

captions. That is, the photographer's name is unidentified, as well as the photographed person.

This makes specific information about the collection 'inaccessible', and as the institution, it is not easy to share the 'unknown' photographs. However, this is not the case with other collections, especially the individual collections by white, male photographers such as Leon Levson and Eli Weinberg. Minkley et al. also noted that the "Levson collection ... together with that of Eli Weinberg and the Drum photographers, constitute the founding archive and mainspring of social documentary photography in South Africa."⁹⁶ The collection of Weinberg and Levson comes with the appearance of complete information needed for research activities. Furthermore, this results in giving power and status to specific artists and annihilating black photographers' voices and contributions to the history of photography in South Africa.

The Leon Levson and Eli Weinberg photography collection Mayibuye Archives (speaks to the invisible regulating power at play when determining whose photographs and which documents get archived while others get discarded.⁹⁷ This sets the precedence on who gets to be researched and written into scholarship.⁹⁸ My research on Levson should not be read as the effect of the archive positioning as research worthy. However, my focus is the Black people depicted or captured by his camera. I am doing this to question his positionality in the archive and the history of photography in South Africa. His visual archive of Black people is one major factor that might have accorded him the status of 'father' of social documentary. I want to disrupt the tradition of White photographers having to get to the visual 'story' of Black

⁹⁶ Minkley and Rassool, 'Photography with a Difference', 188.

⁹⁷ Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and its Limits,' 20.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 20.

people, or rather how the work of white photographers is at the centre and most used to tell stories of Black people. I am clearly stating my position because certain photographers were singled out to constitute the spine of the history of photography in South Africa.

The tendency of privileging White photographer above those of colour or Black is usually done without acknowledging, let alone problematising, the inherited imperial privileges that make the photographer's positionality possible.⁹⁹ The visual archive in South Africa reveals two distinct styles of photography. On the one side is that photography under the colonial period and apartheid was focused on documenting indigenous communities whereby the state used the imagery to implement a divisive, racist ideology that birthed "white privilege, power and hegemony."¹⁰⁰ The other photography is the one used against the state in exposing the atrocities of the apartheid regime. This kind of photography was termed resistance photography which constitutes a large part of the IDAF collection currently housed at Mayibuye Archives. As noted by James Hevia, "...the documentary power of photography was paralleled by the participation of the camera in performances of power."¹⁰¹

A similar view about photography is that of Ariella Azoulay, who states that photography should not only be viewed as a documentary tool of destruction or a tool for implementing segregation as in the case of colonial and apartheid South Africa, but instead, we should consider how photography participated in the destruction.¹⁰² We understand this, firstly by

⁹⁹ Azoulay, *Potential Histories*, 264.

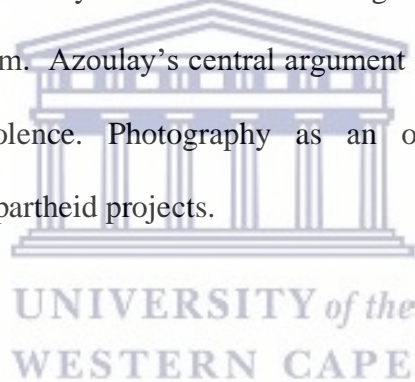
¹⁰⁰ Kylie Thomas, 'History of Photography in Apartheid South Africa', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (2021), 2.

¹⁰¹ James L. Hevia, 'The Photography Complex: Exposing Boxer-Era China (1900–1901), Making Civilization', in Rosalind C. Morris, ed., *Photographies East: The Camera and Its Histories in East and Southeast Asia*, (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 83.

¹⁰² Mary Ellen Dowd, 'An overview of "Unlearning Decisive Moments of Photography" by Ariella Azoulay', *FemLENS*, January 31, 2021 <https://femlens.com/blog-post/imperialism-in-photography/> (accessed March 08, 2021).

acknowledging the state power deposited into the photographer directly or indirectly.¹⁰³ Secondly, acknowledging the photograph as an ‘official report’ is used to advance the agenda of the ruling state privileged by the state power.

Photography as a tool of empire is directly and indirectly deposited into the photographer. In reality, the photographers continue to represent imperial power, even if they seem disconnected from the state power in appearance.¹⁰⁴ Azoulay writes that “when photography emerged, it did not halt this process of plunder that made others and others’ worlds available to the few, but rather accelerated it and provided further opportunities and modalities for pursuing it.”¹⁰⁵ It provided rationality for heinous crimes against certain bodies inflicted by the regime and deemed the norm. Azoulay’s central argument is photography’s participation in the colonial-apartheid violence. Photography as an official record or document institutionalised imperial and apartheid projects.



1.2. *Listening to photographs in archives*

Mbembe draws attention to multi-sensory encounters with the material ‘debris’ of the archive as “inscribed in the universe of the senses: a tactile universe because the document can be touched, a visual universe because it can be seen, a cognitive universe because it can be read and decoded”.¹⁰⁶ This evokes Camp’s notion of haptic temporality, which refers to multiple forms of touch and ways of understanding the archival temporalities of images.¹⁰⁷ Camp argues that photographs that have been silenced or mundane are deeply affective and

¹⁰³ Newbury, *Defiant Images*, 45.

¹⁰⁴ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 140.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰⁶ Mbembe, ‘The Power of the Archive and its Limits’, 20.

¹⁰⁷ Camp, *Listening to images*, 72.

leave an impression upon us through multiple forms of contact. Camppt refers to the haptic-ness not only touches but is cognisant of other ways like feelings or emotional responses that are elicited by the image or the kind of responses that move people in profound ways. Roland Barthes identifies this emotional response as *punctum* - that which of the image has pricked you or moved you emotionally.

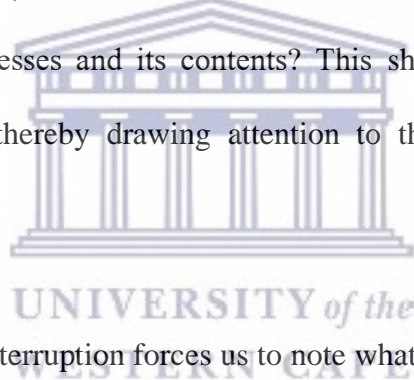
Unlike Barthes, it is essential to note that Camppt's haptic response is that of *studium*, which is the physical qualities of the image. She re-purpose's Barthes definition of *studium* to provide a generative framework that-values and allows to attend to the seriality of the image. Camppt's resuscitation of *studium* and giving it a different definition from its original author reveals multiple sensory responses the images register. The Barthes *studium* contributes to the silencing of other possible narratives photos could tell.

Since photographs are muted firstly by the technical and mechanical such as camera and printing equipment; and chemical, the process of developing films and prints. Secondly, photographs are muted by the photographic intention (ethnography), which the photographer and the archival narrative always determine. The sonic haptic calls us to attend to the silences that are produced by the technological (photography) and the historical (archive) that often divorce "other affective frequencies through which these photographs register."¹⁰⁸ This sensorial touch allows us to acknowledge both the composition of the image and our responses or relation to it.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 43.

Then we must ask what happens when we not only engage the photographs based on the archival narrative or the ethnographic classification but also engage them through their haptics? “They are images touched by the subjects they capture, touched by those who view or encounter them, yet also objects that touch those who view them as well.”¹¹⁰ For example, suppose the researcher engaged the IDAF/Mayibuye photographic archive through the image haptic temporalities. In that case, we can ask, what can we glean from the archival processes and narratives other than what is prescribed by the archive’s grand narratives? What tensions, overlaps, intersections, ambiguity are always present in the photographic archive? What if we hear a sonic glitch in our listening, like when the record has a scratch, tape loops and produces rhetorical interruption, the unintentional and audible evidence of a mistake.¹¹¹ A ‘mistake’ in the archival processes and its contents? This shows the archive as a messy, unstable and embodied site, thereby drawing attention to the tensions that underlie the making of the archive.¹¹²



The archive’s sonic glitch or interruption forces us to note what often goes unnoticed or what seems to be accepted as the ‘truth’, which seems almost taken for granted, thus situating the archive as an experimental place.¹¹³ In the case of Levson and the Mayibuye Archives and IDAF, the universal narrative around the archive and its content produce high sonic frequencies that deafen or silence other possible readings and meanings of the archive and the photographs in it. The traditional approach of reading images, “with its primary register is undoubtedly that of sight,” results in narratives that read images as “illustrations of the history and biographies of the individuals pictured in them.”¹¹⁴ Using the ‘sonic glitch’ allow

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 43.

¹¹¹ Miriam -Webster Online Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com>

¹¹² Swaby and Frank, ‘Archival experiments, notes and (dis)orientations’, 6.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 139.

us to think through the romanticised, materially, and conceptually narratives of Levson photography and IDAF/Mayibuye Archives.

According to Campt, through the concept of listening to images or focusing on sound as a critical interpretive frame of photographs (and archives), we get to engage in forms of looking that are “tentative to the whole sensual ensemble of what is looked at.”¹¹⁵ She further states that neither music nor sound is not contained in the image, but that sound “precedes the image as its constitutive and enunciating force.”¹¹⁶ Similarly, Edwards describes photography, sound and voice as integral to the performance of one another, connecting, extending and integrating the social function of images.¹¹⁷ In turn, Swaby and Frank state that “multisensory readings of the archive enable intimate, embodied ways of knowing.

Through the body— touch, sight, sound and smell—we might be effectively provoked ... to imagine the archive otherwise”¹¹⁸ What insights is ‘listening’ to the “infrasonic frequencies of the images that register through feeling rather than vision or audible sound” reveal to us?¹¹⁹ This is not a way of disregarding the importance of the anti-apartheid archive but is done“ as a way of gaining greater access to the historical insights the images might offer.”¹²⁰ At the same time, Depelchin also warns us that as we uncover silences in the archives, we inevitably reproduce other silences.¹²¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty shares the same sentiment as Depelchin argues that silences are inevitable whether stories are crafted from a

¹¹⁵ Fred Moten, *In the Break. The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 2003), 205-210.

¹¹⁶ Campt, *Image Matters*, 135.

¹¹⁷ Edwards, ‘Photography and History’, 26.

¹¹⁸ Swaby and Frank, ‘Archival experiments’, 9.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²⁰ Campt, *Images Matters*, 7.

