12 "Coloured nature... isn't that easy to shake off": Gordon Jephtas in Switzerland

Féroll-Jon Davids

By the time the South African pianist and répétiteur Gordon Jephtas passed away in New York in July 1992, it can be said that he had freed himself from the racial oppression of the apartheid regime and the psychological scars it left behind. In a 1986 interview with the *Salt Lake Tribune*, Jephtas conveyed a fundamental understanding of the harsh realities of apartheid in his homeland:

> The first thing a child learns in South Africa is color [sic]... You are told that whites are superior[,] Coloured people not quite as superior and the black man is an animal. It is something that is in the air. You feel it everywhere.[1]

Gordon Jephtas, classified as "coloured" in South Africa, left his country in 1965 to pursue his passion for opera, as apartheid legislation prevented "non-white" individuals from attaining professional status in the arts or holding positions at arts institutions. Despite these obstacles, he became a highly sought-after vocal coach specialising in Italian opera. Over the course of three decades, largely spent outside South Africa, Jephtas worked at several prestigious opera houses, including the Zurich Opera, the Chicago Lyric Opera and the San Francisco Opera. He also assisted renowned conductors such as Nello Santi, Nicola Rescigno and Oliviero de Fabritiis, and coached some of the most prominent figures in the opera world, including Renata Tebaldi, Plácido Domingo, Montserrat Caballé and Luciano Pavarotti.

However, his self-imposed exile from South Africa came at no small cost and was not without challenges. Jephtas left behind the Eoan Group,[2] where his journey as a vocal coach had begun. Once he was abroad, his status as a foreigner meant he frequently faced difficulties with work permits. On occasion, he also worked illegally to gain the experience needed

1 Mancy Melich, "South African finds life away from home", in *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 5 October 1986.

2 A cultural and welfare organisation founded in 1933 in Cape Town by the British immigrant Helen Southern-Holt to improve the lives of the coloured community of District Six through "Western civilising" methods: elocution classes, lessons in literature, drama and ballet, and eventually a choir. By 1956, the choir section had morphed into an amateur opera company and produced the first "all-coloured", full-scale Italian opera, Giuseppe Verdi's *La traviata*, in Cape Town. See Hilde Roos, *The* La Traviata *Affair: Opera in the age of apartheid*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018, 18–25.

to advance his career.[3] Had he remained in South Africa, he would have had to relinquish his aspirations of a professional life in opera. Alongside these career obstacles, Jephtas also struggled with deeply personal battles. This chapter does not focus on Jephtas's professional trajectory but rather turns inward. Utilising his 28-year correspondence with the coloured South African soprano May Abrahamse as the primary source, this chapter presents his lived experience of racial identity under apartheid and examines how his extended exile – particularly his years working at the Zurich Opera House in Switzerland – shaped his evolving relationship to his colouredness. From August 1972 to mid-1977, Jephtas was employed at the Zurich Opera as a vocal coach. It was during these years – marked by growing professional recognition and personal freedom – that the most significant shift in his thinking about coloured identity took place, as reflected in his letters.

In 1950, South Africa's National Party enacted the Population Registration Act, which classified all South Africans according to race: white, coloured, Black, and Indian.[4] Those classified as "white" enjoyed a network of privileges, while "non-white" individuals were deprived of equal rights. The term "coloured" in contemporary South Africa is understood differently from elsewhere. It does not serve as an umbrella term for all "non-white" individuals, nor does it carry the same derogatory connotations as it does in the African-American context. The historian Mohamed Adhikari explains that in South Africa, "coloured" uniquely describes "a person perceived to be of mixed racial ancestry".[5] However, during apartheid, the category of "coloured" and the notion of colouredness were far more complex than this definition suggests. The subdivision of the "non-white" category into coloured, Black and Indian was a deliberate tactic to divide these groups and prevent a unified anti-apartheid movement.[6] In maintaining these divisions, the National Party fabricated a second-class citizenship for the coloured community, exempting them from certain laws applicable only to Blacks and providing them with resources denied to Blacks.

