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To my parents, Jean and Juana Feyder.

“This is a strong-room of dreams. The dreamers? My people. The simple people, who you never find mentioned in the history books, who never get statues erected to them, or monuments commemorating their great deeds. People who would be forgotten, and their dreams with them, if it wasn’t for Styles [Photographic Studio]”.


Portrait by Robert Ngilima, early 1950s, Watville (East Rand).
“So what are you going to do with all these dusty old pictures?”, asks Judith, as she leans forward to scrutinize me closely. The strong summer light leaked through the crack between curtains that had seen better days, and caught her eyes: they took a surprising shade of blue. “Why do you need to know all that? Then my ancestors, they come to me at night and say, you are busy disturbing us while we are sleeping, busy telling people about us…”, she goes on. I look down at my feet, at loss for words. Something about the twinkle in my sixty-four year old friend’s eye made me doubt the seriousness of her objections. Judith, in her unpredictable mood swings, had mastered the art of sounding cross with a smile teasing the corner of her lips. But perhaps what made me uneasy was not quite the tone of her voice but her question itself: why do I bother with these old pictures? What am I going to do with

“Je voudrais une Histoire des Regards”. 

Roland Barthes, La chambre claire.
I was confronted with these questions from the very first interview I made with an old woman called Macfies Matmbo. I had gotten very excited when I found out she had worked in a photographic studio called Stella Nova back in the 60s. Having read seminal books like *The colonising camera*, I arrived to one of South Africa’s largest township, Soweto, determined to find out how Black people had come to appropriate the camera since those colonial days. I hoped to uncover and shed light on an innovative and distinct ‘Black’ photography, a ‘popular aesthetic’¹ distinctive to this group of people. The day of the interview, I tried to work through the ridiculously long list of questions I had prepared for Macfies about how the studio worked, what kind of clients came by, how they posed for the camera. Macfies’s bad state of health made her answers slow and almost inaudible. To my embarrassment, I came to understand that Macfies wasn’t the photographer as I had initially thought, but the cleaning lady of the studio. Her husband was the driver and messenger of the studio, both had worked there for almost twenty years. I look at down at her husband’s framed picture I was holding,

¹ Bourdieu 1965: 25 “l’esthétique populaire’ propre aux différents groupes ou classes.”
taken by the Indian photographers of the Stella Nova Studio that was owned by a (white) Jewish man. It was almost too much of a caricature to be true: I was caught up by the realities of apartheid. Meanwhile, her youngest son impatiently throws another unsettling question at me: “so what are you going to do for her now? Are you going to pay her? Look, she is sick, she needs medicine”. It felt like a slap in the face.

Over the next few months, the question of intention and significance would come back every time I came to introduce myself and had to explain my research project. It was a struggle for me to justify such an abstract endeavour. I would try to explain that I was convinced it was a good thing to write a history of the black urban community using artefacts coming from their homes, their private pictures; I would end up using big words and big ideas such as ‘decentralising white-owned archives’ and ‘countering cultural hegemony’, to which people would nod politely and change the topic of conversation.

One sunny morning in November, I learnt that Macfies passed away and had been buried that very weekend. Thinking of our encounter, I remembered these fantastic words she dropped repeatedly with her husky voice: “wonderful pictures, Stella Nova made. Wonderful pictures…” Photographs never cease to seduce people, regardless of their racial group, age, or economic status. I then realised, my research in a first stage needed no other justification other than the pleasure of looking at photos and hearing stories. It then becomes significant to try to keep them and value them, so that others in the future can have the pleasure of looking at them too. The political significance of these images begins to stand out when one looks back into the history of the camera in South Africa.

**Introducing the camera**

The introduction of photography into Africa is almost as old as the medium itself. Three months after the discovery of the Daguerreotype in Paris in 1839, French artists were “daguerreotyping like lions” in Cairo and bringing back pictures from the pyramids. The British and several Americans followed promptly by taking the camera to India and Australia. To get to these destinations, the most direct route was still around the Cape of Good Hope, which is why the daguerreotype process was introduced in South Africa as early as 1840. The

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first known photographs taken in the Cape date from 1842, and significant for this history, depicts a bare-breasted native Mozambican women sitting on a chair. This picture is representative of the ethnographic representations of ‘natives’ that were being produced at the time. In *The Colonizing Camera*, Hartmann, Hayes and Silvester argue that photography not just recorded the major episodes of colonisation but actively participated in the construction of the colonial discourse that justified its ‘civilizing’ project. By visualising the dichotomy between the “natives” and the civilised colonisers, it was a sophisticated means to create and spread racial representations of the exoticised other. The camera became an

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ii. E. Thiesson (French, active 1840s), *Native woman of Sofala, Mozambique, 1845*, Courtesy George Eastman House

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3 Bensusan
effective instrument of control in the production of new knowledge for colonial administrators, anthropologist, explorers, and missionaries. The camera functioned as a site around which power relationship were shaped and organised: the hierarchy between the observer and the observed extends the hierarchy between the one who knows and the one who is known about, between the colonial administrator and the colonial subject. The significance of black popular photography emerges when contrasted with the long-established tradition of Whites representing the “natives” according to their exoticising fantasies or political agenda. My historical study begins when Black people shifted from being mere objects of stereotyping to active subjects of representation. By commissioning the services of a photographer, the Black subject seeks to redress this unbalance of power. Through this shift in agency, we begin to have a photographic history by rather than of Black South Africans.

Can the subaltern ‘shoot’?

Karel Schoeman’s book The face of the country is a selection of South African photographs dating from 1860-1910, which gives a visual impression of what Cape Town society must have been like at the turn of the century. Schoeman, as a post-apartheid scholar, rightly questions to which extent his selection of photographs is representative of South African society. The photographs of the book foremost depict the white affluent classes who had access to the camera, still a rather exclusive and expensive activity back in 1860. In his introduction, Schoeman warns his reader that a history based solely on early South African pictures would inevitably be Eurocentric and biased. Ethnographic studies of natives aside, “members of other races appeared in photographs only incidentally insofar as they had acquired a role on the fringes of white society, for example as nursemaids or grooms”.

Spivak’s famous query “can the subaltern speak?” addresses the general question of the possibility of writing a history of subaltern groups, of whom we have little historical traces left today. Are black communities doomed to be invisible in South African visual history? Do they not ‘see’ as historical subjects? More than a simple question of access to resources, it is also a question of relationships with established institutions: these white photographed subjects of Schoeman’s photographs had the advantage of being geographically stable, of living in houses where one could keep objects like a photo album within the unit of the close-knit family. Groups at the margin of the system tended to have a transient lifestyle,
hence increasing chances of losing such objects. Disconnected from institutions, their pictures would never end up in the archives.

Up until Deborah Poole’s seminal book Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image, there had been a tendency in the historiography of photography to limit their object of study to European and American photographers. Poole’s groundbreaking study of the Andean visual economy greatly advanced the relatively new discipline of visual studies by analysing how Peruvian and Bolivian photographers participated in the production of images. However, she focuses primarily on the local Hispanic elite and only briefly touches upon how working-class and peasant families themselves might have more actively engaged with it. Greg Grandin’s more recent observation that “little research has been conducted on how popular groups themselves engaged the new medium” applies not just to indigenous groups in Latin America, but also to black photographers worldwide. Hence neither Robert Taft, in his Photography and the American Scene 1839-1889 (1938), nor Beaumont Newhall in his monumental History of Photography (1982), acknowledge the existence of Black photographers in the United States. Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson’s Photography's Other Histories, published in 2003, was a radical shift away from this Eurocentric elite-based history of photography. The authors criticized the tendency to describe the spread of the medium as “an explosion of a Western technology whose practice has been moulded by singular individuals”. The essays identify the various ways the medium was locally appropriated, for instance by Aboriginal communities in Australia and studio photographers in India, Kenya and in Nigeria. Deborah Willis is among the first scholars to have initiated efforts to identify Afro-American photographers, her research culminating in the exhibition and book Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present (2000).

In 1966 the first attempt to retrace a South African history of photography was made with Silver images: a history of photography in Africa, written by A.D Bensusan, the namesake of the Photography Museum in Johannesburg. What is remarkable about this work is that black photographers appear merely on one occasion in the whole book. “Bantu photographers” scores only one page entrance in the index file. As a product of the apartheid era, it is not that surprising that the Black Africans should be almost entirely excluded from

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4 Grandin 2004: 85
5 Pinney and Peterson 2003:1
6 under “Bantu photographers”, mentioning Peter Magubane from Drum Magazine, in 1960
this historical account. Yet even more recent post-apartheid academic literature on South African photography still refers to Drum era of the 1950s as the first significant platform for black photographers, namely Bob Gosani and Peter Magubane. Does this mean that between 1842 (the date when the first photographs were taken in South Africa) and the 1950s, Blacks didn’t produce any pictures? That until Drum magazine was created in 1952 Black urban communities didn’t ‘see’ (or ‘shoot’)?

My initial interest in this topic rose from the desire to “fill the gap” in the literature between colonial photography and the famous first Drum photojournalists. I could not conceive that there was no visual archive of black communities previous to 1950, nor that Blacks waited for so long to take on the camera. Who were the first black photographers in South Africa? How were they able to acquire the technique and get access to the equipment? I thus embarked on the project to write a history of black popular photography, by collecting private photographs and their related stories from families living in the townships around Johannesburg. My wish was to honour the ambulant photographers, the skilled darkroom manipulators, the informal studio portraitists…in other words, those humble professionals and skilled autodidacts who brought photography to the working classes living in the townships.

A visual history of urbanisation

I chose to focus my field of research on the time span between the 1920s and the 1950s. It precedes the advent of television in South Africa (1970s) and the other such mass media, which have fundamentally altered our relationship to images. But foremost, it corresponds to a phase in South African history that particularly interested me: the decades in which African urbanisation really kicked off, responding to the manufacturing revolution triggered by the Second World War. Until the 1930s, the economy relied on the migrant labour system, which ensured that the African labour, primarily men, returned to their village at the end of their working contract. Wives, children and other family relatives were not welcome in the mine compounds. However in the 1940s, women began to move to town in big numbers. More readily embracing urban life, their establishment in town allowed the African population to stabilise and even grow. The 1930s and 40s saw the first generation of Africans born and raised in the city.

7 Meterlerkamp p.9;
Between 1939 and 1952, the African urban population of Johannesburg almost doubled, reaching about 750,000 people. The incredible speed and the size of this phenomenon meant that social changes, condensed under such circumstances, were radical and swift. This population expansion coincided with a radical shift in the economy away from mining, as the secondary industry expanded under the impetus of the Second World War. This expansion of the black urban labour force stimulated class-consciousness, so that the 1940s was a period of political ferment manifested by industrial action and spontaneous informal community protest. This had a radicalising effect on African political organisation, in particular on the ANC, with the creation of the Congress Youth League in 1943 and the emergence of young leaders like Nelson Mandela, Olivier Tambo and Walter Sisulu. Feeling threatened by this ‘unstoppable’ African migration, the white settler community (and in particular the Afrikaner rural community) responded to the National Party’s manipulation of the ‘zwart gevaar’\(^8\) and brought them to power in the 1948 elections. While the regime of segregation under British rule had already elaborated a juridical arsenal to slow this migration down, apartheid was characterised by a heightened execution of these laws. They increased the means of the influx control system, which through the use of passbooks and strict policing inhibited Africans from circulating freely from one Bantustan to another, and from the countryside to the city. Apartheid also demarcated itself by systematising forced removals of the inner-city slums and native locations, so as to ‘purify’ white residential spaces from these black ‘temporary sojourners’. In the mist of this period of heightened oppression, the 1950s however was also retrospectively baptised the period of “African Renaissance”\(^9\), in which Black South African writers, musicians and intellectuals acquired national and even international fame. Created in 1952, Drum magazine, the first illustrated magazine in South Africa aiming at a black audience, contributed much to the construction of the African cosmopolitan figure, through mounting stars like Dolly Rathebe or Myriam Makeba.

African urbanisation and ‘detribalisation’ became one of the most explored topics among South African scholars (in particular economist, sociologists and anthropologists)\(^10\). How many are pouring into town and why are they staying there? What are the implications of urbanisation on political formations (for example cross-ethnic trade unions) and on African culture (‘detribalisation’)? Much of this literature produced dichotomies such as

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8 Black peril, the fear of having Africans swarming into the city in massive numbers
10 Mayer 1961, Pauw 1963
traditional/modern, rural/urban, tribal/urbanite. Present day academics are still struggling to move beyond them, while popular imaginaries continue to reproduce them in daily conversations.

I myself became hooked on the theme of an African urban identity from a historical perspective. How was it possible for Black South Africans to develop an urban identity distinct from the dominant White model? After all, public discourses continuously expressed the notion that Africans were only temporary sojourners, the idea of an ‘African urbanite’ was an impossibility, an error of history. Since the very foundation of Johannesburg, juridical, political and economical efforts have been made to exclude non-European groups from designing and defining the urban space. Thankfully, social historians of Marxist inspiration have for the past couple of decades been documenting the history of squatter movements and other such efforts to resist the expulsion of Africans from the city. Yet I still wonder: how was it possible for Africans to find their place within this segregated society and make sense of this urban jungle? What strategies did they develop in order to cope with the harshness and deep instabilities of their lives? What identity could they endorse that would valorise them as human beings and give them the dignity the apartheid system denied them?

One way of tackling these questions is by looking at how the broader social changes triggered by urbanisation found their echo through innovative cultural forms of expression. David Coplan for example analysed a unique form of African jazz called ‘marabi’, that emerged in the slumyards of Johannesburg in the 1920s. According to Coplan, this fusion of musical influences is «the result of new patterns of urban social organization and cultural significance”, born out of a specific situation in which migrant workers from different ethnic backgrounds of the southern African region were thrown together on the mine compounds and forced to cooperate. As “the first pan-ethnic urban African working-class musical style », marabi music is a good example of how situations of rapid change provide opportunities for social innovation in the process of collective adaptation. Other aspects of this ‘slumyard culture’ included a cluster of activities revolving around the social institution of the ‘shebeen’ (a social meeting place to drink beer brewed by local women), the development of tsotsitaal (a language which fuses Afrikaans with African languages) and the tsotsi gangs, the practice of stokvels (system of rotating credit practiced by women), to cite but a few examples of how Black communities were able to “humanise the brutal conditions of urban life”.

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11 Bonner 1995; Bozzoli (ed.) 1979, Labour, Townships and Protest, Ravan
12 Koch 1981: 193
to Koch, the concept of culture must be broadened to include these collective efforts to “give creative expression to the material conditions that surround them”. Koch defines culture as “the way in which social groups ‘handle’ their experience of living in a set of objective conditions and thereby create a corresponding set of attitudes, symbols, values and more”.

**Constructing a positive self-image**

“The choice is between pride and bread and butter”.

Bloke Modisane, Blame me on history.

This is where photography comes into the picture again. Photography is a form of praise. Private photographs are about valorising and cherishing the person in the centre of the frame. People dressed up in their Sunday clothes and looking their very best. Bourdieu observed: “To strike a pose is to respect oneself and demand respect”. My mother for example will flatly refuse to be photographed freshly out of bed in the morning without her makeup and prefer the solemnity of the formal pose, because it corresponds to the dignified image she constructed for herself. In this regard, I am interested in how photography helped Black people to build a positive image of themselves and which images they used in order to achieve this. Despite the automatic mechanism of image-making, photography implies nevertheless a conscious choice of framing, of themes, of composition; “one that praises in its attempt to record, preserve, and celebrate a certain moment”. Thus photographs imply “an implicit value structure particular to a certain group or social class at a particular moment of time”. While it is impossible to reduce someone’s identity to a single picture, a portrait will tell us a little about how the person imagined him/herself and how s/he wanted to be seen. The symbolic choice of clothes and props might say something about the subject’s aspiration; the pose adopted could inform us about his/her cultural references and ultimately his/her value-system. In this context, photography was itself “a modern way of dealing with the world and

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13 Bourdieu 1965
14 Behrend 1998: 140, Bourdieu 1965: 24 “Cependant, lors meme que la production de l’image est entièrement dévolue à l’automatisme de l’appareil, la prise de vue reste un choix qui engage des valeurs esthétiques et éthiques”.
simultaneously of improving one’s standing in it”\textsuperscript{15}.

Modernity was clearly an important element, though not the only one, of this value-system. Black photographic subjects borrowed certain Western elements to construct a modern identity. They increasingly relied on backdrops and props (such as the telephone, the obligatory flower bouquet, the suit…) to produce “consumer-driven images of subjectivity”\textsuperscript{16} (chapter four). But while being complicit with the consumerist ideology that was emerging in the 1950s, other aspects of apartheid economy were clearly rejected. For example, a woman called Mary Xhaba living in Soweto in the 1940s had collected multiple pictures of herself and of the white family for whom she worked many years. The pictures of herself will depict her in Western clothes but in none of them is she seen wearing the uniform of the domestic servant. Bourdieu sought to understand how the French working-class related to photography, in an attempt to grasp how they related to their social condition, and to the objective possibilities and impossibilities that this condition implied\textsuperscript{17}. Photographs, I argue, provide an opportunity to explore the way Black people perceived themselves in relation to society, in particular to the system of apartheid. The title of my thesis “\textit{Think positive, make negatives}”, is not just a (bad) game of words using photographic vocabulary, it sums up my deep interest in understanding how it was possible for an oppressed people to survive in a racist system like apartheid while maintaining their sense of dignity.

How do evolutions in photographic strategies inform us about the changes in the way a black South African perceived him/herself? To what extend does black popular photography reflect an emerging township culture and give evidence of an alternative urban culture? Together these questions explore Black people’s subjective response to the process of urbanisation. Within the space of the photographic studio, dreams and aspiration were being staged out, using a specific cultural and aesthetic code. This thesis tries to establish how the continuities and changes in photographic styles can be regarded as aspects of the overall process of adaptation to urbanisation. Deviances from the established cannon of photographic conventions could be interpreted as a sign that black customers gradually “freed themselves from Western hegemonies and invented their own repertoire of representations”\textsuperscript{18}. My specific interest lays not so much in trying to define an African modernity or an African urban

\textsuperscript{15} Behrend 1998: 149
\textsuperscript{16} Appadurai 1997: 5
\textsuperscript{17} Bourdieu 1965: 35 “Comprendre complètement la signification et la fonction que les ouvriers confèrent à la photographie, c’est comprendre le rapport qu’ils entretiennent avec leur condition”.
\textsuperscript{18} Behrend 1998: 148
identity, but rather in understanding the subjectivities, the imaginations and dreams that sustained this history of urbanisation, marked by exploitation and resistance.

**Photographs as historical documents**

“When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future”.

John Berger, *Another Way of Telling*.

**Potential historical documents**

Barthes famously wrote that the essence of photography was to ratify what the picture represented, to depict a “what-has-been”. The notion that the mechanical nature of photography faithfully records richness of details, (thus giving them the “status of fact”), is hard to sustain when one takes into account the practice of manipulating pictures. Photographs are not simply a mirror of our world and its past events. Photographs lie or hide as much as they show. They are a constructed selection of this reality. To give an example, it is not certain that all the expensive things the subject is posing with belong to belong to him/her; most probably they were hired or borrowed for the shoot. Private photographs depict illusions as much as they record historical events. Hence historians have until recently been reluctant to use images as valid source of history, not having the methodological tools to make them ‘speak’. Between the moment recorded and the present one of looking at the photograph, there is an abyss, reminds Berger. Within the gap of this abyss, interpretations are endless: how valid can a version of history be when based on a mere ‘interpretation’ of images?

But then again, any historical material is subject to the ‘technical operation’ of investing historical meaning into an object originally meant for another purpose. “In history, everything begins with the gesture of setting aside, of putting together, of transforming certain classified objects into ‘documents’”, wrote De Certeau. Part of my excitement in this project came from the motivation of working with ‘raw materials’ that until today have not been considered as potential historical documents and are being kept in plastic bags under the bed, threatened to be chucked away at the next spring cleaning. The growing field of visual history has been developing methodologies to address these questions of interpreting pictures, which takes into account the fictional dimension of photographs. Instead of making it my problem, I

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19 De Certeau 1975: 84
decided to make it my object of study: how did Black people develop a new visual range of practices and aesthetic codes to express their aspirations? Fantasies are to be taken seriously, because they are also charged with values and symbols and are also historically constructed. Hence colonial photography tells us more about the colonial power’s fantasies regarding native people than about how they really dressed and lived. Berger valued the subjectivity at play in private snapshots. All photographs are possible contributions to history, he wrote, but there is a danger of treating photographs as positivist evidence of a single and ultimate (‘objective’) truth. To this ideological use of photography, he prefers the “popular but private use which cherishes a photograph to substantiate a subjective feeling”. But the question still remains: how can a private picture of an individual inform us about collective practices and imaginaries? How do we move from the private realm of life stories and personal values attached to photographs to the public (objective) space of History?

For this master thesis, I have used both a specific collection of photos coming from identified individuals and a broader, more anonymous selection of pictures to compile a rough periodisation of black popular photography, from 1920 to late 1950s. By comparing the photographs between them, I discerned five different styles that all fall under the genre of portraiture: early studio portraiture, hand-tinted portraiture, corner photography, movie snaps and township photography (chapter 2). Talking in terms of genre and style supposes a social process of canonisation and allows us to think in terms of common photographic practices and institutionalized channels of transmission. It also points to the correlation between style and broader social or cultural developments occurring at the same time, making the link between a “period’s visual technology and its structure of understanding”. In-depth interviews with several women from Orlando East (Soweto) allowed me, in Strassler’s words, to “acknowledge the unique sentiments invested in personal images without setting personal practices apart from the larger discursive formations, regimes of value and aesthetic ideologies” (chapter 5).

A history of uses vs. a history of forms

There are many ways to write a history of photography, the term ‘photography’ covering such a large range of activities, people and objects. One can focus on the photographers the technology of the camera, the visual aesthetics at play, the politics of representation, the economic trade of photography, the clients or consumers of images, the circulation of

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20 Schwartz and Przybyski (ed.) 2004: 10-12
21 Strassler 2003: 28
images… Within these focuses, the options are numberless. For example, photographers can refer to the successful artists, the humble professionals, the skilful amateurs, the hardcore photojournalists… To these multiple levels of focus, one must add two fundamentally different ways of treating photographs in the writing of history: one uses photography as an instrument (a means to) and the other one takes photography as its object of study. As Lemagny observes in Photography: a crisis of history, there is a tension between “a historiography that utilizes photography to explain life and another that concentrates on explaining photography itself”22. The first option corresponds to a social history approach, which tends to focus on the sociological uses of photography, anchoring their understanding of the images within the context of their production and consumption. A good example of this approach might be Gisèle Freund’s 1974 Photographie et société, in which she makes the link between the popularity of studio portraiture and the rise of a bourgeoisie seeking to affirm its social ascension.

In her sociological analysis of photography’s popularity, Freund tended to neglect the sensual attraction images exert on its viewers. Why did photo studio portraiture maintain the classic conventions of oil painting? What did the consecutive breakaways from this aesthetic imply? Such socio-historical studies rarely venture into a pictorial analysis of the images. In contrast, an art history approach rather focuses on the image itself and its aesthetic and visual effects. Aesthetics could be defined as “the study of sensuous perceptions as they affected an individual’s feelings”23. The Guggenheim Museum’s In/sight: African photographers, 1940 to the present, is the first art book to shed light on now internationally acknowledged African photographers like Salick Madibé, Saidou Keita and Samuel Fosso. But while the anthology has raised these talented African studio photographers to the rank of artist, it has been criticised for its lack of contextualisation of the images. These quality portraits might be considered as artworks but they were produced for the private consumption of local clients rather than for an international art audience. In their political interpretation of the photographs, the authors are keen to amalgamate the photographers into a single artistic movement of post-colonial ‘African’ photography. Carlo Ginzberg criticised art historians for being too eager to interpret visual material in terms of pre-existing political hypothesis24. Recognising the limits of both schools, I will try in this thesis to write a history of picture-

22 Lamagny in Fontcubera (ed.) 2002
23 Berger 1982: 115
making which will integrate these two approaches. Not only is a social history of photography compatible with a history of aesthetics, my feeling is that they are entirely interdependent. Aesthetics and artistic movements are of this material world, they evolve within it and not out of the blue.

**The photographer as historiographer**

The significance of writing a history on the basis of artefacts coming from Blacks’ homes also comes out when one considers the politics behind the process of archive formation in South Africa. Archives are products of state machinery; technologies that bolstered the production of the state in return. The apartheid regime in particular relied on sophisticated police surveillance and massive bureaucracy in order to execute their racist policies of influx control. Much personal information was collected in order to exert control over the ‘natives’ (birth date, employment, address etc). However, ‘official archives’ deliberately failed to document Black experience in terms of leisure, what people did after work, the daily life experience of the township, what people aspired to or dreamed of despite the restricted social mobility. This kind of information fell outside of their field of interest. Archives contain until now very few information that has been actively produced by Blacks, most of it has been more or less violently extracted or ‘collected’ by the State. The ongoing mistrust of Black communities towards traditionally white controlled institutions meant that until now very few Africans have voluntarily given their private material to archives.

Since 1980s, social historians have been documenting the struggle against colonisation and apartheid, by using innovative methods such as oral history and history workshops. But they have tended to over-politicise Black life experiences, reading the history of Black communities exclusively through the lens of political struggle. What about those who stayed at home instead of participating in the marches and boycotts? What happened between two major historical events?

The author Athol Fugard wrote in 1972 a play called *Sizbe Bansi is Dead*, in which one of the main characters is a photographer called Styles. For Fugard, the photographer is the informal historiographer of his people, witnessing the life and dreams of “the people the writers of the big books forget about”. bell hooks also perceives the camera as an empowering tool for colonized and subjected people to document their lives, one which sustained and affirmed oral history. “When the psychohistory of a people is marked by ongoing loss, when

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25 Hamilton 2002 (ed.)
entire histories are denied, hidden, erased, documentation may become an obsession”\(^{26}\). Thus the walls in southern USA black homes were considered as gallery spaces where these private histories could be shared with friends and strangers.

In summary, I will be arguing that the photographs taken in the households of townships are invaluable historical documents for themes such as evolving material culture (chapter 4), shifts in family structures (chapter 3) and gender relationships (chapter 5). Far from denying the element of creative fiction and narrative construction behind each picture, I try embrace it and use it to understand the visual construction of these imaginaries from a historical perspective, by studying evolving strategies of self-representation (chapter 2). I aim to follow Pinney and Peterson’s plea for a more localised history of photography, trying to uncover another example of « heterodox (photographic) practices flourishing outside of the metropolis, constituting a distinctive postcolonial popular aesthetic». This localised history of photography both articulates with and departs from a more general history of photography, which uses the technological innovation of the camera as its main structuring motor of change. For example, the terrific invention of celluloid film had its impact all over the world, including South Africa. Yet how Black photographers managed to appropriate it and what they did with it was subjected to the specifics of South African history (chapter 1). Hence through this history of photography, we are also retracing a history of cultural interaction between black and white populations via the circulation of images and transmission of skills.

**Images as vehicles of ideology: ways of seeing**

Images make interesting historical documents, not just because they deliver visual details of how things were back in the days (fashion, architecture, etc.), but also because they show how people perceived things. Pinney for example, referring to Heidegger’s essay “The Age of the World Picture”, points out that the European photographic image embodied the profound chasm that modernity created between man and the world. Modernity erects a subject clearly distinguishable from the other objects that are set out there for the subject’s disposal and personal consumption. Similarly, the camera objectifies the landscape, animals and people, placing the world “in the realm of man’s knowing and of his having disposal”\(^{27}\). In *Ways of

\(^{26}\) hooks in Wells (ed.) 2002: 391

\(^{27}\) Heiddeger as quoted in Pinney and Peterson 2003: 209.
Seeing, John Berger establishes a parallel between the flourishing of oil painting and the early capitalist trade emerging at the time. Oil painting, argues Berger, depicts objects in a realist way that brings out their texture as to appeal to our senses. They depict *disposable goods*, for example exotic fruit and fresh lobster, waiting to be consumed by the viewer (111). This literature elaborates this strong idea that images produced by a given society reflect its values and “ways of seeing” (or world-view). Images are never innocent; they are not simply a biological translation of our sensitive organ but rather a social construct.

![Lobster, still life](http://www.1st-art-gallery.com)

Photographs hence are vehicles for ideologies. For instance, Deborah Poole argues that photography helped the popular imagination make sense of the abstract notion of ‘race’ by concretising the exterior, observable physical traits of the body into immediately graspable visual signs.  

28Family pictures stage happy moments that visualise family unity and bonding along the bourgeois model of nucleus family. Early studio portraiture, a fashion born in the second half of the 19th century in France, spread to every city it was exported to the middle-class values of private property through the aesthetic conventions of oil painting. The Black South Africans converted to Christianity also made use of this technology of self-

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28 Pool 1997: 213
representation to fortify their efforts to affirm their state of civilisation and plead for equality with the white man.

By treating photography as a “thoroughly social and historical mode of communication”, we can trace the ‘enduring tropes’ and ‘alien intentions’ permeating these images. “Are these pictures evidence of mental colonisation?” asks curator Santu Mofokeng, regarding the 1910-1920s studio portraits of converted Africans in his exhibition The Black Album: look at me. According to Spivak, the subaltern cannot speak: the figure of the woman, she argues, becomes caught between British agents and Indian patriarchs, between the discourses of tradition and modernization. While the Black community was clearly subjected to these visual ideologies, I would like to argue that, unlike Spivak’s rather pessimistic conclusion, they also partially managed to depart from them. In this thesis, I look at how the connotations of modernity and urbanity attached to the camera at its invention in Europe came to be re-interpreted in the townships. Elements of emerging consumerist culture can be observed in the works of Ronald Ngilima, an informal community photographer of an Eastern Rand township. His pictures show Black people experimenting with new manufactured objects and visualising new ways of relating to them, using a highly theatrical and comical style of miming (chapter 4). But while they seem to endorse this consumerist culture, the outcomes in terms of images and meanings invested in the depicted objects will be characteristic of their experience of apartheid economy. Hence these photographs stand at the interstices of different ideological and cultural positions, at times complicit with and other times departing from the dominant visual regime.

‘Black’ photography? The ‘race debate’

What do I mean by ‘black’ photography? It is always a delicate matter to use a racial adjective to qualify a cultural phenomenon. In the common denominations like black music or black theatre, Black Consciousness or black poetry, what does ‘black’ refer to? Does it refer to an imagined community or to a category created by state machinery? Am I opposing a black photography to a white photography? Part of the problem in using ‘black’ to qualify a mode of expression, is that it risks to fall into biological essentialism that underlined the very

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racist mode of thinking of the apartheid government: do Black people ‘see’ differently and take pictures differently simply because of the colour of their skin? Is there not the risk of overstating the importance of race in the shaping of identities and cultural movements? Are these depicted people from the 1950s defining themselves as Black in their pictures, as some kind of *avant-courreur* of Steve Biko’s Bantu Consciousness movement of the late 1960s?

In South Africa, the issue of race is still a controversial and delicate affair. Today’s acute awareness of race is the residue of the country’s history, in which “every facet of life was saturated with the effects of racial thinking and practice”30. The 2001 conference entitled *The burden of race* pointed to the relative discomfort in South African scholarship with the issue of race31. Previous to the fall of apartheid, much of the literature grappled with the analysis of the political system of apartheid but made little effort to ‘unpack’ the notion. Part of the reason for this disengagement is the discomfort of using the very terms for which liberal and Marxist scholars had a strong distaste for. By qualifying something as ‘black’, is one not reproducing the political and intellectual logic of apartheid? And yet it is difficult to write a history of South Africa without using these racial terms. For example, non-racialist student activists were confronted with the harsh reality that it was hard to meet and hold congresses with their fellow black students, as they were “living in different worlds”. The ideals of non-separatism had to come to terms with the fact that racial categories elaborated and imposed by a repressive regime cannot be erased, because “they were also constitutive of the lived experiences of South African people”.

Hence by qualifying a particular photography as ‘black’, I am referring to the social implications of this history of urbanisation and of racial segregation, in terms of collective experience. Being born black in South Africa at a particular time in history confined you to the social conditions of the township; a social reality that few Blacks could escape. I am *not* referring to an essentialist notion of Blackness akin to Biko’s, which defines it as a cultural identity and a source of pride and human dignity. Nor do I make use of the abstract idea of black or African aesthetics, which would somehow be distinct from Western aesthetic. In *Camera Indica: the social life of Indian photographs*, Pinney cautions against the temptation to pinpoint in Indian photographs the “hyperbolic essentialization of an Indian alterity”, the manifestation of a deeper and unchanged Indian psyche32. I hence will try to avoid giving an interpretation of these pictures based on an essentialized ‘Black’ or ‘African’ way of seeing.

