

PRIVATE SUBJECTS



Family Photography in South Africa and the Right to Opacity

John Peffer

Private Subjects



**The Visual Arts of Africa
and Its Diasporas**

A Series Edited by Kellie Jones
and Steven Nelson

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*For Patricia
and for Mpho, whose name means “gift”*

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Introduction

What photography was for us

In 2010, I was speaking with my friend Mpho Mathebula in Senaoane, Soweto. He had assisted in the research for my book *Art and the End of Apartheid*, where in the last chapter I retell a common story about South African photographic history: There were colonial images that subjugated and exoticized indigenous people, there was a bureaucracy that falsely categorized the population according to ethnic and racial types for purposes of labor control, there were documentary and photojournalistic images that exposed the bodily and institutional violence of the state, there were the liberated voices of artists no longer constrained by commitment to classical documentary modes. But there was something missing—I was not sure what—and that is what I was discussing with Mr. Mathebula. He told me he and his friends who were young men and women in Soweto during the struggle years of the 1970s and 1980s never saw many of the iconic images that were famous abroad. Because of apartheid censorship they had mostly been published overseas, and South Africans could view them only years later, in books and exhibitions. “Why didn’t you ask us about our own photographs?” he said. He brought out his parents’ photograph albums—they had been sitting there next to us in a cabinet in the family room—saying, “This is what photography was, for us.”

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This book presents perspectives about everyday uses of photographs in predominantly Black communities during apartheid in South Africa, giving insight into how they are seen through the eyes of those who own them today. Ultimately it is intended to set out a historical rationale and a model for honoring photographic subjects' rights and demands for privacy. It allows the subjects space to converse about race and history in their own ways rather than be explained about by an omniscient narrator. It also represents a search for a method for writing about vernacular photographic experience that keeps the subjects that appear in those photographs at the center of the picture. No photographs were physically collected for this study, and images have been shared with the permission of the owners of the photographs. Alterations to names or other details have been made for the sake of privacy.

My friend Mpho's gentle upbraiding made me determined to listen and to look more carefully. Over the next several summers I returned when I had time out from teaching, and then my wife and I moved to Johannesburg for research full-time during 2014 and 2015. With Mathebula and also with Patricia Mabusela and other close friends, we went about searching for whatever kind of people's history of Black South African experience might be divined from the personal uses of photography in family homes. We began by visiting the people and neighborhoods in Soweto that were familiar and gradually worked out from there, eventually following leads to Pretoria and to urban and rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, North West, and the Western Cape. We spoke with those who welcomed us into their homes about whatever they were willing to share when asked if they had any personal photograph collections. Often I had follow-up questions, or there might have been some discussion around a certain story or image that held my attention, but mostly it was the owners of the photographs who led the way, and usually what people chose to share prompted the questions and discussion that followed. These were conversations, and depending on people's interest or available time, some were more lengthy and meandering and others more quick and to the point. They were not highly structured interviews in any formal sense, and while I was careful to ask about names and dates, I did not come with any checklist or prepared questions. Though I have a very rudimentary understanding of isiZulu and Afrikaans, interviews were conducted mostly in English, with Mpho or Patricia or another friend assisting with translation when needed. Those encounters and the questions about privacy and personal uses of photography that emerged from them are the foundation of this book.

On some occasions, usually at the end of an interview in someone's home, I was asked not to share too widely certain pictures we had just viewed

and discussed. Other times, pictures were referred to at length but never shown. Over time I found that these instances were accumulating in my notes. Sometimes they were oblique, sometimes more pointed. I began to think of them as a litany of refusal that differed from the literal content of the images themselves. They ranged from a desire for privacy, simple pride, or concern that someone else might profit in some way from their pictures to heavier instances of so-called illegitimacy, embarrassment about ancestry, and related forms of internalized violence that are common in certain historically traumatized communities. This refusal occurred frequently enough that eventually I realized it was not an obstacle in my research; rather, it was something positive that the subjects were telling me about, with implications I needed to consider further. How, why, and what people were choosing to share (or not) was a critical aspect of the picture, giving further insight into how apartheid was survived, in part, through people's self-imaging practices.

The subjects in the pictures were telling us that privacy is important to them. They were also asserting that they are the owners of their pictures of their own faces. With this knowledge I find it troubling when examples of family photography show up on the international art market and are recast as anonymous vernacular photography, or, if they are works from the continent, as just "African photography." When this is done, the agency of their subjects is removed. When this is done, their images are also left open for free imaginative speculation, and market speculation, by strangers. While it is common for writers on family photography to mention the privacy aspect, usually either it is noted in passing or only its repressive dimensions are highlighted. I learned from my work in South Africa that if the approach to photography is subject-centered, then the central questions of subjects' rights to privacy and ownership need more development.