A common perception of the coloured community is that it emerged after the onset of Dutch colonisation at the Cape in the 1600s, implying that the South African coloured community is the product of miscegenation from illicit relationships between Europeans

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3 Féroll-Jon Davids, "Gordon Jephtas (1943–1992): A coloured life in opera". Master thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2021, 15.

4 Union of South Africa. 1950. Population Registration Act (Act No. 30 of 1950), in *Statutes of the Union of South Africa 1950*, 275–99, see 279. Available at: www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/archive-files2/leg19500707.028.020.030.pdf (accessed June 2025).

5 Mohamed Adhikari, "Predicaments of Marginality: Cultural Creativity and Political Adaptation in Southern Africa's Coloured Communities", in *Burdened by Race: Coloured Identities in southern Africa,* ed. Mohamed Adhikari. Cape Town: UCT Press, 2009, vii–xxxii, here viii.

6 Mohamed Adhikari, *Not White Enough, not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005, 35.

and non-Europeans.[7] This led to assumptions that coloured individuals were consequently "deficient in positive qualities associated with racial purity and handicapped by negative ones derived from racial mixture".[8] The notion of racial "purity" has repeatedly found favour throughout history, while racial mixing has been met with disdain, as evidenced by Nazi Germany and the Jim Crow era in the USA. Similarly, when South Africa's National Party rose to power in 1948, it stigmatised coloureds as a race that was "lacking, excessive, inferior, or simply non-existent".[9] For instance, in a 1983 interview with the *Sunday Tribune*, the future first lady Marike de Klerk offered this perspective on the coloured community:

> [Coloureds] are a negative group. The definition of a coloured in the population register is someone that is not black, and is not white and is also not an Indian, in other words a no-person. They are the leftovers. They are the people that were left after the nations were sorted out. They are the rest.[10]

The National Party, however, believed that, being descendants of European colonists, coloureds were more "civilised" than their Black counterparts. Consequently, the coloured community received better housing than what was deemed necessary for Blacks and was granted limited opportunities for secondary and tertiary education. They were also exempt from certain curfews, pass laws, and other restrictions applicable only to Blacks.[11] Nevertheless, despite being treated as a "higher" class of human being than Blacks, the negative connotations associated with their racial "impurity" left some coloured individuals feeling shame, discomfort and resentment toward their own identity.[12] The young Gordon Jephtas internalised these negative perceptions, having absorbed an ideology that described him as somehow "deficient", "less than white" and "inferior". His letters to May Abrahamse, which touch on various topics, also contain several references to "coloured nature" and his own colouredness. These letters, to the author's knowledge, are the only surviving documentary evidence that allows us to trace the shifting perspectives of a South African coloured musician grappling with the personal and professional consequences of apartheid. Through a close reading of these letters, I have identified passages that allude to coloured identity and will discuss them here. Using Adhikari's model of coloured identity during apartheid as a

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7 Adhikari, *Not White Enough, not Black Enough*, 34.

8 Adhikari, *Not White Enough, not Black Enough*, 14.

9 Zimitri Erasmus, "Introduction: Re-imagining Coloured Identities in Post-apartheid South Africa", in *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town*, ed. Zimitri Erasmus. Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2001, 13–28, here 16.

10 Adhikari, *Not White Enough, not Black Enough*, 13.

11 Adhikari, "Predicaments of marginality", vii–xxxii, here xiv.

12 Erasmus, "Introduction: Re-imagining coloured identities", 13–28, here 17.

framework, I have grouped Jephtas's statements on coloured identity into Adhikari's various categories, which are explained as follows:[13]

> The coloured community occupied an intermediate position between blacks and whites.
>
> Some coloured individuals internalised the negative and derogatory connotations of colouredness.
>
> Some coloured people expressed a desire to assimilate into the dominant white society.
>
> The coloured community's responses to their marginality determined their perceptions of identity.

