy 'Madhlawu' Louw.

Sean Jacobs: To ask a follow-up question around your quest to understand your identity. Your website (Nunn 2009) is explicit about why you took the photographs of your mother and grandmother. You say you had developed 'a deep need to explore my identity as a South African of mixed origins', that you 'felt uncomfortable with the moniker of "coloured", or more exactly, "Cape Coloured" bestowed upon me by the state and needed to come to a new understanding of my origins and place in my country in light of my political perspectives' (Nunn 2009). Can you say more about how your extended family served as a 'palette' for you to explore these issues? I'm intrigued by your desire, through photography, to trace a sense of who you are by representing those you know, or came to know more.

Cedric Nunn: I have written about this before: I've argued that 'Blood Relatives', as a look into an ordinary community, shows how it has had to withstand the ravages of exploitative social engineering, and done so with the human ability to rise to challenge. These images are of the communities from which I emerge and map the recent worlds which my predecessors inhabit. But they are also a case study, if you like, of the results of our curious and disastrous recent social experiment. I grew up on a steady diet of discussions, debates and complaints by my father and extended family, regarding the effects of apartheid. However, as I ventured into the community, I was at odds to understand how it was that people, who were suffering so much at the hands of the state, could themselves be the source of such virulent hatred for people of a darker hue than themselves. My burgeoning consciousness was constantly affronted by the racism I discovered within the communities of 'coloured' people. All this brought me to photography, with the intention of using it as a medium to address fellow community members. I wanted other 'coloureds' such as myself to recognise that we were all human, no different from one another. As a teenager entering high school, I had the experience of debating ancestry with about twenty hostel inmates in my exclusively 'coloured' school; every single one of my fellow dorm mates denied any black ancestry. This shocking response got me thinking. So, at the very beginning of my advent into photography, it became clear to me that the bigger challenge was to remove the source of the social order that created the climate for racism in the first place.

'Coloured' has always been a difficult and contentious term. During the struggle we prefixed it with 'so-called' so as to leave people in no doubt as to who had coined the name. Today the struggle as we knew it then has passed, and we all have the opportunity to reflect on our cultural origins. For some of us this has begun a painful process of self-exploration. I think I've come full circle now, and am once again confronted with the nasty remnants of racism. I see it in my community of origin, and I also see how it has permeated every facet of every social structure and community throughout the country. But, I'd like to address the broader issue of people of mixed descent, or the many communities of 'coloureds' who people this land. I do it through what I know best, my community and family of origin. I hope that this will not be interpreted as a betrayal of family in any way. The roots of

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racism are as insidious as they are deep. This is a story of 'bruinous', 'klonkies', 'hotnots', 'griquas', 'coloureds', 'bushies', 'bastas' or 'bastards', people of mixed descent or whatever you choose to call them. It's about people born of Khoi, San or more specifically born of white and black parentage and who were, by legislation, bound to associate only amongst each other. Etched in my memory is a scene when, aged about twelve, my dad parked his truck outside a kraal in the heart of Zululand, and an infant was brought, covered in blankets against the cold early morning air, and handed to me. I nestled it in my lap for the thirty or so kilometres journey to acceptance in the home of my aunt May, my Dad's cousin who had no children. Concerned elders had approached my father to adopt the child, identified as belonging to his 'nation'. Another two siblings arrived in quick succession, in the secrecy of night, to be discovered at the break of day by my aunt. It was clear that they were blood relatives of the first, born of the same black mother and white father. Was their love thwarted by bigotry? Was the intolerance of both whites and blacks at fault? We pass judgment, if at all, with hindsight. We all know what happens to a child who is abandoned by both parents. Could the same happen to a people, abandoned by both societies, because their parents had dared to defy the social norms, boundaries and taboos of the time?

I suppose my generation is still trying to come to terms with the effects of the social engineering foisted on us. Subjected to years of isolation, in which we were shepherded in the direction of the trades or the shop counter, and mostly locked in ghettos until we began to recognise ourselves in the eyes of our fellow inmates. This had been our reality, all we'd known. Now the gates are thrown open to a rapidly transforming world that is, frankly, threatening to most.

There is nothing rational about racism, which is based on bigotry and prejudice. Nor is there much rationality about the need to be accepted. There is a psyche that needs to heal; to begin to feel that it is truly one with this newly created democracy we call the new South Africa. Continued denial will only feed the monster further. No doubt new generations will be imbued with this new spirit more readily. But as long as old animosities persist, some of these will be carried down to children and grandchildren, creating divides where none are necessary. I don't claim to tell the whole story, to recreate history or to conjure up an audit. But merely to tell a simple tale of those I happen to know with whom my paths have crossed. Small and not so small happenings, events, occasions when my interests is piqued and I've been aroused to raise my camera and record a moment, or more exactly, to transform a sliver of time past.

This transformation could be a mirror in which we see aspects of ourselves, hopefully in a new light. The intention of seeing in this way is to use a particular human ability to observe our self-consciousness, and having seen, perhaps question, and ask ourselves: Who? What? Why? How? In seeing myself and my world, through my own eyes, I attempt, in a highly mediated world, to comment on the effects of that notorious social experiment called Apartheid. Once we were dictated to, told who we were and corralled into a 'colouredstan'.[4] Told we were coloured, some exotic new breed of being. We seem largely to have bought the lie and the myth, and by default, by virtue of living cheek by jowl in our ghettoes, marrying each other, working at the same counters, attending the same schools, a culture of sorts has indeed come into being. The culture is a reality, though it is as flawed as the thinking that created the experiment that brought it into being.

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We, that is, all South Africans, have an obligation to examine where we stand. This is largely a taboo subject. How do we see fellow South Africans, and how do they see us? This question should not be the preserve of 'people of mixed descent', but must be addressed to all South Africans. While it's perfectly natural for us to be this way since we were carefully scripted in the Apartheid experiment, it's certainly not normal for us to accept this status quo. In denial we remain way off the mark. It's inevitable that we make this journey; it's simply a matter of when we choose to start it.

Notes

1. A technikon is a non-university higher institution in South Africa offering vocational and professional education. More recently technikons have transformed themselves into universities granting degree programs.
2. One US Dollar is currently equal to about six South African Rands. At the time of the interview this was the equivalent of $1500. At the currency's inception one Rand was worth more than one Dollar. Its slide began in the mid-1980s as Apartheid, in the face of economic sanctions and economic and political unrest by blacks, denied the right to vote.
3. Black Economic Empowerment. This official government policy has anchored social transformation in neo-liberal economic development.
4. 'Colouredstan' is a wordplay on the Bantustans, the 'ethnic homelands' created by the Apartheid State to where it forcefully removed black people to denationalise them. The homelands also served as cheap labour reserves for white capital.

Notes on Contributors

Sean Jacobs is assistant professor of international affairs and chair of the media concentration in the Graduation Programme in International Affairs at The New School in New York City. He is a native of Cape Town, South Africa and is writing a book about postapartheid media culture.

Cedric Nunn is a photographer. He currently lives in Byrne Valley in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

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