¹²¹ Depelchin, *Silences in African History*, 11.

rationality-defensible point of view or an imaginative and creative position.¹²² In *Silencing the Past*, Michel-Rudolph Trouillot highlights another factor that might contribute to silences and perhaps a solution in avoiding them:

The knowledge that narrators assume about their audience limits both their use of the archives and the context within which their story finds significance. To contribute to new knowledge and to add new significance, the narrator must both acknowledge and contradict the power embedded in previous understandings.¹²³

Trouillot's point alludes to historians putting aside their homogenous ways and opting for nonconventional analyses to uncover previously unobserved areas that might reveal new knowledge. By temporarily silencing the louder Mayibuye photography narratives, we position the muted photographed person at the centre of the image analysis and narrative in a way that suggests the image as a site of articulation and aspiration, especially to the marginalised. Within that space and temporality, we begin to hear the voices of the marginalised 'haptically speak'. In the context of minority, the importance of individual agency is emphasised while trying to demonstrate the complexity of lived experience, "the fluidity of identity, and the subjective nature of meaning."¹²⁴

This chapter aimed to highlight and bring awareness to the fact that we do not experience the archive and photographs from an objective place but that our encounter is always registered through our bodies, including all our senses. As it has been noted by Antoinette Burton, "archival work is an embodied experience, one shaped as much by national identity, gender,

¹²² Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts', *Scrutiny*, 23, 1 (1998), 16.

¹²³ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 56.

¹²⁴ Andrew Port, 'History from Below, the History of Everyday Life, and Microhistory', 11 (2015), 108.

race, and class as by professional training or credentials”¹²⁵ This is something to consider in our attempt to refigure the archive and re-imagining otherworldly possibilities when listening to photographs. Or should we even build new archives?

If we do, what would be our conceptual framework and parameters that can imagine the kind of archives that acknowledge the silenced, the missing, and the forgotten? What if we employ futuristic approaches in addressing anomalies found in the Mayibuye Archives to envision a project of recovery that counter a negative historical imaginary and “silences in the historical record”?¹²⁶ An archive that centres black experience and “focuses on events that are constituted by ... [how] they are remembered (archived), but also forgotten (erased)”?¹²⁷

What would an anti-apartheid visual archive look like in 21st century South Africa?



¹²⁵ Burton, *Archive Stories*, 9.

¹²⁶ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, cited by Campt, *Image Matters*, 36.

¹²⁷ Marita Nadal, 'Trauma and the Uncanny in Edgar Allan Poe's "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House Of Usher"', in *The Edgar Allan Poe Review*, 17, 2 (2016), 180.

CHAPTER TWO: Listening for New Readings: The ‘native study’ photographs of Transkei and Bechuanaland

This chapter is about my encounter with photographed subjects in Levson’s photographs, the moment I encountered these images in the photography collection at UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives. I felt an instant kinship with the photographed subjects at that moment of encounter as photography subjects, inversely as the subjects to the photographer. The chapter is also about my relationship to the medium and history of photography and, subsequently, the subjects to photography. What was their primary rationale for being photographed when the sound of the shutter went off as the camera immortalised them? These are some of the contemplations I have grappled with within this chapter.

This chapter is about different ways of seeing. It is about proximity to blackness and, most importantly, the labour required to enable viewing and seeing differently and to rise above the challenges and the terms the images discussed here solicit. Tina Campt, in her book *Listening to Image* - published in 2016 - and her thought on notions of ‘adjacency and ‘a black gaze’¹²⁸ offers me a way to be able to navigate these challenges. Including moments of discomfort when one encounters ethnographic images of Black people that fills many archives, libraries and anthropology or history books and theories of photography globally taught.

Campt’s concept of listening signals slow looking, the labour of looking, gave me as a young Black scholar an opportunity to engage the visual archive of Black people that has been read

¹²⁸ Tina Campt, 'Adjacency: Luke Willis Thompson’s Poethics of Care', *Flash Art*, 327 (2019).

through the homogenising, colonial and ethnographic lens. Listening provides me with ways to claim and theorise the photographs of black people, whose representation was nothing other than to support the racist theories. Campt provides me with a framework to theorise these images from a position of power. She writes quoting Darieck Scott, “even within the lived experience of subjugation perceived to be at its worst, there are potential powers in blackness, uses that undermine or act against racist domination.”¹²⁹ Scott speaks to the work of the state propagated by the camera to subjugate the people. However, he wants us to consider the poses and postures of the photographed person not only as a sign of emancipation for the Black photographed person. Instead through them we can see and hear their postures as a creative force that yields an intangible world that is not bound by her reality.

A potential power allows the subjugated to “imagine beyond current fact and envision what is not but must be.”¹³⁰ Through listening and not only looking, one can hear the power possessed by the photographic archive of the subordinated and marginalised people. ‘Listening’ is about sitting with and allowing ourselves to experience all the emotions evoked by works of art or photographs. To sit with and beyond the visible, letting go of what can easily trigger emotions of anger and shame and opening up to new sets of possible futures. Listening commands us to formulate new ways, disassemble, de-compose and re-compose the images as an act of refusal and rejecting the grand narrative that informs the intention of their making.

¹²⁹ Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 58.

¹³⁰ Campt, *Listening to Images*, 17.

This research's main argument is not to write the social biography of Levson's 'native study' photographs. Instead, I want to critically engage with the photographed persons, the histories implicated during the time these images were taken and examine Levson's photographic inclusion in the anti-apartheid archive with the implicit meanings that arise from their location within the archive: What was cropped out, what might have been lost or hidden through this archive's circulation, and what transpired from being archived in its final home, the Mayibuye Archives?

2.1. *Leon Levson in Transkei and Bechuanaland*

The photographs selected for this thesis were taken between the 1930s and 1940s in the rural areas of Transkei and Bechuanaland. The photographs depict images of women adorned in traditional outfits. I have seen similar images in history books, museums' ethnography collection, and Duggan-Cronin's photographs. The images by Duggan-Cronin and Levson have the same visual or aesthetic qualities. They depict and position black people in a rural landscape wearing 'traditional' outfits. Duggan-Cronin aimed to produce a photographic archive of black people that positioned them as people of the past. Even through contemporary times, as a viewer, you still see them as people from a bygone era. That is the paradox about finding these 'native studies' photographs in an anti and post-apartheid archive.

These photographs at the Mayibuye anti-apartheid archive complicate my engagement with them in their current context. Thus, it muddies the linear understanding of what might be found in an 'anti-apartheid' archive. The aesthetic qualities of the images build on previous histories of photographing Black people in South Africa and the continent. The outfits and

the geography immediately prompt us to categorise these women based on their ethnicity. As has noted by Candice Steele, because of politics of displacement like the Group Areas Act, the South African rural has been constructed as a naturalised geographical, ethnic and linguistic division. Making the rural a site for unchanging traditions and where the Black people are still living in the pre-modern time.¹³¹ I find Levson's photographs beautiful, and I am immediately attracted to them. At the same time, I ask myself what are they doing in this collection; how do they fit with the struggle against apartheid? There is a push and pull between their aesthetic beauty, and the potential histories of violence that are permeable through the genre of photography and the period in which these images were taken. The photographic image is made up of time and history, which then conditions how as visual/art historians and archivists engage and elucidate the photograph.

The aesthetic quality of these photographs sets them apart from the other 'documentary' photographs in the Mayibuye collections. As I noted in the introduction, pictorialism¹³² is a photographic genre that concerns itself with the aesthetics of the image, and the photos are manipulated (during and after) to give them a painterly quality. Pictorialism is more artistic, while documentary photography uses photojournalistic elements such as storytelling. The documentary photograph is a document that records events as they are and seemingly 'unmediated.'¹³³ Such that the presence of the 'native study' photographs at the Mayibuye Archives produces a moment of disjuncture or fracture in the formation and narration of the anti-apartheid collection. Images such as Levson's 'native study' photographs, once

¹³¹ Candice Steele, 'Theorising the Image as Act: Reading the Social and Political in Images of the Rural Eastern Cape', *Kronos*, 46 (2020), 222.

¹³² See Phindezwa Mnyaka, 'From Salons to the Native Reserve: Reformulating the "native question" through Pictorial Photography in 1950s South Africa', *Social Dynamics*, 40,1 (2014), 106-110.

¹³³ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Who is speaking thus?' Some Questions about Documentary Photography' in *Photography at the Dock. Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1991).

encountered, bestow the viewer with a responsibility, signalling the viewer to ‘account for the rawness’ with which they confront us.

Reflecting on this self-imposed responsibility, I am instantly reminded of Gary Minkley and Rassool’s critique of the way Gordon Metz accorded Levson as the ‘father of social documentary photography’ in South Africa.¹³⁴ According to Minkley and Rassool, Levson’s photographic archive needs a closer examination concerning this status. Minkley and Rassool wrote, “...Levson’s documentary project needed to be explored more thoroughly in order to ‘speak of agendas ...’ that inform its contents.”¹³⁵ The decision by Metz to declare Levson as the ‘father of social documentary’ was based on a limited selection of photographic images that were part of the *Margins to Mainstream* exhibition in 1996 at the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town and images published in Luli Callinicos book.¹³⁶

In the book *Working Life, 1886-1940: Factories, Townships and Popular Culture on the Rand* by Callinicos.¹³⁷ According to Marijke Du Toit, Callinicos was not interested in the histories that might have been inscribed or constituted by the photographs. Her interest was the photograph’s realistic depiction of the impoverished lives of Black people.¹³⁸ Therefore, Levson’s status as ‘father of social documentary’ is questionable and problematic. This decision did not consider and read Levson’s ‘native study’ photographs particularly, as the work that participated in the process of Othering.

¹³⁴ Minkley and Rassool. ‘Photography with a Difference’, 205.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 207.

¹³⁷ Luli Callinicos, *Working Life - Factories, Township and Popular Culture 1886 - 1940 - The Early Years at the Rand* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987).

¹³⁸ Du Toit, ‘The General View and Beyond’, 2.

Following on Minkley and Rassool's argument, I also want to call for a careful re-evaluation and rethinking of Levson as the father of social documentary photography since his 'native study' photographs are implicated in the apartheid racial segregation policies and the Group Areas Act. These policies saw many Black people being violently displaced from their ancestral land and excluded from participating in the economy. The main problem is this title's power and insertion in the Mayibuye Archives Collection. That puts him right in the middle of the Black resilient and triumphant stories because his collection comprises almost exclusively black subjects.¹³⁹

Reading Darren Newbury's chapter on Levson, it is clear Freda Levson, his wife, orchestrated his work in its use in the fight against apartheid since Freda Levson worked for the IDAF founder Father John Collins and his wife, Frida. Furthermore, Minkley and Rassool's close reading of the Levson photographic oeuvre indicates that his photographs were produced in line with the political agenda of the time: What is clear is that Levson's 'native photographs' exhibited in galleries and schools in London, Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Kimberley served as a backdrop and set for policy discussions and interventions around the 'native question' by scholars, government officials and those connected to institutions that felt they expressed the interests of Africans.¹⁴⁰

Minkley and Rassool's arguments showed that images cannot be read outside the context of their time since photographs can be used as "historical sources that document the past."¹⁴¹ At the same time, because of photographs' malleability and ambiguity, they can be used to service any dogmatic narratives. This is also caused by how photographs are curated and

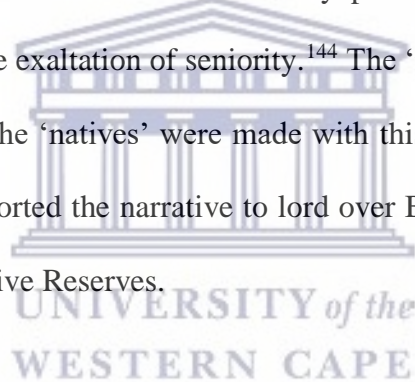
¹³⁹ Du Toit, 'The General View and Beyond', *Gender & History*, 17, 3 (2005), 208.

