



ABOVE: Soraya Naidoo (left) and Cecilia Williams (right) belong to families who have worked in the flower trade for several generations. Photo: Melanie Eva Boehi.

The flower sellers of Cape Town

A history

by Melanie Eva Boehi

Flower sellers have traded in Trafalgar Place and along Adderley Street in central Cape Town since at least the mid-1880s. From the beginning of the Twentieth Century to this day the flower market has been referred to as an essential part of Cape Town, and the flower sellers as representatives of its inhabitants. Nonetheless, not much is known about the history of the market and the people involved in the trade. The flower market is a popular tourist destination but no storyboard exists to inform people about the exceptional history of the market, and unlike the colonial monuments in Adderley Street the marble fountain standing at the end of Trafalgar Place has deteriorated substantially. Flower selling is often referred to as an 'old tradition' and it is thereby ignored that the women and men involved in the trade have also actively made their business possible, often under difficult circumstances. The Adderley Street flower market is one of few places in the inner city of Cape Town where black business people have operated independently for over a century. Being largely excluded from careers in botany and horticulture during apartheid, flower farming and selling were

occupations in which black people successfully made a living by working with flowers. Many of them are very knowledgeable in plant matters and flower farmers like Moses Jaftha from Constantia have worked independently on the conservation of garden flower species. Much like debates about nature conservation and access to natural resources, the disputes about flowers and the regulation of their trade were never apolitical, but much influenced by the distribution of power at the time.

Some authors wrote that the cut flower trade began as an occupation of slaves in early colonial Cape Town. The historian Lance van Sittert suggests that flower selling began in the mid-1880s, a date that is supported by archival documents and oral histories. Most of today's flower sellers belong to families who have been in the trade for several generations. The family of Amina Naidoo, a 63 year old flower seller, has been in the trade for four generations: 'My granny used to sell flowers in Darling Street before the market moved to Trafalgar Place. My mother used to come with her and took over the business. I joined her together with my brothers and sisters. I



ABOVE: Ilhaam Benjamin chooses flowers at her stall for an arrangement ordered by a customer.
BELOW: Cecilia Williams, Trafalgar Place, Adderley Street. Photos: Melanie Eva Boehi.



am still here and my daughter Diela Gamildien is also selling flowers.' Many flower sellers initially came from Constantia. Constantia is situated about 15 kilometres south of Cape Town's CBD and today stands out as one of the city's wealthiest residential areas. Few traces remind us that until the 1960s Constantia was a farming area with a predominantly black working class population. They were farmers, farm workers, domestic workers and fruit and flower sellers, and they practiced subsistence farming, growing vegetables, fruit and flowers, and raising chickens and pigs on the land around Strawberry Lane. According to Moses Jaftha, flowers were the 'bread and butter' of many who lived in Constantia. They were grown in gardens and bought from farms in the area. Vendors took flowers to Rondebosch and central Cape Town by bus or train. Moses Jaftha remembers that in spring you could recognize the bus that came from Constantia by the smell of flowers.

European immigrants and descendants initially preferred exotic to indigenous plants but in the wake of emerging white nationalism after 1890 interest in indigenous plants gained a new momentum. Indigenous plants became vehicles that Europeans and their descendants deployed to create a sense of belonging to the 'foreign' land that had only become theirs through violent appropriation and dispossession of the local people. Discourses concerned with identity and belonging are full of plant metaphors. Roots and ideas of rootedness are the most prominent examples of how humans have used concepts of the plant world to make sense of their relations to their natural and social environment. In South Africa discourses about the flora were not only concerned with nature but were implicitly also about questions of social order. This can be studied in the discussions around 'indigenous,' 'alien' and 'foreign' plants and also in the perception of the flower sellers.