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30 Posel, et al 2001: i  
31 idem: v11  
32 Pinney 1997: 53
do not believe the subjects depicted on these pictures were trying to portray their blackness as a marker of identity. Rather, I would suggest they used a range of aesthetic conventions and symbols to create a positive image of themselves as an urban subject. I am not so interested in trying to define a distinct black modernity, but rather to study how these discourses of modernity, around themes like consumption and individuality, have been locally appropriated through a distinct range of aesthetic conventions and symbols. How did they visualise their modernity according to their own terms? How were the claims to modernity used to request human dignity?

Nor do I wish to seclude the emergence of black popular photography from a ‘white’ western photography, for these two visual economies were tightly interlinked and constantly exchanging images. I argue instead that the kind of photography that came out of the Blacks’ experience of the urban was locally shaped by the specific social conditions imposed by apartheid. The term ‘black’ allows me to include the other Black Africans not living permanently in the townships but who also have contributed to this history of popular photography. My sample of pictures includes photographs of, for example, the Christianised Zulus living in the rural areas, of Africans living in the slumyards of the city, of African migrants constantly shifting between the rural and urban world. What I have called ‘township photography’ is only one genre among others in the broader chronology of photographic styles that I have tried to sketch out. ‘Black popular’ photography hence accounts for the diversity of trajectories within the process of urbanisation while giving a unit of framework to observe evolutions of self-representations across time. Though my study stretched across several decades and embraces Africans’ incredible mobility in the Gauteng region, it also firmly limits itself to the various urban spaces of Johannesburg.
Methodology

Description of the material
I headed to Johannesburg, Soweto, in the late August of 2008, but not without some doubts concerning the success of my enterprise. How was I going to find the material? Where to look for it? And supposed I did find it, what was I going to do with it? To my surprise (and utter relief), during my five and a half months of fieldwork, I found a lot more material than expected. From dusty old wooden frames to loose photographs kept in plastic bags, from elaborate photo albums to more modest notebooks holding pictures, I found that many families living in the townships had more or less consciously kept traces of their visual archives, some of which went back to the early 1910s. I was living with a family based in Orlando East, which is one of the oldest neighbourhoods of Soweto, where a few families have lived in the same house since 1933, the date of its creation. It was indeed the ideal place to start my historical research, and most of my in-depth interviews come from there. My method to collect pictures was inspired by the way things are done in the township: informally, starting from the house next door, relying on a ‘word to mouth’ strategy, but mainly it came down to random luck. I visited quite a few other townships, like Kliptown, Vorsloorus and Alexandra, where I gathered more pictures from various circles of friends that seem to confirm my initial observations shaped in Soweto.

Part of my material comes from the archives of established institutions, for example from the Witwatersrand University. In the past ten years, the Bensusan Photography Museum began to acquire items of Black popular photography, thanks to the devotion key staff members (basically Diane Wall), who had the insight to diversify and up-date the visual archives in an effort to make it more representative of the newly post-apartheid South Africa. Thanks to my contacts at the Bensusan Museum, I fell on Farrell Ngilima, an enthusiastic young graphic designer in his early 30s. At our first meeting, he brought along two small boxes containing hundreds of negatives. As I held the negatives against the light to make out the green and brown figures, Farrell explained to me the exceptional story of his grandfather, Ronald Ngilima, who in his free time was the autodidact community photographer of his township, in the 1950s. During the conversation, Farrell mentioned that there were many more boxes at his father’s place and he estimated the whole collection to contain about 5000 negatives. I nearly fainted: I knew I had hit the jackpot.

The rest of the material comes from private collections from various individuals. Back in the 80s, photographer Santu Mofokeng had worked on a project called “The Black Album:
look at me”, which was a collection of anonymous studio portraits of Black middle and working class people dating from the early 1900 to 1920s. This collection of photographs was to be my “starting point”, from which I could compare the other following styles of popular photography. I got most of my “movie snaps” from David Goldblatt, who curated an exhibition about twenty years ago, using the uncollected pictures of the photographic studios in town. Artist and curator Ruth Sack had much material and knowledge on airbrushed portraits, most of which came from her late aunt, who was one of those airbrush artists that retouched photographs.

Not wishing to separate photography from the other modes of expression of the time, I have included literature as part of my research material. In particular, I have extensively used the autobiographies of Es’kia Mphahlele (Down Second Street) and Bloke Modisane (Blame me on history), two black writers from the Drum era, who through their talented words have given me a real sense of place, as well as much insight into the human dynamics in the township. As already quoted above, I have also found great inspiration from Fugard’s play Sizwe Bansi is dead, who’s character Styles is almost too good (for this thesis) to be true.

Methods of interpretation
But gathering the material was only half the challenge. How was I going to interpret them? How to honour the personal stories attached to a picture while connecting it to broader discourses? My approach to photography was to treat it on three different levels. The first one is what Poole calls “visual economy”, which historically anchors the photographic discourse within a social and economical context. It invites one to look at the specific economic and political formations behind the images. “In this way, vision becomes a problem of social actors and society, rather than of the abstract discourses, regimes of knowledge, sign systems, and ideologies (…)” 33. I hence tried to historically retrace the development of photography as a trade within the Black urban communities, paying attention to the sociological background of the actors (chapter 1). The term of “economy” implies that the field of vision is organised in a systematic way that links up people, ideas and objects. Despite the laws enforcing segregation, images circulated between Black people living in the townships and the white communities, whether via Hollywood films, magazine fashion pictures or advertisement. However, while the term suggests exchange and circulation of objects (the “life blood of

33 Poole 1997: 9
modernity”), it also reminds us that these exchanges are unequal and embedded in power relationships.

Using an art historical methodology, I also approach photographs as two-dimensional representations, subject to the conventions of particular aesthetic genres (chapter 2). A pictorial analysis across the sample of photographs allowed me to identify various styles within the genre of portraiture, which dominated the history of black popular photography. On the basis of this categorization, I was able to sketch a rough chronology of Black popular photography and study the evolutions of aesthetic conventions in terms of choice of theme, props, background, location, posing, framing…

The third approach, more anthropological, is to consider photograph as an “image-object”34 and look at the social practices constructed around it. As a three-dimensional material artefact, the photograph is itself representative of evolving technology, of an evolving material culture. By ‘following the thing’, the camera’s movement across different urban spaces becomes the guideline for this history35. It is hence important to consider the material aspect of images, as cherished objects passed from hand to hand or as markers of social status. In my fifth chapter, for example, I look at the way the women that I interviewed constructed their life narrative through their selection of photographs and the stories attached to them.

In order to understand the person’s relationship to his/her photographs, I used the method of photo-elicitation during my interviews. Pictures thus inserted in the interview and the responses they stimulate become the line threat of the interview36. I would also take my camera along, to take pictures of their pictures (so as to avoid to taking them away) but also to photograph my interviewees. If at first my intentions behind my own photography were more personal and of more artistic nature, I gradually realised that their reaction to the camera- at times complicit and cooperative, other times dismissive or neutral- was as much informative of the importance of photographic practice for them as their own pictures.

34 Poole 1997
35 Appadurai 1983
36 Harper 2002
Outline of the chapters

Chapter one, two and five explore each of these three modes of analysis and illustrate the difference in approaches. Chapter three and four, on urbanisation and consumption, combine these approaches to further elaborate on the relationship between photography and urban identity.

Chapter one starts by sketching out the development of the photographic trade in the black townships, by looking at the production of images by black actors. Using colonial photography as the starting point of my study, this chapter seeks to find out how Black Africans gradually engaged more actively with this medium, by commissioning and collecting pictures of themselves or, at a later stage, by taking over the production line. Who were the first Black photographers? How were these black pioneers able to acquire the photographic skills and the material, given the impediments of the racist economy? This chapter hence focuses on the actors of the black visual economy, in particular the photographers, against the background of apartheid.

Chapter two deals with questions of styles and aesthetic norms, exploring the surface of the photographs as a two-dimensional image. Using methodology of pictorial analysis from the art history school, I try to qualify the rich diversity of visual material collected during my fieldwork, regrouping them according to common characteristics (for example type of pose, props, background, quality of print, frame, shooting location, use of colour…). As the title of this chapter indicates (“Strategies of self-representation”), I emphasise the prominent role of the photographed subjects in the shaping in the ‘township’ style, succeeding in crafting their public image according to their own conventions.

The third chapter looks at the multiple levels of interplay and interconnections between photography and urbanisation. Photography is historically linked to the development of the city, its lifestyle and values. In South Africa, the process of urbanisation took a highly political dimension, as the arsenal of racist laws reserved the definition of and the control over the urban space to Whites. What connection can one make between the development of a new photographic genre and the emergence of an African urban culture alternative to the mainstream one?

The fourth chapter further explores the theme of an emerging African urban identity, but this time through the particular perspective of consumption. The photographs from the Ngilima
collection depict young subjects eager to display their privileged relationship to certain key consumer goods (LPs, radio, bicycle...). How did consumer goods come to be such an important factor of self-representation? How do these photographs help us understand Black’s experience of consumerism in the context of apartheid?

The fifth chapter differs from the other four as so far as it is built on particular case studies. It focuses on the evolving photographic representation of women. By analysing the photographic collection of five different women, I look at the shifts in gender relationships that occurred as women acquired increasing autonomy in the township via the labour system. Their selection of photographs and the choice of poses portray these single-mothers as “ladies”, both seductive and respectable, independent from men yet maintaining certain patriarchal notions of femininity. The in-depth interviews allowed me to analyse how the exercise of making and collecting pictures of themselves participated in the construction of a visual narrative that stressed the image of the independent women over that of the housewife or the mother.
In this chapter, I wish to sketch out the emergence of popular photography among the Black urban communities against the background of a broader historical narrative of colonialism and urbanisation. How did the means and techniques of photography “move out of the hands of the rulers into the hands of the ruled”\(^{37}\)? Tracing the development of a visual economy implies paying attention to the social actors, the transformation of photography into an economic trade, the transmission of skills, the improvement of the photographic equipment. By contrasting the South African situation with other African and Asian experiences, I hope to show that the late establishment of a Black photographic economy in the townships is symptomatic of the racial history of South Africa, which tended to exclude Blacks from free-enterprise and the manipulation of technology.

Particular focus will be put on the camera as a mobile object, its mobility being at once geographical, social and metaphorical. The camera’s travelling is the guideline to this history: we “follow the thing”\(^{38}\) as it was dragged out of the bourgeois bubble of the studio into the streets of the city centre and finally into families’ homes in the townships. The movement of camera outlines the different urban spaces in which the particular history of

\(^{37}\) Appadurai 1997: 5

\(^{38}\) Marcus 1995:107
urbanisation of the region took place: the mine camps, the city-centre, the industrial zones, the townships.

The constant technological simplifications of the camera were key to this newly gained mobility. Not only did cameras become lighter and shed much of their initial bulky equipment, they required less training and specialised knowledge to use them. Thus the camera spread towards working classes and gradually ceased to be a luxury reserved for the privileged classes. The camera at the same time created opportunities for people to interact across ethnic groups, to meet, and share knowledge. For example, the minority groups such as the Indian or the Jewish community played a crucial role in the spread of photographic knowledge and equipment among Black people. By focusing on the agents of transmission and in reverse, factors of restrictions to the camera’s spread, we get a glimpse into the complexities of social spaces shaped by a racist political system, in which cross-ethnic and inter-class interactions were weaved beyond the segregationist policies.

The local visual economy was able to develop within the gaps and interstices of the apartheid economy, as Black photographers sought to bypass work and trading restrictions. Despite the initial obstacles, Black photographers were eventually able to “domesticate” the medium and introduce it into their homes. Dim kitchens, corrugated iron sheets, the brick wall of the factory, the courtyard become the backdrops for these photographs, replacing the painted studio backdrops representing Victorian gardens. The backdrop locates the photographic subject in a certain sort of context, but it also locates the photograph in a certain sort of public discourse, writes Appadurai\(^39\). What ‘invisible’ (ideological) backdrop do these new visual backdrops of the township imply? How to situate them in relation to the dominant political discourse produced at the time, discourses denying the existence of these very Black urban spaces?

I. A brief history of photography in South Africa

A brief retrospective in the broader history of photography in Africa and in particular South Africa allows us to situate this localised history of Black photography with more pan-african and national narratives of the development of the medium. The following use of ‘boxes’, or

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\(^{39}\) Appadurai 1997: 4
framed texts which focus on macro and micro-histories of photography, help visualise this articulation of multi-layered narratives. Hence the connections between the different actors of the visual economy, from George Eastman (founder of Kodak) to Dan Klakete (pioneer photographer of Orlando East, Soweto) can be sketched out across time and space.

As seen in the introduction, the first photographs taken in South Africa date from 1842, four years after the official patenting of the daguerreotype process. Although swift discoveries allowed photography to be applied in numerous scientific fields (for example the microscope, aerial photography, X-rays...), photography had its biggest commercial development through the art of studio portraiture (see box nb.1). In 1846, the first photographer came to establish a permanent commercial studio in Cape Town. Because the equipment was expensive and bulky, photography in those early years was confined to the studio and only practiced by professionals or enthusiastic amateurs who could afford this technological indulgence. Soon enough, waves of curious clients would come to have “their likeness” taken in less than an hour. Encouraged by this flourishing demand, studios were promptly set up in every city and in some of the smaller towns in the country, including in Grahamstown (at the time a marginalised “frontier town”).

**Box 1. “Photography and society”**

According to Gisèle Freund, the success of portraiture (oil painting being subsequently replaced by its mechanical substitute, namely photography) coincided with a particular stage in the social evolution (roughly 1750-1900), in which large portions of society had an increasing political and social weight. To commission a portrait of oneself, she writes, is a symbolic act: it is an effort to visualise and thus to affirm your existence and your consciousness of it. Photographic portraiture, as a “technique of mechanical reproduction”, responded to the increasing demand to make the bourgeois’ social ascension visible to the rest of society. Thus portraiture came in full fashion, also because of the fascination prompted by the degree of detail, the exact “likeness” which flattered 19th century’s obsession with realism and objectivity.

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40 Freund 1974
41 Benjamin 1935
The daguerreotype amazed for its unequalled quality of details, but had the disadvantage of being a single, irreproducible image. The discovery of the collodion process, using wet-glass plates rather than copper plates, allowed one to make endless copies of the same picture, thus substantially cutting the price of each print. However, even the collodion process required bulky and elaborate equipment, imported from overseas. While in Paris there were already 30,000 people making a living from photography or its allied trade in the 1860s, there were barely 40 photographers in the whole of Southern Africa. The cumbersome and expensive equipment, the long exposure times, the complicated chemical methods, all required patience, expertise and considerable capital. Despite these logistical difficulties, a few passionate practitioners of the art would hire wagons to bring the camera deeper into the countryside of South Africa. The technological improvement of the camera will be key in rendering the camera more mobile (see box 2).

**The expansion of the photographic eye**

The camera geographically spread throughout the country via the classic means of colonial expansion: through military expeditions, the spread of missionaries and the exploitation of the mines. Its expansion accompanied the main patterns of urbanisation, spreading from the big cities (Cape Town, Port Elisabeth, Durban…) to the smaller towns (Alice, Beaufort West, Queestown…) thanks to ‘travelling photographers’ who toured the surrounding farming areas and *dorps* with their portable dark room\(^{42}\). As Metelerkamp has argued, the evolution of themes in the early photographs made in South Africa (portraiture, landscape, mines, safaris, the natives…) highlight the main episodes of “the scramble for Africa”. The camera thus provides visual accounts of events such as the diamond rush to Kimberley, the missionaries’ activities and the visit of Prince Alfred to the Eastern Cape. The camera also meticulously recorded the birth and growth of Johannesburg. From the first mine camps to the first school and the first skyscraper, the camera documented most the city’s exponential development. “There are few big cities in the world that can trace their entire history in photography”, writes Bensusan\(^{43}\). In contrast to those urban snapshots, “safari photography” depicted vast vacant wild lands as potential property, ready to be conquered. Photography hence participated in the visualisation of urban spaces, by staging this contrast between the city and the wild bush.

\(^{42}\) Bensusan, 1966  
\(^{43}\) *idem*: 39
Towards democratising photography
The expansion of photography was not only geographical but also social, as the camera progressively reached out towards the working classes. “Before the snapshot, photography was largely a gentleman’s hobby, a pastime that required technical skills and costly equipment” 44. Photography was essentially practiced by scientists_ namely chemists, astronomers and doctors. The elaborate process of photo shooting and developing added to the expensive and bulky equipment meant that daguerreotyping was considered halfway between an art and a science, reserved to the knowledgeable (white) gentlemen. Amateur clubs, composed mainly of scientists and business executers, put the emphasis on the technological aspect of photography rather than on aesthetics: meetings dealt with topics like “lenses, development, toning, enlarging, lantern-slides, shutters and shutter work, optical lanterns, Alpha paper printing, platino type printing, Browide printing…” 45. Later, amateur clubs of the pictorial movement tried to legitimise photography as an art, by developing a network of exclusive and prestigious institutions (“The Johannesburg society of photography”, the Royal Photographic Association...), modelled after the European tradition of art academies 46. It is within this context that one can begin to understand the significance of snapshot photography as the first step towards the democratisation of the medium. With his attractive slogan “you press the button, we do the rest” and his easy-to-use Brownie box, Eastman Kodak launched an aggressive publicity campaign to convince a mass public that photography was for everyone, including women and children (see box 2). In South Africa, the results of this revolution had become apparent by the late 1890s, and photography began to enter the homes of ‘ordinary’ people, allowing them to record informal occasions and the everyday lives. But, as Karel Schoeman points out in his compilation of 19th century South African photography (a post-apartheid publication), these ‘ordinary people’ constitute the relatively exclusive White middle class of the Cape Colony. Apart from the ethnographic studies, « [members of other races] appeared in photographs only incidentally insofar as they had acquired a role on the fringes of white society, for example as nursemaids or grooms » 47.

44 Olivier 2007: 1
45 Bensusan 1966: 34
46 Sternberger 2001: 112 and chapter 4
47 Karel Schoeman 1996: 11
Box 2. “You press the button, we do the rest”

Eastman Kodak in 1888 transformed the practice of photography with the introduction of hand-held cameras. He substituted the wet-plates with roll films, which needed shorter exposure time and did not have to be developed immediately. The pre-loaded film camera got rid of the messy developing and printing process, as the camera simply had to be brought to the lab for processing. The slogan “you press the button, we do the rest” promised to simplify the use of the camera so that even a child could use it. But the first Kodak camera was still $25, which at the time represented 5 full weeks’ wages for an average worker. Thus the true democratisation of the camera only began with the introduction of Brownie box in 1900, sold for a mere 99 cent. In the United States, for example, there were around 10 million amateur photographers by 1905. The advertisement for the Brownie Box particularly targeted children and women, “people who had seen photographs but had not thought of actually taking them any more than they might have considered painting pictures, writing novels, or composing music.” Through its aggressive advertisement campaign, Eastman presents photography as a powerful new form of self-expression, the voice of the people in an increasingly mediatised world.

1.1 Advertisement for Brownie no.2 camera, early 1900s.

The emergence of indigenous photography

However, the occidental monopoly over the photographic medium was far from being generalised in other situations of colonial or economic domination. Since the early days of daguerreotyping, minority and subaltern groups came to engage with the new technology of self-representation. Jules Lion for example, a French émigré Black artist, opened his portrait studio in New Orleans already in 1840, only one year after the invention of the daguerreotype. The black abolitionist Augustus Washington, son of a former slave and an Asian woman, was also operating a studio in Connecticut, before migrating in the mid-1850s to Liberia and Sierra Leone, where he prospered through the establishment of several studios. In Sierra

Leone for example, several other Africans were running permanent studios in Freetown and were travelling as itinerant photographers among the West Africa coastal towns, as early as 1860. The first photograph taken by a Togolese dates back to 1884 and by 1927 was created the “Association professionelle des photographes du Togo” with at least 13 members. The mobility of the “Coastmen” (English-speaking newcomers from Ghana and Nigeria) enabled the introduction of the medium to central Africa (see box 3). In Elisabethville, for example, an African had already set up his own shop by 1910. “By 1931 African’s embrace of photography was so great that a writer for L’Illustration Congolaise remarked that the so-called civilisés (a term the Belgian used to designate the developing class of urban, educated Africans, the very people who patronized photographic studios) would sell their last pagne for their photographic portrait”. In other parts of the world as well, the colonised people were able to set up their own structures after having learnt the technique from Western photographers. In China, Western photographers frequently hired Asian assistants, who then quickly set up their own rival business so that Hong Kong was flourishing with studios by the 1860s and 1870s. By 1885, there are traces of the first Indian women running their own studio in Calcutta. Through these comparisons across the colonies, I am trying to point out to the evidence that the absence of Black members in the South African visual economy of the first 70 years (1850-1920) is therefore symptomatic of the politics of racial segregation that fundamentally marked South Africa’s (colonial) history. Why did it took so long for Black popular photography to develop in South Africa? What were the restrictions and obstacles to the spread of the camera towards the non-European classes and what do these elements tell us about South Africa society?

**Box 3- Photographer Shanu: ‘a local celebrity’**.

Herekiah Andrew Shanu (1858-1905) was born in a village near Lagos, Nigeria. He probably acquired his photographic skills at his school, the C.M.S. grammar school, which trained and employed African photographers. After his secondary schooling, he travels to Boma (Democratic Republic of Congo), to enter the administration as a clerk and translator for the Force Publique, helping the Belgians to recruit soldiers from the English-speaking realms. An avid photographer, he opens his own studio in 1903, which he combines with a general store.

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50 Vera Viditz-Ward 1987: 511
51 Philippe David, “Photographes editeurs au Togo”, in Saint Léon 1998
52 Geary and Pluskota 2003: 107
and a tailor shop. An American missionary, upon his encounter with Shanu, referred to him as “a local celebrity”, “a merchant owning considerable property and enjoying a wide reputation”. Shanu took pictures of peoples of the Lower Congo but also studio portraits of the local elite. Thirty of his plates have survived the ravages of time and are found at the archives of the Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale in Tervuren (Belgium).  

White portraying Black
To claim that Black people were completely invisible from the early history of the country would be erroneous. Actually, by the turn of the 20th century, there was already a rich repertoire of photographic images of the “natives” represented in various ways. The genre of ethnographic photography includes diverse ways of photographing Black Africans. From the dehumanising “mug shots” (frontal and profile close-ups similar to the police criminal visual records), or the staged “rural life scenes”, to the romanticised studio shootings of bare-breasted women, ethnographic photography is far from being homogeneous. Nevertheless, what they all have in common is that they visualise European “fantasies” about native life rather than objectively record reality. The pictures taken in the mines put the emphasis on the grand scale of the business project undertaken. Individual faces were blended in the mass of anonymous Black workers, resembling the multitudes of an ant farm. These kind of pictures reproduce the same dominant power relations visualised in the ethnographic pictures: this dichotomy between ‘us’ (the photographer and the viewer) and ‘them’ (the depicted natives), an undistinguishable mass of dark bodies.

In contrast, the obligatory I.D pictures focus on individual features rather than anonymous groups for the needs of identification of State machinery. Yet, these individual portraits also fail to bring out the personality behind the person. They objectify instead the faces through the set of formal shooting conventions and the standard neutral background, reducing them to physical measurements and an identifying number. According to Werner and Nimis, most Africans’ first encounter with photography was within the context of this state Zwangsakt. Although the I.D

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53 Geary and Pluskota 2003: 104-107
54 “im Rahmen eines von der kolonialen Staatsmacht angeordneten Zwangsaktes”. Werner and Nimis, in Wendl and Behrend 1998: 19
was introduced in the Pass Book only in the late 50s, obligatory pictures had beforehand been introduced for other documentations like the driving license. Werner and Nimis argue that the I.D picture embodies the unequal photographic relationship, anchoring in practice the fact that power resides on the side of the photographer. In the next chapter, we will see how Black people nevertheless succeeded in reversing the ‘logic of the passfoto’ through the personalised practice of airbrush photography.

A very different kind of photography is the one practiced by photographers sympathetic towards the “native cause”. Trade unionist Eli Weinberg took pictures of the mines, while sociologist Ellen Hellman took pictures on her fieldwork in the Black locations. Leon Levson was a studio photographer who towards the end of his career found a new interest in documentary photography and in “Meeting the Bantus” (name of his exhibition). Their photographs visualise for example the terrible living conditions in the Black locations and the repressive system in the mine compounds. This genre of realist photography had emerged in the United States during the depression era when the Farm Security Administration

55 Strassler 2003: 240
commissioned photographers to document the effects of the economic crisis on rural societies. Their pictures were meant to reveal reality ‘from below’, to uncover a truth concealed by the authorities and to stand for black experience. Minkley and Rassol analyse how Leon Levson, although gradually identified through recent curatorial experiences as a “defining photographer for Black workers”, uses in his photographs “particular tropes (…) that consist of the depiction of the subject and the subject’s circumstances as a pictorial spectacle targeted for a different audience of a different ‘race’”. They further observe:

“(these) dominant social relations are inevitably both reduced and reinforced in the act of imagining those who do not have access to means of representation themselves”56.

The early studio photographs of Coloured and Black ‘civilised’ elites strongly demarcate themselves from the above repertoire. Karel Schoeman’s compilation of 19th century photographs includes many pictures of ‘civilised natives’, the sign of an emerging cosmopolitan class, which display a new relationship between photographer and (black) sitter57. These images, echoing those in Santu Mofokeng’s “Black Album” exhibition, are different not because they depict Blacks wearing European clothes. Rather, they bear the trace of reversed intentions: commissioned by the depicted subjects themselves, these are photographs that have been voluntarily sought after (1.3). These pictures are not meant for a public broader than the circle of friends and family. Nor do they carry an explicit political agenda (justifying colonialism, raising funds for a mission base, constructing the nation-state administrative machinery, denouncing the failures of local municipalities…). The subjects requested the services of the photographer to possess their ‘likeness’ for their own private consumption (the pictures will be shown to a selected circle of sympathetic eyes, namely friends and family). This is the starting point for a history of photography by rather than of the Black people of South Africa.

56 Minkley and Rassool, 2005: 213.
57 Karel Schoeman 1996: 11
II. Appropriating the camera

The humble ones
My initial interest in this topic rose from the desire to find out how Black people were finally able to acquire the means to represent themselves. Who were the first Black photographers in South Africa? How were they able to acquire the technique and get access to the equipment? Unfortunately, at this stage of research, very little is known about the first Black photographers in Africa, mainly due to lack of sources. There has been a tendency in the
writing of the history of photography to articulate it around ‘key figures’, namely successful discoverers (Daguerre, Talbot…) and later the famous artists (Paul Strand, Walker Evans, Henry Cartier Bresson…). I suspect a longer research would eventually fish names of South African photographers out from the depths of the anonymous, like Deborah Willis managed to do with the Black American photographers.

Up till today, Bob Gosani and the other Drum photographers like Peter Magubane, are often considered to be the ‘fathers of Black photographers’, by which one needs to understand as ‘the first Black person in South Africa to be recognised as a photographer’. I would suggest however that the ‘missing link’ between the first (White) studio photographers of the 1840s and the first Black photojournalists of the 1950s probably consists of a mass of anonymous itinerant photographers that practiced photography as a small-scale street trade. Working in the 1930s and 40s, these humble photographers are long gone, leaving only mute black and white pictures as indirect traces of their existence. As my informant Uncle Dan declared: “It is almost impossible to pin-point the process, it happened progressively, almost by accident”. The appropriation of the camera by Black South Africans was the result of several factors, including the transmission of the skill by external agents and the simplification of the camera procedure. Finally, the expansion of African urban population, with its small but growing disposable income, gave rise to a ‘Black’ market that probably encouraged new candidates to enter the photographic business.

**Agents of transmission**

According to Werner and Nimis, the first generation of West African photographers (excluding Sierra Leone⁵⁸), born in the 1920s and 1930s, tended to have similar biographies: going to French school and practicing a crafts until they somehow randomly tumbled across a camera. The transmission of the skill was a combination of contact with French circles, and an organic “learning-by-doing” process. One can easily imagine the same scenario that took place in Hong Kong: European photographers hiring a local assistant, who then later sets up his own studio once he has accumulated enough know-how. Saidou Keita, one of the most celebrated Malian photographers in the art world today, was born in 1927. His father had sent

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⁵⁸ Thanks to August Washington, Sierra Leone and Liberia had their first studios run by Black photographers as early as 1860, much earlier than in other African countries. See section ‘The emergence of indigenous photography’.
him to school before he became a carpenter under his uncle. One day, his uncle came back with a camera from one of his long trading journeys and gave it to him. The young Saidou started learning by himself and was later improved his skills and learn how to print through the guidance of Pierre Garnier, the owner of a photographic shop in Dakar.

However, the agents of transmission were not necessarily Europeans. In Indonesia for example, although Europeans owned the earliest studios, Chinese immigrants were responsible for the spread of the medium in the smaller provincial towns. They also served the ‘less’ elite clientele of the large cities with self-made wooden cameras using imported German lenses. By the late 1920s, they owned more studios than Europeans or any other ethnic groups. In Kenya, Indian from Goa quickly followed the Europeans in setting up the first studios in Zanzibar and Mombasa in the 1890s. Where they came from, photography had already become an established institution. Exchanges between India and the East Coast go back centuries via merchant routes. Later, during the colonial time, the British brought thousands of Indians to Kenya to help in the construction of railways. These Indians at one point introduced their own photographic traditions to the East Coast. Since then, their significant influence over local syncretised photographic styles can still be perceived today.

In South Africa, evidence suggests that the Jewish community played a role in the dissemination of the medium among Black people. According to Dan Klakelé, the Jews were the main traders to the miners in the compounds and would have started offering them photographic services. Perhaps one of them took an assistant, a young Black boy, and taught him how to use the camera before sending him off to make the pictures on his own. In any case, photographic equipment would have been distributed along those retailing points organised by the Jewish community. “The camera penetrated the countryside as far as you could find a Jew trading in the region” Indian Diaspora must equally have played an important role, if anything in the dissemination of a broader visual culture thanks to the cinema halls they set up in Fordsburg, the only bioscope near Soweto where Black people could go to. As we have seen, Indians have a long history of dealing with the movie and the photographic industry. According to Macfies Mtambo (1922-2008, Soweto), there was a labour divide along the colour lines at the studio in Orange Groove (near Johannesburg) where she was working: the shop was owned by a Jew, the photographers were Indians and

59 Karen Strassler 2007: 4
60 Behrend 1998: 139
61 hereafter Uncle Dan, photographer born in 1942 and living in Orlando East, Soweto
62 interview with Uncle Dan, 02.09
the Blacks were doing the cleaning up or being the messenger. Yet it is likely that Indians were more than just the hired photographer of the studio. According to David Goldblatt (photographer, born in 1930, based in Johannesburg) and Uncle Dan many of the studios in town in the 1960s, like the Dings Photo studio, were actually owned by Indians but used a White man as a showcase, to bypass the racial restrictions that forbade non-Europeans to open a business in town. In Durban, as in Kenyan situation, Indian-owned studios permeated the local aesthetic with ‘Indian’ props like the bright arc of flowers and gave it a distinct Bollywood flair. More research would need to be done to understand the role of the Jewish and the Indian Diaspora, but perhaps also the Greek community, in the diffusion of the medium among Blacks in South Africa.

“While-you-wait” camera

According to Werner and Nimis, itinerant photographers moving from village to village were responsible for the spread of photography from the city to the countryside in West Africa. On market days, the villagers could have their picture taken against a cloth or a house façade as backdrop. This itinerant photography was enabled thanks to the “Box camera”, a large-format camera that was a darkroom at the same time. The photographer used photographic paper instead of celluloid or glass plates to produce a negative. Once the paper was developed and fixed inside the camera, he would then obtain a positive by photographing the negative again, within a few minutes. This technique known as “Wait & Get” in Ghana allowed a larger portion of Africans to get their picture taken cheaply, thus democratising the access to photography.