¹⁴⁰ Minkley and Rassool, 'Photography with a Difference', 203.

¹⁴¹ Camp, *Image Matters*, 6.

juxtaposed. Levson's photographic style and theme – like those of his predecessors (i.e., Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin, Constance Stuart Larrabee) – was produced within the framework of liberal paternalism and trusteeship¹⁴² of aesthetically photographing black southern Africans.¹⁴³

Paternalism and trusteeship were tools used by the Native Administrators to exercise control and dominion over the Black population while covertly treating them as 'children' and not capable of ruling themselves. "They both used the language of fatherhood, labelling subordinates as children whose welfare would be looked after by a benign father" The relative importance of the three core values shared by paternalists and patriarchs alike - discipline, benevolence, and the exaltation of seniority.¹⁴⁴ The 'native photography' produced by Levson from the 1930s of the 'natives' were made with this sense of paternalism. At the same time, the exhibition supported the narrative to lord over Blacks South Africans and the formation of Bantustans or Native Reserves.



As Minkley and Rassool point out, Levson's work was used to support the segregationist (SIRR) policy that enforced the Bantu Administration and the formation of the Bantu Studies of 'native' Africans that would lay the foundation for the formation of apartheid in South Africa.¹⁴⁵ The tension in his archive is partly the result of this confluence of the past and current historical forces. That is to say, the same photographs that were deployed to enforce apartheid's policies now re-appear as part of Mayibuye's anti-apartheid collection. The attempts to re-inscribe and articulate Levson's work within the oppositional histories of

¹⁴² Minkley and Rassool, 'Photography with a Difference,' 201.

¹⁴³ Newbury, *Defiant Images*, 43.

¹⁴⁴ Diana Wylie, *Starving on a Full Stomach. Hunger and the Triumph of Cultural Racism in Modern South Africa* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 61.

¹⁴⁵ Minkley and Rassool, 'Photography with a Difference', 203.

apartheid only considers his work through the artistic lens instead of placing it within the social context in which the images were initially produced. The artistic lens approach highlights the work's aesthetic qualities, silencing the history implicated in the photographs. Photographs register the historical, social and cultural contexts of when the image was made. However, I acknowledge that his work can be viewed in parts to appreciate the technical and aesthetic particularity of his images and avoid homogenising the experiences of the photographed persons and the particular histories that his photographs narrate.

When comparing his 'native study' photographs and the ones he produced during the apartheid-mine compounds, it is impossible to ignore the contradicting inscription and ambiguity of the photographer's intention. Different epistemological contexts mark both collections: history and geographical locations. While they share the same visual quality: the photographed Black people are aestheticized, objectified. The contradictions and ambiguity in his photographic images result from the fact that these collections were made during the same period in the 1940s (see Figure 2). The images taken in the 'native reserves' can be read within the 'native' photography history. The mine compounds are taken in an urban landscape but still emit violence and discrimination against the Black African men. As Newbury has noted it, the Levson collection is made up of both rural and urban "life of black South Africans."¹⁴⁶ As a result, his work cannot be read outside the histories of conquest, subjugation, and marginalisation of Blacks in southern Africa. This opens a space for questioning the implication of photography and the lengths to which the photographer went for his work to fit within narratives of subjugation of the 'native' African.

¹⁴⁶ Newbury, *Defiant Images*, 45.



Figure 1. Mine workers washing their utensils at the compound, Johannesburg. 1945-1947. Photographer: Leon Levson. Courtesy of UWC-Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archives

Before coming across Levson's images, I looked at the Ali Weinberg collection, which documents the major anti-apartheid campaigns, migrant labourers in mine hostels, and leaders of the resistance. Levson also has similar images taken in 1946 depicting harsh, inhumane conditions that migrant mine workers in the hostels were living under, exposing the harsh conditions the mine companies subjected their workers. However, despite these intentions, the photographs also indicate the refusal of Black photographed persons to remain oppressed and on the margins. Furthermore, even though the mine hostel images do not explicitly depict violence, violence in the 'native study' photographs is implied in how photographs were instrumental in suppressing the suppression of the Black population under colonial-apartheid subjection.



Figure 2. Mine workers standing outside their room at the compound, Johannesburg. 1945-1947. Photographer: Leon Levson. Courtesy of UWC-Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archives

What does this mean for the Mayibuye Archives and their archival processes and the histories of liberation, anti-apartheid that the archive is founded upon? Concurrently, I have delved into notions of the photograph as ambiguous and unpredictable as it is no longer an ultimate record of truth. Images arouse conflicting interpretations that oscillate between depicting real-life situations and what seem to be staged moments, thus changing the images' contextual meanings. Moreover, from the time the image is taken to the time, it becomes a photograph circulated through different platforms, it gets entangled in other histories.

2.2. *Portrait photographs from Bechuanaland and Transkei*

Bechuanaland is the former colonial name of what is today known as Botswana. Like South Africa, Botswana was colonised by the British. Their histories were like one another in that both countries shared problems of land alienation and racial segregation that proved to be the

ground for numerous political associations.¹⁴⁷ On the other hand, Transkei has declared a republican state designated for Black South Africans who were of Xhosa descendants.¹⁴⁸ This brief historical background of the former colonial states is crucial as it foregrounds the following discussion on the photographs. It is important to note that in South Africa, the construction of ethnicity and ‘native subject’ might have been realised differently to colonial Botswana.

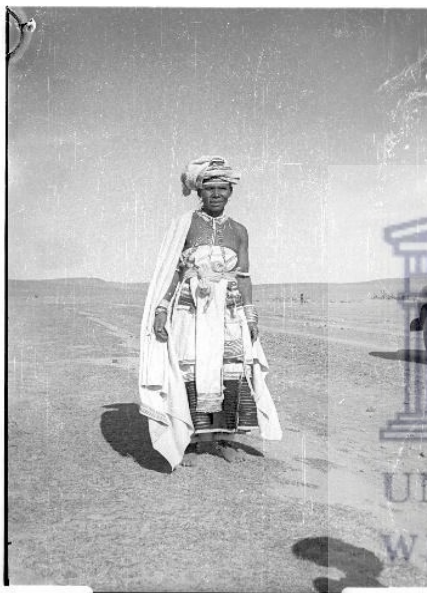


Figure 3.

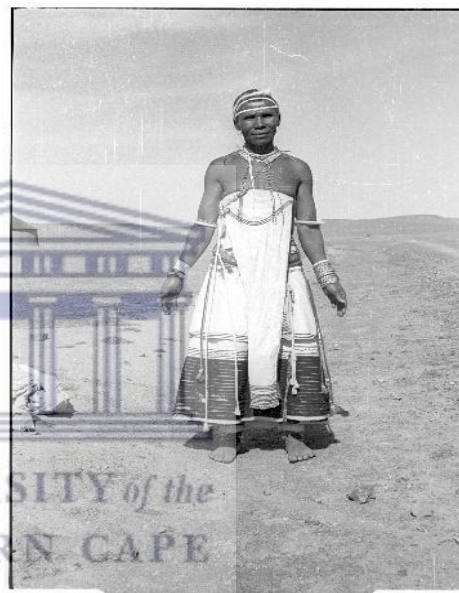


Figure 4.

¹⁴⁷ Pauline E. Peters, review of *The Birth of Botswana: A History of the Bechuanaland Protectorate from 1910 to 1966* by Fred Morton and Jeff Ramsay, *African Economic History*, 18 (1989).

¹⁴⁸ Constitution of the Republic of Transkei, Chapter 1, 1(2), https://www.worldstatesmen.org/Transkei_Constitution.pdf (accessed 26 November 2021).



Figure 1-5. *Transkei: The Chic witch doctor and admirers.*
Photographer: Leon Levson. Courtesy of UWC-Robben Island
Mayibuye Archives

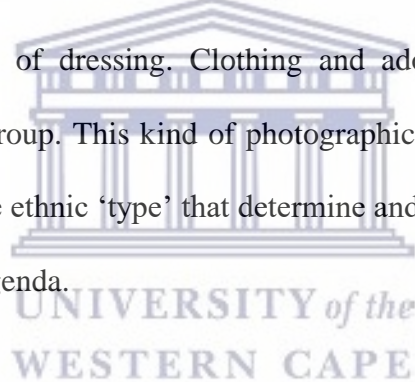
Figure 5.

When looking at Figure 3-5 from the first glance, it is apparent that these images are ‘staged’. That is, perhaps the photographer might have made an appointment to photograph this woman and specify the attire. One can assume that the attire or costume might have been prepared to be worn for this occasion, as the everyday dress code might have been ‘western’ fashion. The type of dress worn by the photographed subject is for special occasions or worn during *umcimbi*. In my sense, the photographed woman knew about this day, and she was prepared for and ready to be captured. That also can be said of Levson. He knew what time of the day his camera would capture the subject and what ‘props’ would be fitting for his ‘native study’ photographs.

The photographed person is at ease and comfortable in front of the camera. The composition of the images is carefully constructed, making her the main focus, while the backgrounds are out of focus and almost vanishing. Since these were taken in the ‘rural’ area, the person

posed, the dress, and the background had to match the context. From the series of images, it is hard to tell which one was the first shot or what sequence they should be viewed in.

The image's story starts with Figure 3, from right to left. She is photographed in different poses in all three of the frames, showing her outfits from different angles. It almost feels like the person was not a focus. Instead, her attire was the focus of the photographic event, as if to show what constitutes her 'ethnicity' is her dress, cape/throw, and accessories, head beads, headscarf, beaded necklace, and wrist bangles. She is bare-footed, a sign of being 'backwards', 'primitive', or *ubuqaba*. I am reminded of Santu Mofokeng's photographs in *The Black Album* with the visual archive of a Black elite who have converted to Christianity and adopted a 'western' way of dressing. Clothing and adornment details in this view constitute a particular ethnic group. This kind of photographic visibility innately reveals the role clothes play in creating the ethnic 'type' that determine and support the racial hierarchies of the colonial and apartheid agenda.