I believe that the linked subjects of privacy and self-ownership should also be considered in light of recent demands for restitution of African cultural heritage. The fashion in the contemporary art scene for marketing private portrait photographs in general terms like "African photography," "found photography," or "vernacular photography" tends to efface their subjects' desires for opacity, agency, and self-ownership. Most, if not all, examples of African portrait photography seen outside of the continent have been reprinted, sold, exhibited, and placed on websites with the subjects remaining unidentified, and in almost every case the subject has not been asked for their consent. The subjects are usually referred to as anonymous or unknown, in part either because the collections themselves were sourced on the secondary market or because photographers' archives were lost, destroyed, or simply not consulted.

To counter the trend toward anonymity and the projective interpretation that often follows from it, this book is concerned with the actual subjects depicted, and my writing attempts to keep them as active, vocal participants at the center of any discussion or analysis. While significant details about photographers emerge from the stories of those photographed, I am not focusing on the studio or the artist as a privileged site of authorship or creativity. I do not wish to lionize the photographer as a primary or sole interlocutor or as an owner of archives to be salvaged for posterity. It was because I was speaking with subjects instead of searching for photographers and archives that I began to find concerns arising everywhere about privacy and over ownership of self-images. And it was by working with family collections in South Africa that I came to realize that many of these pictures in the art galleries actually belonged to the people in the pictures, even though they were usually not credited as such. I think it is important to acknowledge the predatory implications of an art market vogue for an African portrait photography that includes the kinds of images that in another context might be referred to as private, or as family photography.

In South Africa most of the snapshots, studio pictures, and painted enlargements found in homes constitute a family photography because they were produced for, were held by, and helped to self-define the family. Following Thy Phu et al., I am considering family in a broad way to include bonds based not only in biological kinship but also on affection or close personal networks.¹ I use “family photography” to refer to the practices of imaging and *sharing*, mostly involving forms of portraiture, that help create and delineate the parameters of these connections. While in the United States and Europe commentators have noted that it is women who have been the primary creators and consumers of family photography, my own research found that this is not universally true.² In South Africa, men were just as likely to be involved in creating, collecting, and sharing personal photographs. Perhaps this was an effect of the frequent separation of parents by apartheid. It may also be related to African customs for self-praise—for instance, during initiation.³

Though for variation and for specificity (especially in the sections on legal history in part 2) I sometimes use terms like “portrait photography” or “personal photography,” family in the expanded sense of the networked self is the primary frame. In this book I am making the case for considering the family, and individuals within families, as a site of authorship and as the creator and owner of the personal private domestic archive. By reframing African portrait photography as family photography, I think that an ethics of looking and display should follow. Not only do these pictures help construct

an ideal family but they are or were once part of families. It may be useful to treat them as if they are from our own family: to honor, to respect, to hide away, or to self-consciously reveal. It is not just about the right to be looked at or to be regarded with interest or empathy; it is also about the right to opacity.

A brief history of personal uses of photography in South Africa

In South Africa, most images in family and individual photograph collections are what could be broadly described as portraiture. These range in look from stiffly posed formal portraits made in studios or by roaming neighborhood photographers to less formal action snaps featuring individuals or small groups imitating pictures in fashion magazines, or movie scenes, or festively hamming it up at social gatherings. Posing to document new clothing or new possessions (an automobile, a home) or to record special gatherings (family visits, parties) was common. Another important use was the marking of major achievements: a birthday, a school graduation, employment, marriage, and even death. Often the last picture of a person in the album version of their life is of a grave and headstone with a cloth over it. This is the event where the tombstone is unveiled. It is the last major life event, and it comes usually a year or more after one's funeral. Extensive preparations are made and funds are collected so that the extended family and the whole neighborhood may gather for a grand celebration, with food and drink provided, to mark the ceremony where a monument is placed at the grave.

Pictures were stored singly or in shoeboxes or in old purses or in albums. People mostly preferred "full size" photographs (i.e., with the body fully displayed) over headshots. If additional copies were made, they would usually be very few in number, two or three at most, and these might be sent to distant family members, exchanged within a social network of close friends, or given to lovers. Often these photographs were just kept by the person in the picture as an object for self-contemplation, not given away, and rarely displayed.