At the turn of the Nineteenth Century the flower sellers were described as a threat to the flora of the Cape. Laws regulating flower picking were passed in the 1890s and followed by the Wild Flower Protections Act in 1905 and an amendment thereto in 1908. In May



ABOVE: Moses Jaftha is the only flower farmer who has managed to continuously grow flowers in Constantia till this day. After having been forcibly removed during apartheid, he commuted from the Cape Flats to Constantia to farm on land he rented. Today the Jafthas specialize in growing flowers that are disappearing from the market. Photo: Melanie Eva Boehi.

1905 the introduction of a new permit of £3 was discussed. One parliamentarian complained that the licence seemed to be directed 'more against the flower sellers than in favour of the protection of flowers'. Another parliamentarian said that 'able-bodied coloured' men and women should not be flower sellers but employed as farm labourers or domestic workers. Parliamentarians opposing the licence described the flower sellers as 'little boys and girls' and 'poor people' without other means of support. A widow and a blind girl were singled out as examples of vendors for whom the licence would be unaffordable. Flower sellers were not recognised as independent business people. Allowing the flower sellers to trade was thus framed as a philanthropic act. Implicitly the discussions about the flower sellers' rights were about their race, class and gender. 'Coloured' flower sellers were regarded as a threat to nature who lacked a rational understanding of nature and it was therefore the role of organizations like the Botanical Society of South Africa – at the time dominated by white men and few women – to intervene. This can be seen in articles and reports about the protection of wildflowers that appeared in *The Journal of the Botanical Society of South Africa* (now *Veld & Flora*). These articles also saw upper-class female customers as a problem. A report from 1939 states that the protection of wildflowers was 'very difficult to enforce as the beauty of our flowers seems to overcome any scruples which our womenfolk have in buying them at the door'.

The flower sellers' rise to become icons of Cape Town began in the first decades of the Twentieth Century. More often than any other group they were depicted on postcards, in tourist guidebooks, local newspapers and magazines. On early composite postcards of Cape Town flower sellers in Adderley Street featured prominently along with images of landscapes and governmental buildings such as Table Mountain or the Houses of Parliament. Postcards also showed photographs of flower sellers in groups or individually as portraits. Cape Town had become a tourist destination for European and North American travellers and the city was marketed to travellers along the lines of contrasting ideas of European progress and African

backwardness. Following the colonial thinking of the time Cape Town's black inhabitants were presented in exoticised ways that had little to do with how people actually lived. From the beginning of the Twentieth Century guidebooks directed travellers to the Adderley Street flower market. One brochure from 1940 stated that 'perhaps no single display gives such a good idea of the wealth of the Cape flora as the famous market in Adderley Street'.

Postcards and guidebooks predominantly portrayed flower sellers as female, 'coloured' or 'Malay' and poor. Photographs on postcards were altered in ways that emphasised not only the colours of the flowers but also of the flower sellers' dresses, especially the 'Malay' attributes such as women's headscarves and men's fezzes. Painters, with Irma Stern and Vladimir Tretchikoff among the most well-known, frequently produced images of flower sellers. The imaging and imagining of flower sellers as female, 'coloured' or 'Malay' and poor do not accurately represent the people who were actually involved in the flower trade. Also the frequency of visual and textual reproduction is disproportionately high, considering that only a small fraction of Cape Town's population worked in the flower trade. Rather than portraying real people they constitute a discursive figure that says more about the photographers, painters and writers who produced them than about the people involved in the flower trade. The prominence of flower sellers in images and literature is not unique to Cape Town. In Nineteenth Century European cities like Paris and London 'flower girls' featured prominently in writing and imagery. They were described as female, poor and amenable to educational interventions by gentlemen or missionaries. The most famous 'flower girl' is Eliza Doolittle from George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1912) and the musical and film *My Fair Lady* (1956, 1964) based on the play.