Maybe these were taken at a road as part of Levson's visual documentation of his travel as a tourist photographer. Levson might have also borrowed random elements from Alfred Duggan-Cronin and Constance Stuart Larrabee's ethno-photography and classifications in terms of composition. This is indicated by the image captions "which assigns a racial typology to the subject."¹⁴⁹ The issue of typologies used when describing these images dominated the philosophical meaning that could have emerged from the possible interpretation of the photographs. As noted by Edwards [historical] photography has been

¹⁴⁹ Gabriela Zamorano, 'Traitorous Physiognomy: Photography and the Racialization of Bolivian Indians by the Cr'equi-Montfort Expedition (1903)', *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 16, 2 (2011), 427.

used to support the “production of anthropological data.”¹⁵⁰ Returning to Levson’s photographs in exhibitions, as a curator and having organised exhibitions, I know that exhibitions are not neutral but reinforce a particular narrative. I am arguing that Levson presented the Black subjects in his photographs so that they were made to perform under his direction. In doing so, their performance-pose fit his conscious intention with the photographs and the exhibition audience, a white audience.

‘Native’ was synonymous to ethnic based on the colonial rule of divide and conquer, which was integrated into the apartheid regime. Listening to these images, what can be heard from this event. Firstly, is the apparent performance-pose by the photographed person, who also projects their aspiration while subsequently signifying the photographer's intention. The aspiration in this context is felt since the photographs also affect us through a feeling. The aspiration of the photographed woman is not only embodied through her pose but is also reflected through the facial expressions. One can think of the photographed person as unconsciously or consciously performing their blackness or ethnicity (native-ness), not for the camera-photographer.

However, the future generation will not see it. Her eyes are almost hidden by the shadow cast by directly facing the sun. I have spent hours looking at these images, sometimes looking without paying attention but sometimes looking with a hope of ‘hearing’ her speak. Sharing what was going on in her mind, I wondered what Levson said to her. Did he promise to give her a copy of the photo? What was the agreement, and how was that agreement reached that led to this moment? As she is fixed in her position, whether willingly or compelled, I see the

¹⁵⁰ Elizabeth Edwards, *Anthropology and Photography from 1860-1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 4.

beauty of the image, the person, and a sense of pride in who she is and represents in her. I see what might have been a full smile in the middle frame if the shutter did not quickly close and capture her. Or maybe a facial reaction to the heat of the sun. But what else that might have been captured by the camera that would have made her either cheerful or uncomfortable?

When you listen to these images, the immediate assumption that a photographer is in control and the photographer lacks agency during the photographic event becomes re-configured and dis-assembled. By inhabiting the third space as a viewer surface beyond the visible, I start to re-compose the images to ‘hear’ other temporalities, what the image solicits from me outside/beyond the noise of archive stories. This way, we attend to the affective dimension of “what it meant to make such images in a particular cultural and historical context.”¹⁵¹ In Figure 6 and Figure 7, not much can be further deduced from the background to get more information on the photographed person. Besides the three huts at the horizon of the image appearing unobtrusively, we can speculate that it is the home of the photographed woman.

Also, because I am familiar with the spatial design of the ‘native reserves’ in the Eastern Cape, I can instantly imagine another homestead similar to the one in the image at a distance of one or two metres away. I wonder then if the difference in the composition of these images is not the indication of his internal conflict as a portraitist (painter) and his intended purpose for the images.¹⁵² On the one hand, the tension results from the aesthetic quality of the images in which he had framed his subject, considering where the light and the shadows fall. On the other side, there is the evidential nature of photographs where they served an “array of

¹⁵¹ Kevin Coleman, 'Practices of Refusal in Images: An Interview with Tina M. Campt', *Radical History Review*, 132 (2018), 214.

¹⁵² Minkley and Rassool, 'Photography with a Difference', 193.

scientific, commercial and aesthetic purposes.”¹⁵³ The period in which Levson took his ‘native study’ photographs was when his ‘predecessors’ had captured and produced visual records of ‘native’ Africans (that represents a paternalistic interest) as representatives of timeless culture.¹⁵⁴ My re-readings of his photographs open space for the narratives and counter-narratives to emerge. It is essential to highlight the evidence and effect to talk about what is exposed by the light and consider the shadows. To lay bare both the dominant and counter-narrative.

Levson’s photography portraits attest to this tension: on one side, they have been carefully constructed with soft lighting that creates a painterly and dream-like atmosphere. Even the shadows appear soft and not harsh as one would expect them to be, especially on a black and white film. Other factors might also attribute to the softness of the figures and the shadows, namely the time of the day and the exposure time in the darkroom, which add to the image's aesthetic qualities. The picturesque technique attests to the painter in Levson. That makes reading the ‘native study’ photographs challenging, producing incoherence and contradictions in the analyses. Even in art history, especially in painting, black bodies occupied the periphery of the painting or on the cusp of the frame.

The black body occupies an insignificant part of the story. “You’ve written about the white woman on the bed for fifty pages and more, and hardly mentioned the black woman alongside her.”¹⁵⁵ A painting that comes to mind is *Olympia* by Edouard Manet. If they happen to be in the centre of the painting, they are reduced to fetish, exotic and invisible-visible objects. Lorraine O’Grady asserts, “Olympia’s maid, like all other ‘peripheral

¹⁵³ Newbury, *Defiant Image*, 15.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁵⁵ T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

Negroes", is a robot conveniently made to disappear into the background drapery. While the confrontational gaze of Olympia is often referenced as the pinnacle of defiance toward patriarchy, the oppositional gaze of Olympia's maid is ignored; she is part of the background with little to no attention given to the critical role of her presence.¹⁵⁶ The history of painting shows that the objectification and invisibilisation of Black bodies preceded the invention of the camera.

However, these conventions of sight and seeing were set as the foundation of art history: painting and sculpture as 'the' fine art. I am mentioning these two mediums because photography imitates these mediums both in theory and practice through various photographic technologies. The treatment of the black body in photography, as argued by Azoulay, determines the position black bodies occupy in the real world, but also how they are conditioned to be identified and recognise themselves is perceived as a normal part of the order of things.¹⁵⁷ Santu Mofokeng also reiterates the above point about how these racial structures are engraved in the humanities and social sciences, and technologies. For example, he notes that Black people in the field of taxonomy were in the same category as plants and depicted in the "same visual language as flora and fauna."¹⁵⁸

Let me return to the 'native reserve' of the Transkei. The Native Land Act of 1913 laid the ideological framework where Black Africans were to be forcibly removed from their ancestral homes and find themselves as *non-citizens* in the land of their forefathers. What they knew as borderless land under the colonialism-apartheid regime was now a bordered

¹⁵⁶ Lorraine, O'Grady, 'Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity' in Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 174-187.

¹⁵⁷ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 134.

¹⁵⁸ Santu Mofokeng, *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890-1950* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl Verlag, 2013), 70.

land, designated according to the colour of your skin. The reserves were also a depository for ‘free labour’ for the white settler mine owners in the urban areas- particularly Johannesburg. The Black South African was transformed from being a non-person into a forced labourer. Again, Levson’s work becomes interesting because he records the ‘native’ Africans from their natural setting before the “corrupting influence of Western influence”¹⁵⁹ in the mines, the conditions of the mine compounds, and the urban poverty, squatter camps, townships. Focusing on the background is useful and productive as philosophically and archaeologically speaking, one understands that the ground or the earth in its nature could hide and reveal atrocities that humans keep hidden or unknown.

Thus, the saying ‘if the ground could speak’ attests to the hidden knowledge that humans (who are working so hard to erase traces of evil doings) are worked so hard to erase from the face of the earth. I am curious about what the reserves would say if they could speak, what violent stories would emanate. By its nature, the reserve was a place of annihilation that those who were forced to the reserves were sent there to die, a death that would look like natural death when, in reality, they would succumb to the system of annihilation that was embedded in the colonialism-apartheid segregation policies. I want to now turn my attention to a series of photographs which I refer to as ‘the cigarette portraits.’

¹⁵⁹ Newbury, *Defiant Images*, 15.



Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 6-7 Transkei: the missionary, the witch doctor and the cigarette. Photographer: Leon Levson. Courtesy of UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives

“Smoking a cigarette may be compared to making a poem...”. That is the opening sentence of Richard Klein’s second chapter, *Cigarettes Are Sublime*, also the book’s title.¹⁶⁰ Klein alludes to the charm, desire, or sensuality of smoking a cigarette. Klein’s analysis posits the act of smoking to be like reading poetry, thus allowing one to dream of the possibilities unrealised.¹⁶¹ That is, cigarettes encourage one to think about the future or be in the future momentarily, but not in a ‘fairy-tale. Using Didi-Huberman’s language of imagination¹⁶², the cigarette is then not just a proof or a prop in this case if we are to use Klein’s analogy of cigarettes as poetry. In the context of this photographic event, the woman in Figure 6-8 - is figuratively introduced to one of the aspects of the ‘modern’ world. The cigarette becomes a signifier of the ‘new’ world or culture that is slowly coming to the ‘native reserves’ or rural and has arrived. The gentleman’s western apparel and wristwatch add to the production of a

¹⁶⁰ Richard Klein, *Cigarettes Are Sublime* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 51.

¹⁶¹ Klein, *Cigarettes Are Sublime*, 52.

¹⁶² Georges Didi-Huberman, *Atlas, or The Anxious Gay of Science* (Cambridge: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 3.

¹⁶² Didi-Huberman, *Atlas, or the Anxious Gay of Science*, 7.

particular cultural identity in which the medium of photography participates. Time is not an element guessed in this event but instantiated by the wristwatch, the woman's dress, and the hidden camera. However, in the third frame (Figure 8), I can see her gaze away from the camera and her regal shows that she no longer dreams or conjures up this 'new' world, but she already inhabits it, and importantly she is of the 'new' world. It is not brought by the 'civilised' (the photographer and his assistant). It must be noted that it is a world that she presently and futuristically inhabits. Civilisation is her, and she is civilisation. Hence, her pose, with head held high, looking away from the camera, but casting her gaze ahead as if to show me the world she is fashion that the photographer and his audience do not limit.