Drum magazine, the first magazine to be explicitly directed at Black and Coloured audience, published an advertisement for such a camera in 1954. “Make money with a While-you-wait camera”, it states. The advertisement presents the camera as a quick and easy way of earning cash, “from £2 to £3 a day”. As further proof, they quote Mr. Moss from the Cape Province who once earned up to £12 in a single day! Lucrative, the While-you-wait

63 interview with Macfies Matombo, 16.09.08
64 David Goldblatt, 22.12.08; Uncle Dan, 12.11.08
65 in my interview with Philip, one of the veteran Black photographer on the Bree Street, it came up that many of the airbrush artist were Greeks, while a man called Hellas Sakridakis apparently owned of a chain of up to four or five photo studios in different parts of town, all attending mainly Non-European customers.
67 An earlier version might exist, the Witwatersrand University however had only kept copies of it from 1954 onwards. Two years of publication were thus missing.
camera is also easy to use: “easy to operate. Simple to learn. No previous experience is necessary”. Above this small advertisement, a larger one situated just above it urges its customers to “always use Kodak”, because “it’s so easy to take good pictures on ‘Kodak’ film”. The process had indeed been simplified and speeded up considerably compared to the initial daguerreotype: it took only 5 minutes to hand over a finished photograph to the client, according to the advertisement, from the snapshot to the end result. However, compared to the Leicas and other professional hand-cameras, being produced from 1930s onwards, the camera seems still quite bulky as it necessitated a tripod and chemicals and obliged the photographer to remain fixed to a street corner. This suggests that the model proposed is actually old-fashioned and was around for much longer than 1954.

Further evidence of this is a picture from Leon Levson dating from the 1940s and showing a well-dressed “township pavement photographer”, using an old Box camera on a tripod (unlike Levson’s which was using a new hand-held model for this picture), photographing a Black client, flamboyantly dressed, holding a long stick and grinning in a clearly staged pose against a brick wall. Is it a Black photographer? Possibly, although it is very hard to say for sure, as his face is hidden by the camera. What this picture suggests is
that by the 40s, itinerant photographers were addressing specifically Black clients, going to their locations and adapting to their demands. As a consequence, for the first time, working migrant labourers, including single women are finally represented in photographs. Peter Magubane, for example recalls the presence of the “corner photographer”, his 4x5 camera and his black hood, when he was growing up in Sophiatown: he’d set up his stall in the corner of a street and wait for the passing-by to stop for a picture. This is an indication of how the camera increasingly became a part of daily life, rather than being an exceptionally formal event.

The ensuing introduction of hand-held cameras further facilitated the work of ambulant photographers. Film rolls introduced by Kodak cameras separated the phase of picture taking from the messy one of development. The photographer no longer needed to be a chemist and carry his dark room around. No longer fixed to his “corner”, the photographer could then be free to cover a larger territory in the search for more potential clients. Ronald Ngilima (box 4), the autodidact photographer from Watville, managed to expand his business to the neighbouring State mines and other factories and residential neighbourhoods around Benoni, up to 15 km away from his house.

While Ronald developed his own films, most of the ambulant photographers hence after had to bring their films to the labs in Johannesburg. If film rolls further simplified the process, it however presented the disadvantage of having to delegate a portion of the business to a specialist, thus losing your control over the full chain of production. The extra developing and transport cost (to town and back) means that the marginal revenue on every photo was quite small; faulty non-billed photos would make the photographer run the risk of no covering his costs. This is why most photographers who started off as ambulant photographers then tried to specialise into weddings and funerals and other such social occasions, with the hope of getting bulk commissions.

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**Box 4: Ronald Ngilima, community photographer and printer**

Ronald Ngilima was born in 1910 in the Eastern Cape, in a Xhosa family of 7 children. When Ronald decides to join his brother in Gauteng, he is barely in his early 20s. Around 1948, he was among the firsts to move into the newly built township called Watville.

68 Interview with Peter Magubane, 14.10.08
where he lived with his wife Sarah and his 6 children (three more to come) in a typical two-bedroom house. During the week, Ronald worked for a tobacco company called Douglas.

How he became interested in photography or how he acquired his first camera is still unknown. It is very likely that Ngilima was an autodidact photographer, as many photographers of that era in which photo schools did yet not exist. Yet what is remarkable in Ronald’s case is the fact that he wasn’t just a self-taught photographer but also a lab processor, a printer and a framer, all of which requires more equipment (and capital) and a more sophisticated degree of know-how. Ronald installed his dark room in the toilets situated in the backyard. His enlarger appears in one of the pictures, which depicts a family relative proudly posing with this piece of technology.

His bicycle and light photographic equipment allowed him to expand his business to neighbouring towns and mine compounds and cover a relatively large area, a circumference of around 10 to 15 km. The professional photo studios in the city centre of Benoni (the closest town) meant that his market was mainly the urban spaces beyond the city centre: townships

1. 5 Self-portrait, home studio.
Ronald Ngilima, 1950s.
and other such ‘native’ locations, Asian Bazaars, mine compounds, industrial areas… His geographical mobility was completed with a social one as well. Whether in terms of class, ethnic group, or generation, Ronald was flexible enough to adapt to each of their specific demands. He photographed the relatively well-off Coloured family in their richly decorated living room of their compound house as well as the old Black woman in rags holding her grandchild on her lap, sitting on a home-made bench in front of a shack. He would be invited to shoot at various social events (party, shabeens, dance hall, church, body building club…) as well as being called up for a private shooting at home. Eventually he installs a rudimentary photo studio in his living room: it consisted of a drawn curtain, a *gueridon* with lace and a bouquet of dried flowers in a vase, a few chairs and props.

This business was relatively lucrative, it seems, even if it never replaced the job at the tobacco company. According to a woman called Aunt Gobi, born in 1937 on the State mines, Ronald “used to come every time” to the compound, where there was a high and constant demand for pictures from the mine workers. “The Mozambicans liked having their picture taken with all their things, to send to Maputo”

Ronald’s son recalls him coming home with bags of pennies that his sons were in charge of counting. According to Farrell Ngilima, his grandfather was able to help all members of the family in times of need and had accumulated enough inheritance to leave some inheritance at his death, which was quite rare at the time. In a letter to Aunt Edith (his sister in law), Ronald writes about his desire to enter the field of photojournalism by joining a local newspaper. This suggests that his level of skill and confidence gained such a level that he was preparing to go professional shortly before his death. In 1960, Ronald was shot dead in a mysterious ambush, a few houses away from his home. At that point, he left behind him an impressive collection of about 5000 negatives, kept in 9 boxes which are stored to this present day at his son’s place in the Vorsloorus township. The earliest pictures dating from the early 50s, Ronald hence recorded at least a decade of history of the local community.

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**Photographers on the colour line**

In general, transmission of ideas depends on the circulation of highly mobile agents, hence the important role of Diaspora communities and of a mobile camera in this history. But in the case of South Africa, this mobility seems to have been partially structured along the breaches

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69 Interview with Aunt Gobi, 5.11.2008.
of the different racial communities. What is common in the first generation of Black photojournalists’, their biography includes a familiar struggle to “make their way up” in the photographic hierarchy. Most photographers started in the confines of the dark room, where they are merely allowed to assist senior Indian printers, until they gradually came across a camera themselves. Peter Magubane, one of South Africa’s most internationally known photographer, started his career in the press as the driver for White photographers. Although there is no evidence of direct impediment of Whites against Blacks using photographic equipment, the general economic context discouraged any transmission of skills to and qualification of the Black workforce. Black’s engagement with technology was basically limited to the workplace, where the higher skilled jobs using more sophisticated machinery were reserved to a White labour force. As Sowetan Uncle Dan (see box 5.) recalls: “We could carry heavy material to the Coloured or hold his step-ladder while he used the machine. But we Blacks could not use them, we were meant by law to do manual work”. He further recalls a British charity organisation doing skill transfers in the townships_ basic electricity and motor-mechanics engineering_ but was promptly closed down by the government. “As long as you talk of life after death, it’s all fine but once you start giving these men skills that could threaten the system, you were in trouble”. This might explain why it took so long for the medium to spread among Black communities. Furthermore, photography institutions admitting Black people didn’t open until the 1980s, for instance when David Goldblatt founded the progressive Market Photo Workshop in 1989. Photography schools (the first one being opened as early as 1910 in the United States) played an important role in channelizing the transmission of skills and in the legitimising of photography as an art medium and a recognised profession.

Yet the beauty of photography is that its relatively simple principles of mechanisms (the ray of lights refracted by the lens onto a photo-sensitive material) can be transmitted on without necessarily a long period of training. Once the camera entered the Black townships, the medium spread out quickly mainly from ear to mouth, without perhaps a degree of distortion on the way (see box-3). The mechanical dimension of photography is propitious for this auto-didactic way of learning. Photography was not an expensive hobby, affirms Uncle Dan, because it was one of those hobbies where you’d be “earning by learning”. Through ambulant portraiture, you could generate enough capital for the next film and perhaps save to

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70 Uncle Dan, 02.2009
upgrade your equipment. But the first camera was always the hardest to acquire: “no one had thought of at the time to import second hand cameras from overseas, so you had to buy a new one”, remembers Mac, a photographer for The World (previously the Bantu World) in the 1970s. Credits were not easily given to Blacks, they had to pay by placement every month, until the sum was complete. Mac could borrow from the furniture company he was working in, where he remained another 6 years until he get a job as a full-time photographer for the Bantu World.

Photography as work?

Though photography proved to be an efficient way of earning extra cash (and expanding your popularity with the girls, I was often told), it didn’t correspond to the common perception of “work”, which had to be “hard” and “manual”. This seems to have been particularly true among the elder generation than with the youth, perhaps more eager to aspire to “white-collar” jobs. In the play Swasi Bansi is dead by A.Fugard, the photographer Styles explains his father’s reaction to his decision to quit his job at the Ford factory to start a studio: “My father was the worst. ‘You call that work? Click-clack with a camera. Are you mad?’” 71 As we have seen, apartheid had constructed a particular conception of what work for a Black man was supposed to be, a conception that was also internalised to a certain extent by the Blacks themselves. Photojournalism did a lot to give credibility to photography as a serious way of earning a living. Drum magazine in particular gave a glamour element to photography through its cosmopolitan image. It was the first publication to publish photographs taken by Blacks. There was a certain pride to have your picture published in a famous magazine, even if your name as a photographer didn’t appear.

Photography also attracted young amateurs because it was one of the rare activities that potentially allowed a Black man to be self-employed. In Fugard’s play, Styles talks of the dignity that his new studio gives him, as a business allowing him to stand on his own 2 feet and escape the “white baas-black employee” relationship. “I tried to explain. ‘Daddy, if I can stand on my own two feet and not be somebody else’s tool, I’d have some respect for myself. I’d be a man.” 72 The first studio set up in Soweto seemed to have been in 1951 in Orlando by a man called Kessel, according to the local elder photographers. But in the 1950s, they

71 Fugard (1972) 1993: 156.
72 Fugard (1972) 1993: 156
were few and not labelled as such. “It wasn’t one of those things the government felt a Black man should do. When he opened his studio, it was usually in protest, because he didn’t have a permit.” The local economy being tightly controlled by the local municipality, any kind of trade, whether permanent or ambulant, required a licence. Philip Bonner describes so the economic situation in the townships:

“Suffocating regulations stamped out virtually every sign of individual initiative and enterprise. Licenses for shopkeepers were tightly restricted (...). Hawking and street vending were mostly prohibited and the daily labourer’s pass which in earlier years had allowed a section of the Black urban population the freedom to be self-employed, was abolished in 1952.”

One way to bypass the strict regulations was to hide the studio in the back of another shop: “having a studio was unheard of, it was unclassifiable. You could call it “shoe making” and then somewhere at the back you’re doing this other thing.” Indeed, many of the pictures that were made in informal studios in the townships carried a stamp that showed different activities under a single banner: “A.B.C dry-cleaner cleaner/photo studio” or “Magani Watchmaker/photographer” or “photography/general stores”. Ronald Ngilima’s informal studio was hidden in his living-room: it consisted of a drawn curtain, a gueridon with lace and a bouquet of dried flowers in a vase, a few chairs and props. People would drop on every Sunday afternoon, when Ronald wasn’t working for the tobacco company. The difficulty to get legal documents and the impermanence that qualified township life (according to the government, no Native belonged to the urban spaces but were “temporarily” residing there) perhaps explains why most photographers chose to remain informal and ambulant. Although an important way of completing the thin wages, the tight influx control laws meant that photography could never replace their real job, not because it wasn’t interesting economically, but because they needed some evidence of employment in order to remain legal in town.

**Box 5. From grave digger to magazine editor**

Uncle Dan, one of the pioneer Black press photographers, still remembers his first photography lessons from the only boy with a camera in his neighbourhood of Orlando East, Soweto. At the time they thought the secret to a successful photograph laid in your ability to keep the air out of the camera. On windy days, it was not auspicious to take pictures: too

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73 Dan Klaketle, 12.11.08
74 Philip Bonner 1998: 34
75 idem.
much air would ruin the film. Not surprisingly, his first film came out completely dark. However, gradually and with the advice of a few seniors, he was able to improve his skills until he eventually became professional.

Uncle Dan remembers his first pay check when he started free-lancing for newspapers as a photographer. “For a press photo at the time, they were paying 70 shillings a photo. My first pay was quite some money! But because of the pass laws, I could not continue being self-employed because it was the strangest way of earning a living. This situation of being your own boss was not accepted under apartheid law”. After a year of free-lancing, he got in irregular situation for not being able to show continuous employment. He was forced to accept working as a grave digger for the municipality to regulate his situation. “From grave-digger, I was promoted to assisting-editor for Bona magazine within few weeks”, he loves to tell. With the desire of facilitating the spread of photographic skills, Uncle Dan founded the first photography club at the community hall of Orlando East (today known as the YMCA) in 1961. Just as he secured sponsorship from Kodak Eastman Company to get some projectors and occasional training, the American corporation were obliged to pull out of the country as economic sanctions against South Africa were finally imposed in the late 1980s. He went on

76 Uncle Dan’s father was a shoemaker, so that Uncle Dan was able to get counselling from a Black photojournalist in exchange for getting his shoes mended at a cheaper price…
77 Uncle Dan, 02.2009
78 Bona magazine, a popular woman’s magazine that is still in existence today.
to open the first photography lab in Soweto in 1978, which turned into an ‘hour-lab’ a year later. The lab wasn’t very successful however, because its location in Soweto (Diepkloof) meant that it was more difficult and costlier for most clients to reach it by taxi than to go all the way to town.

Photography was therefore too flexible and too mobile an activity to fit into the apartheid economy designed to stabilise its Bantu urban population (to a single living place but also a single working place) and to maintain it to lowly qualified manual labour. Photography offered some freedom but only within the loopholes of the system. Photography’s profound mobile character also explains why photography was an activity overwhelmingly practiced by men. Women were not meant to amble the streets in such fashion. Even today, ambulant photography is practised mainly by men. It is in the field of photojournalism and especially art photography that South Africa has seen Black females develop their talent in the past twenty years.

**The subaltern backdrop**
I will conclude this chapter by leading a reflection on the evolution of the “backdrop” in the pictures that we have analysed so far. The studio portraits of the early 20th century, depicting ‘civilised’ natives in European clothes, use a backdrop composed of a range of props that refer to a very Victorian world, a world which they aspire to belong to. Often the studio decoration was actually plaster imitation of furniture. It was a theatre stage, meant to create an effect while the performance lasted or while the picture was being taken. The hand-tinted portraits (a style which appeared in the 1930s and reached its golden age in the 1950s, to be further explored in the next section) also show a backdrop removed from the subject’s social reality. The dominant blue sky in the background suggests a time and space that is beyond our material world. Forever together, the essence of both (post-mortem) figures floats through a space outside of this linear chronology.

With the emergence of the first ambulant photographers venturing into the townships, an element of urbaneness and social realism jumps into their pictures. Instead of a bourgeois environment, we see an industrial landscape: papers, refuse, spill, the side-walk, a corner of a brick building, a bit of iron shack, a plastic cover stretched out as an improvised backdrop...These pictures associate Blacks for the first time with an environmental urban
landscape. What is more, it is the urban landscape of the townships and Black locations. These itinerant photographers are responsible for dragging the camera out of the studio of the city centre and into the streets of Black townships and locations like Ferreirastown.

The significance of this movement of the camera from the interior studios of the city centre into the locations and townships cannot be stressed enough. According to Appadurai, the visible backdrop is doubled by an invisible one, which consists of “the other photographs, visual texts and verbal discourses” that inform the eye of the photographer and of the viewer. This wider visual order hence doubles the frame and locates the photograph in a sort of public discourse. Hence the painted Victorian backdrop not only locates the subject in a particular time and context (for example the colonial period) but also in the ideology of middle-class respectability. What does the shift towards urban landscapes in backdrops imply?

I would suggest it produces a visual discourse that potentially counters the dominant political discourses on Black urban spaces on which policies of apartheid and segregation were founded. From the early foundational years of Johannesburg to the 1950s, the municipal authorities constantly sought to verbally reduce these spaces to unhealthy zones of poverty and squalor, some kind of anonymous no man’s land. In the following decades, this verbal annihilation actually materialised itself via the practice of forced removals and slum clearances, its peak coinciding with the height of the apartheid years, in the mid 1950s and 1960s. In contrast to this public discourse, these photographs produced by anonymous ambulant photographers are visual and ideological evidence for the establishment of a permanent urban Black population. Paul Valérie affirmed photography legitimised a historical event by casting its eye on it. Similarly, the camera also legitimised the social spaces it depicted as a place worth living in, a place worth remembering. Peter Magubane, when talking of the presence of the corner photographer and his stall, swiftly moved on to a nostalgic description of this future icon of township culture: “Sophiatown had everything. Shops, schools, churches, friends, shabeens…it had a different vibe”. In other words, Sophiatown was not just a dormitory town but a place with its own life, and even its own photographer.

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79 Appadurai 1997: 5
80 Beavon 2003: chapter 2
81 The municipal authorities didn’t wait for apartheid to put removal plans in execution. Unlike what people usually think, the first forceful evictions took place in 1903, with the destruction of the ‘Coolie Location’. Cf Beavon 2004: 78
This trend goes on as ambulant photography continues to explore the townships, once photographers were rendered more mobile with hand-held cameras. The anonymous brick wall of the factory is replaced by someone’s home. Home, with all the emotional load that this word contains, is now given an image. “This is my front door, this is the family’s veranda. Look at our little garden”. The backdrop becomes something you recognise as your own. “That’s where we used to play, under those trees…” The landmarks are familiar, they have measured and paced the years of your childhood. This picture stands for the continuity of a Black man’s bond with an urban place, a continuity which held against all odds, resisting the systematic attempt by the government to break it into permanent impermanence. With popular photography, we do not just enter the realm of the domestic sphere, but also of memory. And eventually of dignity.

1. Portrait of a young boy. For some reason, my favourite picture of all the Ngilima collection. Watville, early 1950s.
Chapter 2:

STRATEGIES OF (SELF)-REPRESENTATION

_Car la Photographie, c’est l’avènement de moi-même comme autre: une dissociation rétorse de la conscience d’identité._

Roland Barthes. _La chamber claire._

This chapter focuses on the different strategies of representation adopted by the photographers and subjects throughout the decades. I will attempt to qualify the abundant visual material that I have collected in terms of genre and style, which I will use as the basis for a rough periodisation in the history of Black popular photography. Historians have already pointed out the problems that arise when attempting to divide history according to artificial chronological divisions. In this case, the correspondence between a photographic genre and a period of history (for example the 1920s, the 1930s, etc) is far from being perfectly cut out, and it is likely that the different styles of photography coexisted for some time, rather than abruptly replacing each other. Pinney perceives the disjunction between visual narratives and the usual timeframe of a more ‘familiar’ history as evidence that pictures constitute their own history. Rather than a ‘mirror for conclusions established elsewhere’, Pinney presents visual culture as “an experimental zone where new possibilities and identities are forged”. By accepting this disjunction, we rearrange history so that “a central place can be found for the
visual” and images become “an integral element of history in the making”\textsuperscript{82}. This chapter will hence focus on the evolution in the strategies of representation as reflective of dynamic changes in self-perception of Black South African societies. I avoid trying to make a genre artificially coincide with a specific decade, which would produces a neat linear chronology. I will however venture to establish some looser correlation between style and the broader social or cultural developments occurring at the same time, trying to make the link between a “period’s visual technology and its structure of understanding”\textsuperscript{83}.

A genre is a combination of distinctive features that unites different artworks into a single identifiable category. Documentary photography and fashion photography are two very different genres that nevertheless use the same medium, the camera. Art historians traditionally define a genre according to style, form or content. I have added other factors to the list, for example the material dimension of the photograph and the degree of interaction between photographer and subject. Emphasis was put the ‘strategies of representation’: the different techniques (composition, lighting, use of space, use of props and background, painting techniques, clothing, shooting location…) utilised by the photographer and the subject in order to put a message across. To this end, I draw on methodologies of pictorial analysis as developed and practiced by art historians. While the first chapter was mainly about the photographers, the focus here is the image itself and the way the subjects of these images portrayed themselves.

Portraiture as a genre dominated African photography until the first Black photojournalists appeared in the late 1950s. While amateur photographers in the 1890s explored other genres such as landscape and still photography, Black street photographers turned mainly to portraiture. This can perhaps partly be explained in economic terms: the White gentry was not under the same economic constraints as Black photographers and could afford to practice photography as a hobby more than a trade. Black photographers on the other hand were under the constant obligation of generating enough capital to re-invest in the new material needed to continue taking pictures. Portraiture, until photojournalism and fashion photography took over from the 1930s onwards, was until then practically the only way of making money through photography. Landscape, safari or ethnographic photography had less possibilities of commercialisation, limited for example to the emerging postcard industry and to occasional clients. Hence “portraiture has played a central and significant role in

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{82} Pinney 2004: 8
\textsuperscript{83} Schwartz and Przyblyski 2004: 10-12
\end{footnotesize}
delineating the expressive and representational code of modern and contemporary African photography”\textsuperscript{84}.

Within a genre, various subgenres or styles ensure a diversity of images. For example, ethnographic studio portraits and airbrushed tinted portraits are ruled by very distinct sets of conventions and intentions, but they are both a variant of portraiture. Consequently, portraiture was both the site for constructing and resisting a dehumanising way of representing Blacks.

Style in art history is most often used to distinguish an artist from the other; style is understood as the visual manifestation of personal expression, the individuality of a set of works. I adopt the notion of style developed by art historian Meyer Schapiro, who perceived style not only as the personality of a single artist’s work but also as the reflection of the ‘inner form’ of collective thinking and feeling. “What is important here is not the style of an individual or of a single art, but forms and qualities shared by all the arts of a culture during a significant span of time”\textsuperscript{85}. This notion of style has the advantage of perceiving unity of works within an economy of multiple authors. In this thesis, I am at times referring to individual photographers, like Ronald Ngilima, but I mostly try to relate them to the cluster of anonymous photographers of a particular time. Furthermore, Schapiro’s notion of style allows me to set criterions that help me localize and date the photographs. By setting such common grounds, I can then measure the changes in aesthetic conventions and detect the innovative aspect of township photography. As indicative of ‘culture at large’, Shapiro’s notion of style also avoids separating the form from the context; it connects the aesthetic conventions to the economic and social circumstances in which the photographers were working. In this sense, style thus reveals underlying cultural assumptions and normative values.

Talking in terms of genre and style supposes a social process of canonisation. The unity and coherence of distinctive features emerge out of collective photographic practices and institutionalised channels of transmission. For example, impressionism was born out of a group of painters, most of them befriended, who rebelled against the formal aesthetic conventions of the established Beaux Arts. In the case in South African townships, the informal nature of the popular photography raises the question of social institutions: how were these conventions elaborated? Who took part in their shaping? Hence an analysis of aesthetic conventions leads to the exploration of the social setting in which these conventions

\textsuperscript{84} Enwezor 2006 : 27
\textsuperscript{85} Schapiro 1994
were bred. Ultimately, the question we are trying to answer in this chapter is: to what extent were Blacks able to develop their own set of photographic conventions, or a “different iconography of the African self”\(^{86}\), given the restrictions of apartheid (as discussed in chapter 1)?

**Early studio photography**

As we have seen in the previous chapter, early studio photography, its golden age stretching from the period late 19\(^{th}\) century to 1920s, marks the beginning of a history of photography actively shaped by Black South Africans. These photographs show Blacks dressed in European clothes, sitting or standing gravely in front of the camera. When contrasted with the ethnographic shots of half-naked ‘Natives’ made around the same time (see photo “Native woman of Sofola”, introduction), these studio photographs strike by the self-conscious presence the depicted Black subjects seem to affirm. Far from being an imposed exercise of control, these studio photographs were *commissioned* by the subjects themselves, for their own private consumption. The economic transaction ensured that the photographer produced an image to the liking of his client. In any case the pictures are evidence of Black families’ increasing familiarity and ease with the camera and a certain eagerness to participate into this new fashion of self-imaging. The visual conventions of bourgeois portraiture emphasized the personification of the depicted subject. Disdéri, one of the early French studio photographer, perceived the portrait as the visual emanation of an individual’s inner essence. It was the photographer’s mission to “unravel the true character that lies underneath the attitudes and borrowed looks”\(^{87}\). To this effect, visual conventions were elaborated to allow the eye to focus on the erect figures. For example in certain high-class studios, the game of light, carefully set according to European conventions, created a spatial depth, thus setting off the subject sharply against the background\(^{88}\).

While “mug shot” photography usually displayed Black bodies against a neutral white background, studio photography provides a fabricated social context to celebrate the body

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\(^{86}\) *idem*: 25  
\(^{87}\) Disdéri cited in Poole 1997: 111  
\(^{88}\) Behrend 1997: 142
displayed at the centre of a ‘salon’ full of things that evoked a European lifestyle.

According to Woodall, Dutch portraiture during the 17th century period played an important role in “the creation and maintenance of social hierarchies”, at a time when the newly emancipated burgher elite sought claim equality to the hereditary nobility. Similarly, the studio portraiture suggested the depicted person’s belonging to a social class. The degree of luxury exhibited varied from studio to studio and prices per image varied accordingly. While some were sparsely furnished (barely a chair), others display a fuller range of props deploying a symbolism heavily borrowed from bourgeois classic portraiture: the column, the first steps of a staircase, the Chinese vase, the heavy theatre curtain, the wooden guéridon, the fur rug… The painted backdrop usually suggested an indistinct romanticised nature, such as a tended French garden, blurring the border between inside and outside, between the ‘here’ (South Africa) and ‘there’ (France, England…). The display of these luxury goods hence visually anchored the subject in the social class associated with these kind of objects. In consequence, the fluctuating degree of abundance depicted in the pictures insinuated the beginning of a class differentiation among the Black urban community.

Yet creating a fictive but convincing visual reality is a distinctive property of photography. “Some of (the pictures) may be fiction, a creation of the artist insofar as the setting, the props, the clothing or pose are concerned” writes Santu Mofokeng on the Black Photo Album exhibition. But we are ready to believe this visual fiction because “they tell us a little about how these people imagined themselves”. The frame of photograph is the selective filter ensuring that the illusion actually works. Like the painted royal gardens in the background, the furniture and props were often only partially finished (for instance, half a staircase) and made of plaster or imitation of wood just for the purpose of the studio. Studios in those days frequently rented out clothes for the picture. These pictures therefore are not necessarily representative of the clients’ level of wealth, even though the fact that they went to the studio suggests that they have at least enough to spare on such luxuries.

The visual luxury represented in the photograph was extended to the materiality of the photograph. Printed on thick cardboard with the name and the address of the photographer engraved in golden letters, these high-end photographs were valued status-symbol objects in and of itself. The golden letters on the bottom corner did not just suggest nobility but also

89 Woodall 1997: 75-96
90 Mofokeng 1998
bared witness to the subject’s physical visit to town\textsuperscript{91}. The *passe-partout* that framed the picture made it ready to be exhibited in the living room or in the parlour for society to admire. The smaller prints (6 x 10 cm format) served as *carte-de-visite*, to be distributed among friends and family members. The *carte-de-visite*, invented in 1854, initiated a new phase in the history of photography, in which images were being mass-produced. As an icon of exchange, this new format fostered the social practice of circulating private images in the public space\textsuperscript{92}.

Other photographs of the same period were taken outside, with a single sheet as an improvised backdrop, not quite fully covering the corrugated iron wall or the bush it was trying to hide. These photographs, unlike the official studio ones, do not bare any signs of authorship. They were probably made by one of those anonymous ambulant photographers who were looked down upon by the established studio photographers for threatening to steal ‘their’ clients\textsuperscript{93}. These ‘low-end’ portraits, though made outside of the sphere of the studio, shared many of the same characteristics, the “salon style” dictating much of the visual conventions in fashion at a particular time. The “salon style” distinguishes itself by the formalism that was requested at the time for a ‘good’ photograph. Nothing was left to improvisation but was instead meticulously arranged according to pre-existing notions of a “good” picture, which were inherited from the tradition of classic portraiture. The humbleness of the background (the peeled wall or the corrugated iron sheet, the modest blanket spread out on the dirt) was somehow compensated by the subject’s formal and dignified presentation of his/herself.

\textsuperscript{91} Similarly, the postcard’s essential function is less to greet the person addressed but to inform him/her that “I’ve been here (while you stayed at home)”.
\textsuperscript{92} Poole 1997: chapter 5 “Equivalent images”
\textsuperscript{93} Bensusan 1967
People held the gaze of the camera with gravity and tried to maintain their body in absolute stillness. The stiffness of the body was the standard way of carrying oneself in front of the camera, an inheritance of the times when the photographic technology at its start necessitated long exposure times (up to an hour!) and requested *reposes-têtes* (head holders) to prevent the person from moving. But the stiffness is also the result of the gravity of the photographic occasion, at a time when going to the photographer was costly and a special (perhaps unique) occasion. For this special occasion, one wears one’s “Sunday best” or rents some clothes from the studio. The corporeal stiffness also embodied a new discipline of the body that accompanied the effort to control one’s public image. This translated for example in the refusal to smile, in the way women clasped their hands together, in an intense look of concentration, etc. Further examples are the way the women’s hair was pulled back in (more or less) the shape of a bun (symbol of Victorian femininity) or neatly tucked under a modest *doek* (head scarf, sign of married woman), their tiny waists were squeezed in the corset, men’s African hair was made to part in the middle.

The formalist nature of this photography also elaborated standard conventions for group compositions, in the way the bodies were made to stand in relation to each other to visualise the bonds that linked them up. Careful positioning by the photographer directed the wife’s hand on the husband’s shoulder, the child’s hand on the mother’s knee as to form a chain of hands connecting every member of the family. Family portraits are more abundant in this period than in the following decades, the intention being to visually conform to the bourgeois lifestyle, which includes the model of the nucleus family. As Hirsch argues, since Kodak’s invention of the box camera,” photography’s social functions have been integrally tied to the ideology of the modern family”

94 Through these conventional dispositions of family members, the family cohesion is both represented and being socially practiced through what became the ritual of family picture-taking. Thus *framing* the family (in the double sense of the term), the dominant ideology of the family can be perpetuated through these symbolically loaded images. Hence the father, head of the family, is usually situated in the middle of the picture, with the rest of the family sprawled around him, often in a pyramidal structure.

94 Hirsch 1997: 9-11
Studio portraits of the same period taken by Black American photographers display much of the same conventions. New fashions established in France or the United States were copied in other parts of the world. The exchange of carte-de-visite and postcards promoted the expansion of these studio conventions across the globe. According to Poole, the millions of pocket-size cartes de visite produced between the 1860s and 1880s all over the world “served to disseminate the particular canon of aesthetic value, moral judgment, taste, and distinction that would come and constitute nineteenth-century bourgeois culture”. As an icon of exchange, the carte de visite standardised airs and poses across borders and thus helped to shape specific forms of self-imaging that would come to characterize the bourgeoisie. The implications of Blacks adopting this dominant style to shape the image of an idealised self will be discussed more in details in the next chapter. But in this chapter, I wish to analyse possible reasons why the ‘salon’ style was so popular. Apart from the physical pleasure of contemplating such realistic graphical works, I would suggest studio photography was very effective in bringing out the individuality of Black subjects, in contrast to the criminalising mugshots or dehumanising ethnographic portraits. Benjamin claimed that the precision of early portrait photography magically passed on the individuality of the person photographed. The richness in details revealed the “coincidence”, the “visual subconscious” of the person laid bare on the photographic paper. It was a powerful and perhaps unique way to visually contest the generalising categories of race emanated by the “purported objectivity and identification of the scientific mug shot.”

**Hand-tinted portraits**

In the 1930s, a new style of photography was introduced into the country. Between a painting and a photograph, the hand-tinted portraits break clearly away from the studio portrait. To begin with, they depict only single individuals or two people (maximum three), usually a man and a woman as a married couple.