Adhikari's first point refers to the coloured community's second-class citizenship fabricated by the National Party to inhibit the rise of a unified anti-apartheid establishment. Jephtas's status as coloured thus meant that he was by default positioned between Blacks and whites. However, Adhikari's subsequent points are more relevant to Jephtas's statements in his correspondence.

The findings from Jephtas's letters reveal that during the first 12 years of his correspondence with Abrahamse, he repeatedly expressed negative views about his identity, often making bitter remarks regarding his colouredness. He perceived coloured identity as an obstacle or handicap – more mental than physical – and frequently blamed his "coloured nature" for his inability to assert himself.[14] One of the earliest examples comes when he was 20 years old and travelling abroad for the first time. He shared his experience with Abrahamse as follows:

> The main purpose in writing to you was to tell you about some Jamaicans we recently met. Both Didi and I thought and expected that the West Indians were people with natures and minds like our people – we were pleasantly shocked.
>
> First of all, they are much better bred, spoken and read than we could hope for. They have a fantastic command of language and whereas our people very often have difficulty in saying what they think merely because they have not a command of English or Afrikaans, these people can present a logical and understandable point of view with the utmost facility and ease...
>
> While we were there, they discussed radiography, compared American and English economics. Yes, it is fantastic – Didi and I just marvelled. Perhaps if our people were less interested in skin colour and hair quality, they could reach the same intellectual status – but will they!!!!!![15]

This extract not only highlights the inadequate education afforded to the coloured commu-

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13 Adhikari, *Not White Enough, not Black Enough*, 8–17.

14 Davids, "Gordon Jephtas (1943–1992)", 45.

15 Gordon Jephtas, 1963. Letter to May Abrahamse, 28 December. Eoan Group Archive, Documentation Centre for Music and Research (DOMUS), Stellenbosch University (all further letters from Jephtas listed here are also held in the Eoan Group Archive).

nity by the National Party, but also shows that the young Jephtas was astonished to discover that people who resembled him in appearance could be so different from his community back home. His encounter with a West Indian family revealed to him that skin colour, contrary to the lessons of apartheid, was not a determinant of intellect, culture or intelligence.

Let us fast-forward eight years to February 1972: Jephtas, now 28, was living in Italy and facing professional struggles. He was unemployed, financially burdened, and at times gave vocal coaching sessions in return for a plate of spaghetti. The Italian immigration authorities even issued him with 10 days' notice to leave the country, although this was later rescinded. By this point, Jephtas felt that he should have achieved more in his career. While many of the factors responsible for his difficulty in finding work were bureaucratic in nature, Jephtas, in his depression, provided Abrahamse with a specific reason for his misfortune:

> ... I used to be so exemplary at fighting back tears and facing whatever the situation was ... There are strong moments when I ... decide, well, I have talent and so I must pull myself together – but when the real situation appears I chicken out. Man, I seem to have been running – and running – from something inexplicable that bugs me but cannot shake it off – and as the thirty-years age blinks in the near future (I'll be 29 next week), the thought that I should really already have reached someplace – but this subservient, yes-boss, coloured nature that I was born with and lived with for 28 years isn't that easy to shake off.[16]

Adhikari argues that expressing specific views of colouredness shapes an individual's identity.[17] At this particular point in his life, being coloured was something that Jephtas deemed negative and undesirable – an impediment to professional success. Yet ironically, one year later, despite achieving significant success – being appointed as a vocal coach at the prestigious Zurich Opera House and as an assistant conductor at the Lisbon Opera – Jephtas's self-disparagement over his coloured identity persisted. In April 1973, he wrote to Abrahamse:

> [The conductor Nicola] Rescigno talked about [getting me to] Dallas [Texas]. I'm very interested in their '74 season – *Lucrezia Borgia* (Donizetti) with Beverly Sills. This season they do *Coq d'or* (Rimsky-Korsakov), *Marriage of Figaro* (with [Victoria] de los Ángeles) and *Andrea Chénier* – none of which particularly interests me – just look at me! – can't escape my origins, climb one step on the ladder and think I'm higher than God himself – coloured, coloured!! I try so hard – and worse! Counting those chickens as soon as the egg has been laid.
>
> Anyway, I do have another chicken – the agent, Ansalone, has re-signed me for next year's Lisbon season. The operas he will tell me in Milan – just my luck! – I don't like Lisbon. I can hear you thinking – "Never happy! Us humans" (no, I forget, we are not human, we're coloured, not even black – and after all, only "black is beautiful").[18]

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16 Gordon Jephtas, letter to May Abrahamse, 26 February 1972.
17 Adhikari, "Predicaments of marginality", ix.
18 Gordon Jephtas, letter to May Abrahamse, 4 April 1973.