Figure 8. Transkei: the missionary, the witch doctor and the cigarette. Photographer: Leon Levson. Courtesy of UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives

Oozing confidence with a cigarette in her mouth captured by the camera, I do not see what the photographer intended us to see- a face of the past or static culture. Instead, what I see and hear is a face that defied and refused the bias terms on which the photographic event was based. She embodies the present, past, and future at the same time. She is ancient. The work of imagination summoned one to conjure up the inconceivable, as the photograph sometimes cannot depict or give us everything. Didi Huberman writes that imagination is ancient

reading, an inexhaustible resource of re-reading the world.¹⁶³ Thus then, the photographs in this research are an inexhaustible resource for reading the yet-to-be worlds. They are a well overflowing with possibilities of the future - a future that will have to happen. In the cigarette portraits, the cigarette is a prop, and smoking is an anticipation of the performance of whatever reality/life the actors' desire to conjure up for the audience. The cigarette becomes a social space, where actors/photographed subjects and viewers can come in and out of it at certain moments. The introduction of a cigarette instead of pipe contradicts the overly used famous stock images of the 'native'/Xhosa woman with a pipe, a turban, and a painted, decorated face. This is the visual trope with a backdrop of the rural that has been re-produced repeatedly in the visual history of ethnography.¹⁶⁴

Could it be that Levson wanted to create his visual trope of the 'native' women in traditional outfits smoking a cigarette instead of a pipe? The cigarette and the presence of a white man in this scene gently direct my thoughts to the meeting of different races, times, and so-called civilisations. Was the missionary in the image an accident or planned shot to highlight the existing relationship between Europeans and 'native' Africans? In the *Cigarette Portrait*, Levson captures time, from the so-called untainted 'native' African cultures to the "corrupt influence of the Western civilisation."¹⁶⁵ Each frame creates a cinematic scene. The viewers are invited along the journey of creating a narrative; we see how an intimate moment was created and partake in the fictional space. It feels like something out of the movies where the male hero offers a cigarette to a potential lover, luring her into his *fantastical* world. The atmosphere was pleasant. I could hear a slight breeze now and then 'whooshing' across the protagonist's face. Her eyelids slightly closed, responding to the air coming towards her eyes.

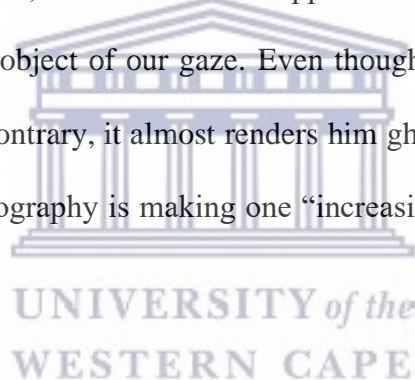
¹⁶³ Didi-Huberman, *Atlas, or the Anxious Gay of Science*, 7.

¹⁶⁴ See Candice Steele, 'Theorising the Image as Act: Reading the Social and Political in Images of the Rural Eastern Cape', *Kronos*, 46, 2020.

¹⁶⁵ Newbury, *Defiant Images*, 16.

I hear the distant sounds of *uHadi* and playing far away, signalling the presence of those who have departed but are still with us through the evocation of the songs and dance. I hear the song because the distant mountains and hills echo the sound of the alive people and those who became our ancestors. There is *umgidi* somewhere in the village, and the woman photographed had spared her time to engage and pose at the moment created by the camera. The woman exudes a self-assured attitude in the third frame that forms the triptych.

This cinematic view takes place behind a backdrop of three huts—one without the thatched roof at the far left of the image—indicating other homesteads similar to the one photographed. Likewise, in the cigarette portrait, it is the woman’s appearance—her outfit with a cigarette in her mouth—that makes her the object of our gaze. Even though he is noticeable, her 'helper' does not distract him. On the contrary, it almost renders him ghost-like: invisible but present. One of the many traits of photography is making one “increasingly visible as “race” and the other increasingly invisible.”¹⁶⁶



The photographed woman and the supportive ‘actor’ in the ‘movie-like’ moment highlight the disparities between time and history. This scene sharpens the focus on time and the historical moment in which this photographic event occurred. The presence of the supportive actor was not spontaneous nor by chance. The photographer had intended this interaction to happen. Perhaps Levson wanted to depict the initial influence of western civilisation? The gentleman’s western apparel and wristwatch add to the production of a different cultural identity in which the medium of photography further perpetuates.

¹⁶⁶ Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight. Photography and the Unseen* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke Press University, 2013), 16.



Figure 10

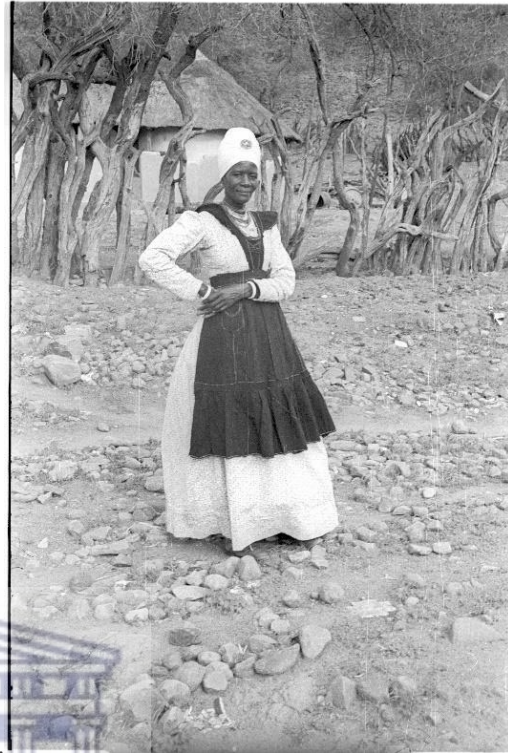


Figure 9.

Figure 9-10 Bechuanaland: 12-16 January 1947. Photographer: Leon Levson. Courtesy of UWC-Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archives.

In Figure.7, two women are posing for the camera. The second woman is slightly in the background of the leading photographed woman. She is facing down, almost looking like she is also posing to capture her image. However, even though her gaze is downward, her stature is someone waiting to be snapped by the camera. Could there be another camera station set up while Levson took this image and included her as an inactive subject? The leading photographed woman is not directly looking at the camera; she might have been directed not to look directly but away from the photographer. While this genre of photography becomes a recurring and almost acceptable visual identity of the 'native' African, listening to these images provides a counter-narrative from photography's colonial past. It is a form of refusal

to that which has been set to mark difference, to create the ‘Other.’ By describing the gaze of the woman photographed as not defined by time nor geography. I am reading the image within a ‘new’ set of conventions that rejects existing and fixed stereotypes of the ‘native subject’ produced by an ethnographic lens. Listening removes the photographer as the sole creator of the image and the subject as a passive participant. Paradoxically, the captured trace of the subjects’ expressions still allows us to perceive their humanity, giving the images an aesthetic force despite the pragmatic intentions for which they were produced.

The refusal of the ethnographic label and linear reading of time in these images inadvertently forces the viewer to see the image of these women as not subjects of ethnography. In my attempt to restore, rescue, and remove these images from the problematic taxonomy seen applied in ‘archives’ and museums, I am inspired by ‘the Practicing Refusal Collective’, which comprises Black scholars, artists, and activists. Tina Campt and Saidiya Hartman lead the collective. They are dedicated to devising strategies that articulate the practices of refusal and inculcate strategies that re-define and undermine the colonial terms and infrastructure. The Collective embodies what Fred Moten refers to as the *undercommons* in his book with Stefano Harney. The *undercommons*, according to Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, is a space found in the relationship between people who have been denied resources, and who are joined not by the common use or ownership of space, but by belonging within the community of those who have been excluded.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe / New York / Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013).

This is done within the Black cultural politics that rethinks the time, space, and fundamental vocabulary of what constitutes politics, activism, and theory.¹⁶⁸ I wanted to bring these theories in the photo-analysis chapter to destabilise and agitate the quotidian of the colonial framework fixed in the photographic image. Adjacency and “practising refusal” become productive in attempts of unlearning the terms given to us and what we were trained to believe. These concepts are generative in rallying us to bear witness to not only the “there-then” photographic ritual but also the “here-now” events. These events provide us with a glimpse into a moment that produced the photographic images and a moment that provides a different understanding of Black life in contemporary times.¹⁶⁹

In my view, the concept of ‘adjacent’ is sensitising us to the fact that the photographic image does not fully show us how things were. Instead, what it immediately depicts is the photographer’s vision or intention. The image depicted on the photograph is subjective and therefore requires us to read it as records of choices and chance and as “records of intentions.”¹⁷⁰ Campt further states that:

The question of why a photograph was made involves understanding the social, cultural, and historical relationships figured in the image, as well as a larger set of relationships outside and beyond the frame... *the social life the photo*.¹⁷¹

However, adjacency makes us aware of our encounter, not just to see, hear and feel but to be witnesses and be rallied into action. The instant relationship and recognising my power as the

¹⁶⁸ Tina Campt, 'Black Visuality and The Practice of Refusal', February 25, 2019, <https://www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand/29-1/campt> (accessed June 27, 2020).

¹⁶⁹ Tina Campt, 'Adjacency: Luke Willis Thompson’s Poethics of Care', *Flash Art*, 327 (2019).

¹⁷⁰ Campt, *Image Matters*, 6.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

viewer come with gazing and reading that I needed to address. Adjacency is a radical approach to reading the photographs that situate and confers them as historical. In the context of ‘native study’ photographs, the intent might have been political or to capture the ‘native’ Africans in their ‘natural settings’ as people of the past’. But I think an element escapes not just the photographer’s eye but also the camera itself. Their appearances refuse to be read as people of the past, making it challenging and limiting the outsider only to what the human eye can see. Even though these women might not have had a say in making these images, the Afrotropic effect of these portraits alludes to some kind of negotiation that allowed the black subjects to imagine themselves beyond time and space.¹⁷² That is, the portraits of these women become a site and moment of self-fashioning, self-determining that escapes being ‘captured’ by the technological ability of the camera.

Photography’s technological qualities, together with its embedding in particular historical situations, are what give these images an “ambiguous openness that makes it possible to approach them as scientific, political, historical, or even personal documents.”¹⁷³ As argued by Ariella Azoulay, “photography is the result of an encounter with another, and, as such, does not have one obvious, constant owner.”¹⁷⁴ Azoulay’s position opens up the space in photography that is borderless and not confined and regulated within the state judiciary system that privileges the photographer as the sole proprietor of the image-photograph; that the photographer has exclusive rights to the image or photograph.¹⁷⁵

⁴⁹ Leah Dickerman, David Joselit, Mignon Nixon, 'Afrotropes: A conversation with Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson', *October Magazine*, 162 (2017).

¹⁷³ Zamorano, 'Photography and the Racialization of Bolivian Indians', 438.

¹⁷⁴ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 95.

¹⁷⁵ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 93-97.

This contests the photographer's ownership of the image and photograph and that the photographed person is passive and powerless. Through listening to these images, the notion of a passive and powerless subject is a fallacy. What I see-hear is the power that the photographed person possesses to re-create her own intangible, timeless world, perhaps even unconsciously, to the photographer. One of the arguments made by Ulrich Baer in *Spectral Evidence*¹⁷⁶ is questioning how to see and the validity of the photographic image as the 'truth'. His arguments allude to the image sometimes not truthfully reflecting the world or the reality as we know it, but somehow the image reveals another world. This is the fleeting moment where another world is created or captured by the camera, but we fail to see or recognise it by our human eye.

As also noted by James Hevia, we should consider a photograph/image as a space of multiplicity. Moreover, the visible and invisible worlds are enmeshed and extend beyond the photograph's surface.¹⁷⁷ Azoulay acknowledges other co-creators in the photography world, moving beyond the photograph and its owner. She introduces what she has termed as "citizenry of photography,"¹⁷⁸ which produces a different condition of engaging with a photograph. As a viewer, I occupy a 'space of multiplicity' oscillating between the photographer's gaze and the spectator's position.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (The MIT Press, 2002), 216.