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95 Though differences should also be mentioned: the three-quarters bust portraits with the sitter looking past the camera, suggesting interiority and composure, were popular in America but are not really found in South Africa.
96 Poole 1997: 112
97 Benjamin 1931
98 Smith 2004: 75
99 Most of the information gathered on the hand-tinted portraits was transmitted to me during two in-depth interviews with Ruth Sack, an art historian whose aunt was one of these airbrush artist. Ruth did an exhibition on these portraits in 1998(?) and for the exhibition led extensive research on them. The results of the research were alas never published, as most of the typed notes were accidently lost.
The horizontal frame becomes the standard way of representing couples, while the vertical frame remains the obvious choice of single persons. The frame hugs the heads and busts so tightly that apart from the faces, one can only see a standard plain blue background behind them. The sense of space is completely squeezed out as the shoulders of the couple are glued together and fill in the whole frame. Eyes are decidedly set forward, locked into the gaze of the camera in an almost military way. Another of its major distinctive features is the explosion of colours. Black skin is lightened to various shades of brown. The whiteness of the bride’s veil or the husband’s shirt stands out against the strong monochrome blue background. At a later stage more colours were added to the portraits, for example a light purple aura around the heads merging with the blue background, or a sudden burst of red and yellow from the bouquet of flowers the bride is holding. This ‘sky’ blue background is perhaps the most distinctive feature of this genre, as it comes back consistently. Despite variations, for example the extra presence of clouds or an additional shade of purple, the blue background nevertheless remains the dominant convention for this style.
The execution of these portraits combines photography with other techniques of painting. The client’s old picture (usually an I.D picture, hence the almost ‘military’ gaze) is photographed (photo 2.4). The negative obtained can then be used to enlarge and to merge pictures of two different persons onto the same light-sensitive paper (photo 2.5).

2.4. First step: making a negative of the picture. Photo Sophie Feyder.

2.5. Second step: blowing up. Private collection, Ruth Sack.
Once the paper is developed, the colours are spray-painted onto the blown up portrait, adding the chosen clothes and accessories with the help of stencils. Finer details like the eyes, the lace and the flowers of the marriage bouquet are painted by hand with pastel or gouache type of paint. Earlier portraits were done entirely with pastels but with time, pastels were relegated to the finer details as the airbrush technique became more and more sophisticated.

The result is a strange mixture of realism and plasticity. The faces are given a distinct airbrushed look, similar to the aesthetic of painted movie posters of the 1920s and 1930s. In these posters, the movie stars are represented in a way that is both realistic enough to be easily recognised and yet removes them from the immediate sphere of everyday reality, preserving their status of mythical figures. The commissioned hand-tinted portraits, I would suggest, carry the same purpose of mystification. The couple depicted are mystified, not for fame or stardom but for posterity, for the sake of preserving memory. Many of these portraits were commissioned at the depicted subject’s death by his/her relatives. For the purpose of preserving memory, these objects were meant to last a long time. Hence the portrait was mounted on a heavy wooden oval frame and put behind glass. This elaborated object, of an imposing size and weight, was clearly meant for exhibition purposes. Hung on the wall of the living room or set above a closet, it manifests its presence in the room with certain authority. The quality of the portrait ensured its survival until today.

The special temporality or rather the absence of temporality in these portraits reinforces this process of mystification. The blue background removes the subject from any social context; there are no external objects (furniture, house, etc.) as reference point to situate the year in which the picture was made. The person or the couple seem to float through the waves of time in a single space of infinity. The airbrush technique further strengthens the floating effect, by seamlessly blending two or more colours, resulting into its characteristic soft shading effects. Wrinkles and other such imperfections are smoothed out, thus reducing signs of time passed and reinforcing the “glamour effect”.

This absence of time is also due to the fact that often, in the representation of a married couple, the two pictures used are of different years. In picture 2.6-8, for example, the relatives chose a snapshot picture of the grandmother in her old age, while the picture of the grandfather was an I.D picture of him as a young man. It is the artist’s job to try harmonising the faces but the disparity in ages is sometimes hard to bridge. Its multiple layers of chronology therefore make it really difficult to determine how old such a portrait is: the years
the initial pictures were taken do not coincide with each other, nor with the year the portrait was commissioned and made.

2.6 Original picture of the husband. Private collection Ruth Sack

2.7 Original photo of wife. Private collection, Ruth Sack
Airbrushes started to be manufactured and exploited by major art-supplying companies in the 1880s in Chicago\textsuperscript{100}. The photograph retouching industry was the first and largest market for airbrushes from about the 1890s to the 1920s. In an era when photographs had to be coloured by hand, the airbrush was greatly appreciated for creating highly rendered images at a high level of realism, saving labour and time. The technique came to South Africa in the late 1920s, initially introduced to white families in Cape Town. Perhaps its sudden popularity could be tied to the pre-existing tradition of hand-painted portraiture, which had a similar blue-grey background. By the 1930s, air brushed portraits had spread to the big cities across the country and were found in certain Black families. The Second World War triggered a major boom in demand, especially among the Coloured families in the Cape who wished to have a portrait of their son before he was sent to war. To be depicted in an army uniform became very fashionable, perhaps because it somehow restored dignity to coloured families, who had been downgraded in the colour hierarchy of the Cape society. The “golden age” for airbrush portraiture among Black communities however came later, in the late 1940s and 1950s, when the white families became increasingly disinterested in these hand-tinted portraits and moved to other more exclusive modes of self-representations\textsuperscript{101}.

\textsuperscript{100} http://www.airbrushmuseum.com/

\textsuperscript{101} It is likely that airbrush artists increasingly had to turn to the “Black market” to survive. An interesting research question would be what impact the market evolution could have had on stylistic conventions. Did the artists have to adapt to Blacks’ tastes and demands? Did evolutions in styles reflect the increasing weight of Black people as the sole commissioner?
The economy of the airbrushed portraiture industry is fascinating yet still underresearched. The airbrush artists (usually Whites) had their studio in the centre of town. They hired or collaborated with an army of salesmen who went out into the country to find commissions for them. According to Ruth Sack’s initial research, these hawkers would go as far as to Rhodesia, Mozambique, and perhaps even the Congo. These salesmen are responsible for spreading airbrushed portraits and more generally ready-framed images to even the secluded villages deeper in the countryside. The portraits were only one item among the vast range of things they would sell, including other framed images of chiefs, a Christian religious figure or the British royal family. Their role in the construction of a national visual culture, ensuring the circulation of images from town to countryside and vice versa, would be the object of another fascinating thesis.

The original pictures collected for the portrait would be kept in a small white envelope, on which they would write the name of the client, as well as their wishes for the portrait: “Man left, woman right”, “suit and tie” or simply “wedding costume”. Uniforms (army, police, nurse…) and wedding dresses, as marks of status and of belonging to an institution, dominated the bulk of demands. It was the artist’s role to ensure the magical transformation from an old and used I.D picture of a man in his working outfit to a colourful portrait of a successful urban businessman. Hence the element of illusion already exploited in studio photography is pushed to another level here: the clothes sprayed on the faces never actually existed, the subject perhaps had never been to town. This kind of portraiture finalises the breaking of the inherent relationship photography was thought to have with the material world, as the physical emulsion or a visual print of what was there, while imitating its realist visual effect. As a consequence, more Blacks could participate in this kind of photography. While early studio photography was practiced essentially by Christianised educated families who laid claims to be part of a ‘civilised’ elite, hand-tinted portraiture reached out to working class families or families who actually lived in the countryside.

\[102\] Barthes 1980: 120. Barthes perceived the indexical relationship to our past world as the essence of photography, summarised with the words “ça a été”.
In another example, the man got his I.D picture wearing a working blouse transformed into a spray-painted portrait of himself dressed in a police uniform. Hence, such ‘montage’ photography, akin to Appadurai’s subaltern backdrop, promotes “the fantastic, the arbitrary, the ludic and the utopian as accessories for the subjectivity”. Just like Indian studios and their painted backdrops and their montage skills were spaces where the colonized subject could “experiment with modernity”, hand-tinted photography provides Black Africans with
“occasions for rehearsing new positions”, positions that were in real life inaccessible to them.\footnote{Appadurai 1997: 6-7}

The artist sometimes had to deal with small, faded and badly tattered pictures and showed much creativity in dealing with tears, crinkles and other such faults. In one example, the punched holes from the passport stamp were transformed into white lace of the woman’s hat. Regardless of the quality of the picture, the artist ensured the person or the couple looked smart and ageless in the end product. The power of creatively recycling ‘State material’ into something personal is perhaps the most striking quality of this photographic practice. Strassler identified in contemporary Indonesia similar photographic practices through which people would “transform the identity photograph from a decontextualised sign of citizenship to a sign of personal history”, by incorporating them within a family album, or using it for funeral purposes. Rather than seeing identity photography as only a sign of state power, Strassler invites us to consider people’s ability to “playfully inverse the logic of the \textit{pasfoto}”\footnote{Strassler 2003: 237, 240-241} and affirming their choice of self-representation. I would suggest that the symbolism of transforming an I.D picture into an elaborate wedding portrait is further heightened when one takes into account the particular history of I.D pictures in South Africa, where from the late 1950s onwards they became obligatory for passbooks and hence participated in the implementation of the “Influx control” policies, a cornerstone of apartheid. While I.D pictures represent photography as an instrument of state power, these hand-tinted portraits shows how this element of control can be, if not bypassed, then transformed to one’s advantage.

**Corner photography**

As we have seen in chapter 1, corner photography is probably the entry point for the first Black photographers into this trade. As the box camera became lighter, simpler to use and more affordable, photographers set up their stalls on a street corner. The most striking difference between this photography and the previous two genres is its informal quality. Photography as a practice quickened in tempo, it became immediate, with the promise of “while-you-wait” delivery within five minutes of the shooting. There was less time for preparation and adjustments. You can see it by the way the frame of the picture sometimes
sits slanted on the rectangle of the white photographic paper. The depicted subjects are dressed in everyday clothes instead of the “Sunday best”. In one of the pictures, the woman even kept on her white working blouse over her town clothes.

2.10 Mary Xaba (left) and friend, circa 1930s. Private collection, Jabo Xaba.

In another, the man is posing with a stylish bowling hat and suspenders but without a jacket or a tie. It looks as if they had accidentally bumped into the ambulant photographer in the street and decided then and there to have their picture taken. The subjects are still standing very still in front of the camera but their bodies betray the “passing by” quality of this photographic experience of a new kind: the half smoked cigarette held by a relaxed hand, the unbuttoned jacket, the hand in the pocket, persons simply standing next to each other (as opposed to
sitting). Outside of the physical and cultural space of the studio “salon”, the bodies are no longer submitted to the confines of the style and adopt more casual, and at times awkward pose. The background shows a somewhat random selection of urban landscape that a plastic cover partly tries to cover. The absence of furniture, especially the chair, underlines the temporary and ephemeral nature of the street, where bodies flow past in vast numbers. It is an interesting contrast to the bourgeois studio, in which the column, the staircase, the tended garden (as fake as they are) visually emanate the sense of permanence and security of private ownership.

Instead of being a finished elaborated product, kept in a heavy wooden frame or in a thick cardboard cover with engraved golden letters, these pictures were delivered unsigned on thinner paper of a smaller size. The studio and hand tinted portraits were elaborate objects to be kept preciously; something you would hang on your wall and look up at from a distance, to be revered as some sacred object. The long exposure time and slow shutter speed of early studio photography impressed a sense of duration on the photography, wrote Benjamin\textsuperscript{105}. In contrast, the photographs made on the street corner were printed in a format closer to the previous carte-de-visite (9x14 instead of 6x10), designed to be touched and passed on by many hands. Today the numerous smudged fingerprints and creases on the surface of the picture bare witness to the object’s history of circulation. The back of the street-made picture was printed like a postcard, with a space outlined for a message and an address. Much like the old carte-de-visite of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, these material elements introduced Black popular photography into a system of circulation rather than one based on static conservation. It matches in a way the profound transformation that the country’s economy was undergoing in the late 1940s: the manufacturing boom meant that things were being produced in mass quantities and circulating in an ever-expanding national market. Similarly, from the 1930s onwards, South Africa experienced new levels of image production and distribution, via newspapers, magazines and advertisement. Corner photography was the product of this era in which the manufacturing revolution was equally transforming the country’s visual culture. A lack of historical evidence makes it hard to determine to what extent Black people truly used these photographs. The few street photographs printed as postcards that I came across did not bear any address. Did corner photography participate in the creation of a community feeling among an urban class within the emerging regional and national territory, much like the “print

\textsuperscript{105} Benjamin 1931
capitalism” described by Benedict Anderson articulated the shared interests of class sectors? Or did it rather help the migrant worker to confirm and strengthen his connection to his family back in his village?

As we have seen in the previous chapter, corner photographers played a crucial role in the popularisation of photography. I would further argue that they were also the ones who integrated photography into popular culture, with the development of the ‘snapshot’ as a genre. The camera is literally and symbolically dragged out of the bourgeois studios and brought out into the street. Photography ceased to be the privilege of (want-to-be) elite Black families, and became an affordable activity for the lower classes, even more so that the hand-tinted portraits. Hence casual clothing and more functional props (like cigarettes) enter the frame of the photograph. In other words, elements of daily life become photographically “acceptable” and “worthwhile”. Photography also became more popular as it became an affordable activity one could repeat, rather than being a once-in-a-lifetime formal occasion. Mary Xaba (Sowetan, 1910/15-1956) for example kept five such street pictures in her little personal album. The different outfits and backgrounds, as well as the various people she appears with, suggest that posing for the street photographer was something she did repeatedly (although maybe not frequently) with her female friends. Photography, as a street business, thus enters the field of popular leisure.

Movie Snaps

Around the time of the Second World War, a new kind of street photography appeared, not just in the big cities of South Africa, but in many other countries across the world. I remember my friend Marie Jeanne Manuelan, an 82 year old French woman, proudly showing me such a picture of her husband and herself, walking down the bustling streets of Paris in the 1950s. Her husband Gilbert is looking towards the shops but Marie-Jeanne had caught the photographer standing on the side of the sidewalk. She is beaming at him as she is holding the arm of her recently wed husband. My South African friend Tom, with English and Dutch origins, has a similar picture of his grandfather in Cairo, where he was serving the British army during the Second World War. In the picture, he is walking towards the photographer but doesn’t seem to notice him. Probably, once the picture was snapped, the photographer approached him with a ticket and a number on it, inviting him to come and pick up the picture.
the next day at a studio nearby. According to David Goldblatt, this practice of photography was a well-organised business: it involved a special professional camera that used 250 exposure films, a photographer hired by a photography studio to stay on the side of the street and take pictures of people walking past without waiting for their consent. The pictures left uncollected would be put up on the window of the studio. The business was fruitful enough to make up for those uncollected pictures, probably thanks to the economies of scale generated by this highly organised, almost industrial scale of production. Out of lack of evidence, it is uncertain whether the studio hired Black males as well as Whites as the photographer. According to a man called Noor, Cape Town studios would hire coloured young men like himself. It is not impossible that Blacks were considered apt for this kind of labour.

Interestingly enough, in South Africa these photographs were baptised “movie snaps.” This analogy with movies could be interpreted in various ways. What immediately sticks out is that for the first time, the photographic subject is no longer self-consciously standing still in front of the camera but is frozen in a dynamic walk.

![Image of a man walking](image)

2.11 Albert Tima’s father, Johannesburg, circa 1945s. Private collection, Albert Tima.

106 interview January 2009. Noor works at the community-based District Six Museum, taking care of the
The other people perceived in the background, all walking in the same direction, translate the busy and continuous flow of the city. Another interesting characteristic is the change of camera angle. The photographer, situated at the edge of the street, watching out for the next approaching client, is thus no longer positioned straight in front of his subject. The until then dominating frontal plane is suddenly replaced by a side one, which pushes the point of perspective away from the centre. The tiles of the pavement for example stretch out and culminate towards this point somewhere in the upper left or right corner of the picture. Sketching out this perspective, they thus give a depth and a sense of space that was previously absent in the picture. These evading lines emphasize the dynamism of the photograph. The eyes of the subject looking straight ahead (away from the camera s/he does not see) draw the space beyond the camera, stressing the sense of direction, of “going” somewhere. As a result, one has the impression these people are walking on a sort of catwalk. The camera has selected one person out of this flow of people and positioned him or her at the forefront of the “movie snap.” Ultimately, the movie snap is the promise to make you the star of your own movie.

In the play *Swazi Bansi is dead*, the photographer Styles receives a client (Robert Z.) in his studio, whom he quickly persuades to go beyond the initially desired portraits and “try a movie.” The client is made to stand in front of a background depicting the cityscape of Johannesburg and to pretend to walk towards the camera, halting half-way. To encourage his somewhat reluctant and shy client to adopt the right attitude for the picture, Styles develops a storyline and a role for him: “Mr. Robert Z, man about town, future head of Feltex, walking through the city of the Future!.” Styles then imagines the reception of the photographic card at home, as the children and wife receive the picture and read the caption: “Making my way back to you for Christmas”. For Styles, walking through town becomes a metaphor not only of social ascension but also a message-bearer announcing his eminent return home. A fictional present and a whole future can thus be condensed within a single frame, while the potential narrative moves beyond it. A “movie snap” combines the photographic still with the flowing narrative of a movie.
Township photography

Township photography is harder to qualify as a style because it is much more eclectic than the other photography analysed so far. The binding factor underlying this last category is mainly the township itself as the social and cultural space of production and consumption. The following analysis is for the most part based on my analysis of Ronald Ngilima’s collection of negatives from Watville, Eastern Rand, dating from the early 1950s. The unique size of the collection and its uncensored nature gave me a unique insight into the business of ambulant photography at that time. Other single photographs found in the households in various townships confirmed these conclusions while widening their scope in terms of scale and nuances.

Until now, the distinctive features of previous photography were shaped by common restrictions in terms of shooting location (a studio or a street corner), a particular type of camera (the box camera or 250 poses camera), or a dominant style (Victorian portraiture). In reverse, township photography finds its unity in breaking free from these restrictions and conventions. In comparison to the previous styles, it is characterised by its eclecticism in terms of choice of subjects, of poses, of shooting locations... Several factors can explain this flourishing diversity. First of all, with the development of camera technology producing ever lighter, more affordable and easier to use cameras, authorship becomes more diverse as more men try their hand at photography. As discussed in Chapter 1, most of them, like Ronald Ngilima simply “learned by doing.” The absence of official training with the transmission of pre-existing formal aesthetic conventions also could explain the lack of homogeneity in township photography. Furthermore, the hand-held camera rendered the photographer much more mobile, hence enlarging the photographer’s options in terms of shooting locations. Ronald’s high degree of mobility, both socially and geographically, results in a great diversity of settings for the photo shootings: the tobacco company, front gardens and back yards, people’s private living room, the sidewalk... The hand held camera also gave more mobility in terms of shooting angles. No longer restricted by the tripod, the township photographer could try out different heights and planes.

Hence, while portraiture remains its sole object, township photography distinguishes itself by its innovative approach to this genre of photography. I argue that township

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107 see box 4. in chapter 1
photography was a platform propitious for the emerging Black township culture to express itself. Not only were photographers offered a broader range of shooting possibilities, but the depicted subjects themselves were less impeded by external conventions. Township photography differs in that the subjects themselves played an active role in the shaping of aesthetic conventions. There is a much greater engagement of the subjects with the camera, a certain appropriation of the end product. In these “home-made” snapshots, people seem more at ease and more confident to affirm their own style. In the play *Sizwe Bansi is dead*, the photographer Styles recommends “Something you mustn’t do is interfere with a man’s dream. If he wants to do it standing, let him stand. If he wants to sit, let him sit. Do exactly what they want!” Hence the client emerges as the co-author in the process of making an image and of negotiating aesthetic conventions. It is possible that, as photography is increasingly integrated in popular culture, the growing familiarity with the camera created a generation of subjects who, as Styles suggests, knew exactly what they wanted. I would also suggest that, the fact the photographer, like Ronald Ngilima, came from the community and was “one of them” (i.e. Black), fostered an atmosphere of trust and ease between photographer and sitter. Auntie Gobi was around 16 year old when Ronald took that picture of her and her sisters, at the mine compound where they was living. She still recalls Ronald very well, insisted on the fact that Ronald Ngilima was a “friend of the family”, with whom they would share tea and cake on a Sunday afternoon.

As a consequence, “home-made photography” gave the freedom to break away from conventional poses and compositions, which suggests that from the 1950s onwards, Blacks developed their own aesthetic conventions and photographic patterns of representation. This comes out clearest in the pictures made in the informal studios. Perhaps the closed space of the studio, its stronger institutionalised photographic heritage, are factors which encouraged the formation of an identifiable canon of conventions. As in the earlier ‘salon’ style, there is an insistence on including the entire body figure in the photo (rather than focusing on a fragment of the body like the face or a three quarter bust). However, township photographers nevertheless began for instance to explore the use of horizontal frame for

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108 The relaxation of the body also has to do with the improvement of the camera technique, increasing the shutter speed so that people no longer needed to stay frozen for extended periods of time.


110 interview with Aunt Gobi, 5/11/08

111 The insistence on including the whole body might be a common characteristic across various African indigenous photographic practices. Sprague noted back in 1960 that “the entire body is always included within the frame, and a neutral vertical background immediately behind serves to isolate the subject in a shallow three-dimensional space” (Sprague in Pinney and Peterson 2003: 244).
individuals instead of groups. The horizontal frame became quite popular to capture the whole length of women’s body, lying on the floor in a half-reclined pose (photo 2.12).


In the Ngilima studio pictures, the photographer is positioned with respect to the subject in such a way that the line of horizon is not perpendicular to the vertical lines of the picture but rather slanted, cutting across the lower part of the frame. It gives the same dynamism as the evading lines of the movie snaps. The diagonal plane (slanted horizon line) also destroys the illusion of the studio, allowing us to have a peek at what stands beyond the backdrop. On this level, we can draw a parallel between these pictures and the works of post-independence Malian and Central African photographers Malik Sidibé and Samuel Fosso.
In their internationally acclaimed portraits, they make no attempt to hide the artificiality of the photographic exercise. Similarly, the edge of the curtain exposes the township photographer’s living room wall, with the frames and calendars hung on it. Sometimes, the spotlights are seen in the forefront of the picture shining on the subject, as a *mise-en-abîme* of the situation. These elements that are usually cut out of European portraiture openly challenge the liminal space of the studio.

Another distinctive feature of this informal studio portraiture is the play of patterns of the different textures present in the picture: the curtain in background, clashing with the black and white tiles of the floor or the rug, the lace on the guéridon, maybe the woman’s dress. In this aspect, we can draw another parallel between for example photo 2.14 and Malian Saïdou Keyta’s pictures, known for this striking play with textiles. In photo 2.14 of Jabo Xaba as a junior gangster, the abundance of patterns from the tiles, his trousers and the curtain immediately stands out.
Recognising the role of textiles in West African photography, Pinther shows how the juxtaposition of seemingly clashing patterns corresponds to the aesthetic ideals of continuity and balance that dominate other African plastic arts. Photographers seem to search for tension and impulsivity, rather than harmony and calmness.\textsuperscript{112}

On the other side of the camera, the photographed clients also begin to innovate in terms of body language and poses. For example, in both South African township and West African photography the figure of the crouching woman emerges, from 1950s onwards. A woman kneeling, I was told, is a sign of respect and attachment to tradition. Interestingly enough, this distinctively African pose is not found in White South African family albums of the time. Also, in Ronald Ngilima’s studio portraits, the Black youth started to manifest a keenness to engage in theatrical performance and practices of imposture. While the photographer includes the edge of the curtain or the visible spotlight in his frame, the subjects

\textsuperscript{112} Pinther in Behrend et.al1998
also play with the manifested artificiality in this photography, by for example fully acknowledging the camera. In picture 2.15, the young man beckons the viewer towards him with his right hand, as if to challenge him/her to come closer. In another picture, the young man with the stylish hat is winking at his audience. To interpellate the viewer is a way to affirm presence and equality with him/her.

2.15 Young man beckoning towards his viewer. Ronald Ngilima, early 1950s, East Rand.
In many of the Ngilima pictures, the subjects (especially the youth), are clearly performing a role: the tsotsi (township gangster), the American cowboy, the frightened Hollywood star, the literate man reading the newspaper, the secretary on her way to work… Similarly, Central African photographer Samuel Fosso became internationally known for his self-portraits made in the space of his commercial studio after hours, in which he adopts different costumes and roles. The studio became for him the locus to explore the multiple identities of his personality, thus innovating strategies of self-invention. In Ronald’s studio pictures, another dimension of performance arises from group inscenation. Groups of friends (usually 3 or 4) adopt different poses that are connected to each other so as to construct a single frame story, similar to the humoristic mime techniques of silent movies.

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113 Bell, C et al (1996)…
Clothing and props play an important part in the photographic performance. Clothing comes to support the practice of imposture, helping the subject perform out his role. The adoption of certain key ‘European’ dressing elements for instance (the hat, the jacket, ‘smart’ shoes) shows one’s engagement with modernity and visually defines you as a sophisticated urbanite. As we will see in chapter 4, the consumption of certain consumer goods like LP discs or a fashionable illustrated magazine became a central theme of the picture. Rather than subtly disposing of status goods and adopting a ‘natural look’, these subjects display the highly symbolic objects in such an obvious way that they are pushed to the forefront and occupy a prevalent place in the photograph. As Appadurai observed in photography in the postcolonial world, “photographic backdrops and props play an increasing role in the work of the imagination, in consumer-driven images of subjectivity and in socially mobile practices of self-representation and class-identification”114.

Facing the subject

Through the identification of these five different styles of portraiture, I hoped to have shown the complexities and richness of popular photography as it emerged among Black communities. Though avoiding setting them in a single chronological line of progression, the comparison between these different styles nevertheless points to an evolution in ways of approaching portraiture and in the various concerns underlying them. I have argued that township photography, breaking away from previous conventions and restrictions, emerged as a style through which township culture could express itself.

Perhaps the most striking difference between the early studio photography and township photography is the readiness to reveal the artificial nature of the photographic exercise and the ‘fantasy’ element in it. Unlike the early studio photography, which was sober and strove towards formal realism, the informal studio photography that developed in the township celebrated, in Appadurai’s words, the ludic, the fantastic and the utopian. Early studio photography was concerned with reflecting the client’s aspired social standing and material achievements. The clever use of backdrops, fake props and lighting created a convincing and realist illusion of private property and blurred the line between representation

114 Appurai 1997: 6
and reality. Township photography, characterised by the relaxation of any strict conventions and the flourishing of poses, rather revealed the edges of the studio and stressed the element of performance through a more obvious interaction between the subject and the photographer and between the subject and his props.

Portraiture, according to French photographer Disdéri, was meant to be the physical emulation of the subject’s unique essence; the frame capturing an “unchanging self” for the posterity of memory. Township photographers were more interested not in revealing an inner self but rather of improving it visually, recreating the subject more than capturing it. Perhaps an explanation for this evolution is the fact that photography turned into a mass-produced commodity made it technically and financially possible for a client to produce several self-images in the current of his life. In comparison, back in the time of the daguerreotype, each picture was unique and irreproducible; similarly the heaviness and bulk size of the airbrushed portraits remind us of how unique the photographic experience was in those years.

For Pinney, the preference for doubles and poses in recent photographic portraiture in central India is not so much the result of technological facilitation of reproducibility but rather as evidence of an altogether different conception of personal identities and its relationship to a physical appearance. The lack of any desire to ‘capture’ sitters within bounded spatial and temporal frames reflects the lack of a centred, visible ‘personality’115. Similarly, Pinther made the connection between clothing in African photography and the notion of “second skin” prevalent in West African culture, as manifested in masks or trance dances for example. I confess I do not know enough about indigenous concepts of the self nor of indigenous art forms of portraiture to be able to make such a statement. But it became clear to me that Black urbanites distanced themselves from photographic realism and the emphasis on personal singularity that characterised previous photographic styles.

115 Pinney in Woodall 1997: 134
Chapter 3:

VISUALISING THE PROCESS OF URBANISATION

After having analysed the different visual tools black photographers developed to represent their communities, this chapter will make a first attempt to interpret the significance of these pictures for the depicted subjects. While chapter one and two focused on the producers of images, this chapter will look closely at their consumers and their visual messages, in an attempt to situate these images within the meta-narrative of urbanisation. Who were the people in these pictures? What was their background? Who among Black urban Africans actually had their picture taken and for what purpose? What did these pictures mean to them?

Through this socio-historical analysis of the represented subjects, I wish to explore the multileveled interplay between photography and urbanisation. During the 19th century, colonialism and missionary activity had more or less successfully attempted to transform the native into a colonial subject. During the first half of the 20th century, African urban migration became the single most dynamic force of social change, one that has deeply marked contemporary South African history. In the space of two decades alone, the African urban population almost doubled, to the point that ‘European’ South Africans felt threatened by their presence in town. The establishment of a permanent African urban population had countless political, social and economic consequences, primarily affecting the social institutions of traditional African societies. The first part of this chapter analyses the particular twist that this historical process took in South Africa, within the framework of segregation and apartheid. It briefly looks at the role photography played in the creation of a powerful
cultural dichotomy between the urban and the rural world.

The creation of townships in the 1930s and the first forced displacements initiated a new chapter in the history of African urbanisation. Caught between the political negation of their existence by White politicians and the increasing necessity to make their livelihood in town, the urban Blacks developed a range of strategies to cope with the hardships of this urban reality. For example, I argue popular photography in the townships, I argue, was a humble way to deal with for example the absence of a father or a husband. The second part of this chapter looks at how the historical process of urbanisation produced a specific local history of photography. Because photography was entangled with daily preoccupations and concerns, I suggest that these photographs provide unique and subjective insights on African urbanisation, from the internal viewpoint of the township.

Given segregation and following apartheid government’s efforts to monopolise the production of urbanity, it is therefore significant to observe how Blacks were able to articulate a urban identity of their own. The third and final section of this chapter explores how the experience of living in the township led to the development of a Black urban identity distinct to the dominant Anglo-Boer one. I wish to show that photography participated in its articulation, by visualising certain key elements of township culture. Township photography is characterised by a flourishing of poses, body language and dress codes, which celebrates indigenous cultural references. I shall end the chapter with a note of nuance on how the camera was used to portray traditional identities as well as modern ones.

I. African urban migration: a historical overview

Town as space of white rule
Before the stabilisation of a permanent Black urban population, towns and cities were perceived both by blacks and whites to be the space of white people, where Blacks were subjected to white rule and its racist legislation. The Native Urban Areas Act 1923 was a key piece of legislation which deemed urban areas in South Africa as "white" and forced all black African men in cities and towns to carry passes at all times, under the threat of being arrested and sent back to a rural area if they failed to produce the document at command. The Act further confined Blacks to live in delimited areas, which very quickly were overcrowded. A
Black had to avoid walking on the pavements, was to stick to the main streets, was excluded from the main public places, was not permitted to use the trams. The presence of a Black man in town was contingent on his ability to find and keep employment: “(...) Natives should be permitted within municipal areas insofar and for so long as their presence is demanded by the wants of the white population”. A Black man without a job was tolerated for barely a few days before he risked to be sent back to his “homeland”. This act and its following amendments gave substance to the concept that “African people were to be no more than sojourners in the urban areas”\textsuperscript{116}, that a Black man or woman in town was an anomaly, a temporary condition tolerated under certain conditions, and that they didn’t belong to the city but rather to their original \textit{kraal}.

Cities like Johannesburg were designed from the start and grew along lines of racial discrimination, which kept non-Europeans at the margins of the urban centre. By settling (out of lack of alternative) outside of their designated areas, squatters threatened the white municipal government’s control over the city and were consequently fiercely fought against. Way before the apartheid government came to power, the British municipality was already exerting forced removals as early as 1903, when the ‘Coolie location’, under the excuse of a possible outbreak of plague, was simply burnt down\textsuperscript{117}. Unlike the Indians and Coloured Black people were devoid of any political rights, completely submitted to the rule of the municipal Council without any counterpart. White South Africans were determined to keep the monopoly over the growth of the city and the definition of what ‘urban’ meant.

Living in town or city inevitably required adopting certain aspects of ‘White lifestyle’. Even those who remained attached to their traditional identities endorsed the European dress code when coming to town. Although they managed to keep many aspects of their village lifestyle, the “Reds”\textsuperscript{118} still had to put up with a capitalist and racist economy which, limiting them to the role of hard manual labour, transformed them into consumers instead of being producers. What characterises urban lifestyle, more than the brick houses and the water from the tap, is that one is forced to sell one’s labour force in order to buy food and pay for rent. In

\textsuperscript{116} Beavon: 97
\textsuperscript{117} Beavon: 77
\textsuperscript{118} popular nickname for traditionalist Xhosa, according to Mayer, Mayer 1961.
other words, living in town means participating in a monetary economic system\textsuperscript{119}. For Black people, this implied working long, hard hours for very little wages.