Jephtas's sardonic remarks reflect not only the entrenched patterns of thinking that were indoctrinated under apartheid but also the negative conceptualisation of coloured identity that was not uncommon among coloured people and other racial groups subjected to the distorted logic of apartheid.[19]

From August 1972 to mid-1977, Jephtas was employed at the Zurich Opera as a vocal coach, and it is in his letters from Zurich that we observe the first notable change in his attitude towards his identity. His letter to Abrahamse, dated 14 January 1975, when he was 31 years old, marks the first shift in his thinking:

> The longer I am abroad, the more I realize that we as [coloured] people, we do have talent and are capable ... we people have it to be great. We are too busy being sorry for our unfair lot – and we are right – we have been humiliated – but the young have to learn to say "Screw you".[20]

Other examples from this period read as follows:

> Every while I get letters from other friends at home with cryptic comments like "do you still have to wait around for whatever comes your way" – and I spend weeks trying to understand what they mean to know – and then even more weeks to unfathom our coloured mentality – my own way of thinking has been so tainted by my Italian sojourn – that I don't even know where to start...
>
> I am so thrilled about the Eoan Group's overseas visit[21] because I really want to work and pass on to all the artists what I have learnt – of course what has taken me 10 years to learn cannot be taught in 15 days – but it is better than nothing. I do so hope not to be completely misunderstood by whoever is coming – my biggest competitor will no doubt be "the white man" – but I mean to fight that in my way – for me [it] is important to impart that we coloureds have something to offer – once we have learnt what is required and forget our humiliation problem; be proud of what we are and make the very most of what we have going for us. Then we can get on to the job of perfecting our good things.[22]

What brought about this shift in attitude, and what drove it? The first answer lies in Jephtas's own words to Abrahamse: the longer he was abroad, living in an environment drastically different from apartheid, the better he was able to make sense of his situation from a distance. The second answer is more complex and multifaceted.

During Jephtas's first two years in Zurich, he changed residences frequently, but in June 1974, he found a more stable living situation when he moved into a platonic flat-share with a colleague from the Zurich Opera, Johannes Lüthi, where he stayed until 1976. In an inter-

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19 Erasmus, "Introduction: Re-imagining coloured identities", 17.

20 Gordon Jephtas, letter to May Abrahamse, 14 January 1973.

21 The International Festival of Youth Orchestras invited Eoan to its 1975 Festival held in Aberdeen. See also Chapter 6 above.

22 Gordon Jephtas, letter to May Abrahamse, 13 June 1975.

view, Lüthi explained that although he and Jephtas led largely separate lives, they regularly shared meals, particularly Sunday brunches, which were often communal affairs, joined by Lüthi's girlfriend and whomever happened to be Jephtas's boyfriend at the time.[23] Sources, including Jephtas's colleagues and friends from Switzerland,[24] confirm that Jephtas lived a relatively open homosexual life in Zurich. However, this was not common knowledge among his family and friends back in South Africa – and with good reason. Under apartheid, homosexuality was a criminal offence, punishable by imprisonment, and considered so subversive that the military ran brutal "conversion" programmes aimed at "curing" it.[25] For Jephtas, who already bore the weight of being coloured, being gay in apartheid South Africa would have only compounded his struggles. Switzerland, on the other hand, had decriminalised homosexuality in 1942, which meant that Jephtas was free to express his sexuality without fear of reprisal. It is possible, then, that this freedom to live openly as a gay man also enabled Jephtas to confront and embrace his coloured identity without shame or humiliation.