¹⁷⁷ Elizabeth Edwards, 'Objects of Affect: Photography Beyond the Image', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 41 (2012), 224.

¹⁷⁸ Edwards, 'Objects of Affect', 93.

¹⁷⁹ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 93.

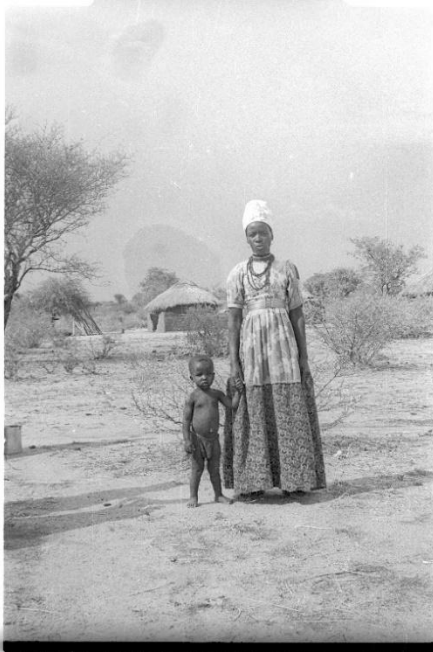


Figure 11.



Figure 12.

Figure 11-12. *Bechuanaland: 12-16 January 1947.* Photographer: Leon Levson.
Courtesy of UWC-Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archives

Figure 11-12 have the romantic and idyllic qualities of the clear skies, hut house and trees in the background. The aesthetic quality of both photographs fits perfectly within pictorialism, and its aestheticizing of the black subject against primaevial background. The tension arises when looking at the background and the photographed person. There is a sense of time being different between the photographed persons and the background in both images. The background is a typical African landscape of a mother and a naked child. The women's attire in the Bechuanaland photographs is completely different from the women photographed in Transkei.

The flower prints, patchwork design, and Victorian-like style reflect the missionaries' presence and influences. Unlike in the Transkei photographs, the dress in these images cannot tell us the ethnic groups and the region the women are from. As a result, I cannot place them according to their 'ethnic' groups. Whereas in Transkei, South Africa, the 'traditional' dress

is a site for ethnic construction along with a backdrop of the rural setting. Even with clear influences of the Western culture, Levson still wanted to construct the image of the Black African still living in the ‘past.’ The Bechuanaland images reveals the hypocrisy of the colonial ideologies of constantly depicting the African subjects as tribal and not civilised enough to govern themselves. The unclothed child photographed with his mother is typical of ethnographic images of Black people. The design of the dress is different from the images of the women taken in the Transkei, as indicated in the caption.

The Bechuanaland photographs of women; their attire is not ‘traditional’ without immediately identifying the women according to their tribes. The hat is almost reminiscent of the Pope’s mitre hats, turning their outfits into religious attire. Through the vibration frequencies of the images, I feel that these are not everyday dresses or outfits. Instead, they are outfits worn at special events. Listening to the images has allowed me to “reassert honour, dignity, and character,¹⁸⁰ to those that the camera has consistently marked their difference. Instead of seeing them as motionless, Campt encourages us to engage them through stasis that allows listening through vibration-infrasonic frequencies.¹⁸¹ Infrasonic frequencies challenge the conventions of privileging optics in photographs but attend to images through feeling.¹⁸²

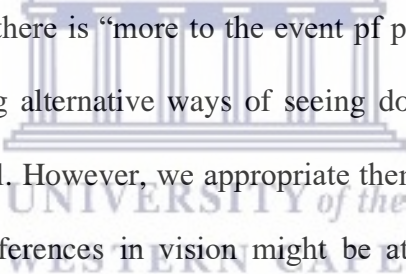
This not only liberates the photographed subject from being placed into a fixed category but also disrupts the way I ‘see’ the Black photographed subjects. I see their frozen gaze and static pose as a site of quiet refusal, particularly because they are the ‘victims’ of *double-*

¹⁸⁰ John Pepper, ‘Vernacular Recollection and Popular Photography in South Africa’, in Christopher Morton and Darren Newbury, eds., *The African Photography Archive, Research and Curatorial Strategies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 130.

¹⁸¹ Campt, *Listening to Images*, 3.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 3-4.

vision and perpetually “objects of the other’s gaze.”¹⁸³ I mean by double vision to indicate the double layer of the visual field at play when looking at photographs. The camera-photographer inside the scene occupies the first layer, and the second level is occupied by the outside viewer looking at the mediated scene by the camera-photographer. In this *double vision*, the viewer participates in the worldview already constructed while simultaneously having her vision of what is depicted and what has been ‘framed’ out. Most of the time, the *double vision* never aligns; as a matter of fact, it draws attention to the disjuncture and fracture (fragmented vision) when looking at the image, or the tension between visible and invisible, the interior and the exterior, since the photograph hides as much as it purports to expose.



As noted by James Hevia that there is “more to the event of producing a photograph than a simple reflection.”¹⁸⁴ Signalling alternative ways of seeing does not mean they have to be implemented as the old/colonial. However, we appropriate them “so that different visualities might be kept at play and differences in vision might be at work.”¹⁸⁵ This new way of experiencing the photographs estranges the familiar convention by opening up a world that is not instantly visible. As argued by Elizabeth Edwards, “the photograph awakens a desire to know that which it cannot show.”¹⁸⁶ The pose, the stoic, graceful face symbolises time, not as static nor linear but time that refuses the “links created by obviated resemblance... that direct observation cannot discern.”¹⁸⁷ This is a time that signals a past, present and future. The links create new zones that generate new ways of “seeing and not seeing, of seeing the unseen, and

¹⁸³ Simon Njami, 'Imagined Communities', *African Identities*, 9, 2 (2011), 200.

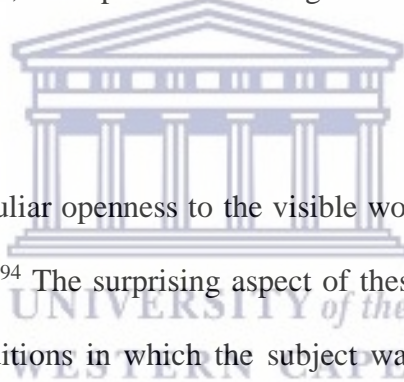
¹⁸⁴ Hevia, 'The Photography Complex', 80.

¹⁸⁵ Hall Foster, *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), xiv.

¹⁸⁶ Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 19.

¹⁸⁷ Didi-Huberman, *The Anxious Gay Sciences*, 2-25.

of seeing that we don't see that photography sets forth."¹⁸⁸ Since photographs are fragments, so is the gaze; our 'seeing' at images produces fragmented-isolated elements.¹⁸⁹ They are suggestive; they do not give a 'sustained and coherent argument.'¹⁹⁰ While they may reveal the knowable, they cannot state the 'ultimate truths' or give a whole picture of the photographic ritual's context.¹⁹¹ The 'What might that be? ', the fragmented and the suggested image, is it not the indication that [highlight the shortcoming] photography as a tool that depicts 'reality', has a deficiency? Alternatively, perhaps the problem lies not with photography but a defect in the naked human eye — "how much could be seen in photographs?"¹⁹² The minute details like the shadow in an image that the photographer fails to detect when taking a picture; an aspect of the image that could never be seen with the human eye unaided.¹⁹³



Furthermore, they reveal a peculiar openness to the visible world in ways that permit access to new and surprising aspects.¹⁹⁴ The surprising aspect of these images is their highlighting the silent histories of the conditions in which the subject was photographed. Even though there is a residue of celebrating who they are, the history of the reserves speaks louder in these images, where most black people were forced to live. The apartheid government believed that the 'natives' could have their own 'land' (14%) and have their government while being intentionally excluded from their country's wealth. However, this research focuses on engaging these portraits and seeing these women beyond their social, political, and historical context.

¹⁸⁸ Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*, 16.

¹⁸⁹ Njami, 'Imagined Communities', 201.

¹⁹⁰ Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 10.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁹² Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*, 2.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹⁴ Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 10.

By zooming into the images, we attend not to their facial and body gestures but engage with the photographs within a larger context. This allows us to consider photographs through their “anterior grammar and quiet frequencies” that contradicts the photographer’s intended objective and challenge the camera’s nature of transforming African bodies into ethnic types, racialised cultural categories.¹⁹⁵ This insight encourages us to view the poses as forms of refusal of “the terms of negation and dispossession”¹⁹⁶ and to see the photographed persons as expressing themselves: black self-fashioning without dwelling on what the photographs intended to serve whether subjects were coerced to partake. The subject’s agency in these photographs is no longer abstract but perceptible to the human eye.

The idea of listening to images, to the work of art is something new and outside the conventions of art history education. In art school, you are trained to look like the first step in understanding what you see to translate it into the work of art, even more so when you study photography. We are conditioned to look, to see the same, since the conventions of seeing were already established. Art school taught me to see within those boundaries and see with the set frameworks. Biases meant that I could never look at the photographed persons discussed in this paper outside the ethnographic histories.

John Berger in his seminal text *Ways of Seeing* talks about seeing as affected by what we know.¹⁹⁷ We eventually understand that the meaning of the thing is produced by pre-existing knowledge about the thing. So, we never come to the interpretation of artworks with empty minds or new sets of eyes. Therefore, sight becomes the most favoured sense and the most

¹⁹⁵ Campt, *Listening to Images*, 94.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 96.

¹⁹⁷ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 8.

reliable of all senses. At the same, thinking about these photographs through the concept of listening does not mean I am not relying on my eyes to look to engage with them. The sight still plays a crucial role in the concept of listening to images.

However, I am not completely relying only on my sight to decipher these images but also bringing my ears to listen and even speaking to the photographed person to let me into this moment in time. Listening allows me to also ‘speak’ to the images, ask them, the women photographed, and what I might be limited to hear, even see. When I ‘speak’ to the women photographed pinned against the wall, these are not thoughts, but they are actual utterances of sounds pushing through my stomach and forming audible and intelligible words through my mouth. Because I am speaking and writing about real people, they might be alive now. Nevertheless, they were once flesh and blood and had dreams and hopes. I am having this real conversation because I see myself, my generation in them. Levson’s camera might have captured the oppressed people and had no voice. However, I see a woman whose pose and gaze looking at or away from the camera, shy, almost flirtatious.

I hear defiance, determination, and strength that undermines the very oppression and racial inequality on which the photographic event was embedded. This power is embodied in their still, ‘not-yet modern’ looks that the camera failed to capture, which Levson failed to see and understand through ‘native study’ photographs. The act of listening diffracts historical moments and time that comprised the photographic moment and the photograph. By listening, I am given an opportune time to slow-look and hear the women photographed, stand with them committed to seeing the beauty and regal in their poses. Their beauty defies the given frameworks and conventions of seeing, drawing me to the edge of sight, ultimately defying what I was taught in art school and the world’s definition of beauty.