**Visualising dichotomies**
Photography participated in the construction of an imagined dichotomy between modernity and tradition, between the urban and the rural. Schwartz and Przyblyski discuss how “seeing the city and seeing in the city became a preoccupation of urban life”\textsuperscript{120}. The first daguerreotypists turned the lens of their camera towards the famous buildings of Paris like Notre-dame-de-Paris before using it for portraiture\textsuperscript{121}. It didn’t take long before amateur photographers were taking the camera to the countryside. Rural people and peasant lifestyle, in the brink of disappearance, became important sentimental topics\textsuperscript{122}.

In South Africa, such dichotomies were also being articulated in public discourse through other artistic mediums, whether in the paintings of black painters like Milwa Pemba and writers like R.R.R Dlhomo\textsuperscript{123}. Yet they included an extra political connotation because they were part of a discourse that edified White superiority and justified colonial conquest. The camera meticulously recorded the birth and growth of Johannesburg. From the first mine camps to the first school and the first skyscraper, the camera documented most the city’s exponential development. “There are few big cities in the world that can trace their entire history in photography”, write Benthusan\textsuperscript{124}. In contrast to those urban snapshots, “safari photography” depicted vast vacant wild lands as potential property, ready to be conquered. This kind of photography, stressing the “possessability of spaces”\textsuperscript{125}, later played an important role in the South African efforts to justify the annexation of Namibia\textsuperscript{126}. When encountering the inhabitants of these lands, colonial administrators and anthropologists depicted them in such a way that it visualised the dichotomy between the civilised colonisers and the primitive natives. The focus on the naked body of the native set in its natural environment symbolised the savageness or primitive character of these people, in opposition

\textsuperscript{119} Burke 1996: 65  
\textsuperscript{120} Schwartz and Przyblyski  
\textsuperscript{121} Benthusan (to check).  
\textsuperscript{122} Marien 2002: 28/29  
\textsuperscript{123} van Robbroeck 2008: 209  
\textsuperscript{124} Benthusan 1960: 39  
\textsuperscript{125} Landau 1996: 132  
\textsuperscript{126} Pieterse 1992: 35, quoted in Hartmann, Silvester and Hayes 1998: 15
to the clothed civilised.\textsuperscript{127} The consumption of postcards and magazines like *National Geographic* helped to articulate this hierarchical relationship between the metropolis and the colony, as they offered the metropolitan public, the settlers and the expatriates the opportunity to look down on the inferior colonial other, in a common spectacle, a gaze ‘*en masse*’\textsuperscript{128}.

In this visual articulation of the urban space versus the rural one, white settlers were consolidating the notion that Blacks did not belong to the city. Yet, as we will see in the next section, African migration took off from the 1930s, reaching its peak in the 1940s and 50s. By 1948, when the National Party came to power, the ‘zwart gevaar’ was a ‘problem’ politicians could no longer ignore.

**Black migration to town**

Blacks came to Johannesburg as soon as the mines needed manual labour. In 1896, there were about 14,000 Africans in town, compared to the 50,000 Whites. In 1911, Johannesburg was barely 25 years old but already held a staggering population of 240,000 people, of which about 102,500 of them were Africans (cf graph). The Land Act of 1913 reserving 87\% of the land to the tiny white majority was a decisive factor that pushed Africans towards the city, as they were increasingly unable to make a livelihood from the degraded and limited land they were attributed. However, up till the mid-1930s, the majority of Africans were still living in the countryside, with 2 million living in the Reserves, 2.2 million on (mainly white-owned) farms, and only 1.5 million in urban areas.

\textsuperscript{127} Pinney 1988

\textsuperscript{128} Harris 1998: 21
In the 1930s, the majority of Africans in town were single males living in the mine compounds. Jobs rarely lasted for longer than a year and every 20 months, there was a complete turnover in the labour force\textsuperscript{129}. This was to change in the 1940s and 50s, as the economy shifted away from mining towards manufacturing industry under the impetus of the Second World War. “South Africa’s urban centres experienced fundamental transformation during the 1940s and 1950s, the principal manifestations of which were the extraordinary industrialization of the economy and the ensuing large influx of blacks to the towns”. The radical and rapid transformation of the economy attracted an unequalled wave of migration: between 1936 and 1944, the African urban population increased by half a million. But urban migration not only grew in size, it was also deeply transformed in terms of the character of its population profile. The shift to a manufacturing economy implied a more stable working force with longer-term contracts and more highly skilled workers, paving the way for a more stable African proletariat. By 1946, there were more African industrial employees than miners and there were more Africans living in the locations on a more permanent basis than on the compounds. Women were an essential factor of stabilisation of urban population, as they gave birth to fully urban born and rooted generation of Africans. Thus, women were an important component of the new wave of urban migration: if in 1900 the gender ratio was of 12 men to

\textsuperscript{129} Bonner (Soweto a history
one woman, by 1945 it was reduced to 3 to 1 and by 1967, is was almost equated. By 1950, the urban demographic was very different from what it was before the war and the native locations had already changed.

Whites claimed monopole over the city, both in terms of urban design and of defining who belonged to it and who had access to it. Given this historical context, it is particularly significant to analyse when and how Black communities managed to appropriate urban spaces. Hegemonic culture is constantly exchanging with oppositional and marginal practices\textsuperscript{130}. Thus, with the first and following generations of urban-born Africans, urban identities inevitably escaped the control of the initiators.

II. Views into African urban migration

The social reality of segregation and apartheid permeated every aspect of Blacks’ daily lives. This social reality, I wish to argue, created particular needs and demands for visual representation, which in turn spurred a specific production of photographs. Personal photographs, as historical documents, are visual traces of the profound changes in the social structures that occurred in the township, particularly in regards to family structures and gender relationships. They give us an interesting insight into how Africans responded to the social pressures of migrant labour, urbanisation and the monetary economy.

**Representing the family**

Private photographs are a reflection of the social institutions relevant in the holder of the photograph’s life. In France back in the 1960s, Bourdieu had ascribed the solemn recording of family life’s major events as the main purpose and raison d’être of popular photography. Historically the camera became the “family’s primary instrument of self-knowledge and self-representation; the primary means by which a family memory is perpetuated and the family’s story is told”. The “family function” of the camera erected the model of nuclear family as a self-contained social institution and the basic unit of European society.

\textsuperscript{130} Sturken and Cartwright 2005: 59
Given the primacy of family snapshots in European photo albums, it is striking how, in comparison, there are very few family pictures prevailing in township photography of the 1950s. It is also surprising given the frequent recurrence of the family pattern in the early era of photographic studio in the first decades of the 20th century. Out of the sample of 150 pictures of the Ngilima collection, only 24 of them have as central theme the depiction of kinship, loosely qualified as an intimate bond between people of different generations. Out of these 24 pictures, only 10 would fit the conventions of the formal European family portrait, in which the family members are spatially organised around the head of the household. Most of these family pictures are actually of the Ngilima family; Ronald Ngilima, it seems, was keen in repeating this exercise. The other composed family pictures come mainly from the Indian and Coloured community. In none of them, apart from maybe one or two, can one recognise the ‘ideal’ pattern of the nuclear family: mother, father and their (one or two) children. Instead, the pattern of mother and child (in two occasions father/child) comes up regularly, or that of a chaotic and somewhat joyful jumble of the extended family, and in a few examples, a group of siblings at young age.

The lack of photographic representations of the nuclear family is probably due to the fact that this Eurocentric model of the family never really fitted the reality of family structures in the township to begin with. The distinction between cousin and brother or sister is not made in traditional African societies, while it is normal for several generations to live under a single roof. Furthermore, the process of urbanisation affected family structures via the changing role of women in the urban setting. As we will see in chapter five, women settled in town and started working as domestics, nurses or beer brewers (shebeen queens), thus gaining considerable independence from their husband and his extended family. Sociologist Pauw wrote in his *Study of the family among urbanized Bantu in East London* in the early 1960s, “the most noticeable feature about family growth among urban Bantu is the large proportion of children born of illicit unions”. In the time of the survey, the majority of ‘town Bantu girls’ had at least a baby before getting married, and nearly half of the 15-19 years old girls were pregnant131. Children born outside of regular marital structures were integrated in the mother’s family. They would grow up with their grandparents or a relative in the countryside, if the mother was unable to take care of them in town because of her job132.

131 B.A.Pauw 1963: 137
132 Domestic servants sleeping in the quarters of the employees could not bring their children with them. Those women with no relative in the townships had to send them to the countryside.
Family structures were thus complexified and destructured: an unmarried couple might live in the same room together with children from a previous marriage; a mother might live with the children she had with different men at her father’s household, which might even include the mother’s daughter’s daughter, etc. Far from being self-contained and clearly delimited, the family was often split geographically and extended over several generations and lineages. Families being so complex and fluctuating made it harder to represent them visually. Ironically, what comes out clearly in many of these family pictures is the absence of the figure of the father. Several photographs depict a woman with a child or several children around her (3.2). One cannot determine for sure whether the woman is the mother of these children, but her central position in the picture, along with a certain toughness and self-determinism in the expression of her face, give us a strong impression of the emerging figure of the single mother as the head of the household.

3.2 The figure of the single-mother? Ronald Ngilima, Watville early 1950s.
Far more prevailing are portraits of children, alone or in group. The urge to grasp childhood in its fleeting stage is surely the main motivation behind these numerous portraits of children. Marriage portrait of grandparents, numerous other pictures some other important passed-away relative occupied nearly every household. So it is not to say that family relationships wasn’t an important theme in township photography. However, I would like to suggest that the European obsession with representing a tight-knitted family unity was definitely not shared by African urban communities in the 1950s. Further research would determine to what extent these pictures elaborated alternative images to represent the family/household according to their understanding of the notion.

**Association vs. kinship**

Instead of family snapshots, one will find many more pictures of peer groups, depicted involved in one of the many activities available in the townships. Urban lifestyle characterised itself by the somewhat artificial dichotomy of time between working hours and free time\(^{133}\). The urban environment offered a larger array of leisure activities than the village, including hall dancing, bioscope, tennis or cricket team… As Pauw argued back in 1963, this expanded the range of options in term of setting up a social network. The family unit appears to be have been relegated to being only one among various other alternative networks, constructed on the principle of association rather than kinship. The Ngilima negatives depict groups of friends, possibly neighbours, church associations, shebeen drinking groups, or the body building club, tsotsi gangs…Together, this collection of negatives is a remarkable gallery of the major institutions of socialisation in the townships in the early 50s.

\(^{133}\) see essay “Free time” by Theodor Adorno in *The culture industry: selected essays on mass culture*, Routledge Classics 2002.
3.3 The body building club of Watville. Ronald Ngilima, Watville 1950.

3.4 Church Mission Johannesburg Cazas (?) Ethiopia, Ronald Ngilima, Watville early 1950s.
The ‘youth’ as a distinct category figures as one of the most recurrent group composition in the Ngilima collection. Glaser shows that the emergence of tsotsi groups are linked to the instability of the nuclear family structure. The absent father, the breaking down of traditional disciplinary structures, the long hours of labour and commuting meant that young males were left unsupervised for most of the day\textsuperscript{134}. While in traditional African societies, the youth is submitted to the age hierarchy, the Ngilima group pictures of young men and women are an indication of how they began to assert themselves within township society. The ANC/Youth League split of 1943 was symptomatic of this new order, in which young leaders affirmed their disagreement with their elders. Similarly, the tsotsis’ anti-work ethic, their rejection of school and parental authority, the embracing of criminality as a lifestyle, were all statements to mark their opposition to their parents’ passive acceptance of the rule of law. Within the space of the studio, young men and women showed the greatest ability to innovate poses and break away from the previous conventions of formality (see section ‘township photography in chapter two). Rather than endorsing respectable and formal poses, these kids would disrupt the usual order of the studio, for instance by displacing the traditional flower basket to the floor, or putting one’s leg up on a chair set backwards (3.5). This young man’s crossed arms further strengthen this impression of rebellion and “I don’t care” attitude. I would suggest that their photographic creativity and their rejection of the conventional photography’s symbolic ordering is an “allegory”\textsuperscript{135} for their struggle to find their place in their changing society.

\textsuperscript{134} Glaser 2000
\textsuperscript{135} Bourdieu 1965: 60
Coping with distance
The migrant labour system separated couples and families for long periods of time, generating a demand for photographs particularly among migrant workers to emotionally deal with the distance and long periods of separation. The hand-tinted portraits can potentially be interpreted as a response to the migrant labour system under segregation. It is significant that the marriage portrait is by far the most recurrent pattern among hand-tinted portraits. Interestingly enough, though family snapshots are in general rare among photographs from the townships, representations of the married couple conforming to the idealised “white” marriage abound. The popular genre of portraiture started in the 1930s while urbanisation
based on the mine-based migrant labour system was still in full swing. As mentioned earlier on in this chapter, gender ratio in 1900 was as disparate as 12 to 1, and in 1945 it was still 3 to 1. Until the radical change in policy of the new Nationalist government, segregation laws specifically discouraged families to follow the migrant worker to town, clinging on to the notion that Black were merely “temporary sojourners”. Men were not allowed to bring their wives to the male-only mines compounds, while finding accommodation for the family outside of the compound was difficult because of the limited availability in the overcrowded “native” locations, were rent was absurdly expensive. Hence many wives had to stay behind and lived in fear of seeing their families dissolve over time. There were endless accounts of husbands getting a concubine or another wife ‘over there’ and ending up cutting ties with his family in the countryside. Given these strains on family unity, one can conceive that the travelling agents collecting commissions for hand tinted portraits in the countryside found a demand from women or their descendents, wanting to consolidate and give material substance to their marriage bond. According to Uncle Dan, these hand-tinted portraits became really popular in the countryside because it visually reunited the husband working in the mines and the wife back in the village, within the abstract space and endless timezone of the oval frame.

The production of hand-tinted portraiture ceased after the last airbrush artist died in the 1980s. However, the tradition of sending studio pictures back home to one’s wife or girlfriend is still a common practice among Zulu workers living in Johannesburg, who shape the major part of Philip’s clientele for his (dying) photographic studio on the Bree street. These Zulus spend nine months of the year in Johannesburg away from their family and return for Christmas for 6 weeks, as well as for other shorter spells of one or two weeks spread out over the rest of the year (much like in the 1950s!). This photographic practice has evolved from being a confirmation of marriage to being integrated in the process of lobola negotiations (in which the exact financial compensation the future man has to pay to his future wife’s family is fixed). Future man and wife exchange photographs so that the bride can return from the exclusive photo shooting session in Johannesburg with a picture of her promised husband to show to her parents and relatives back in Kwazulu-Natal.

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136 Bonner 1995: 120
137 Interview Uncle Dan 12.11.08
138 Interview Philip, 9.10.2008
I hence argue that photographers tapped into a demand generated by the experience of migration and adapted their products accordingly. The Dings photo studio, based in Johannesburg, made small sized plastified albums taking 20 postcard size photos, especially for Zulu migrant workers, its main source of demand. 

“The album was stiffened to protect the photos in its long journey, and small enough to put in a pocket.” Tswaledi Thobejane, a man who began his career as a street photographer in northern Limpopo in the 1980s gave another example of how the visual economy was shaped by urbanisation. The mine compound and hostel was, according to his experience, the best place to put up his ambulant photography booth, because there was a constant demand for pictures to send back home. According to Tswaledi, the post-1994 freedom of movement ensuing the abortion of pass laws, has altered the photography market: potential workers moved to Johannesburg with their whole family, where they could rent a single room or shack and live together. Thus the

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139 Informal interview with Diane Wall, head of archive collection of the Museum Africa, to whom photographer Mr. Pillay, the owner of the Dings studio, gave various artefacts from his studio.
140 Entry form nb. B 1995 1510, Museum Africa
demand for photographs has declined over the past 10 years, also due to the wider availability of cameras, including on the mobile phone. Today, the geography of remaining photographic studios in Johannesburg, clustered around governmental institutions, recall a time when the bureaucracy of apartheid influenced the location of photo studios. With the introduction of photographs in the passbook, photo studios derived their main source of income from I.D pictures. Uncle Dan spoke in particular of the famous Leon studio photography that was strategically established next to the Bantu Affair Commissioner’s office on Market Street, Johannesburg. Photos would be delivered within an hour. The use of photographs to support influx control policies\(^\text{141}\) by the apartheid regime was the driving force behind the boycott campaign against Polaroid, who sold among other things sophisticated equipment to instantly register I.D pictures into computers\(^\text{142}\).

African urbanisation, as framed by segregation and apartheid, put much strain on human relationships and traditional social structures. With this section, I tried to show how Black popular photography developed in a particular way because one of its social functions was to cope with these pressures. The social conditions of living in the townships therefore produced a history of photography distinct to this place. Considering their strong rooting in the daily realities and concerns, I further suggest that these photographs give us a unique insight into urbanisation from the perspective of the township. The next section explores which identities possibly came out of this human experience of the township and how photography played a role in its articulation.

\(^{141}\) Influx control policies were the cornerstone for apartheid’s notion of separate development and include all police instruments of controlling African migration (the passbook being the essential element).

III. Urban identities in motion: visualising an emerging Black township culture

While photographs can effectively be read as rich historical documents delivering information about the Blacks’ experience of urbanisation, it would be a mistake to reduce these photographs to simple reflections of social reality and its evolutions. As seen in the second chapter, subjects and photographers consciously mobilised strategies of representation in order to alter the reality to which they were confined. Hence it is important to recognise the element of imagination and fantasy behind the production of these representations. The photographic studio in particular, as a “strong room of dreams”, allows the individual to create his/her self-image in a social environment disconnected from the bleakness of everyday life. Heike Behrend asked the studio photographers of Mombasa why their clients preferred to pose against painted backdrops depicting a sea than in front of the Indian Ocean itself. They replied: “because they found them more beautiful”. “In their images, the Likoni photographers did not so much attempt to produce an outside “reality” but rather they used the décor of their studios to improve the world and to transform and upgrade their own position in it”143.

Not wishing to pinpoint the ‘essence’ of an African urban identity to a series of fixed images, I nevertheless perceive these visual fictions as an integral part of identities in the making. In this sense, township photography didn’t ‘shape’ an urban identity144, but actively participated in its visualisation. These fabricated fictions, I suggest, are visual evidence of the emergence of a Black township culture, distinct from the dominating White urban one. To support this point, I will try to bring out the innovative aspects of township photography, by comparing it with the ‘salon’ style of the early photographic studios of the turn of the century. The African converted Christians tried to affirm a modern identity that was inspired by ‘missionary’ inculcated notions of civilisation, independently of whether they lived in the city or the countryside. A few generations later, the urban-born generation of Africans were also “experimenting with modernity” but expressing it in their own terms and inspired by their direct experience of the urban space.

143 Behrend 2003: 237
144 Poole warned “photography, no matter what its claims, cannot "shape" anyone's identity” Poole 2007: 201
**Not quite, not white**

In chapter 2, we saw how creating a fictive visual reality was the distinctive property of photography. The first photographic studios of the 19th and early 20th studio made considerable efforts to create the impression of a bourgeois salon, filling it with cheap versions of the major artefacts of Victorian culture (furniture, column, staircase, vase…). The sitters most likely could not afford such a luxurious lifestyle; perhaps did they not even own the clothes they are posing with but had rented them from the studio for the special occasion. The picture of my friend Judith Matlala’s grandparents, dating from the 1920s reminded me very much of the crackling pictures from my own Luxemburgish father’s family.

3.7 Judith Matlala’s grandparents, studio portrait 1920s, probably Newcastle (KZN).
Private collection, Judith Matlala.
Both look at ease in the bubble of the enclosed studio, with the grandfather’s hand casually resting on the guéridon and the grandmother’s eyes drifting past the camera, expressing concentration and interiority. During the interview with Judith, I was surprised to find out that they lived on a small farm, about 10 km away from the closest town (Newcastle, Kwazulu Natal). My surprise came from the fact that their modern display of the body emanating in their portrait was not inspired by an actual urban lifestyle. Going to town for them was a rare expedition that would take them the whole day.

I experienced the same surprise when Boysie Khanyile showed me his father Enoch’s photo albums, which brings out the importance of small towns and other such intermediary urban spaces in the process of urbanisation. Born in 1909 in Enkumba (KZN), he started in his early twenties to collect photographs of himself, a habit that went on throughout the various stages of his life. The pictures previous to his moving to Johannesburg (in 1934) suggest that Enoch was already self-conscious of his image and grooming it through the practice of photography. I was left pondering: what cultural values or models were they inspired by, if it weren’t those of the city? If ‘European’ fashion and material culture (furniture, books, and other props frequently used in the studio) isn’t necessarily a privilege of urban lifestyle, than what characteristics specifically defines the urban?

Symbols of ‘civilisation’
In 1930 was published a book called “The African Yearly Register”, a kind of illustrated “Who’s who” of the Black folk in South Africa. The book consists of a collection of biographies and pictures of illustrious Black men, most of which were pastors and ministers, a handful of doctors, lawyers, writers... What these “great men” have in common is the missionary education they received. Missionaries, as the “preeminent agents of cultural influence and change”\(^\text{145}\), did not just transmit the doctrines of the new religion, but also sought to transform the ‘native’ by investing their daily life with a set of cultural codes: the English language, the European dress code, the square hut, an obsession with cleanliness and hygiene, the meaning of money, new cultures of consumption... Missionary education cultivated a receptive space among African subjects for the promotion of Western modernity\(^\text{146}\). It also seemed to have fostered a certain readiness to embrace an urban lifestyle.

\(^{145}\) De Kock 1996
\(^{146}\) Comaroff and Comaroff 1997, vol. 2
Sociologist Pauw, in his study of second generation of African urbanites in East London dating from the early 1960s, recognised a strong correlation between an African’s cultural background and his or her decision to settle in town permanently.

Most of the Africans depicted in the early studio pictures, I would suggest, came from a ‘School’ background. According to Mofokeng, many of the (depicted) subjects of the Black Album collection were “people who owned property or those who had acquired Christian mission education, and they considered themselves to be ‘civilised’.” Enoch Khanyile for instance had achieved secondary education and began to work in the closest small town called Ladysmith. Among his first photographs, we find group pictures of the local tennis club and the football club, both of which he was the captain.

3.8 Enoch Khanyile (second from the left, second row), Stars Lawn Tennis Club, Ladysmith 1938. Private collection, Khanyile family.

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147 Meyer perceived a fundamental distinction in Xhosa society of East London between the Schools (converted, educated, embracing Western lifestyle) and the Reds (traditionalists, anti-education, rejecting Western lifestyle).
148 Mofokeng 1998
According to Ranger, a growing number of aspiring petty-bourgeois Africans took to sports, in particular tennis and cricket, as a way “to make its own the range of attitudes and activities that defined the European middle classes”\(^{149}\). The glowing whiteness of the sport uniform could almost be a metaphor for the aspiration of ‘being white’.

The book, most often the Bible, is among the most recurrent prop in these early pictures of the 1900s-1920s. The holding of the book signified the subject’s literacy, a symbol of his self-improvement and social ascension via the missionary education he had received. Literacy was the key mode of transmission, not just of knowledge, but also of philosophical and moral ideals. In Judith grandparent’s case, both are holding what looks like rolled-up newspapers. In the interview, it came out that they were very religious (although the exact church to which they were affiliated is unknown to me), and that the grandmother was locally known for being a prophetess, to whom people would turn in times of drought.

**The logic of ‘camouflage’**

Christianised Africans became the main agents of transmission for Western culture in African society\(^{150}\). By adopting “European ways”, they were striving to differentiate themselves from the other Africans in the hope of improving their economic, political and social position within the racist White rule that was emerging. Is it possible that having their picture taken in the studio was part of the exercise of visually distinguishing the *Amarespectables* (the respectable people) from their pagan brothers? As seen in the previous chapter, the style of studio photography materialised the association between the depicted subjects and ‘civilisation’ by portraying them within a room full of Western artefacts that symbolised European culture, missionary education, Christian morality, private property, bourgeois respectability, and so on. The magic of photography, by confusing the sign with the signifier, erases the fiction behind this staging so that the subjects look like the actual owners of these things. By displaying ownership over these objects, the prestige of these western goods was

\(^{149}\) Ranger 1992: 237

\(^{150}\) The Comaroffs make the important nuance that while the Tswana elite followed the dictates of European fashion, ordinary people developed a distinct “folk” couture which borrowed elements of European dress while marking their ethnic ground. This example of cultural patchwork complexifies the simple narrative of colonial domination. Unfortunately I suspect these ‘ordinary’ people did not participate in the visual economy of photography out of lack of financial means. Which makes ‘corner photography’ all the more relevant, as this cheap mode of producing images enabled the lower working classes to have their portrait made and thus enter the visual history this thesis is trying to write. Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 252-273
thus transferred to them\(^{151}\). In their self-depiction as civilised people, they are both expressing their social difference with the ‘Red’ Africans, while at the same time realigning themselves with the logics of dominant white bourgeoisie.

Other minority groups in similar situation of cultural hegemony made use of this visual strategy. Dubois, in his Georgian Negro albums shown at the Paris Exhibition in 1900, chose pictures that would combat the negative image Whites had constructed of American Negros. The selected portraits show families coming from the “best classes”, anchored in luxurious interiors and using similar aesthetic code than their counterparts in South Africa. Smith uses these middle-class portraits to bring out the correlation between class, material culture and equality in Dubois’s argumentation. “Du Bois forwards the ‘Americanness’ of his better classes by emphasizing their conformity to white middle–class standards of economic success, once again invoking class to make claims on equality”\(^{152}\).

Similarly, Mofokeng rejects the tendency among his peers to dismiss the photographs of the Black Album collection simply as “evidence of pathologies of bourgeois disillusions”. He invites us instead to read these images as a place where identity was contested, where the depicted subjects “engaged in performances of bourgeois identity that would facilitate their integration into the hegemonic world of white affluent power”. In the words of Luthuli, a descendent of Dhlomo:

“In those days (...) the world seemed to be opening out for Africans. It seemed mainly a matter of proving our ability and worth as citizens, and that did not seem impossible. (...) There seemed point, in my youth, in striving after the values of the Western world. It seemed to be striving after wholeness and fulfilment. Since then, we have watched the steady degeneration of South African affairs…”\(^{153}\)

Homi Bhabha, in the \textit{Location of Culture}, not only recognises the logic behind the strategy of adopting the White man’s ways, but also perceives in it an ambivalence that potentially constitutes a threat to his power. The ‘mimic man’, \textit{“almost the same but not white”}, produces a slippage in colonial discourse: it forces us to think about what difference lies exactly between being English and being Anglicized. This slippage challenges the

\(^{151}\) Burke 1996  
\(^{152}\) Smith 2004: 98  
\(^{153}\) Couzens 1985: 50
colonial production of dichotomies such as civilised/savage, Black/White. The mimic man, “not quite/not white”, destroys the unquestionable authenticity and absolute authority on which colonial power is based. In the very act of repetition, originality is lost and centrality de-centred. The observer is suddenly observed, “the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined”\textsuperscript{154}.

A good illustration of this point is for example how the African educated elite embraced the English language and used it to press for further political rights, by writing in the first journals run by and for Black people\textsuperscript{155}. By emphasizing their Christian beliefs, their educational and their material achievements, their loyalty to the Brits, these educated Africans could plea for being exempted of Native law, because they truly believed to be citizens of the British Empire. Hence having the racist Native laws applied to all Africans regardless of their level of education was felt as a great unfairness. In the words of Johannes Kumalo, a relative of the eminent writer H.E.I Dlhomo: “Look around you. You have an English house, English tables, chairs-everything around us in English but one and that is the law”\textsuperscript{156}.

In this light, the “visibility of mimicry” performed in the studio photographs of Christianized Africans are not so much signs of mental colonisation but a strategy of ‘camouflage’, in a period when assimilating to the dominant power seemed to be the most viable option for survival. As part of a strategy of camouflage, the cultural references at play in these photographs are those of civilisation and modernity, but not necessarily of urbanity. Similarly, the hand-tinted portraits, as seen in chapter one, were often commissioned by people living in the countryside. They reflect more their urban-oriented aspirations rather than their effective urban lifestyle. An educated but rustic Xhosa freshly arriving in town could be identified miles away despite the cultural acquirements that missionary education gave him\textsuperscript{157}. What’s more, the rustic educated Xhosa might actually have wished not to be confused with the “real townpeople” whom they disapproved for being deprived of moral values. Moving to the native locations was perceived to be a definite path towards sin, where men would get drunk in public and girls inevitably get pregnant before getting married. In the next section, the specifics of township culture, that which distinguished a ‘rustic School’ from an African urbanite, will be explored. How did it find its visual expression in township photography?

\textsuperscript{154} Bhabha: 89
\textsuperscript{155} De Kock 1996
\textsuperscript{156} Couzens 1985: 44-50
\textsuperscript{157} Mayer 1961
Township photography: the articulation of a Black urban culture

From slumyards to townships

The emergence of African townships marked a new stage in the history of urban development of the country from 1930 onwards. Until then, Africans were either ‘locked up’ in the mine compounds or placed in a location beyond the municipal boundary. Housing within town was limited to tightly defined ghettos like Prospect and New Doornfontein and to the servant’s quarters of white householders. As the African urban population continued to grow, these limited places became oversaturated with people. Meanwhile, the growing economy needed more industrial land around the blossoming CDB. Hence the new Slums Act of 1934 provided the legal framework to clear the internal slums like Ferreirastown and Bertrams. Evicted Africans were offered to settle in Orlando, the ‘model native township’\textsuperscript{158}, which was in fact little more than a “bleak residential outpost on the veld”\textsuperscript{159}, endless rows of identical matchbox houses. While the White residential areas were called ‘suburbs’, Orlando and the following expansions were labelled townships, a pejorative word used only for Natives locations. Koch argues that the displacement to the townships was a heavy blow on the slumyard culture that had emerged out of the 1920s and 1930s, which revolved around the brewing of beer and marabi music. The monopolisation of beer production and the strict control exercised within the township (guarded gates, curfew hours, streetlamps, regular police raiding…) undermined the lifeblood of slumyard culture. Contrary to this nostalgic view, I would suggest that the experience of living within the space of the township gave way to a “corresponding set of attitudes, symbols, values and mores”\textsuperscript{160}, which constituted the basis for a distinct Black urban identity.

Producing local models

The emergence of township photography, as a practice and as a style, I argue is the visual expression of this cultural development. As mentioned in the previous chapter, township

\textsuperscript{158} One article in the Bantu World is entitled for example “All quiet in the model township: attractive garden flowers add charm to the beauty of Orlando”, January 26, 1935, p.9.

\textsuperscript{159} Beavon 2004: 121

\textsuperscript{160} Koch 1983: 154
photography distinguished itself by the explosion of the range of poses and a new set of aesthetic conventions. The important element of fantasy and of performance characterised a distinct approach to portraiture. Rather than standing stiffly with the arms along the body staring straight into the lens, people began to innovate a new body language for the camera. Men, for example, stand slightly sideways, with the external foot set forward, as if about to start walking.

According to my friend Mpapa, a young Zulu actor and dancer from Durban, this pose is inspired by Zulu dances, it indicates that one is prepared for action. Another version of this pose, with knees and elbows bent, recalls the boxer ready to strike (3.10). Women, on the other hand, liked to have their picture taken sitting on the floor and legs tucked to the side, with their dress spreading out in full circle (see cover picture).

The Ngilima pictures of the 1950s were clearly inspired by the major figures of township culture. Black urbanites developed poses that referred to their own social models and heroes. As mentioned earlier on, one of the most vibrant figure is the tsotsi, the figure of the romanticised but ruthless gangster that emerged specifically in the townships in the 1930s (see section ‘Association vs. kinship’). The most notorious gang from Sophiatown, called the
Americans, were known for driving the most expensive cars, for their sophisticated style and distinct code of behaviour (as well as their criminal activities). These lines taken from Bloke Modisane’s autobiography give us an indication of the aura the tsotsis exerted on township youth: “But the white man fears the tsotis who are perhaps among the only Africans who have personal dignity, they answer white arrogance with black arrogance, they take their just desserts from a discriminating economy by robbery and pillage”\(^{161}\).

