

'They didn't allow me inside': the South African town of Daleside revisited

When Magnum nominee Lindokuhle Sobekwa's mother worked as a live-in help in this one-time white-dominated community, the family wouldn't let him inside. He returned as a photographer to document the town's transformation

by Lindokuhle Sobekwa and Sean O'Toole

Main image: 'I kept being reminded that I did not belong there,' said Sobekwa. Photograph: Lindokuhle Sobekwa/Magnum Photos, courtesy Rubis Mécénat

The Guardian

Cities is supported by



Fri 25 Oct 2019 06.00 BST

"I first went because my mother used to be employed there as a domestic worker," says photojournalist Lindokuhle Sobekwa. "When I first visited Daleside, to me it seemed an isolated place, a ghost town."

Daleside used to be a white-dominated area, but now it is mixed. In the early 2000s Sobekwa's mother took a job as live-in help with a white family in this town south of Johannesburg. As she struggled alone to support her four children he only saw her on weekends and during school holidays.

"I would visit Daleside with my brother and we would assist her with things like garden work," says the 24-year-old Magnum nominee who grew up an hour away in the eastern Johannesburg township of Thokoza. All his work, he says, took place outdoors. "The people my mother worked for didn't allow me inside."



Midday, midweek, outside the local bottle store in Daleside

The racist snub prompted his fascination to see more, to venture past the threshold of the *stoep*. More than a decade later, having established himself with a remarkable photojournalism project on drug abuse in Thokoza, Sobekwa returned to Daleside.

"I realised that I had built up an illusion of what I might find," he says. "Daleside has changed since 2001. There are now black people living there, and there is also visible separation between rich and poor."



Jonathan and Jeannie play on a swing

Unlike its neighbour, Henley on Klip, a swanky riverside settlement once described by an apartheid parliamentarian as “one of the most beautiful residential areas in the Transvaal”, Daleside more accurately reflects the renamed Gauteng province’s industrial character. Located next to an open-pit dolomite mine, adjacent to a busy highway connecting Johannesburg with a constellation of manufacturing towns to its south, Daleside’s inhabitants are a mix of small-scale farmers and mine workers.

“Daleside is a forgotten area,” says Sobekwa. Class has complicated the region’s older racial binaries. “The rich area nearby is protected by a lot of security guards carrying guns. I tried to photograph there but was told to leave.”

Photographing in Daleside proved no less difficult at first.



A gardener at home in Daleside. The previously white-dominated area is now more mixed

“People still confused me for a garden worker.” Sobekwa’s camera was also a source of distrust. “There is heightened suspicion because of the killing of white farmers. They thought I might be a criminal.”

Sobekwa says it was easier to work when he was with his travel companion, French photographer Cyprien Clément-Delmas.

“For me, when I’m with Clément-Delmas - my white, French, collaborator - it is easier to work there. But when I’m alone - when he goes back to France - it is a bit challenging for me. I have to constantly be careful how I approach people and their personal spaces.”



A girl who wants to be a model sits on her bed in her room

The pair befriended a kindly pastor at a local church to help gain the trust of Daleside’s conservative white community.

Among the photos Sobekwa has produced for their work-in-progress book on Daleside are frank portraits of residents in their bedrooms. One shows an adolescent girl with ginger hair reclining on a bed with a pink crocheted bedspread. Pasted on the wall behind her are hand-drawn pictures and photos torn from magazines. “I was amazed to see posters of people she looked up to on the wall,” says Sobekwa. “This is what we do in the township.”



Interior of one of the first houses in Daleside

Sobekwa met the girl's family at the supermarket and he has often visited them. He has even been invited to stay over - a noticeably different attitude to that of some white families in the town who have refused to be photographed. There are no mixed-race couples in Daleside.



Bosman, Jorden and Naiden chilling outside the Burns' house

"Cyprien did some interviews with the white residents by himself," says Sobekwa. "I was so surprised at what they told him. Most of them don't like black people. They say black people have brought crime, drugs, all the bad things."

Religion is an important facet of life in this community. Christian icons are commonplace in its homes, says Sobekwa. For the photographer this is another point of overlap with life in South Africa's black townships. He describes the inhabitants of Daleside as being in "the same trap as poor black people" - dependent on religion at a time of worsening income disparities and economic stagnation.



Morne in his backyard with his dog

Sobekwa sees similarities between the challenges facing Daleside and the township of Thokoza where he grew up. "This helps me relate to them, to some extent," he says, "but there are also differences that make it difficult for me. As an outsider, most of the time I was mistaken for someone who was looking for a job. This wouldn't happen if I was there with Cyprien.

"At times I'd also feel like I wasn't connecting with them: for me it is important to connect with the people I photograph. I think it was because I kept being reminded that I did not belong there, even though I felt like I did because of those similarities I saw between our communities."



'Garden boy' in the middle-class area of Daleside