Campt, in her first book, *Image Matters*, evokes Azoulay's conception of the citizenry of photography. She writes that the 'event of photography' does not consider only the photographer's intentions but also the photographed person. This reveals that the photographed persons, whether coerced and willingly participated in the event, has an urgency and aspirations on "how they wanted to be seen, ... and what they attempted or intended to project and portray."¹⁹⁸ Azoulay describes the citizenry of photography as giving a photographed community a right to claim their agency and own their stories. The citizenry of photography is "about a community of people, anyone that bears any relationship whatsoever to photographs bound together in the re-interpretation, de-constructing of civil contract of photography."¹⁹⁹

This is not about photography but about the physically dispossessed people as citizens of the land they occupy but dispossessed in how they would like to represent themselves through photography. The citizenry of photography inherently undermines anyone who claims "exclusive property rights to a photograph" and instead acknowledges other participants in the photographic field.²⁰⁰

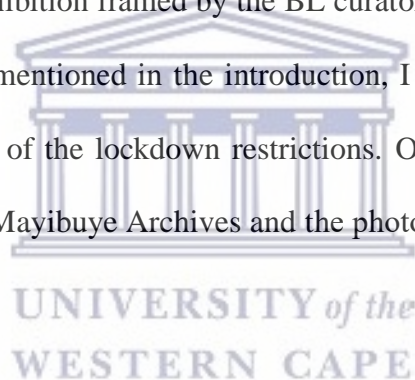
¹⁹⁸ Campt, *Image Matters*, 6.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 97.

²⁰⁰ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 93.

CHAPTER THREE: *Black Luminosity*: Thoughts towards a curatorial intervention

In the latter half of 2020, I was requested to conceptualise a show for a gallery to participate in an annual art fair in the USA. The request came when I was busy working on the second chapter of this thesis. The show was called *Black Luminosity* and its curatorial statement was inspired by these photographs which I was writing about and was anchored in the work of Tina Campt and Georges Didi-Huberman. In 2021, the same gallery approached me and requested if I can mount an exhibition framed by the BL curatorial statement using the works of artists in their stable. As I mentioned in the introduction, I was writing this thesis under stressful conditions as a result of the lockdown restrictions. One of the constraints was not being able to access again the Mayibuye Archives and the photograph collections I'm writing about.



Black Luminosity was about me grappling with notion of Blackness in the ‘native study’ photography genre and at time when there was so much violence inflicted on Black bodies during the pandemic. The ‘native study’ photographs in that fleeting moment reveal the quotidian violence that the Black body has been subjected to time immemorial. Conceptualising *Black Luminosity* and staging the exhibition afforded me an opportunity to use the framework of ‘listening to images’ which I have used in analysing and re-writing the interpretation of the portrait photographs of Bechuanaland and Transkei. This is not only for the portraits of Transkei and Bechuanaland- as I would like to call them - but for every photo or visual archive of Black people taken under the violence of the camera or the state and locked away in archives, libraries, and academic institutions. Through the framework of

Black Luminosity, I started seeing the photographs discussed in this thesis differently from the encounter that produced them. I wanted to know more about the photographed woman in a way that the ‘archive’ or existing photography literature does not talk or write about them. I penned *Black Luminosity* to acknowledge my connection or proximity to the ‘quotidian violence’²⁰¹ that is brought about by the photographs. As a young academic in training, I wanted to write about the Black subjects in a way that has never been written about before in the history of photography.

I foregrounded *Black Luminosity* on Édouard Glissant’s definition of opacity as not the absence of light, but “as the reason of every light.”²⁰² This problematises the limits of colonial definitions of identity, visibility, and representation that “prevent sufficient understanding of multiple perspectives of the world and its peoples.”²⁰³ So through the words of Glissant, *Black Luminosity* emerged, as a lens through which blackness appears as the essence of light and whose form we can annotate.

*The Blackness in these works is not the lack of light, or the artist’s use of ‘pure’ black pigment: but it is the mixing and intertwining with other hues or matters in which its form is intelligible, and we can annotate it. Black Luminosity reminds us to claim our connection, our links to each other across the borders of Blackness: Blackness in its temporality is non-linear but fluid through space and as something connected to this moment to understand our place in the world.*²⁰⁴

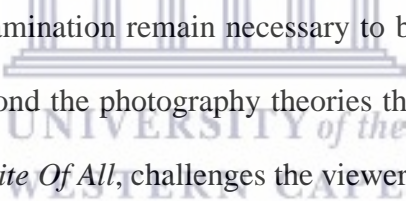
²⁰¹ Campt, *Images Matters*, 2012.

²⁰² Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990).

²⁰³ Zach Blas, ‘Opacities: An Introduction + Biometrics and Opacity: A Conversation 2016’. <https://zachblas.info/writings/opacities-introduction-biometrics-opacity-conversation/> (accessed 28 October 2021).

²⁰⁴ Kehinde Andrews, *Back to Black: Retelling Black Radicalism for the 21st Century (Blackness in Britain)* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 6.

Keeping Glissant's notion of opacity the back of my mind while completing my thesis, I wanted to encourage the viewers, including myself to slow look at what can easily be glossed over about these images taken in the Transkei and Bechuanaland, and in addition to investigate what we have been conditioned and believed to be the 'truth' about this genre of photography. In the exhibition I played with Blackness as a political identity and the negative stereotypes that are associated with the colour black. I wanted to invert the stereotypes that we have internalised and were conditioned to believe about ourselves as Black people to understand the 'reality' that the works are trying to communicate but has not been visually represented. At the same time, these thoughts stayed with me in the process of analysing these photographs.



Hence imagination and self-examination remain necessary to be able to go beyond what the photographer intended and beyond the photography theories that privilege the photographer. Didi Huberman in *Images In Spite Of All*, challenges the viewer to go as far as to attend to the dark areas of the photograph, to question its formal function. I would extend his thought and encourage the viewers to also question what is depicted by the image, to read what is represented in the image: "We must dig again in their ever so fragile temporality, as to honour them, to inquire into them, only then will we be able to truly understand the reality they depict."²⁰⁵

Black Luminosity is an archaeological exercise that investigates the forms of blackness depicted in the selected artworks; what is it about black that gives the work its presence, dignity, elegance as well the futurity inherent in its being and

²⁰⁵ Didi-Huberman, *Images In Spite of All*, 182.

appearance. In this context black, refers to the dark, opaque surface of the artworks. The opaque-ness or blackness of the artwork becomes a site of critique; to unmask methodologies and modes of production that generate paths of knowledge and 'authoritative forms of visibility which function to refuse Blackness itself.'²⁰⁶ Black Luminosity exhibition becomes a space of refusal; refusing the narratives and terms given to us²⁰⁷, deconstructing the clichés and stereotypes. In addition, Blackness as a praxis of refusal continues neither as utopic nor autonomous, and neither pessimistic nor futuristic, but uses 'negation' as generative.²⁰⁸

In photography, the opaque areas may be due to an underexposure and overexposure, resulting in very bright and too dark areas. In the context of this thesis, the *Cigarette Portrait*; Figure 8, perfectly illustrates this issue. Thus, I would describe the image as being overexposed. In this case, the black body required different aperture settings compared to the white body. What happens when both bodies are in the photographic frame, like Figure 8? The woman's features are not as sharp and focused as in Figure 3-5 The image is almost flat or washed out by the white light. The effect might be the result of the time of the day the images were taken and the dark room processes.

One of the many traits of photography is that of making one "increasingly visible as 'race' and the other increasingly invisible".²⁰⁹ With his concern on victims of the holocaust, Didi-Huberman writes about people disappearing even though they are 'hyper-visible' and on display or exhibited. His statement is about how photography renders certain bodies visible, legitimising them as 'normal', while at the same devalues the lives and experiences of the

²⁰⁶ Campt, 'Black Visibility and the Practice of Refusal', 2019.

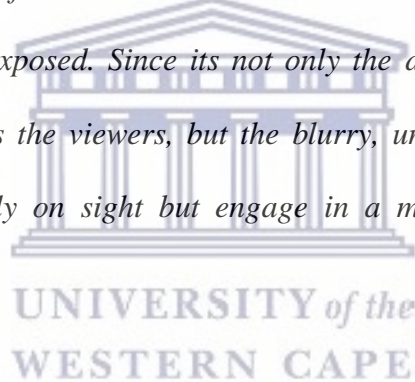
²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*, 16.

others. He then encourages us to not perpetuate the same violence, and instead apply imagination as a new method of ‘looking’ since photographs do not replicate reality but through imagination make visible worlds and realities that are not detectable to the human eye.

Using this photographic practice more broadly in the varied modalities, the blackened or abstracted artworks become the optical unconscious of the artwork. Meaning that even the unintelligible areas of the image are part of the phenomenology of the artworks making. Therefore, the dark areas of the artwork require the same effort from the viewers as the areas of the image-artwork that is readable or perfectly exposed. Since its not only the distinctly defined areas of the image that can address the viewers, but the blurry, under/overexposed that offer a chance to not only rely on sight but engage in a multi-sensorial reading of the artworks.



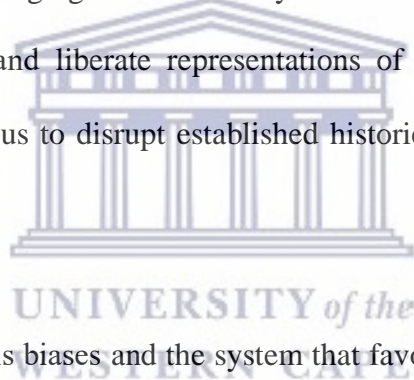
The *optical unconscious* in the context of the exhibition was alluding to the minute details, like the shadow in an image, that the creator-artists themselves fail to detect when making the work; an aspect of the work that is hidden or invisible to the human eye. As argued by Walter Benjamin it is the part of the photographic event that is not “consciously controlled in the making, circulation, and viewing of photographs.”²¹⁰ In a similar tone, Shawn Michelle Smith in *Edge of Sight* writes that the optical unconscious is the revelation of an unseen world that the photograph does not fully disclose but makes us aware of it in its invisibility.²¹¹ Likewise, when discussing the photographs of enslaved people of Caribbean descent Krista Thompson

²¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *A Short History of Photography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²¹¹ Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*, 6.

argues that ‘invisible’ sometimes is not by accident or chance, but that there is concerted effort to render something invisible or absent.²¹² The absences can be revealed through listening to the quiet vibrations emitted by the photographs. Then photographs reveal a peculiar openness to the invisible world, permitting access to new and surprising aspects.