The young man on photograph 2.15 managed to piece together some of the vital different elements of the tsotsi ‘style’ (the hat, the shoes). The missing narrow-bottom pants are compensated by his body performance, as his look and his beckoning hand defies the viewer to have a good look at him and dare to come closer. The same young man can be seen in another picture endorsing the image of the runaway (anti-State) cowboy, another figure which inspired the tsotsis, from watching all the Westerns projected in the community halls\(^{162}\). In another example, a smartly dressed young man (hat, jacket, neatly made-up tie, white shirt, watch) is gravely winking at the camera while casually leaning against the chair. As the traditional hierarchy based on age lost footage in the urban space, young men felt confident enough to affirm themselves visually in terms inspired by their subculture.

Drum magazine was another important cultural marker of township culture that has clearly impressed its influence on local photography. Young women of the Ngilima portraits would copy the fashion and poses of the cover girls. Others would actually pose with a copy of the magazine, pretending to read it or simply hold it up, making the title clearly legible for the viewer\(^{163}\). Posing with Drum was a way to identify oneself with the cultural values of the magazine. As the first magazine to have a Black writing and photographic staff and which aimed specifically a Black readership, Drum shaped a strong image of what a modern urban Bantu was supposed to do, how he is to dress, eat, behave. Drum magazine also helped erect many of these local African musicians and boxers to the level of stardom.

In other words, the cultural references that inspired photographic poses became much more eclectic: they are no longer simply the symbols of White Victorian civilisation but rather

\(^{161}\) Modisane 1963: 227
\(^{162}\) According to Tim Counzens, municipal authorities began to screen movies in the townhalls as part of an effort to ‘moralise leisure time’. The problem is, the audience would cheer when the ‘bad guys’ were winning and booing when the army would ruin their getaway. Couzens 1982
\(^{163}\) Zonk and Bona magazine, two other Black popular magazines, also appear several times in these pictures.
references to the Black boxing hero, the cover girls from Drum magazine, American pin-up girls, Zulu warriors, the romantic image of the intellectual man, the cow-boy from American Westerns... It is not that Black South Africans all of sudden ceased to be interested in Western popular figures but the choice seemed to have expanded, and included more indigenous figures to which Blacks could look up to. Advertisement campaigns targeting the ‘Black market’ began to notice this shift in the 1960s and started using African models, which they found out made “as good symbols as the (American) Negro and perhaps even better since the local model represents an attainable ideal”\textsuperscript{164}. As African executive Nimrod Mkele remarked:

“although the Africans do not have all these things they have found the symbols of their aspirations among themselves: they have their own political leaders, educated and wealthy men, their Miriam Makebas and fashionable women. They have become emotionally self-sufficient…”\textsuperscript{165},

\textit{Photography is for fun!}

In the intention of these photographs, there is also a significant shift from previous styles of photography. As seen in chapter two, corner photographer had succeeded in transforming the practice of photography into a popular leisure activity. The seriousness and formality of the early studio portraiture reflected the deeper political agenda at stake: to convince the rest of society that civilised Blacks were equal to their white brothers. In the townships however, photography became much more associated with leisure and ‘fun’.

Of these socialising activities, beer drinking in shebeens is perhaps the most recurrent shooting place in the Ngilima sample of negatives. As a channel to reconnect with the ancestors, beer plays an important role in ceremonies such as funerals or birth celebrations. As a place of social convergence and a centre for music performances, the shebeens constituted the lifeblood of the early marabi culture, the earliest form of urban culture grown from the slumyards in the city centre. In the townships, shebeens also came to represent Black women’s resistance to the government’s various attempt to control their independent means of raising an income. As a central element of township culture, beer, contained in jars, tins or buckets (sign of home-brewed, as opposed to the manufactured bottled beer) is quite pervasive in the Ngilima pictures. It is often the central focus of the picture, as the subject

\textsuperscript{164} Mkele, quoted in Burke 1996: 157
holds it out to the photographer, or points to it, or is held by many hands, illustrating its bonding force.

Music is another theme that comes back regularly. I found pictures of jazz bands and chorals, my favourite one being a somehow blurry and spontaneous picture of a man and two women singing with their eyes closed, enraptured in their common tune. Among the studio pictures, the LP disc and disc player is one of the most recurrent prop.
As the photographic event becoming more informal and began to record social events ‘in the heart of action’, many of the subjects broke with the usual conventions of photographic respectability: in one picture a mixed group of friends are sitting on the floor in a corner of the room, all huddled so that legs are pill ed on top of each other; in another picture, two men are sloppily sitting on top of a cupboard, hat tilted to the side, looking quite drunk. As mentioned earlier, young sitters would make up their own rules for a suitable pose within the space of the studio. The Ngilima informal studio was admittedly a more humble version of the lavish studios in town, yet had the basic props and settings. How the sitters engaged with these props and the outcomes of the shootings was very different from those of their counterparts of the previous generation: instead of sitting on the chair, this young boy chooses to lean on it; here the basket of flower is displaced onto the floor, next to where the lady is sitting in the popular kneeling pose. As her two little girls are looking at the camera trying to maintain their symmetrical positions, Sarah Ngilima (Ronald’s wife) chooses to hide behind the backdrop and sticks her head out from the crack of the curtain (3.12). The imaginative ways in which the sitters engaged with the space of the studio and invent new visual effects is quite remarkable. This creative engagement with the studio definitely anchors the photographic exercise in the field of leisure, miles away from the experience of being identified and categorised for the obligatory I.D picture.
In conclusion, I would suggest that this innovative way of occupying the space of the studio is a sign not just of familiarity with the photographic practice, but also of a unprecedented self-confidence in oneself and one’s culture. The emergence of elements taken from township culture in these pictures suggests that Black people started to valorise their culture to the extent that it became ‘photographable’, that is, legitimate to present to the camera and by extension to their world.

**Nuances**

Although this Black urban identity was inspired by Blacks’ lived experience of the urban, it would be an error to claim that photography was mainly about modernity and only about the city. The dichotomy between countryside/town or tradition/modernity anthropologists perceived and wrote about back in the 1960s and 70s, have since then been heavily questioned.
and nuanced\textsuperscript{166}. The Ngilima images at times tend to contradict these dichotomies, while in other examples seem to reinforce them. In picture 3.13 for example, the adult man dressed in a smart suit (hat, tie, shoes, watch, belt…) holds a child by the hand while he keeps his other hand casually in his pocket; his child carries bead jewellery around his neck and many bangles at his ankles and wrists. Perhaps elements of traditional attire were relegated to infants and women; perhaps this photo was taken at a special occasion for which this jewellery was worn. While the exact context of this picture is unknown, this photograph suggests in any case that signs of tradition were part of the repertoire of what was considered ‘photographable’ and went (as the picture shows) hand in hand with signs of modernity in a continuous way rather than in a binary opposition. In the township, such marks of attachment to traditions found ‘their place’ among symbols of modernity.

\textbf{3.13 Traditional bead necklace and European suit. Ngilima collection, early 1950s.}

\textsuperscript{166} See critique Coplan, Industrialisation and social change.
Pauw’s survey of material culture in Xhosa households in East London revealed that images, including photographs, calendars, religious pictures, decorated the walls of every household, including of the most humble. While the amakholwas (the Christian believers) were probably among the first Blacks to get involved with photography, by the 1950s photographs were owned by all sections of the population, including the so-called Reds, who otherwise rejected Western lifestyle and whose houses were in general sparsely furnished. Zulu migrants in particular seemed to have not just participated in photography, but also developed their own style of portraiture. I came across a stack of postcard-size of studio pictures of Zulus dating from the late 1950s and 60s. These pictures show individuals or couples, displaying the elaborated beadwork of their traditional attire and holding distinctive ‘Zulu’ poses. Some of the women are bare-breasted to show their status as of virginity, while men adopt poses inspired by warrior dances (3.14). These markers of ‘Zuluness’ stand out against the range of classic Western props that appears on the background of the photographs: the French guéridon, the old-fashioned Victorian weaved basket holding a bouquet of dried flowers... Yet the hand lightly resting on the table or on the flower arch seems to affirm a bond- rather than an opposition- between these two sets of cultural signs. This genre of Zulu portraiture hence challenges the assumption prevalent in academic literature that colonial subjects used photography mainly to affirm a modern identity. If anything, these pictures are evidence of African (urban) subjects engaging with a modern medium to perform their Zulu ethnicity and attachment to tradition.
Another interesting feature is the consumption by Black urbanites of postcards depicting rural traditional life scenes, for example bare breasted women cooking in front of a mud hut. Among Enoch Khanyile’s impressive personal collection of photographs were several of these postcards. From the interview with his son Boysie, it came out that Enoch had a strong interest in Zulu culture and the history of his ancestors. In a notebook, he started writing the family history repeatedly, going back as early 1650. As a passionate choral director, he would constantly be searching for ancient Zulu songs to teach to his group. Boysie remembers many summers where they would pack the van and leave for KZN to visit old relatives and maintain their connection to the countryside. Hence while these postcards would today be dismissed as colonial and exoticising, Enoch liked them and collected them, possibly because they helped him foster a bond with his Zulu roots. It is as if the alienation of the urban setting created a certain nostalgia for the village lifestyle and the need to assert one’s connection to it.

3.14 “Solizwe Subsisi, Gemini Street, Pietermarizburg (KZN), 20.08.1967”. Private collection, Peter Magubane.
3.15. Postcard of Zulu ‘traditional’ lifestyle.
Artco, Photo S.A. Private collection, Khanyile family
Chapter 4:

THE PERFORMANCE OF CONSUMPTION

4.1 Mr. Johannes Molele, his wife (right) and his sister (left). Collection Museum Africa.
This is Mr. Johannes Molele. One day, around the year 1927, he decided to have his picture taken with his wife (right) and his sister (left). I found this information on the back of the picture, carefully written in pencil by the attentive hand of an archivist from Museum Africa. The photograph is printed slightly slanted on postcard format paper, which suggests strongly that it was taken with a ‘while-you-wait’ camera (see chapter 1). The rough floor and the cracked wall in the background, showing the outside environment of the photo shooting, support this first guess. What immediately strikes the viewer is the central figure of the man: he is the only one sitting, framed by the two women standing behind him in a symmetrical way. The women also stand behind him in the sense that they are only identified and presented in relation to him (‘his sister’, ‘his’ wife). At closer look, you notice smaller things, like Mrs Molele’s concerned expression, the sister’s timid smile, Mr. Molele’s cane, his tie pin, the hat placed on the floor at his wife’s feet. By his left foot, also discreetly set on the floor, is a book. The archivist added an extra note about the book: “NB: Bible on the ground”. The bible, as seen in chapter two, works as a symbol for Christianity but also for literacy and education. The European clothes and the bible achieve to indicate us that Mr. Molele and the two women come from a well-to-do, educated family.

This picture was taken by Ronald Ngilima in the early 1950s. In contrast to the previous picture, the three young men are interacting with the camera, perfectly at ease. The horizontal line formed by the three sitting on the floor replaces the inversed pyramidal composition of corner photographs. The clothes and fashion accessories (in particular the diamond-patterned socks and the watch) allow us to identify them as young urbanites from the 1950s. The Zonk! magazine that they are holding up was one of the first magazines to target a Black audience. Like Drum, it presented a very cosmopolitan, educated, and western image of the African. It included many large illustrations and pictures to attract the non-literate as well as the more educated. But what I wanted to emphasize here is the central place the magazine occupies within the frame. While the bible of the previous picture exposes only a plain cover, the easily identifiable label of the publication stands out by the way they are holding it up. The magazine further seems to organise the action in the picture and bind the three men in its common reading. The bible in the first picture is just set down in a corner and plays no obvious role in the picture. In contrast, it becomes impossible to ignore the magazine in the second picture: the man on the right points to the content of the pages, the other two are looking down, pretending to read it, while the one on the left holds up another rolled up magazine, like a torch.

These two pictures hence illustrate a series of changes in the role objects play and its position in the pictures, implying a difference in the way the photographic subject relates to them. Barely twenty-five years separate these two pictures. In the space of that time, the country went through many economic changes, namely a shift away from mining and towards the manufacturing sector. By the end of the Second World War, consumer goods were becoming readily available to a larger proportion of the population. A magazine or a photograph are good examples of consumer goods: unnecessary for one’s survival, it is produced in mass and not meant to last a long time but rather be consumed time and again. While marketing strategies were targeting a “Black market” from the 1940s onwards, the apartheid economy still relied on keeping the wage of Africans as low as possible, hence limiting Black’s ability to consume. Yet consumption seemed to play a big role in people’s motivation to move to town and their experience of an urban lifestyle. In the Ngilima studio and street portraits, people are posing with LPs, cigarettes, radios, bicycles, etc. in the performance style that characterises township portraiture. I suggest that this new selection of props is representative of new patterns of consumption.
In the previous chapter, we looked at the emergence of a distinct African urban identity, based a common lived experience of the township and its major socialising institutions. This chapter further explores the theme of an emerging African urban identity, through the particular angle of consumption. How did consumer goods acquire meaning and value for a population that could in majority not afford them? What is the role of consumption in the articulation of an urban identity? How did photography participate in this process?

Photographs of the 1940s and 50s, I argue, depict subjects experiencing consumption or staging out their material aspirations by displaying a privileged relationship to objects. Two styles of photography in particular are deeply related to the theme of consumption: the movie snaps and the township portraits. Movie snaps depict Black subjects walking through the main shopping streets of the city, at times absorbed by the reflections of the shopping windows. Yet, the political and economic reality behind the surface of this apparently pleasurable mise-en-scène points to the ambiguous dimension of the pictures, which reflect for the complexities of the apartheid economy as a whole.

Coming back from the city centre, Africans imported the enchantment of consumption inside the space of the informal studio of the township. The Ngilima studio portraits give us an insight into what objects people chose to pose with and how they visually engaged with it. My main argument is that these private photographs illustrate how objects came to occupy a more central part in people’s lives, and how they came to define aspirations and identities in the 1950s, at a moment when South Africa was experiencing a major shift towards a consumerist, manufacturing economy. As both a product and a vehicle of this social and cultural change, studio photography from the township visualises a growing Black consumer-consciousness. The historical progression reveals itself when the early studio photographs from the 1910s and 20s are contrasted with the movie snaps and township photographs from the 1950s.

I. Early studio photography: props as symbols of civilisation

The picture of Mr. Molele has shown us that objects already played an important role in the early studio style of photography. As seen in chapter two, the style characterised itself by the setting up of a bourgeois salon within the space of the studio, using the main artefacts of
Victorian culture. In this section, we will explore how these objects came to work as symbols of civilisation in order to understand why they became essential props for studio photography.

**Consumption as a mark of civilisation**
Consumption, as Burke suggest, is a key issue around which fundamental debates concerning the role of Black people in the economy and the colonising mission were constructed.\(^{167}\)

Consumption must be understood in the 19\(^{th}\) century British perspective, in its link to the broader colonial project. It integrated the colonial subject within the larger imperial economy and encouraged the use of money. It was also argued that the creation of consumerist desires in the native would make him a docile worker, as it will naturally lead him to “want” to sell his labour to acquire these goods.

Evangelists in South Africa adhered to this absolute faith in the positive attributes of the market. “By its graces the social order was animated and shaped: an ethos of enterprise was induced in right-minded people; persons of energy and discipline were rewarded…”. It was believed that consumption could be the motor for new desires, new exertions, new forms of wealth, perhaps even a new society.\(^{168}\) the African would learn to want and use these European things in a refined Christian manner. Missionary education and later some of the African churches played a key role in linking consumption to the notion of civilisation and progress. They stressed on economic advancement and encouraged their followers to invest in good furniture for example. In the early 1960s, a sociological survey identified that the acquisition of furniture was not so much linked to level of income but rather whether or not the household belonged to a church community.

Advertisement, as the major tool for promoting consumption, also put forward the notion that in the consumption of their goods laid the advancement of the Bantu race and promised equal membership to the ‘universal humanity’.\(^{169}\) These advertisements, mainly for white-owned businesses and inserted in newspapers for Black readership, bluntly articulated the adoption of white standards of beauty with social ascension:

> “Do you want to improve your position? Every man and woman has this desire, but perhaps there is a slight suspicion of colour accentuated by frizzy hair, and

\(^{167}\) Burke 1996
\(^{168}\) Camoroffs 1997: 219
\(^{169}\) van Robboek 2008: 214
you are barred. Percine removes that suspicion, and opens up avenues in the employment field at wages that were previously unthought of.¹⁷⁰

Yet the consumption of certain products by Africans was not welcomed by all parts of settler society. By consuming certain products previously only used by Whites, Blacks were threatening the very divide between the civilised and the savages by which segregation was justified. There was a sense that Whites needed to keep a standard of living above all other groups. For an African to ‘waste’ his money a gramophone or such luxury goods was not just suspicious (‘where did he get the money?’), it was looked upon as a something ridiculous and inappropriate. The British seemed to have found a way out of this contradiction (needing Black market yet maintaining White standards of living) via the artificial distinction between “need” and “want”. While spending money on food and other such ‘necessities’ was good for the economy, spending it on liquor, cigarettes, fashion clothes…was simply arrogant and to be scolded.

**Prop as a symbol**

As a key issue in the articulation of racial relationships, consumption also became the site for blurring the colour line. It is significant for example that the first aspiring Africans to wear top hats provoked much of an uproar in the local press. The role of objects in studio photography becomes clearer when one takes this dimension into account. The objects were part of the strategy to claim equality with Whites (and distance from pagan Africans) through the use of bourgeois iconography. The early studio pictures are evidence of the familiarity of aspiring Africans with western goods and fashion by the turn of the century. The sharpness of large-format photography offered to the eye of the viewer the pleasure of picking out the details of accessories such as the pipe, the watch, the rosary, the umbrella, the book (usually the bible), European clothing in general (trousers, shoes, tall hats, gloves, bows or ties, long skirts and blouses with lace and ribbons…). There are also objects around them in the backdrop whose purpose was to convey a bourgeois environment: chairs, the velvet curtain, the fake column, the vase holding a bouquet of flowers, the first steps of a staircase. As argued in chapter two, these heavy (looking) objects, many of which were permanently fixed to the shooting set, suggested stability of private property. The clients’ choice of props was probably limited to the fashion accessories they would wear. As a sitter, their role was to

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¹⁷⁰ advertisement for hair straightener, Imvo Zabantsundu, 1927. In van Robbroeck 2008: 213
ensure that their persona ‘fitted’ the salon so that the prestige of these foreign goods could be transferred to them. While certain clients managed to convey the confidence as the potential owners of these things (see photo 2.1), others looked rather ill at ease in this formal preset arrangement of space that was perhaps not theirs (photo 4.3, note the way the woman made her pinkies stand out).

Nevertheless in the choice of representation, this new elite was “redefining the public symbolism of status”, in contrast to the more traditional perception of wealth, which revolved around ownership of land, cattle and women\textsuperscript{171}. These prestige objects played the classic role of props in the photographs: they helped complete the illusion of the studio and guided the

\textsuperscript{171} Burke 1996: 194
principle protagonist (the subject) in his performance. Rather than occupying the front of the picture, these props are relegated to being part of the décor, integrated in a larger amalgamation of details. I argue that in early studio photography, objects functioned as symbols: they conveyed status to the beholder because they stood for European culture, education, Christian morality, bourgeois respectability, etc.

Just like the consumption of manufactured things signalled one’s affiliation to these cultural connotations, the refusal to consume was equally a strong message of cultural identity. Anthropologist Pauw noted in the 1960s that the ‘Red’ Xhosas made a point of rejecting consumption and the lifestyle associated with it. They perceived their stay in town as a hardship to endure in order to raise money that they would save carefully for cattle, lobola (dowry) and such things. To be sure, migrant workers would also bring back goods like fabric, dresses, beads and metal products from their stay in town. The reality of the economy of consumption therefore exceeded this simple binary between the ‘Reds’ and ‘Schools’. Nevertheless in people’s perception, consumption, as a “central issue in a war between change and tradition”172, became an important marker of identity, a way of visually expressing one’s cultural affiliation.

II. The city centre: the mirage of window shopping

In this section, we move away from the ‘salon’ of the studio to enter the city centre of Johannesburg through the intermediary of ‘movie snaps’. In chapter two, I presented the movie snaps as a style of street photography that became globally popular around the period of the Second World War173. They are pictures taken incognito of pedestrians walking down a commercial street. The dynamic visual effect combined with the urban landscape in the background draw the contours of a particular urban space, different to the modern ‘salon’ and the ‘native’ township: that of the city centre. Within this space, the photographed subjects are portrayed as potential shoppers. To grasp the ambiguities of this representation, one needs to read the movie snaps against the backdrop of rapid industrialisation and emerging yet refrained African consumption of mass-produced goods.

172 Stearns 2001: 105
173 The earliest picture of the sort that I found carried the date 1942 on it, but a person in Cape Town that I interviewed claimed it had been around since the early 30s.
A manufacturing revolution
The Second World War gave the initial critical impetus to launch a period of intense industrialisation. At the time of early studio photography, the South African economy was still dominated by mining and agriculture. While manufactured goods were being imported as far back as the 1870s, little encouragement was at first given to develop local manufactures. By the First World War, manufacturing was still largely limited to the production of fairly basic consumer goods and goods required by the gold mines (gum boots, explosives). The Second World War generated an unprecedented local and international demand for consumer goods, especially by the embattled Allied countries whose economy was furthermore affected by the war. Their strong gold reserve, the shortage of imported goods and the South African economy being left undamaged by the war, meant that the country was in a good position to respond to this demand. The South African government thus adopted a more aggressive import substitute policy and took measures to protect local manufactures from foreign competition. By 1938, the total volume in output more than doubled its previous peak level 1929/30. By 1943, the manufacturing industry had become the single largest contributor to the gross national product, and took up the role of driver of the economy, a role the mining industry had traditionally held until then. While many White South Africans had gone abroad to fight the war and the number of highly skilled foreign workers sank dramatically, the local demand for labourers seemed insatiable. Between 1936 and 1951 the number of African male workers employed in industry increased by more than 100%, and surpassed that of African miners by 1943.

Debates among industrialist, policy-makers, and state commissions arose concerning the role of Africans in the national economy. The economic system rooted in discrimination and inequality initially created by white farmers was later on transplanted to the mining industry. However this low-wage, low-productivity system could not be an appropriate basis for the development of a secondary industry. The demand for labour had dramatically changed: while mining needed a handful of highly skilled men and a large flexible supply of unskilled labour, manufacturing required in almost every branch trained, adaptable and motivated workers in order to achieve higher productivity. The migrant labour system, with its high turnover and the colour bars that prevented Blacks from doing semi-skilled or skilled work was thus

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174 Feinstein 2005:115
175 Feinstein 2005: 123
inconsistent with these new demands. Industrialists in favour of economic reforms found stark opposition from the mine industrialists: allowing Blacks to rise in the labour hierarchy supposed increasing their wages, which would then put pressure on the mining wages too, as workers would increasingly leave the mines to go and work in the factories.

The contradiction of this economy meant that the low wages for Africans, while reducing costs of production, at the same time undermined the potential local demand and their potential for further expansion. The mining industry did not care for the local market, as they knew for every once of gold they produced, there was a guaranteed market for it abroad. However, the manufacturing industry could not easily export its products, because the low productivity that the colour bars entailed made them too uncompetitive. They thus relied much more on a domestic market, which was limited essentially to the small white settler society as long as the Black population was still condemned to extreme poverty. There was much reluctance among settlers to recognise the important role of African consumption and permit Africans to consume “white” goods. This position slowly changed however, when the general economic expansion and prosperity of the 1940s and 50s, combined with the beginning of decolonisation elsewhere in Africa spurred an interest in metropolitan commercial circles in African markets. Numerous books and articles reviewed and assessed these new African national markets, so that by the late 1950s market researchers took an interest to discover “African taste” and launched in depth investigation on the “Bantu customs”. Advertisers took up the missionary’s civilising mission of manufacturing a new African personhood, with the desire to create new African subjectivities:

“From the outset, we must realise that almost all our efforts in the African market should be designed predominantly to change culture-the traditional way of doing things- and in some instances even to introduce ideas which are foreign to and contradict tradition and, therefore, will meet with resistance…”\textsuperscript{176}

\textbf{Shopping in the city centre}

From 1870s onwards, retailing stores supplying African clients, called the ‘truck trade’, had facilitated the penetration of manufactured objects into even the most remote farm and rural native reserves. European colonizers and evangelists sough not only to cultivate in Non-European people a taste for Western things but also to have them to use these objects in

\textsuperscript{176} Advertisement executor J.E. Maroun in 1960, quoted in Burke 1996: 125
specific ways by implanting new cultures of consumption. One aspect of this new culture is the practice of shopping, or buying as a leisure hobby. It is an activity that remained exclusive to the city centre, as it involved a whole sensorial experience within a particular geographical space. The shopping experience includes the excitement of the busy streets, the visual spectacle of the dazzling windowpanes showing off a far vaster range of consumer and luxury goods, the pleasure of looking around, the anticipation of finding something special… The special perspective in the movie snaps translates the dynamism of the city centre. Ambling down the commercial streets of the city centre was a particular characteristic of cities.

4.4. Living the shopping experience of Johannesburg. Movie snap (date unknown), private collection, David Goldblatt.

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178 One can cite for example the famous pedestrian street called “las Amblas” in Barcelona.
The movie snaps embodies much of this leisure dimension of consumption. The movie snap in itself is an object of leisure, without any functional purpose other than keeping a record of a pleasant afternoon. One can easily imagine the client flattered by the unexpected attention of the mysterious photographer as he hands him/her over the ticket. Much like the emerging marketing and advertisement strategies, movie snap photography was about convincing potential clients that they wanted something they never really asked for. In the movie snaps, you see Black subjects ambling through the city centre: the shopping windows are clearly visible behind them, as well as the silhouette of goods on display. In several of these pictures, the targeted person is not even looking at the photographer, his or her gaze seems to be caught by the promising commodities exhibited behind the glass and piled on street stalls. Hence these pictures show the attraction of consumption at work on the photographed subject, while offering a duplication of the show, an opportunity to gaze at oneself gazing at the windows. In this sense, they illustrate Schwarty and Przyblyski’s point that cities became the “crystallisation of the spectacle of modern life.” Movie snaps, with the game of different gazes at work (of the subject looking at the windows, of the anonymous eye of the photographer), are the results of the process by which urbanisation developed its fundamental visual character. In the second half of the 19th century, cities initiated new modes and surfaces to communicate visually: electric signs, billboards, banners, fliers... Department stores in particular imposed a new visual spectacle, via the lavishly decorated shopping windows, hence innovating the notion of shopping as a recreation.

**Contested terrains**

The movie snaps are in my opinion profoundly ambiguous when set against the contemporary political situation of the 1940s and the radicalisation of racial policies, which culminated with the beginning of the apartheid regime in 1948. The city centre developed along the policies of segregation, which, as the economic expansion claimed more and more land, designed an arsenal of laws to legalise forced removals and slum clearances, so as to push the ‘native’ locations further away from the centre (see chapter three, section I.1). Consequently, the physical presence of Black people in the city centre was contingent on specific conditions, such as the possession of papers (the *passbook*) and having a White employer. It is important also to remember that under the Urban Act the access to the city centre was limited by a

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179 Schwartz and Przyblyski 2004: 165
curfew. Any native found in the city after 8 pm without a valid pass from his or her employer could be subjected to punishment.

A closer look into the geographical details of the shooting location gives us further indications about the possible significance of these photographs. The ‘movie snap’ photographers would be waiting for their fleeting clients along Eloff Street and Rissik Street, the two main and prestigious retail shopping streets. Eloff Street was also one of the busy pedestrian streets that linked the main train station (Park Station) to the city centre. Buses and trams would drop Africans at the periphery of the city, so that Africans had to walk to the rest of the way. It was a symbolic way of reminding Blacks of their inferior status in this space of white rule: excluded from using the inner city trams, Blacks had to enter the city walking, while White could swoosh past in their cars or trams.

Yet, the camera didn’t seem to make any racial distinction between black and white individuals in its choice of subject. In the background, behind the targeted person, one can distinguish people of different ethnic groups walking towards the photographer. On the brink of the apartheid era, the movie snaps are rare evidence of Black and White people sharing a common space, suggesting Johannesburg’s cosmopolitan character. Furthermore, Black people figuring on the movie snaps do not strike as subjects consciously submitted to policing control. They are depicted as urbanites walking confidently down familiar streets or enjoying the spectacle of the windowpanes. I thus suggest movie snaps imagine the city centre as a “contested terrain, where new commercial spaces, (…) and a range of public spectacles and reform activities inspired a different set of social actors to assert their own claims to self-creation in the public domain”180.

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180 Walkowitz, in Schwartz and Przyblyski 2004:207
The ambiguities of ‘economic democracy’
The consumerist ideology of Europe and the United States, just like the camera, promised to be colour blind: “Consumption was economic democracy, a generously provided pluralism of goods and services in which the vox populi was king and ‘choice’ reigned supreme”\(^{181}\). There is an ambivalent dimension of democratization inherent to the industrial revolution and which comes out in the movie snaps. Through manufacture economy, goods are produced in large scale, thus becoming affordable to larger masses and challenging the monopsony (singly buyer) of the higher classes on these goods. Capitalist claims to universality (currently translated in logos like “United Colours of Benetton”) clearly contradicted the economic

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\(^{181}\) Burke 1996: 127
policy of the time, dedicated to secure eternal white supremacy. Yet it seems as if capitalism can accommodate such contradictions to a certain extent: while waiting for increasing political rights, in the meantime Africans could elect the toothpaste or the beauty queen of their choice.

Hence, to be photographed in this street was to be captured at the heart of economic activity and the temple of consumption. According to Sowetan ex-photographer Uncle Dan (see box nr. 5, chapter 1), the popularity of the movie snaps among Black people came from the fact that they are represented in a way that includes them in this exciting environment. Taking into account the economic reality of African wages, the depicted African subject could probably not afford to buy most of the things in display behind the windowpanes. Yet the camera gives a chance to “enter a space from which they are actually excluded”\textsuperscript{182}. Windowpanes promises to offer some form of consolation to the poorer classes, giving to everybody the chance of at least looking, (but at the same time creates the new desires and frustrations in those who can merely look). Movie snaps function much the same way: they give to the excluded masses the possibility of being visually included in a space and practice of consumption through the exercise of gazing.

III. Back to the (home) studio: staging consumption in the townships, 1950s.

The shopping experience from the city centre, its glamour effect and its sensual stimulation on the subjects, was imported into the township and visualised in the ‘home-made’ photographs. While the movie snaps only depict the subject looking at the windowpanes, the informal space of the township studio was used to experiment with modern objects on one’s own terms, regardless of one’s level of income. These experiments with modernity are all the more meaningful, when one takes into account the history of trade in the townships.

Limiting native trade and consumption
As seen in the previous section, African consumption was limited by the miserable wages fixed by the Wage Board. Wages were calculated according to what the worker needed for a

\textsuperscript{182} Behrend 1998: 227
basic living, excluding the costs of maintaining a family. Until 1955, wages were not indexed along the rates of inflation, leading to an actual squeezing of African’s purchasing power, in favour of white workers\textsuperscript{183}. It was hence very difficult for workers to save money as every penny was used for daily survival. Reduced to the role of cheap labour power, Africans were essentially limited to the consumption of basic goods. Furthermore, the system impeded Blacks from earning money in ways other than through employment wages. As seen in chapter one, barriers to credit and the required administrative procedures and restraints made it virtually impossible for Africans to open their own business. The Urban Act restricted the range of commodities available to the African population, as well as the number of different retailing points, resulting in a ratio of about one shop per 1000 families\textsuperscript{184}. Licenses were given out to cater the “basic necessities” of African people (fish-fryers, milk-shop, fruit and vegetable shop, butcher, bakery…), while specialist shops like photographic studios were excluded, as they did not fit the criterion of ‘reasonable needs’ (see chapter 1, section ‘Photography as work?’). The shopping experience in the locations was thus limited to street hawkers and these badly lit \textit{spaza} stores (corner shop) without refrigeration system. Given these limitations, Soweto was all but Johannesburg’s “twin city”.

Even today, one only does the immediate last-minute, basic groceries at the \textit{spaza}. Sowetans prefer to go shopping in the sophisticated, shiny malls that have been built there the past few years. When the massive Maponya Mall opened its doors in 2007, there was a sense of historical justice being achieved: “Today I have brought Sandton City to Soweto”, declared its founder. Perhaps the sense of pride and revenge comes from a reaction against the obligatory grim \textit{spaza} shopping. “We don’t even need to go to town (Johannesburg) anymore. We have the whole world right here, in Soweto. I’m telling you, Soweto is \textit{happening}”, explained my friend Laurence, a young man from Limpopo. Living with my host family in Orlando allowed me to observe through daily incidents and conversations how crucial the theme of consumption is in people’s daily life. But rather than being a recent phenomenon coinciding with the end of apartheid and the recent liberalisation of the economy, I propose to consider the Ngilima portraits of the 1950s as evidence of Blacks’ earlier engagement with new manufactured consumerist goods. What do these pictures tell us about Blacks’ evolving relationship to consumption in the 1950s? What was the role of photography in this process?

