

Real Eyes

(on Alice Mertens)



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If the various and continued actions of Fallism could be partially ascribed to the fallacy of the generational designation "Born Free", so too the Stellenbosch University students in this photograph from Alice Mertens' 1966 photo book *Stellenbosch*, could be conceived of as "Born Just Before" or "Born Into" Apartheid. Their subjectivity – to be clear, their whiteness – is marked by the fabulation of its own infallibility, which in turn scaffolds the insoluble persistence of heterosexuality. Captioned "*At the Eerste Rivier, a quick clear running stream rising in the mountains behind Jonkershoek, students forget their academic cares*", the photograph chronicles student romance not only as scholastic respite, but, in the staging of bodies alongside and overlooking the banks of the First River at Coetzenberg Bridge, as the citadel of youth, naturalness, health, and ultimately progeny. Presiding over the landscape, the framing of Mertens' white ethnography conflates learning with dominion over land: education as safeguarding as annexation as repeopling as supremacy. This procedure is meant to be conveyed and felt as benign, if not amicable, occlusions eclipsed by a stock photography versed in the aesthetics of leisure and privilege.

It is important to note that Mertens, a German-Namibian best known for her publication *African Elegance* (1973), was from 1964 to 1980 the inaugural lecturer of photography at Stellenbosch University's Visual Arts Department. *Stellenbosch* was republished in 1979 as an updated and expanded edition, rendering it the definitive visual document of life in the town during Apartheid – a condition one could say indigenous to, and tended in, the place

Simon van der Stel set aside at the first river he encountered after Cape Town for *burghers* distancing themselves from the VOC. If the ocean is the space of coloniality, the river is that of settlement.

Rivers have long marked sites of the confluences of queer lives, specifically in the unreproductive occupation of cruising along embankments. *Die Laan*, a lover's lane adjacent to the First River in Mertens' photograph, hosted the annual *Soen in Die Laan*, a Guinness World Record attempt for the most couples kissing in one place in one hour, commencing with 7000 students in 2008. Antithetical to other couplings, the LesBiGay Student Organisation joined proceedings in 2010, with Vanessa Smeets documenting a kiss between Mark Brown and Björn Czepan subsequently published on the cover of *Die Matie* student newspaper, kindling a cascade of homophobic onslaught and the cancellation of the event. Such vociferous suppressions snake down the river to its mouth in False Bay at Macassar Beach, a former separate amenity for people classified as "Coloured" under Apartheid, now an abandoned strand next to a sewerage works (s.v. River Lethe). The flow of the river from Jonkershoek to Macassar pantomimes the disparities of affluence and technologies of visibility earmarking South African realities.

In December 2014 I visited the site of this photograph – at the bardic base of the bridge, the side slipped out of the image – the graffiti *Real EYES Realize Real Lies*, a herald of Fallism.