While the figure of the Cape Town flower sellers is highly visible, historians have for long paid little attention to what goes on beyond these images and imaginings. Contrary to the idea that the flower sellers have always been an essential part of Cape Town, their position was often precarious. The challenges posed by nature protection legislation have already been mentioned. In the second half of the Twentieth Century apartheid politics threatened the flower trade. In 1965, central Cape Town was proclaimed a white Group Area. P. W. Botha announced in parliament that 'the coloured flower sellers would eventually have to move from the flower market in Adderley Street'. This caused agitation and debates in the local newspapers. Some writers worried that the removal of the flower market to the Cape Flats would impact negatively upon South Africa's image abroad. Following the public outcry and likely also the fact that the flower sellers catered to white customers and fitted into an ideology of philanthropy, they were allowed to stay in Adderley Street. Nonetheless most vendors were affected by forced removals. Constantia where many of them lived was declared a white area, black residents were evicted and their houses and gardens destroyed.

In 1978 the future of the flower sellers was threatened again. The municipality regarded the presence of vagrants at Trafalgar Place as a problem and the possibility of the flower market's closure was debated in the media. The unofficial status of the flower market as a heritage site was again brought up as an argument against the closure. Also changes in the cut flower industry affected the flower sellers. The range of flowers offered at the Cape Town markets has varied strongly over time and the cut flower trade today is highly globalized. Three decades ago the most common species at the market were dahlias, daffodils, daisies, freesias, gladioli, godesias, larkspur, narcissus, poppies, ranunculus, snapdragons, sweat peas and violets. These were seasonal and locally grown flowers. Flower sellers today refer to them as 'Cape Town flowers', 'local flowers' or 'small flowers'. Most of these species are not indigenous to South Africa but they were cultivated on farms in Constantia, Philippi



ABOVE: Trafalgar Place, Adderley Street flower market in the 1950s.

BELOW: Sandra Solomons, Trafalgar Place, Adderley Street. Photo: Melanie Eva Boehi.



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and Retreat. Proteas and other fynbos plants were grown on farms around Cape Town. The commercial protea industry only emerged in the 1960s. The flower business changed dramatically with the increase of imported flowers in the 1990s. South Africa's centre of the cut flower industry is the Multiflora flower auction house in Johannesburg. The traded flowers are grown in greenhouses in the Gauteng area, in other parts of the country or the continent, especially in Zimbabwe, Kenya and Tanzania. A rose bought at the Adderley Street flower market today has most likely travelled many kilometres before arriving in a vase in somebody's living room.

Today, flower sellers complain that customers do not value 'local flowers' anymore and therefore it is not worth stocking them. 'Since the Jo'burg flowers are in, the people don't look at Cape Town flowers anymore,' says Garonesa Benjamin, an 80 year old flower seller who has been working at the flower market in Trafalgar Place since she was 16. As imported flowers replaced locally grown ones, they became more expensive both for traders and customers. Production and transport costs increased and more intermediary traders became involved. These developments culminated in a process of concentration, where fewer flower sellers sell larger amounts of flowers of a wider variety than previous generations. The trade at the flower market has also been impacted upon by department stores also selling flowers.

Local flowers have not disappeared completely though and two men who will make sure this won't happen in the future either are Moses Jaftha and his sons Malcolm and Charles. Moses Jaftha is the only flower farmer who has managed to continuously grow flowers in Constantia till this day. Long ago, even his great-grandmother Susan Williams grew flowers in Strawberry Lane. After having been forcibly removed he commuted from the Cape Flats to Constantia to farm on land he rented. Today the Jafthas specialize in growing flowers that are disappearing from the market. On their fields off Brounger Road they have been growing species of the same stock for decades. They are adamant about growing these old species organically and preserving their strong scents. Moses Jaftha has also collected rare species of fig trees that grew in Constantia before the forced removals. Independently he has created a conservatory of horticultural plants and an unofficial heritage site of black people's lives in Constantia. It is places like the Jafthas' farm and the Adderley Street flower market, and the lives of people who made a living by cultivating and selling flowers that we need to take into consideration if we want to deepen our understanding of South Africa's rich cultural history of plants. 🌱