\textsuperscript{183} Bonner, Delius and Posel 1993: 25
\textsuperscript{184} Beavon 2004: 140
Reframing the props

As we have seen earlier in this chapter, the use of objects as essential props in the fabrication of a ‘believable’ fiction is not something new in photography. Yet in this section, I argue that the choice of objects, their place in the picture and the way the subjects pose with them, indicate a clear evolution of the role of props. The first difference that one notices in the Ngilima pictures, is that the choice of goods has since then greatly expanded: you see subjects eagerly posing with packs of cigarette, a birthday cake, an illustrated magazine, a dummy telephone, an LP or a disc player, a radio set, a bicycle…They are mainly manufactured and at times technological objects which would be qualified as modern consumer goods.

Second, the spatial location of the props within the frame evolved as the photographer shifted his composition and placed the object at the centre of the frame.

In picture number 4.6, Robert composed the picture in such a way as to put well in view the cluster of things set out on the table. The two chairs carefully pulled out frame the contents of the table, and seem to invite the viewer to come closer and have a sit.
More subtly, there is third of all an evolution in the function of props in relation to the other elements in the photographs. In the early studio pictures, there was a calculated coherence between background, subject and props. Props ranged from watches to books, but mainly stayed within the range of dress accessories. In other words, the props did not particularly stand out, they were not singled out but were rather blended into an ensemble of things and general body language, which together reconstructed the bourgeois salon. Aspiring to a realist aesthetic, the preformatted harmony and balance between the elements laid out within the frame was essential to make the fiction ‘believable’. As a result, the bible in the first picture of this chapter, while being an important vessel of meaning, is only discreetly set down at Mr. Molele’s feet. Township pictures in contrast were not submitted to the same obligations of coherency than early studio photography. With the subject’s own private home as the background for the picture, s/he could choose to display objects that had no link with the rest of the picture. Not concerned with the same pressures of producing a believable fiction, the photographed scene can fall outside of the logic of ‘common sense’. A bicycle can thus be
found in the middle in the living room; thick winter clothes will be worn and showed off in the enclosed space of the informal studio (4.7). The incoherency within the picture creates an effect of surprise; one cannot help but notice these objects.

4.7 Winter coat with radio and vase. Ronald Ngilima, East Rand township, early 1950s.

The fourth and last difference relates to the subject’s attitude to the object. Through a range of gestures, the subject invites the attention of viewer to focus on the object s/he is presenting to the camera. In these pictures, you see fingers pointing at the bottle of alcohol, hands holding out a Zonk! magazine or the music disc in clear view of the camera. Clients often posed with the props, pretending o speak on the phone or gesturing towards the vase.

These four tactics outlined above mean that the eyes of the viewer are inevitably drawn to the objects displayed in the Ngilima pictures. In other words, the object slips from being just a side prop in the background to being visually pushed to the forefront of the picture. I would suggest, we can draw a parallel between the new central place the props took in the pictures and the one consumer objects took in people’s lives. The acquisition of a new object, for
example, becomes the main event that motivates the photographic exercise. Photographer Anne Sasson (co-curator with David Goldblatt) writes about the photographs that were exhibited at the Market Theatre in 1976, a collection of random uncollected studio pictures from the 1970s that the curators found in processing labs and photo studios in town:

“The studios used props to suggest a middle-class domestic environment eg dummy telephone, plastic flowers in a vase, patterned rug on the floor, curtains - and one had a painted backdrop of a seascape(…). Some photographs seemed to be taken especially to show off a new purchase - a record held up or propped in front of the client, new clothes, even a pack of cigarettes being displayed. One man celebrating a new outfit had taken off one shoe to show a snazzy sock.”

Anne’s comments, although concerning photographs from a later period and from town studios, confirm the trends that one can already observe in the pictures from early 50s: consumption as a practice and a signpost of identity becomes a central theme for township photography.

**Performing consumption**

In picture 4.8, two men seem absorbed by the LP discs and the record player that is set on a table between the two of them, next to a pile of discs. The two sitting bodies frame the musical contents of the table, so that it occupies the middle point of the picture. Furthermore, the two men are passing an LP to each other: both are holding it with one hand and visibly pointing towards it with the other. A pair of eyes are looking down at the LP, which draws yet another visual axe towards the LP they hold. There is no question about it: the photograph is as much about the LP and record player than about the subjects themselves. These pictures suggest that the relationship between people and objects was becoming more interactive and personalised.

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In the early studio pictures, people posed with the object in way that suggested a passive relationship of pretended ownership with it. In the Ngilima pictures, the main difference is that people posed with objects while staging the very act of consuming it, thus establishing a dynamic and active relationship with it. The pictures depict subjects playing the piano, lighting up a candle, smoking a cigarette, pouring a glass of whiskey, drinking from a tea cup…There is a strong theatrical dimension that comes across in these pictures, in the way the subjects interact with each other in group pictures, but also in the way they interact with objects individually. In another picture for example, the young man is posing with the photo enlarger set on the dining table. One hand is fiddling with the aperture of the lens, the other is lifting the board on which the picture is to be projected, and where one can distinguish a picture of a couple. The young man is thus displaying his understanding of this piece of technology, what it is for and how one uses it. This example underlines the performing aspect of consumption: it is not enough simply to own an expensive jacket, one needs to know how to ‘wear it’ and perform the role associated with this piece of clothing in order to ‘pull it off’. The informal studio provides the space and the occasion for rehearsing new roles: the subjects can fashion themselves as modern subjects through practices of (staged) consumption.
Global connectedness

No one is quite sure whether the wealth displayed in the early studio photographs really belonged to the depicted client. The movie snaps depict Black walking past and admiring the shopping windows they can only look at. Similarly, Blacks used the space of their informal studio to stage ownership over objects that they were probably unable to afford. “We found two photographs of the same two boys with one smart sweater, one wore it in one shot and the other had it on in the other shot”, observed Anne Sasson. In the Ngilima collection, similar examples were found where friends alternated posing individually with the prop. Similarly, in Kinshasa of the 1980s, the *sapeurs* would share each other’s various items of clothing, so that each could take turns to wear the complete suit that neither of them could own fully as a single person\(^\text{186}\). Such practices, I argue, constitute alternative ways for people with restricted means to participate to the consumerist hype. As Lury points out, “while poverty restricts the possibility of participating in consumptions, it does not necessarily prevent—indeed, it may incite—participation in consumer culture”\(^\text{187}\). With studio photography, ownership of material goods ceases to be the precondition to take part in the act of consumption. The photograph substitutes the object with a permanent visual evidence of one’s staged consumption of it\(^\text{188}\).

For example, the telephone, one of the most recurrent props in the studio pictures of the 1960s, did not enter the townships until the late 80s or even later. In my friend Thabo’s words: “it was not easy for a person [to have a phone] despite having cattle or what. To have a phone! by then, electricity or water in the yard [was becoming widespread, but] having a phone! as a black person, that was quite unheard of”. Under these circumstances, posing with a dummy telephone was a humble way of compensating for this lack of services, a way of experimenting with an exciting new mode of communication, which came to symbolise white affluence.

Symbolically, it was also a way to break the seclusion of the ghetto. When discussing the popularity of posing with the telephone in the 1960s, Thabo, a young historian from Alexandra township, interpreted it as an effort to visually manifest Black’s connection to the rest of the world and to modernity: “I think it’s to say look, we are now getting to things of being connected. We are now made of these things”.


\(^{188}\) Behrend 2002b: 54
Clothes were another way of marking one’s global connectedness. Young men from the townships, particularly the tsotsis, had developed a particular taste for foreign expensive brands. An extract of Blake Modisane’s autobiography further sheds light on this point:

“...The well-dressed man about Sophiatown was exclusively styled with American and English labels unobtainable around the shops of Johannesburg; the boys were expensively dressed in a stunning ensemble of colour; ‘Jewished’ in their phraseology; in dress items described as ‘can’t gets’; clothes sent for from New York or London. Shoes from America-Florsheims, Winthrops, Saxone and Manfield from London; BVD’s Van Heusen, Arrow shirts, suits from Simpsons, Hector Powe, Robert Hall; Dobbs, Woodrows, Borsolino hats. The label was the thing.”\textsuperscript{189}

\textsuperscript{189} Modisane 1963: 50
Acquiring these international fashion labels was a way of rebelling against the determinism of poverty but also against the increasing restrictions on freedom of movement. The passbook and the influx control policies ensured that Africans were restricted from circulating beyond a certain region (let alone outside of the country), or after a certain time of the day. Wearing clothes from London or New York was a way to transcend geographical and financial limitations imposed by the system of apartheid. Hence the clothes presented in the township portraits do not just stand for status of wealth but also for the ability to reach out beyond the limits of the township. The space of the photography studio offers the promise of escaping the township: the backdrop functions as a common denominator, a neutral surface which doesn’t betray the realities of one’s shabby home.

Consumption as a marker of social classes

Beyond the space of his studio, Ronald also took pictures inside people’s homes. Whereas the studio background and main props reflected Ronald’s means as a studio photographer, the objects in these pictures supposedly belonged to the depicted person. As a consequence, the degree of cluttered goods seen within the picture directly suggests the person’s level of wealth and his/her cultural background. Obviously, it is possible that the client altered his/her home and included things that did not usually belong the house for the photographic occasion. Yet many of Ronald’s pictures were taken spontaneously, as he was passing in the neighbourhood. The things that one perceives in the photograph can hence be considered as indicators- at least to a certain extent-of the person’s belonging to a certain social class. By 1955, sociologist Ellen Hellman had started to observe a slow process of emerging social classes in the township. The process of urbanisation, with the new range of jobs and informal trades one had in the city, brought new opportunities to accumulate money and redefined the social hierarchy in terms of class prestige, it being associated with “different occupational and educational levels and a different way of life”. Hellman identified the possession of furniture, clothes, books, and recreational patterns as the external signs of this phenomenon. In his 1963 study of urban Xhosas in East London, sociologist B.E Pauw established a correlation between types of occupation and the level of material culture. A white-collar employee will most definitely have a well-furnished house, whereas a semi-skilled or unskilled worker’s acquisition of furniture will depend not only on his level of

\[190\] Hellman 1955
income, but also on other factors such as his cultural preference, his belonging to a church
group, level of education…191. The diversity in the Ngilima collection gives us a sense of this
class formation. Robert, as an ambulant photographer, was astonishingly mobile, both
geographically and socially (ethnic group/class). The bicycle gave Robert the mobility to
move around and beyond the township, to the next town (Actonville), the neighbouring
mining compounds and factory zone. Together, these pictures give us sense of the material
disparities between different households. In picture 4.10, an apparently elderly woman is
holding her child (or grandchild) on her knees. The raw handcrafted bench on which she is
sitting, the iron sheet of her shack in the background, together with the tatted clothes and the
bare feet suggest her relative state of poverty. In contrast, in picture 4.11, Mrs. January sits
comfortably on manufactured chair, dressed in a flowery dress, shoes, wearing earring as well
as a hairpin. She is sitting next to a big bouquet of flower in a vase, which rests on the lace
that covers the coffee table. About her are other pieces of furniture, while the shelves are
cluttered with infinite decorative objects (wooden statues, framed images, glass ashtrays,
different cups and glasses…) and the walls decorated by a hand-tinted portrait and a calendar.
The floor is covered in what looks like carpet, while the smooth white walls suggest a well-
built house made of brick instead of corrugated iron sheets. Mrs. Susan January was a
coloured woman living in a state mine in Reinswood, used as the government’s showcase in
terms of working and living conditions192.

191 Pauw 1963: 29-37
192 Interview with Aunt Gobi…
4.10 Woman and child on a bench. Ronald Ngilima, location unknown, mid-1950s.
There is a range of pictures depicting interiors that fall somewhere in between these two examples stated above: for example, in a picture one can discern that the floor is probably made of dirt instead of being cement, but the teacup and the woman’s elegance seem to make up for the overall shabbiness of the place. In another picture, a beautiful piano takes up much of the seemingly narrow room and clashes with the washing hanging on a line behind it and the bareness of the walls. Most pictures present a cluster of random non-matching furniture that looks second-hand, but will also show a single item of “luxury” good, like a gas cooker, a piano, a room divider. As Hellman wrote back in 1955, the emergence of classes was still at its early development, which is why “the lines between classes are not rigid. There is, as one would expect of a system that is in the making, considerable fluidity and a degree of mobility greater even than in the European open class system.”\(^{193}\)

\(^{193}\) Hellman 1955: 144
Conclusion

Interesting to note, photographs are one type of good that was found in all households, regardless of its socio-economic class or cultural background (see chapter 3, section ‘Nuances’). As itself a consumer object, photographs found in both ends of the social ladder seem to exemplify the promising democratising aspect of the manufacturing revolution of the 1940s and 50s. Yet while photographs were increasingly easy to get, the objects depicted within the frame were not. The paradoxes of the apartheid economy meant that while it created materialist desires in people, it also maintained them to a limited ascribed role in the economy. Rather than reflecting a real economic redistribution of wealth, these photographs point to an evolution in people’s relationship to objects of consumption, as they try to grapple with these paradoxes. Whether as a marker of social class or of one’s connection with the world, township photography shows how central consumption became in the fashioning of urban identities. Through the process of photographic self-creation, Blacks were able to experiment with objects of consumption, including those out of their reach and fashion themselves as modern individuals, connected to the national and international economy of goods. These township photographs hence depict Black people struggling to find their position in a changing economy, one that is increasingly oriented towards consumption but also towards the maintenance of white domination. In Uncle Dan’s words, reacting to the Ngilima pictures: “These pictures show people who are struggling to be something acceptable in the western world”.
Chapter 5:

WOMEN AND THEIR PHOTOGRAPHS

“Now look here. Would you believe this is me?”, Aunty Phindi exclaims as she shows me a first picture, exploding in her hearty and characteristic laugh. She is obviously very proud of this photograph, which depicts her as a young glowing bride in a white dress. The object of her pride is not so much the wedding itself, but rather her glowing beauty, her youth, her slimness, the beautiful dress-in short the image of herself at the peak of her youth. I expected her next to show me the usual portrait of the married couple, but to my surprise, both the image and the name of the husband remained concealed. I later found out that her marriage hadn’t last very long. After the divorce, she swore to herself never to re-marry. Aunty Phindi is one of the many strong female figures I encountered in Soweto, with a relatively rich collection of photographs. During the interview, she showed me a picture of her mother probably dating from the late 1920s (5.?). As I starred at the various pictures laid out in front of me, I kept wondering how these two women could possibly be mother and daughter. The pictures evoked two worlds that were just so different: the sternness of her mother’s doek (headscarf) and prim, ironed skirt, her clasped hands contrasted with Phindi’s picture, where she holds a relaxed smile, high eyebrows and matching high heels.

Aunty Phindi’s collection is particularly relevant of the fundamental shift in the role of women in urban society. Her pictures raise some of the key issues concerning evolving notions and representations of femininity. The main question this chapter seeks to answer is how women managed to adapt the traditional regime of female representation to their new
gender identity and what role photography played in the shaping of this ‘modern girl’ identity. The first section of this chapter explores the historical background of this female migration to the cities, a phenomenon that took off from the 1930s onwards. While gender relationships were adjusting to the new urban setting, ideals of womanhood inherited from Victorian and missionary culture had no choice but to evolve. How was a good wife supposed to remain in the cosiness of the domestic home while facing the obligation to work to make ends meet? The second section addresses the notion of respectability, fundamental not just to the bourgeois elite but also much of the working class population. The new emerging figure of the single-mother put in question the foundations of respectability, previously based on the marriage institution. In a third section, I argue that this new foundation of respectability enabled women to break free from previous Victorian conventions and express their sensuality more openly in their pictures. In the last section, I proceed to analyse in a more anthropological approach how my different interviewees present their life narrative through their pictures. The different life stories that I came across pointed to a strong correlation between an acute interest in collecting pictures and these women’s consciousness and affirmation of their autonomy.

Throughout this chapter, the biographies of the various women I interviewed in Soweto come out in separate frames. As in chapter one, this system of boxes facilitates the articulation between the broader social historical changes and these individual life stories, between the macro and micro histories. I do not perceive these framed biographies as mere illustrations of broader phenomena. In the contrary, the occasional disjunction between the two histories brings out the special character of each person’s path and resists the homogenising effect of generalisations. I thus hope the box system will give each of these ‘case studies’ a human face.
I. ‘Unattached’ women

Urbanization and women: 1930s-1950s
In chapter three, we saw that black women were the central figure in the unprecedented wave of African migration to the cities from the 1930s to 1950s. If in 1911 women numbered 19% of the total urban African population, the proportion increased to 33% by 1946, and 42.5% by 1970. Various sociologists such as Hellman, Pauw, and Meyer observed back in the 1950s and 60s the particular attraction that urbanisation had on those who had little to loose in the countryside: sons who were not entitled to inheritance, and in particular women. The strongly patriarchal nature of African traditional culture assigned women to a subordinate status, excluding them from process of decision-making and lines of inheritance. As Walker argued, the state, realising the benefits of a system that kept women to agriculture, played a

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194 Bonner in Walker 1990: 222
195 Hellman, 1974: 14
big role in the strengthening of this patriarchal system\textsuperscript{196}. The institutionalisation of customary laws “shore(d) up the patriarchal authority of chiefs and homestead heads and tie(d) African women to homestead production”. Strenuous relationships with the extended family and with the mother-in-law encouraged many women to escape to the urban pockets. Others went to town in a desperate attempt to find their husbands, who had dissolved into the cities as migrant worker. But as Bonner points out, the advanced degree of pauperisation and the social breakdown in Basotho society accounts for the massive migration of the Basotho women, who formed a disproportional part of woman migration. The state was baffled by this wave of women, whose migration it was unable to control. In the 1930s, women were not (yet) obliged to carry passes, this freedom being the direct result of past struggles against passes. The authorities invariably labelled the Basotho women as ‘undesirable’, unattached, immoral and loose\textsuperscript{197}.

Adapting to urban life
A very precarious and potentially violent reality awaited these migrant women when reaching the locations. If the range of working possibilities were narrow for men, they were even more so for women. Domestic service, laundry washing, beer-brewing or prostitution were the main female economic activities. Nevertheless, one cannot overlook the implications for gender relations of women earning a livelihood independently from men: “That women and girls can keep their own economic and social footing, not by virtue of their relationship to men but in their own right-this of course is one of the greatest novelties of town life as compared with Xhosa countryside”\textsuperscript{198}. Beer-brewing in particular, while being an illegal and potentially dangerous business, was a lucrative business for women, generating up to 10 to 20 pounds a week\textsuperscript{199}. In the 1940s and 50s, a distinct class of successful female beer brewers, called the ‘shebeen queens’, began to emerge. The writer Can Themba, in his report for the City Health Department of Johannesburg, concluded that ‘queens’ owned ‘the latest models of cars and elegant houses’ with well-furnished interiors, and invested their profits in the education of their children\textsuperscript{200}.

Perhaps for the freedom the city gave them, women seemed more eager to embrace

\textsuperscript{196} Walker 1990: 18
\textsuperscript{197} Bonner in Walker 1990: 231; 250
\textsuperscript{198} Meyer 1961: 234
\textsuperscript{199} Bonner in Walker 1990. A female teacher, in comparison, earned 8 pounds a month in the late 1940s. See Mphahlele 1959:156
\textsuperscript{200} Can Themba, quoted in Goodhew 2000: 253
urban lifestyle than men, who rather tended to maintain their rural connections. According to a late 1950s survey in a East London township, more mothers than fathers (from the first generation of African urbanites, born in the early 1900-1910 and moved to Johannesburg in the 30s and 40s) were regarded as completely settled in town\textsuperscript{201}. For instance, they would be more likely to stay in town after loosing their father or husband, instead of considering moving back to their village of origin. The kind of jobs women were assigned to could also explain women’s willingness to urbanise. Domestic workers living in the backrooms of their employee’s house were constantly emerged in white urban lifestyle. “The common run of women’s employment are such as to develop and encourage town-style personal habits and wants”\textsuperscript{202}.

**Transient men**

One of the implications of this new autonomy is the increasingly dispensation of men in the maintenance of the family. The living conditions of the migrant labour system made it increasingly difficult for men and women to maintain stable sexual and familial relationships. As seen in chapter three, “new family forms emerged in the urban areas, centred on women and their children, and in which men were largely transitory figures”\textsuperscript{203}. It was estimated that the average period of cohabitation of black men and women in Johannesburg at the end of the 1930s was two years. Traditional marriages by cattle were probably more stable than this but “the volatility and flux of the urban environment seem to have exacted a heavy toll on these relationships as well”\textsuperscript{204}. As African marriage became less and less stable an institution, women asserted themselves as heads of households. But this gain in autonomy also implied that women were forced to assume more and more of the burden of homestead production.

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**The Xaba family: a line of single-parents**

Mary Xaba could be considered as one of these “unattached” women. Born around 1910 in Small Farms (near Everton), she followed some relatives to a location called Prospect, a slum next to a mine camp near Johannesburg, which quickly became overcrowded. When the slum

\textsuperscript{201} Pauw 1963
\textsuperscript{202} idem: 245
\textsuperscript{203} Walker 1990: 20
\textsuperscript{204} Bonner in Walker 1990: 240
was cleared, they were moved to Orlando in 1933, where Mary was somehow able to rent a house under her name, which would later share with her half-sister and her children. It was clearly a household run by women, living off whatever Mary earned from working as a domestic servant for the Richard family. She never felt the need to marry, but fell pregnant from a Zimbabwean who was working as a gardener in the suburbs with her. There is neither mention of his name nor of what became of him.

Mary was quite fond of having pictures of herself made. By the time she died in 1956, she left a collection of pictures, which she kept in a small little self-made album. Her collection included several pictures of herself with various different girlfriends, taken by a corner photographer (see photo 2.10). The buildings in the background suggest they were taken in town. As a domestic worker, Mary would probably live during the week with her employer in the suburbs. The various elegant outfits (heels, handbag, strings of necklaces, stylish cape with very long tassels, hat with feather) suggest that she repeated the exercise several times, perhaps as part of a pleasurable outing on her free day.

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205 This was long before the Native Laws Amendment Act of 1963, which from 1967 onwards forbade unmarried women to acquire or hold on to a house in the townships.
206 It became a tradition to put on one’s best clothes for the Sunday stroll, the Star making mention of the “Kaffir parade” in the Kruis Street, Johannesburg, 3/8/1918.
Interestingly enough, none of her pictures show her wearing the working clothes of the domestic servant, although her album includes pictures of the Richard babies she took care of. Jabo spoke of the strong affection between both families, which even outlasted Mary’s death. It would be interesting to compare Mary’s album with the Richard’s photo album, in which, according to Jabo, Mary would most certainly appear but perhaps portrayed as the domestic servant. Apart from the corner photographs, she also commissioned a large sized airbrush portrait of herself, based on photo 5.2 (see the cross over her head). This collection of photographs overall leaves us with the image of a dignified woman, ‘unattached’ to any men.
but certain of her position in society and of the image she wanted to give of herself as an autonomous woman.

Her daughter Pauline was born in 1940 in Orlando, but grew up in KZN, as her mother couldn’t take care of her (domestics were not allowed to raise their children in their quarters). When Mary died, Pauline was barely 16, and her aunt became her tutor. She attended a Christian school before working in the chemistry industry. Her little notebooks give a quasi scientific detailed account of her romance with Jabo’s father, George Twshete in a very dry, matter-of-fact tone: “October 15th 1962 met in the morning and in the afternoon. October 19th supposed to come. March 3rd, Mr G. was in Sharpeville (true of false?)”. The writings include reflections on love and the meaning of marriage. Yet the narrative abruptly ends with the discovery of her pregnancy, for which G. is clearly unhappy about. The diary is replaced by an account of the money G. owed her for childcare. I am not sure whether this money was ever paid but G. clearly disappeared from Pauline’s life soon after. Jabo never had a fatherly relationship with him, although he knows he lives in the next neighbourhood.

Pauline was equally keen in collecting pictures. In Pauline’s set of picture, men don’t
come up at all (except of course for Jabo as a young boy). In general, women tended to take pictures either alone or with another girlfriend. Men also favoured individual pictures but also took group pictures of their friends, particularly of their drinking friends. Pauline’s collection consisted essentially of shots of her taken by various ambulant township photographers in the late 50s. She repeated the exercise several times over time, at different locations around the house, posing with girlfriends or with her white working blouse at her workplace. She also collected various pictures of her only son, Jabo, at various phases of his childhood. But interestingly enough, there are no pictures of Pauline together with her son, depicting her as a mother.

5. 4 Pauline Xaba in the front porch of the Xaba’s house, Herby Mdingi Street, Orlando East, around 1956.

Jabo seemed to have perpetuated the pattern, as he himself became a single parent of three children with two mothers. At one point in the 1980s, he was a keen amateur photographer. Jabo still lives in the house that Mary had acquired back in the 1940s. This stability of location, and Jabo’s reluctance to part with any object and paper, favoured the preservation of these photographic documents. The two-bedroom house is crammed with columns of stacked newspapers and other odd, dusty things. The richness of the material, together with Jabo’s remarkable memory and sharp historical comments make the Xaba family one of the most interesting case studies.
II. Notions of respectability

“Being a lady” was an expression that often came out in my interviews. “That’s when I became a lady”, “I loved to dress and walk like a lady, handbag and all”. When I further asked Aunty Phindi what “being a lady” entailed, she named appearance (looking your best, orderly and neat) as being the most important element, followed by behaviour (good manners and respect towards elders) and performance (how to walk, talk…). While dressing smartly could involve exposing your legs by wearing short(er) skirts, Phindi insisted that being a lady also meant preserving one’s ‘respectability’. “Respectability, dignity means everything! We judge a person by the way they handle themselves”\textsuperscript{207}. Not surprisingly, she strongly disapproved the current fashion in which girls exhibited too much of their bodies. Phindi was clearly referring to older precepts of a woman’s dignity, which were based on patriarchal notions, such as modesty and repressed sexuality. As much as economic and social autonomy

\textsuperscript{207} Interview Aunty Phindi, second round, January 2009.
was important for her, respectability was equally a fundamental notion. Yet how did these notions fit with her own biography: a divorced woman, who had a second child outside of wedlock? In other words, how have the notions of respectability, inherited from Christian ideals of womanhood, adapt to the shifting gender roles and the harsh conditions of the township? How did the expression “being a lady” relating to fashion fit into the morals of respectability?

A good Christian wife
During the 1870s and 1880s, ‘respectability’ had become a major ideological force in South Africa, one which the Amarespectables Africans (the ‘respectable people’) readily embraced. It was founded on Victorian values, which included reverence for private property, submission to authority, hard work and cleanliness, and was associated with English ethnicity. “Racial respectability refers to people’s desires and efforts to claim positive recognition in contexts powerfully structured by racism.” As in most patriarchal societies, female respectability involved sexual containment and control over woman’s sexuality. Over the 19th century, missionaries elaborated an ideology of female domesticity, which emphasized women’s role as a mother and a wife. Missionaries promoted a profoundly different vision of marital and sexual relationships, based on monogamy and fidelity. Similarly, Dubois perceived uncontrolled female sexuality to be the key factor of the degradation of the Negro race. Many of the family portraits composing his Georgia Negro album seem to expressly visualise the moral value of its women, putting emphasis on their wedding status and clothing modesty. In one example, the woman holds her chin with her right hand. It becomes impossible to observe her face without noticing the wedding ring gleaming beside it. This Christian ideal of womanhood and motherhood hence found its expression through a range of attributes, poses, and appearance, which came to dominate the way of representing women in studio photography.

While at the turn of the century, African Christianity was still predominantly anchored in the rural world, urban centres like the Witwatersrand quickly became vital growing points for the church. Missionary services were almost taken aback by women’s particular zealous

209 Thomas 2006: 467
210 Smith, Photographs on the color line
devotion and their contribution in terms of fundraising was crucial for the growth of local congregations. Women’s prayer groups were perceived to play a vital role in safeguarding female chastity, marital fidelity and maternal responsibilities\textsuperscript{211}. Given the violence, the instability and precarious nature of township life, Goodhew shows that the attachment to respectable values was the foundation of daily living for much of the township population. “Respectability was far from being the preserve of the middle and upper classes”, but instead touched on preoccupations common to much of the working class population.

\textbf{Henrietta Dhluhla: a ‘hard-working woman’.}

The picture of Phindi’s mother, Henrietta Dhludhla, comes close to this style of female representation, which puts emphasis on visual signs of married status. Her right hand clasped over the left one clearly displays her wedding ring. The perfectly wrapped doek, worn essentially by married women, reveal a pair of earrings. The overall impression of neatness of clothes, generated by the whiteness of the blouse and the perfectly ironed skirt, further reinforces this image of the respectable housewife. On this enlarged copy of the original, the edges of the picture are cut off but still reveal the arm of a child in the lower right corner. The hand-painted backdrop and the stand suggest the photo was shot in a studio, probably in the late 20s (in any case before 1940, date of her death). Henrietta’s impeccable appearance suggests that the picture was not done spontaneously but with anticipation. But the enlarged copy, re-centering the picture on her figure, prevents us from further understanding the context and purpose of the picture. Was it for a special event? Did Henrietta went to the studio out of her own initiative?

\textsuperscript{211} Gaitskell in Walker 1990: 251
What we do know is that Henrietta Mpatha was born around 1900 in Nqulutuba, KwaZulu Natal. She married Kusch Dhlulhla, and moved with him to Randfontein, where he was working as a senior clerk on the mines. The family later moved to Nigel, in the East Rand, where Henrietta gave birth to her last son, before passing away in 1942. In total, she would have given birth to 10 children, out of which 5 died in infancy (and only two are still living today). In our interview, Phindi described her mother as a hard-working person, who had the reputation of keeping her house extremely clean. Phindi does not remember her working for a wage but she apparently did a lot of crochet handworks and housecleaning. Being the secretary of the woman’s league of the African Congregational Church is a sign of Henrietta’s level of education but also of her religious devotion. She was even buried in her
church uniform. Henrietta thus seemed to conform relatively well to the attributes of the good Christian woman, in her emphasis on religious belief, cleanliness, and in her range of domestic activities. Her daughter Phindi clearly took over some of these aspects, especially concerning the domestic order and cleanliness of the house. In the interview, Phindi mentioned jokingly that her two sons used to claim never to get married because of her particular standards of hygiene. “Their wives won’t want to live with me”, admitted Phindi laughing.

**Introducing flexibility**

But how was this ideal of domesticity and dependency on the husband to be maintained when confronted to the economic reality of the township? The men’s salaries were so low, that women were obliged to work to cover the basic needs of the household. As seen in the previous section, African women increasingly had to count on themselves to make ends meet. “The individualism promoted by these changes did not sit easily with the ideal of female behaviour of either the reconstructed ‘traditional’ or the settler ideology of gender”\(^\text{212}\).

Respectability implied hostility to alcohol, gambling, and sexual unions outside marriage. Yet, the temptation to get involved in the beer brewing business was great:

“It’s almost impossible for us to live decently in Johannesburg...The temptation to sell this stuff (beer) is too strong. All women around here are making a lot of money; buying pianos and gramophones and silk dresses. Because I am a Christian and try to go straight, I have to stand here day and night and kill myself washing.”\(^\text{213}\).

Hence, while gambling was an open secret, it was also well know that some of the most prominent Church people were also prominent liquor brewers\(^\text{214}\). Walker suggested that the growing cleavage between ‘respectable women’ and ‘unrespectable women’, between the shebeen queens and the churchwomen, is evidence for class differentiation\(^\text{215}\). Yet I would agree more with Goodhew, who underlines that respectability’s starched exterior hid a surprising flexibility. For instance a historical study of Nairobi’s prostitutes revealed that far from being marginal, these women were arguably the respectable women, and certainly the

\(^{212}\) Walker 1990: 19


\(^{214}\) Goodhew 2000: 254

\(^{215}\) Walker 1990: 20
richest\textsuperscript{216}. Similarly, Goodhew argues, the shebeen queens were potentially the pillars of respectability, particularly given the fact that more honourable professionals like clerks or teachers were hardly better paid than a semi-skilled worker. Far removed from the ideal domestic cosiness of the Christian household, women were instead being economically rewarded for qualities like taking initiative or being self-reliant\textsuperscript{217}.