The *Black Luminosity* curatorial statement as a framework to view these photographs complicates ways of seeing. It brings to the fore the biases entrenched in the way we have been taught and conditioned to see. Thus, seeing becomes means attending to the frequencies of the photographs. In this manner, the concept of listening becomes a site for learning and un-learning, a site for acknowledging non-western systems of knowledge and understanding and importantly to ‘uncode’ and liberate representations of Blackness from the colonial construction of race. It allows us to disrupt established histories and open up new potential associations.



Levson’s photographs reveal his biases and the system that favoured him as a white man and how race, in the case of Mayibuye Archives and IDAF seemed to be a determining factor in the selection, creation and the formula that constituted Mayibuye Archives as an anti-apartheid archive. My thesis therefore encourages viewers to be mindful of these ‘neo-liberal’ rigid and racially biased modes of reading and remind us that the archive is made up of the archivists’ worldviews. It is a call to read alongside the archival grain and rethink the established narratives about the archive and Levson’s photographs in order to recover the material and histories that are intentionally excluded or made invisible.

²¹² Krista Thompson, 'The Evidence of Things Not Photographed: Slavery and Historical Memory in the British West Indies', in *Representations*, 113, 1 (2011), 66-67.

Returning to *Black Luminosity* when looking at the images discussed in this thesis, I see *Blackness* in its multiple appearances and sensibilities. The aim of my research was to rethink the images of rural African people and provide generative frameworks that challenge and overturn the colonial repressive narratives. The Portraits of Transkei and Bechuanaland are Afrotropic- they did not re-appear over time: they are about time, its passage and return. They determine their own 'return', their own restitution process, defining their own rules of engagement, almost establishing a performance of refusal. Copeland and Thompson explain that Afrotropes "defy logic and explanation; appearing in unpredictable and highly selective of ways across time and space."²¹³ They are a signal, a 'presence' that oscillates between present, past future and the futures.

Hence, I argue for the experience of the image that does not subscribe to linearity, nor sequence but as "explosive bursts of isolated events."²¹⁴ In the context of the image-photograph, Walter Benjamin argues that images are dialectical illuminations of materialist representation of history, a reflection on our experience while speaking to the present and to the future. The time that is locked and frozen within the image functions outside the dimension of the people's conception of time. When discussing the Grenada revolution in *Omens of Adversity* David Scott points out two elements, namely History and Time, that are also important in the history of photography. Scott's book is not about photography but the failure and flawed revolution ideologies that produced a 'stalled' emancipatory future for Grenada people. He describes the failed revolution as an "experience of time standing away from its conventional grounding and embeddedness in history."²¹⁵ That is, time is no longer synonymous with history, there is a disjuncture in our experience of time and the experience

²¹³ Dickerman, Joselit and Nixon, 'Afrotropes: A Conversation with Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson', 6.

²¹⁴ Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 6.

²¹⁵ David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 2.

of history. The important aspect I want to bring across from Scott's argument is the idea that photographs similarly to an 'event or revolution' cannot be read within a conception of linear, chronological time. The image exposed on the photographic paper becomes 'frozen' as to make 'tangible' the moment captured by the camera through chemical and technical processes of photography. However, the image is constantly in flux, and "carries us forward from event to event in an unstoppable stream."²¹⁶

It provides a "temporal experience—the nonexistence of the past, the not-yet of the future, the fleeting instant of the present—by contrast with the divine transparency and constancy of eternity."²¹⁷ Moreover, images are not simply remnants of the past, but also represent the temporal experiences of the present now.²¹⁸ Photographs may reveal something about the past times but do not represent the 'full' truth of the past. However, they reveal a "peculiar openness to the visible world in ways that permit access to new and surprising aspects."²¹⁹ As I have noted, Elizabeth Edwards argues that if we only perceive photographs as expressing loss and of the past, we repeat or restate the tropes of a disappeared 'authentic.'

Roland Barthes on the other hand argues about the inability to fix images in the past, but says they bring the past and the future into the present, in what he termed as the here-now and the there-then.²²⁰ Thus the act of listening to the photographs discussed in this thesis is pivotal since the act of listening diffracts the frozen time in images and reveals the violent histories that constitute the making of ethnographic photographs of Black subjects that are historically

²¹⁶ Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 3.

²¹⁷ Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 1.

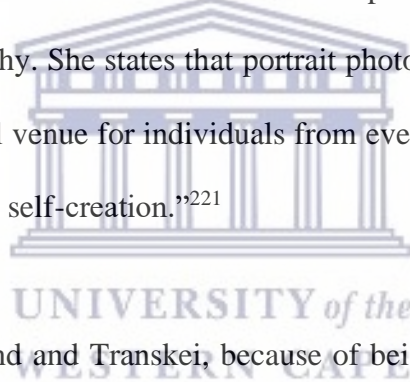
²¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 2007), 262.

²¹⁹ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', 10.

²²⁰ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 76.

dismissed. In turn, these violent histories inherent in the ethnographic photographs of Black subjects are not re-produced repeatedly.

Listening therefore, does not produce a fixed or ‘single story’ interpretation but an interpretation that is in flux and expands the frames of critique. I have discussed in the previous chapter that the photographer does not have complete control of the photographic event, but that the anterior of the photograph creates a room for the photographed person to perform for the camera and decide how they would like to be seen. They self-fashion their own world and renunciate the photographer’s desire and reclaim their personal image. Candace M. Keller in her essay *Visual Griots* attests to the power of self-actualisation that is embodied in portrait photography. She states that portrait photography plays a critical role as a “personal, social and political venue for individuals from every social class to express their agency, self-determination, and self-creation.”²²¹

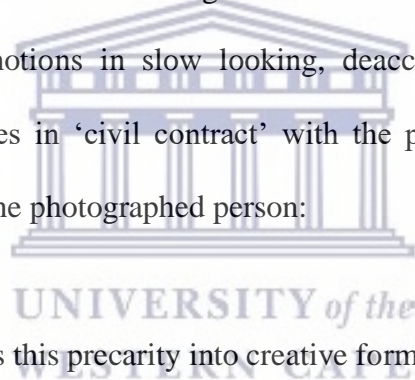


In the Portraits of Bechuanaland and Transkei, because of being framed ‘native study’ they are not immediately read the photographed women as having agency and the power to determine how they would like to be seen since the photographs were not produced at their own request nor for their own personal archives but were made for the intentions and desires of the photographer. Reading them as portraits situates them outside the violence of the ethnography in which they were produced. Firstly, portraiture in art or visual history is seen as the highest form of representation whose power lies solely on the subject. Portrait photography creates a space where one can imagine who they wish to be. A space of fluidity and ambiguity. Secondly, as argued by Campt, I wanted to create ‘new’ modalities of

²²¹ Candace M. Keller, ‘Visual Griots: Identity, Aesthetics and the Social Roles of Portrait Photography in Mali’, in John Peffer & Elizabeth L. Cameron, eds., *Portraiture & Photography in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 7.

perception where images speak to me through the speculative curatorial intervention. As also noted by Azoulay, “the possible encounter with the photographed people who, through the photograph, are co-present with the spectators in the event of viewing the photograph.”²²²

I want to prompt Mayibuye archivists to consider this methodological shift to not only prioritise the evidential nature of the photographic collection but the context in which they were produced and what the photographer intended to frame within it. ‘Listening’ as a methodological shift does not mask or dismiss the trauma or violence of the photographic event. But what I am suggesting is that this new way of viewing affords me the opportunity to slow down my thoughts, consider them alongside the emotional response elicited by the images, to examine those emotions in slow looking, deaccelerated time, to come to a response-action that participates in ‘civil contract’ with the photographed. That is, seeing myself and my community in the photographed person:



is a gaze that transforms this precarity into creative forms of affirmation. It repurposes vulnerability and makes it (re)generative. In doing so, it shifts the optics of ‘looking at’ to an intentional practice of looking with and alongside.²²³

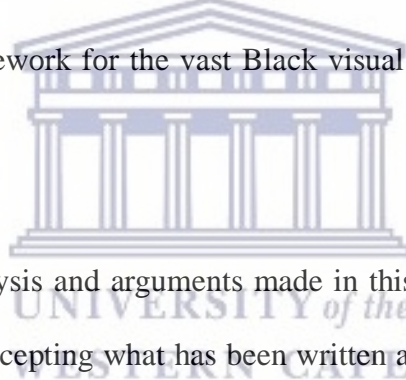
Listening provides a possibility for transformation and regeneration to become something other than what has been defined as Blackness. With listening and slow looking we get to the ‘fill our cups’, we forge practices of care by inventing a visual language of our own that celebrates and is anchored in strength, joy and love. We get to define the terms in which we ‘show up’.

²²² Ariella Azoulay, ‘Getting Rid of the Distinction between the Aesthetic and the Political’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27 (2015), 7-8.

²²³ Campt, ‘Adjacency: Luke Willis Thompson’s Poethics of Care’.

Listening demands the “work of maintaining a relation to, and connection with another.”²²⁴ Listening refuses the colonial framework that assumes the photographer as the brain or sole creator of the image and the subjects as a passive participant. Instead, it situates the photographed person at the centre of the image making and is in control of the photographic moment.

As a result, I read the moment before the shutter closes as the moment when they signal and conjure up a world that even not the speed of light could capture. It is listening to these quiet images, in slowing looking that I see how they use the photographic event to write their own history and emancipate themselves from the shackles of the real world. *Black Luminosity* is a curatorial and theoretical framework for the vast Black visual archive that is out there in the world of academia.



As I conclude, I want the analysis and arguments made in this thesis to contribute to a new scholarship that is no longer accepting what has been written about these images. These new frameworks challenge colonial epistemic power that surrounds the reading and historical writing of the photographic images.²²⁵ I wanted to show that we can write about the photographic image of Black people outside the photograph’s coloniality without having to re-traumatise or re-wound ourselves. In *Decolonising the Camera: Photography in Racial Time* Mark Sealy states that there cannot only be one cultural perspective on reading the image in the history of photography.²²⁶ Sealy calls for a decolonial approach that challenges photography’s colonial legacies by applying different knowledge systems that facilitate unlearning and learning.

²²⁴ Ibid., 3.

²²⁵ Mark Sealy, *Decolonising the Camera: Photography in Racial Time* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2019).

²²⁶ Ibid.

Similarly, I wanted to encourage a re-reading of these historical photographs and to read them within the contemporary socio-political context without replicating what has been done. But importantly I wanted to lay claim on this kind of photographic collection and be able to write about and with them from a place of dignity. This research encourages new scholarship within the discipline of critical thinking and African history of photography that is in opposition to official colonial institutions and that enables a reading beyond historical subject formations, particularly as these pertain to visual subjects in a rural setting.²²⁷ I am advocating for an *undercommons* scholarship outside the colonial university curriculum and structure.



²²⁷ Steele, 'Theorising the Image as Act', 46.

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