Another potential catalyst for this shift in perspective may have been Jephtas's professional environment at the Zurich Opera House, which had engaged him for his skills as a vocal coach, regardless of his race or status as an immigrant. While this does not mean that he never experienced racism in Zurich, there is no mention of any such incidents in his letters, nor do his Swiss friends recall any. His role as a vocal coach also required him to interact with international opera singers, each with their own unique personalities and cultural backgrounds. This constant exposure to diverse individuals and cultures at the Zurich Opera House may have further contributed to Jephtas's evolving relationship with his coloured identity. By 1988, by which time he was firmly established in the USA, Jephtas had stopped signing his letters with his name, opting instead to use the term "boesman". According to the *Dictionary of South African English*, when used in English, "boesman" is an "insulting term for a 'coloured' person".[26] However, Jephtas's letters suggest that he used the term with a sense of pride, possibly indicating by this stage in his life (at 45) that he had fully embraced his coloured identity.

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23 Johannes Lüthi, interview conducted by Chris Walton in August 2022.

24 This information derives from numerous interviews conducted between 2021 and 2022 with acquaintances of the late Gordon Jephtas by the editors of the book *"Sorry. I am what I am." The Life and Letters of the South African Pianist and Opera Coach Gordon Jephtas (1943–92)*, ed. Hilde Roos, Féroll-Jon Davids and Chris Walton. Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2023.

25 Robert M. Kaplan, "Treatment of Homosexuality during Apartheid", in *BMJ*, 329 (18–25 December 2004), 1415–16.

26 *Dictionary of South African English*, "Boesman", at: https://dsae.co.za/entry/boesman/e01015. (accessed 8 July 2023).

Figure 12.1 Gordon Jephtas in the USA, late 1980s. Eoan Archive, Stellenbosch.

Conclusion

Gordon Jephtas's time at the Zurich Opera House, and more broadly his experience of Swiss society in the mid-1970s, played a pivotal role in reshaping his understanding of his coloured identity. More than simply a place of professional advancement, Zurich offered Jephtas a form of exile that allowed him to distance himself – both physically and mentally – from the racialised oppression of apartheid. The multicultural environment of the Zurich Opera House and the relatively progressive social norms of Switzerland provided Jephtas with an opportunity to reevaluate his self-worth, free from the constraints of apartheid's dehumanising racial hierarchies.

What is striking in Jephtas's evolution is that his shift in identity was a gradual process that unfolded over years of introspection. His letters show a clear trajectory from self-

loathing and internalised racism to a more empowered, albeit complicated, embrace of his colouredness. This transformation was likely facilitated by his experiences abroad, where he encountered individuals from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, thus undermining the reductive binaries of apartheid.

The importance of this transformation cannot be overstated. Jephtas's life and letters underscore the profound impact of apartheid on the individual psyche of a man born into the coloured community, where one was often trapped in a paradoxical position – seen as "superior" to Blacks but still regarded as "inferior" to whites. His letters reveal the extent to which apartheid's racial ideologies were internalised, not just by its oppressors, but by its victims too. Yet by the end of his life, Jephtas's use of the otherwise derogatory term "boesman" as a self-identifier suggests that he had reclaimed and redefined his racial identity on his own terms. This act of reclamation is significant: it demonstrates that identity is not a static construct but rather a dynamic and evolving process shaped by both external circumstances and internal reflection.

Ultimately, Jephtas's journey is emblematic of the broader struggles of the coloured community under apartheid – a group caught between privilege and oppression, acceptance and exclusion. His experience illustrates how identity, when subjected to systemic marginalisation, can become a site of both vulnerability and resistance. Jephtas's transformation from a man burdened by his colouredness to one who ultimately embraced it with a sense of pride is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of profound adversity. His story serves as a reminder that identity is not merely assigned by societal categories but is continuously constructed and reconstructed through lived experience, personal reflection, and, in Jephtas's case, the liberating potential of exile.

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