The flexibility of the standards of respectability can particularly be observed in the evolution of opinion on the theme of pregnancy outside marriage\textsuperscript{218}. In traditional African society, the virginity of the girl was vital to preserve, and premarital pregnancy would bring shame to the whole family. Yet it was known that an unmarried girl moving to town was bound to fall pregnant within two years, a perception which sociologist Pauw’s 1963 survey to a certain extent confirmed\textsuperscript{219}. The law made it possible for the pregnant woman’s family to press legal charges against the father, in case he refuses to pay for child maintenance. Hence it became increasingly acceptable for women to be mother without a husband, given this cash arrangement. This means that marital status was no longer the sole foundation for a woman’s respectability. The economic status of a woman was its alternative source. As women increasingly reached teaching positions, education became another pillar for respectability. As a result, these township women appropriated this Victorian expression of “being a lady” and separated it from its aristocratic and domestic connotation. It became an expression that best described the new generation of town-bred girls: fashionable, educated, autonomous yet respectable all the same.

\textit{Aunty Phindi: “I swore to myself, never again.”}

Aunty Phindi is one of the most respected figures of Orlando East. My neighbour Jabo Xaba had recommended me to interview Aunty Phindi, a woman he described as being very enlightened and highly educated: “quite a character” as he put it. This 77-year-old woman lived barely three streets away from us, occupying alone the main house of the courtyard, with her brother and his wife living in the backrooms. Yet instead of passing by spontaneously like with other households, Jabo made me call her to make a formal

\textsuperscript{216} quoted in Goodhew 2000: 242
\textsuperscript{217} Walker 1990: 20
\textsuperscript{218} Ellen Hellman noted already back in 1935: “This changed attitude (towards pregnancy) is plainly evident both in the large number of men and women living together in Rooiyard (a Johannesburg slum yard) without having entered into any form of marriage at all, and in the total absence of of discrimination against them on this account by the other inhabitants of Rooiyard”.
\textsuperscript{219} see chapter 3 p. ..., about half of the 15-19 year olds had fallen pregnant by the age of 10.
appointment, as it quickly came clear to me that Phindi, despite her old age, was still very mobile and active, and hence often absent from home. The house was extremely well maintained, with a fully-equipped kitchen and a living room that was impressively decorated (velvet paper wall and matching curtains, room divider, matching furniture, many porcelain figures etc). She welcomed us with a hearty laugh, setting herself immediately to fixing us some drinks. She took great care of details in the process: the tray, the lace on the tray, the rinsed glasses, the saucer for each glass, the napkins…

Born in 1932 in Randfontein, Phindi was 8 when she arrived in Soweto. As a young adult, she pursued a teacher’s training in Durban, where she met her husband. The marriage didn’t work out, and after her divorce, Phindi moved back to Orlando to her father’s with her first son. Her divorce was the turning point in her life: “I swore to myself never again, then that allowed to study and go to a few places abroad, I was on my own then. I was working, this was my money, this was me, doing what I liked with my life, what I wanted to do, independent”. She worked as a saleswoman for a cosmetic company, then in the film industry as the first black woman in South Africa “doing the continuities”, and finally for corporate companies as a translator. She travelled a few times outside of the country: Holland, India, Brazil and Israel. More recently, she decided to start studying again and completed a doctorate in theology (although I think the doctorate came from a private church institution rather than a university).

Phindi had prepared for our appointment and set aside her pictures kept in brown envelopes of different sizes. One small picture of her passed away siblings at young age, dating from the late 1930s, was kept apart in a thin translucent envelope. She chose to start the interview with her wedding portrait, where the young bride stands alone in her white dress. There are a few other pictures from that day, but she doesn’t linger on them as much as on the first portrait. They are the only pictures of that period of her life; there are no other pictures of her husband. While she openly talked about the divorce as an abstract civil state, the actual name of her husband or anything personal related to him was never mentioned. Her second son’s father also was not talked about at all during the interviews. The silence on these male figures reflects the transient role they played in her life, rather than reluctance on her part to talk about them. The only stable male figure in her life was her father Kusch. She has a couple of pictures of him, one in his policeman uniform and one when he was walking her to the aisle of the church as a bride.
The rest of Phindi’s photographic collection consists mainly of pictures of herself throughout the different stages in her career or attending social events, covering the late 50s to the 80s. Most of these pictures were taken by ambulant photographers, who by the late 1960s were always present in such social events. Phindi would have chosen which pictures she wanted to buy from their post-production selection. There is a picture of her doing the promotion of Ambi cream (a skin lightener), another one during a film set.
In most of these pictures, she is dressed up in a very stylish way. These pictures led us to a discussion on dress and standards of beauty. According to Phindi, her mother was ‘extremely beautiful’ but in a natural way. Standards of beauty evolved with the emergence of beauty products like cosmetics and creams. Phindi built herself a reputation for being the best-dressed woman in the neighbourhood, giving advice to the girlfriends of her male friends (Phindi claims that her closest friends were all male). She even went to a beauty centre to learn how to walk with high heels. The bulk of the photo collection comes from this period of self-fashioning, which began on her return to Johannesburg as a divorced woman in the mid-50s. Phindi clearly made the correlation between her newly acquired civil status, the beginning of her professional career, her passion for clothes:

“I was craving to work for myself, but wasn’t allowed to. (...)When you get married, you are not allowed to work, you have to stay at home. This is why, after divorce, I started to see the light: I want to dress like this, I want to do this...I never looked back, that’s how I developed myself, and achieved what I achieved on my own. Otherwise I wouldn’t have, would have been stereotyped until now”.

Getting a wage was hence the key factor in her newly acquired independence and the basis for her growing respectability. For example, Aunty Phindi still recalls the father’s enthusiastic reaction as she handed him her first paycheck. All the improvements of the house were enabled by her economic situation, which explains why she occupies it on her own up till today, while her brother and his wife stay in the backrooms.

As she was developing her autonomy, it also marked the beginning of her regular practice of collecting pictures as part of the larger exercise of crafting her new appearance and exerting control over her own life. What is striking is that most of her pictures have the purpose of depicting her as an individual person, rather than representing human bonds (friendship, family unit…). On one picture she appears sitting on the couch with her first son and a nephew. This is the only picture that represents her as a mother. The other pictures show her as a smartly dressed active woman, speaking on the telephone, drinking a cup of tea, selling skin lighteners…

Aunty Phindi was very proud of her doctorate degree in theology. Her wide spread reputation of being ‘enlightened’ meant that her opinion was often requested in matters of the church or to lead a funeral ceremony. One recent picture depicts Phindi holding up two photographs from the graduation ceremony. As an image of herself holding two images, the duplication suggests to what extent this graduation ceremony was an important event in her life. Looking back upon this event, Phindi perhaps wanted to relive the joy and pride it brought her by posing with her photographs of the graduation ceremony.
In conclusion, Aunti Phindi seems to have succeeded in incorporating certain elements of Christian ideals of womanhood within the exciting developments of her own life. Though she failed to conform fully to the expectancies of female domesticity, she inherited the high degree of orderliness and cleanliness from her religious mother. Her deep religious belief evolved towards a more critical stance of various churches ever since she graduated in theology. As a divorced woman, with two sons with two different (absent) fathers, she managed to affirm herself as the head of the family. Though she clearly did not reject her commitment to family responsibilities, her role as a mother doesn’t come out as much in her pictures than that of a social and secure woman. Her successful career, her higher level of education and experience of the world gave her the respectability that she enjoys up till today.
III. Evolving regimes of representation

The immense dislocation of social life under the pressures of urbanisation had far reaching reverberations on gender roles. As men increasingly became transient in women’s lives, women had to learn to rely on themselves and affirm themselves as head of the households (section one). This in turn had implications in terms of what was expected from a woman and how women perceived themselves. The Christian ideals of womanhood, inherited from missionary culture, had to adapt to daily living conditions in the township (section two). In this section, I focus on how the above gender evolutions had an impact on the way women were photographically represented. The shift in the foundations for respectability, I would suggest, enabled among other factors, an evolution in the range of images and visual codes traditionally assigned to women. As alternative sources of respectability emerged, women were probably freer to explicitly express femininity and sensuality without endangering their reputation. Hence, while in the earlier pictures women conformed to the image of the docile domestic housewife, they increasingly challenged these photographic conventions over the next few decades.

Female agents in the visual economy

As seen in the first chapter, the world of photographers was clearly dominated by men, the ambulant nature of the business clashing with the domesticity of the female sphere. But from the 1950s onwards, African women became agents that participated more fully in the visual economy. As Mary Xaba and Aunt Phindi’s cases show, women had the economic means to actually commission the photos of themselves, executed according to their taste. In the township photography of the 1950s, one gets the sense that women are engaging with the camera in a freer and more assertive way, which translated in the use of a wider range of poses and of new cultural references. Developing in an urban setting also meant that women were increasingly consuming illustrated magazines like Drum or Bona, watching movies or being subjected to advertisement. In other words, women were exposed to other visual regimes of female representation, from which they could select certain elements and incorporate it in their photography.

220 It seems the first Black female photographers did not emerge in South Africa until the 1980s, in the fields of artistic photography and later photojournalism.
Like a movie star

5.10 Young Judith posing on her bed. Photographer unknown, circa mid 1950s. Private collection, Judith Matlala.

In this picture, Judith (the subject of our upcoming case study) is in her late teens. She poses half-lying on the bed and apparently being interrupted in her reading of an illustrated magazine. The picture could be a still shot taken out of a suspense movie. The pose shows off her curvy silhouette and exposes her legs up to the knee. Her searching eyes and cocked head echoes the anguished look of a movie star listening attentively to some strange noise. Similar to the movie snaps (see chapter two), this photograph suggests a visual narrative that goes beyond the still frame. The dramatic quality of this pose, the vulnerability and femininity that it suggests, makes it hard to believe there is a generation separating this picture to the studio picture of her grandmother (see picture 3. 7) taken in the late 1920s.

Many of the pictures I came across had a definite ‘Hollywood’ flair to them. In the cover picture taken by Ronald Ngilima, the woman poses kneeling on the floor with her skirt fully spread out in full circle. She is looking not at the camera but away, towards the afar, pretending to be gracefully unaware of “being in the spotlight”. This ‘movie star’ pose with the spread out skirt was a favourite pose among women and came repeatedly in the Ngilima
portraits, suggesting that new poses were quickly copied and passed around in the township. The ‘Hollywood’ flair reflects the subject’s effort to recreate herself by endorsing the role of the actress or the movie star. These ‘Hollywood’ pictures confirm that the fantasy dimension, performance and the effort to create a visual narrative are the major qualities of township photography.

**Eroticising the female figure**
What strikes most between the 1920s photos and those of the 1950s is how women consciously started using and visually displaying their bodies in a more sensual way. The township pictures of the 1950s show women more assertive of their femininity by striking poses that emphasise their feminine features. The 30s had paved the way towards the loosening of the rigid countenance of early studio portraiture. For example, the winning picture of a beauty contest published in the Bantu World shows a light-skinned woman, smiling with all her teeth and wearing a glamorous attire (cloche hat, string of pearls, drop neckline, ostrich feather boa...). Her photo contrasts greatly with the other entrants, who “resonated with these 19th century figures in their fully clad dress and sombre expressions”.

The published name “Mrs. Floa Ndobe” indicates her married status, yet it is not the object of the photo. It suggested that even married women could perform the modern girl style and look like the African American stars, circulating in South Africa through periodicals like *Negro World*.

While beauty contest among White South African communities already displayed female bodies in swimming suits in the 1930s, Drum magazine was the first media to introduce pictures of African women as cover girls. The tradition of having a ‘cover-girl’ for the cover of every issue generated a series of pictures of African girls in scant clothes and bathing suits, in the aftermath of the American “pin-up girl” style that mixed sexuality and girlish innocence.

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221 Thomas 2006: 476
Such media material had a clear influence on township photography. In one of Pauline’s picture, her girlfriend is leaning against the wall with her hand holding her chin, her pinkie curved elegantly. The leaning position and the knee drop further enhance the curve of her hip and the silhouette of her calves (5.12). Even Mary Xaba seemed to have gone along to a certain extent with the evolving standards: in her later portrait taken under the porch of her house, she is not standing straight in front of the camera with her arms simply hanging along the body as in her earlier pictures from the 40s. Rather, she holds a modelling pose, with her hand set on her hip and her right foot set forward. These pictures are evidence of relaxation of dress code and of women choosing certain poses to consciously bring attention to their female attributes.
But how was it possible to be seductive while preserving people’s respect for oneself? How did this sensuality articulate with obligations of respectability? While certain poses accentuated a curvy silhouette, women often had their legs crossed as a sign of sexual modesty. Some of the pictures I have seen seem to straddle this thin line between seduction and respectability. There is a picture of Judith, where she stands by the oven pretending to look after the pot on the fire. Her bent knee rests on a chair, and her hand lies stylishly on her calf, as she looks straight at the camera with a coy smile. The wooden spoon she holds up with the other hand is a strange contrast to her lavish wig and heavy make-up. In the portrait of Judith in her twenties referred to earlier (5. 10), her short boyish haircut and her staged anxiety (apparently frightened by some sound) produces an innocence that is in strong contrast to the curve of her body. The fact she is lying on a bed seemingly vulnerable enhances the sensuality of her body language. In both of these pictures, her playful sensuality is mixed with more conventional images of the schoolgirl or the housewife.
New constraints

The circulation of films, advertisements, magazines, and newspapers played a big role in the dissemination of new gender practices, by promoting the cosmopolitan figure of ‘the modern girl’. “These figures (of modern girls) appeared to reject the roles of dutiful daughter, wife and mother through their engagement of international commodity cultures, mass media and political discourses”. However, while liberating themselves from previous conventions and ideals of womanhood, township women also took up new constraints and social pressures that these magazines subtly conveyed through their abundant advertisement. Modern femininity included a strong element of corporal discipline and self-control: small waist, thin eyebrows, new hygiene practices, high heels, ‘ladylike manners’…all of which are signs of urbanity and degree of ‘civilisation’, distinguishing them from their rural counterparts. As Phindi observed, standards of beauty evolved with the increasing consumption of cosmetics. The picture of Phindi promoting the Ambi products on the streets (5.8) reminds us of some of the darker aspects of this modern beauty ideology, which drove many women to use dangerous skin lighteners that even burnt their faces.

I.V Crafting one’s autonomy

After having analysed the correlation between shifting gender identities and the evolving photographic conventions, this section will inverse the relationship and look at how women used photography to construct a narrative which emphasized a modern and autonomous identity. Pictures rarely coincide with the bare facts of a person’s life. Family pictures, for instance, are a bias selection of happy moments of celebration, cutting out all the tensions and power issues that usually go about in a family. So for example, that men do not appear in Pauline Xaba’s pictures does not imply she had no interaction with men. Her diary entries on her romance with George (Jabo’s father) were the proof that men (or at least one man) were obviously part of her daily preoccupations.

222 Thomas 2006: 462
223 According to a quick calculation cutting across
Edited life stories
Rather than being a perfect mirror of one’s life, or some kind of illustrated autobiography, I would suggest to consider photographic albums and collections as a visual support for the ‘edited’ life narrative the person constructed for her/himself. As the product of a constructed narrative, the pictures favour certain dimensions of one’s life while excluding others. In Pauline’s case, her pictures focus on her personal development, her ties with close friends, her son’s childhood, and excludes Jabo’s father or other passing elements of her life. The choice of pose, of themes for the photograph, the selection of which picture is kept or discarded, and how they are being kept… Every step of this process of documenting and presenting one’s life involves a degree of decision-making and self-fashioning.

In Africa’s hidden stories, Barber analyses new genres of personal writing by Africans in the mid-19th century, such as diaries, autobiographies, personal letters. The editor argues that such ‘tin-trunk literature’ did not simply constitute a new platform of expression for something already there, but also shaped new forms of consciousness and conceptions of the self. For example, the diary is a writing exercise that presents the self to the self, encourages introspection but also develops an ability to project and present a shifting multiple self. From the collections and biographies that I have studied, I concluded that photography similarly promoted a new kind of self-consciousness: the concern for one’s appearance, appearance being a crucial expression of one’s position in society.

Technology of historicization
Karen Strassler, in her study of vernacular photography in Indonesia, qualified the increasingly popular practice of making photographic records or ‘personal archives’, as a technology of historicization224. Although the elderly women I have interviewed in Soweto did not seem to “live the present as a future past”, nor show an obsession with time passing, they nevertheless gave me the sense that they had a heightened consciousness of who they were, as a historical subject who has had a relatively great deal of control over their life paths (compared with their mothers, perhaps). As Phindi’s interview clearly brought out, her interest in collecting pictures of herself coincided with the post-divorce phase, in which she started working (hence economically empowering herself) and paying more attention to her image by upgrading her dressing style. The decision-making behind the selection of poses and photographs echoed the decision she was able to make as a newly autonomous woman. I

224 Strassler 2003: 30
hence suggest that being photographed and collecting pictures of oneself, or in other words the practice of constructing one’s self-image, is part of the exercise of defining one’s personal and historical narrative, in the larger process of female emancipation. To illustrate this point, I will turn to a last case study, my friend Judith Matlala, from Diepkloof Extension 5.

**Judith Matlala: photographs in frames, photographs in plastic bags.**

I met Judith through her younger sister Olga who lives in the original parent’s house in Orlando, just behind my house. Having noted my interest in the old pictures of her grandparents, Olga redirected me towards Judith, the eldest of the family. Judith was born in 1940 and grew up in KZN with her grandparents (see picture 3.7) in a small farm near Newcastle, while her mother worked in Johannesburg as a domestic servant. She moved to Johannesburg after the death of her grandmother and shortly after her grandfather remarried, in 1954. As still a schoolgirl, she met her future husband, with whom she had two children before they eventually got married in 1967. Her husband, a policeman by profession, was unfortunately shot dead few months after getting married. An enlarged picture of him hangs on the walls of her small house in Diepkloof Extension. Another enlarged picture of her son also hangs in the living room, as well as a very faded one of her father with another friend. Her other pictures are simply kept in a loose stack in a plastic bag somewhere in a cupboard of the house. They are mainly pictures of herself with various groups of friends, and of her daughter in her training to become an *ingoma* (witch doctor).

Judith worked as a domestic servant, then in a cookie factory before retiring in 1998. Her pension seems to be the only source of income of the household, which other than Judith includes her daughter Patricia (in her mid-40s), her granddaughter (early 20s), and her great granddaughter (4 or 5). Judith is a woman with much character, a fondness for beer and a wicked sense of humour, with men as her favourite object of ridicule. Through our various encounters, different accounts of her past came up and played against each other. Her feelings towards her dead husband were ambiguous. She often complained about his loss, if anything for the precarious economic situation it put her in. In such moments, she would sorrowfully raise her hands towards his photograph and blow kisses in his directions. She would also call upon the mercy of her ancestors, waving towards the portrait of her grandparents. One day I had taken this portrait over from Olga’s house to show Judith and she decided to kept it with
her ever since, claiming she needed their protection. These invocations seemed to emphasize an attachment to family bonds and attachment to lineage.

Yet the dominant discourse was that of a single woman, who enjoyed ‘jiving’ (dancing) and drinking in society, despite her belonging to the Methodist church of which her sister was minister. Through these stories of past travels and parties, one understood she valued the freedom to socialise with friends, including with her various boyfriends. She later admitted this amount of freedom would not have been possible had her husband remained alive. He seemed to have been a quite strict husband. At times, she would shake her head in disbelief when I told her I was 25 and still unmarried, but then she would agree with my choice and state that men were useless and more trouble than help.

This ambiguity also came out in her collection of pictures. The framed pictures hanging on the wall of her living room illustrate the important male figures in her life (grandfather, father, husband and son), and thus reflected her status as a widow and a mother, honouring her ancestors.
Yet the other pictures in the plastic bag depict a life full of social events, including a beach trip to Durban with her work colleges. Like in Phindi and Mary Xaba’s case, Judith’s pictures of herself do not depict her at all as a mother but rather as a popular and attractive woman. Hence, these two accounts seem to co-exist, the first one being a more ‘edited’ and ‘presentable’ version of her past (thus the pictures are hanging in the public/private space of the living room) and the second one being a more informal version of it, more focused on herself and her social development, but kept in a plastic bag.
Conclusion

As in the other chapters, the theme of women and their photographs point to an ambiguous and complex interconnection between ‘real life’ and what the photographs show us. I have tried to suggest that the new range of images of women is the result of changing ideals of womanhood, itself the product of broader shifts in gender roles. Clearly, there is a stark contrast between the pictures of women taken in the 1920s and those from the 1950s. The increasing sensuality of poses, the more affirmative and feminine use of body language, the role of fashion style, the higher degree of interaction with the photographer…all these elements are evidence of emancipation from previous Victorian conventions. Partly this evolution is thanks to a greater participation of women in the visual economy and in the economy in general; partly it is the influence of a broader erotisation of the female figure in illustrated magazines, advertisement and cinema.

Yet to state that these photographs merely reflect these social changes in women’s lives would deny the active role of women in creating this evolution. Social changes are never clearly laid out, old and new social concepts overlapped and coexisted for some time. Hence for example residues of the patriarchal ideology of sexual morality partly resisted the liberalisation effects of the media. The popular expression of “being a lady” converged these old-fashioned notions with the newer expectations of the ‘modern girl’ identity. I argue that it is within this very ambiguity of shifting gender roles that town-bred women found the space to change the traditional regime of female representation, for instance by combining the image of the domestic housewife with playful sensuality (Judith).

Finally, while photographs cannot be considered as a faithful mirror of social change, I suggest the ‘fictional’ dimension integral to the pictures is just as informative of gender identities. As an exercise of self-creation, photographic practices develop a new kind of self-consciousness of one’s image and one’s evolution as a historical subject. I have shown that these female head of households crafted a life narrative through their photographs, which enhanced and confirmed their identity as a modern and self-reliant woman.
GENERAL CONCLUSION

‘Township style’

What I hope has emerged throughout these five chapters is the conclusion that there was a genuine appropriation of the camera by the ‘subaltern’ community of Black urbanites. As discussed in chapter 1, Black photographers benefited from the greater accessibility of the camera, resulting from technological simplifications of the equipment and its cheaper cost of production. Turned into a popular street trade, the growth of photography in the townships was however impeded by apartheid restrictions on trade and skill transmissions. The local visual economy had to develop within the gaps and interstices of the apartheid system, thus acquiring its unique local colours.

Having succeeded in acquiring the tools and skills of the trade, the corner photographers dragged the camera away from the Victorian space of the established studios, and introduced it into the urban spaces Blacks had begun to occupy. The brick walls and the corrugated iron sheets of the inner-city slums and townships became the background for their pictures. In this movement of the camera, working-class people had a chance to participate in this exercise of self-representation, investing their photographs with the special moments, the joys and aspirations that constitute the fabric of daily life. Unlike the West’s obsession with family pictures, black urban communities were more concerned with representing the vitality of social life in the township community.

Out of this encounter between Black street photographers and the lower-class people, a distinct style of photography could emerge in the township. By categorising pictures from the 1920s to the 1960s in terms of styles, it is possible to identify a clear distancing from the aesthetic conventions that ruled early studio portraiture of the late 19th and early 20th century in South Africa and in other parts of the world (chapter 2). Township photography, as I have named it, characterises itself by the importance it delegates to fantasy. Township
photographers like Ronald Ngilima dropped all claims to realism and embraced the inherent performance dimension of photography. Within the space of the homemade (and unauthorised) studio, Black town-bred youth could recreate themselves in multiple identities and create exciting narratives that were condensed into a single still shot. While the 19th century notions of portraiture was about bringing out the unique inner essence of the individual, this practice of self-creation anchors its approach to portraiture on the endless recreation of the individual. The new range of poses and dress styles reflected the emergence of indigenous role figures like the tsotsi or rising Black stars like the singer Dolly Rathebe. The studio became a theatre stage, where Blacks could perform an urban identity, distinct to the dominant white one.

Performing urban identities

As Pinney has argued, such indigenous photographic practices gave rise to “vernacular modernism”\textsuperscript{225}. Not wishing to reduce the broad (and perhaps vague) concept of ‘African modernity’ to a series of snapshots, I argue instead that the various styles point towards the multi-layered construction of urban identities (chapter 3). Early studio photography and the hand tinted portrait called on notions of modernity and civilisation based on ideals of family unity, marriage and education, western lifestyle. In contrast, movie snapshots qualified ‘urbaneness’ as the space of the city-centre: bustling action, the high buildings and dazzling shopping windows, the cosmopolitan individual among the mixed crowd, the accelerated tempo, the excitement, literally of being \textit{at the centre of things}. Back in the townships, some African men and women would frame modern identities in their staged consumption of technological goods and fashionable clothes (chapter 4). For women, the notion of the ‘modern girl’ laid emphasis on economic autonomy, the ability to craft one’s life narrative and one’s image, combined with more old-fashioned notions of respectability (chapter 5). While this modernity based on the experience of the urban was often explicitly articulated in opposition to the rural world, elements of traditional African culture subtly permeate many of these pictures, reminding the viewer that this dichotomy was more imagined than factual.

\textsuperscript{225} Pinney and Peterson 2003: 202
This vernacular modernity was not shaped in isolation from the dominant one. The consumption of illustrated magazines, of Hollywood movies and advertisement ensured a constant circulation of images and ideas from one culture to another. That consumption became a central theme for township photography also suggests that Black urbanites were far from completely rejecting the dominant narratives of modernity. This African modernity was not built against a White one: in Uncle Dan’s words, the Ngilima portraits “show people who are struggling to be something acceptable in the Western world”. By staging their consumption of inaccessible goods, the photographed subjects could grapple with the paradoxes of apartheid economy, which stimulated material desires in them while restricted their means of accumulating capital. Much of these photographs are about manifesting inclusion into a system that was constantly trying to reject them. The township studio becomes the space where one could escape the seclusion of the township and the determinism of poverty. The discriminating consumption of best-quality clothes was a way of stating that Blacks shared the same tastes with the members of the dominant class, thus establishing a certain equality with them. The visual emphasis on fashion, on international brands and on modern objects of technology like the telephone affirmed their connection to the broader national and international community of consumers, beyond the confines of the township.

In this sense, the images from the 1950s are far from Steve Biko’s ‘Black Consciousness’ of the 1970s, which tried to extract dignity and value from blackness (the essence of Black identity) as a way of stressing the Black man’s distinction from the White man, with the slogan ‘black man, you’re on your own’. But they are also very far from the images of the African middle classes and converted Christians, which clearly tried to mimic the manners and values of the White man as part of a strategy to defend their threatened status in an increasingly racist South African society. By comparing the different photographic regimes of representations, I hoped to have shown how Black urban communities came to affirm their culture born out of the hardships and instability of the township, by legitimizing it as being photographable, something worthwhile to keep a visual record of. The drunken figures holding up tins of home-brewed beer, the young girl handing over an LP disc, the winking adolescent dressed up as a cowboy, the respectable woman in her church uniform were perhaps not trying to be blatantly anti-apartheid, were not trying to affirm a ‘Black’ identity, a white nor an anti-white attitude. They were simply trying to state their existence as a subject, to affirm their self-worth in terms that reflected their own understanding of the (urban) world.
‘I like where I am’

Their perhaps-not-so political message acquires however a political meaning when one takes into account the historical developments taking place in the background. As the African urban population was rapidly expanding, the municipal council elaborated juridical instruments stating that Africans were permitted in ‘white’ towns only in so far as they were needed to attend the needs of Whites. By 1933, the whole of Johannesburg was proclaimed under the 1923 Urban Areas Act, which eventually paved the way to the destruction of Sophiatown in 1955-1956. Sophiatown had a particular emotional aura as the hub of black intellectual, musical and cultural life. What the government was attempting to destroy was not just an anarchistic location, a haven for illegal migrants and criminals. More than anything, the municipal authorities were trying to stomp out this mystical Black urban culture that Sophiatown incarnated and that didn’t fit with their notion of ‘temporary sojourners’. Perceiving the symbolism behind the location’s imminent destruction, the resistance movement reached nationwide audience. Though it failed to save Sophiatown, the demonstrators’ banners stating “I like where I am”226 proved the same point that comes out in the Ngilima pictures: I like it here, I belong here, I am from here.

Thus by laying a claim to a distinct urban culture, the town-bred generation of Africans were also laying a claim to the city. While Blacks were excluded from inner-city business and from using its transport system, the ‘movie snaps’ proved their inclusion to this exclusive urban space. Through the progression in photographic styles, we get a sense of the various urban spaces Black people came to occupy, first in their imagination (for example the hand tinted portraits commissioned by villagers) and later with their actual bodies, stories and memories. In other words, Black photographers recorded the history of African urbanisation, the history of how Blacks came to appropriate the urban space. The development of a specific style- or in other words, the distancing from the dominant culture incarnated in previous aesthetic conventions- is a sign of a growing self-confidence and self-sufficiency. The appropriation of the space of the studio hence echoes the process by which Africans increasingly crafted their place within urban society and ways to (visually) express their urban

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226 Lodge 1983: 103
From historical records to social memory

“And so, hundreds of millions of photographs, fragile images, often carried next to the heart or placed by the side of the bed, are used to refer to that which historical time has no right to destroy”.

John Berger, Another way of telling.

For the historian working on Black urban communities of this period, these pictures will give him/her many visual details on the major social institutions of the township, the shifting gender identities, the evolving material culture, the growing cleavage of social classes. Our historian will nevertheless have to remember that far from being a perfect mirror of these social changes, these pictures tell us foremost how people perceived themselves and how they tried to alter their reality according to their dreams and aspirations.

But for the present inhabitants of Soweto and the other townships, these photographs are much more than ‘historical records’. Historical accounts on the Black resistance movement abound with impersonal figures, charts and names, of big events like marches, riots and boycotts which involved large anonymous crowds led by certain key leaders. But in general these fail to convey a sense of who these people were, what they were thinking beyond these major historical events. Private pictures from the townships show the faces of those who formed this political history, as well as those who invested the township with smaller apolitical anecdotes, those stories that created the township in the first place.

Art critique Benjamin Buchloh qualified Gerhard Richter’s Atlas, a series of panels displaying family pictures, amateur holiday snapshots and magazine photographs organised in rectangular grid, as a reflexion on a photograph’s ability to generate social memory. The question of mnemonic experience became all the more urgent at a moment when the « most violent, collectively enacted repression of history » was being unleashed in the consumerist West Germany of the 1960s. Buchloh writes:

“Mnemonic desire, it appears then, is activated especially in those moments of extreme duress in which the traditional material bonds among subjects, between subjects and objects, and between objects and their representation appear to be on the verge of displacement, if not
outright disappearance".227

Snapshots from the townships are potential vehicles for memory of places that longer are. The destruction of Sophiatown was not the first forced removal and neither was it the last. Watville, the township of which Ronald Ngilima recorded its first ten years of existence, has lost most of its original inhabitants, who were relocated to other townships after the wave of forced removals of the 1960s. It is very difficult to track down the original inhabitants of Watville portrayed in the Ngilima portraits. With the forced removals, collective memory was also dissolved. What is the role of a photograph, as the visual trace of what has been, in such situations of “memory crisis”?

Future research

This will be one of the research questions we hope to address in the research group we initiated this year, under the framework of the project “Cultural Dynamics: heritage and popular culture”, funded by the NWO. My present supervisors, Robert Ross and Patricia Spyer, together with our South African partners, plan to continue and broaden this research on the history of visual representation in South Africa. The project includes the organization of history workshops in Watville and other townships, as well as the mounting of a traveling exhibition of Ronald Ngilima and other (still) anonymous photographer’s works. Furthermore, we hope very much to be able to help Ronald’s family to digitalize the whole of the Ngilima collection and set up a public archive for it, which would be accessible to both the local community and the international community of researchers. These five thousand photographs for the moment sit in boxes, awaiting for memories and stories to spring back to life.

Epilogue

Next time that Judith will scrutinize me closely with her sharp blue eyes, and ask me “So what are you going to do with all these dusty old pictures?”, I hope I will be able to explain

227 Buchloh 1999: 136
myself a bit better. I would say, they must be kept and valued, as material traces of the Black
wo/man’s continuous bond with the urban place, a continuity held against all odds, against the
government’s systematic attempt to push it into the no man’s land of amnesia. Simply put,
these pictures represent for me the proof that the project of apartheid, in keeping the city a
purely white zone, ultimately failed- and this, way before 1994.

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