Santu Mofokeng was one of the few who early on recognized the importance of these private domestic picturing practices for the understanding of South African history. He himself had worked as a photojournalist and as a neighborhood photographer in Soweto before joining the Institute for Advanced Social Research at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in the late 1980s. In South Africa, Black elites, mostly those who had attended missionary-run schools, had posed for studio-portrait photographs as early

as the late nineteenth century. They are the subject of Mofokeng's archival project created while he was at Wits, titled *The Black Photo Album/Look at Me: 1890–1950* (1996). It uses examples of Black portraiture to document and comment on what Black life was before apartheid laws were imposed to try to crush any material aspirations for their families. Mofokeng recovered and rephotographed cabinet-card portraits of well-dressed middle-class Black sitters from before mid-century, objects that had mostly been buried in private family collections. From this he created an eighty-slide projected installation alternating the images and his own commentary texts, which brought to light what at that point had become a repressed history of the image world of Black South Africans. When I asked Mofokeng about the new research I was doing with more recent images, he was encouraging, replying that the real heyday of paper photography was actually later, *during* apartheid. It turns out that the desire for self-images had not suddenly ceased with apartheid in the 1950s; rather, it had expanded exponentially. It became a characteristic of Black life more widely, not just among the educated elite.

My own subsequent research confirmed that the mass popularity of photography in the Black communities in South Africa dates from roughly the 1950s to the 1990s. I found that by the 1950s there were already numerous camera enthusiasts, some who made a small living by going door to door on holidays, making images of people in their homes, and many who set up small studios in the commercial districts of the so-called native locations. By the 1960s, almost every neighborhood had at least one such studio, and these were popular places for residents to record images of themselves.

As I visited people in their homes with my research associates Mpho Mathebula and Patricia Mabusela, I began noticing that the backs of most older images in family collections held a photographer's stamp, and from the range of names and locations it became clear that this was a whole category of Black photographers whose work had been overlooked. Interestingly, I found that casual snapshots clearly taken at home also usually had a photographer's business stamp on the back. This indicated they were taken by professional photographers or by semiprofessionals—that is, by neighbors working a side business in the township. Until cell phones with cameras became widely available in the early 2000s, very few families in South Africa's Black neighborhoods owned a camera.

The post–World War II decades in South Africa witnessed the more established presence of Black people in the cities. The period also saw efforts to control their labor and mobility and to define their ethnic identity through apartheid laws and the creation of a police state. The late-twentieth-century

era of popular paper photography was in this way synonymous with the era of apartheid, with its photo ID passbooks and also with the counter-practice of exposé photojournalism published in magazines and newspapers. The generation that grew up with apartheid had their own images made, too. Their self-authored portraits vastly outnumbered and were more popular than the journalistic images about apartheid, which in many cases were not widely seen in South Africa. They showed in their own images how they wished to be represented and remembered, despite apartheid. When we look at these pictures today, it seems, at least on the surface, as if apartheid had never even happened. They created a private space where apartheid was not welcome.

From its earliest history, photographic portraiture has often meant a dressing-up and a social definition of the person, through making-up and accessorizing via staged backgrounds, clothing, and props. Since the nineteenth century, in innumerable examples from around the world, this theater of the persona has been used to play with alterity. Photography has been used to classify or degrade (in the case of colonizing images) or enhance the image of the self or the other. Even supposedly scientific and objective colonial-era photographic portrait “native studies” mixed fantasy with reality when its subjects were dressed or undressed, posed, and placed in unfamiliar settings that created them as ethnic types. These kinds of images casting individuals as types became widely known in South Africa, and still today they can be seen in tourist postcards and popular magazines. By the mid-twentieth century, all South Africans grew up around such images. Those working in middle-class people’s homes would also have seen the ennobling portrait galleries displayed there and associated them with what it meant to live in a modern house.

These elements combined into what could be thought of as a South African “visual economy,” to borrow and adapt Deborah Poole’s term.⁴ This likely resulted in the Black communities developing a double consciousness about portrait photography as a place where identity is both staged and documented. By the time, around 1950, that most people were able to commission their own portraits or had some access to cameras, the idea that “this is what you do, you make-up and dress-up yourself” was already well understood to be what a visit with a photographer was all about. Portrait photography was a commodity form that produced these desired effects and affects. Even the obligatory headshots used for the apartheid reference books were in a sense a land of make-believe, when, for instance, a cosmopolitan person was told their picture merely illustrated an ethnic type. This helps explain some common properties shared across Black studio photographers’

work: the flowers and lace, the fantasy backdrops, the telephones and other props, and the desire to document clothes, cars, homes, and other possessions real or wished for.

Apartheid pass laws were imposed in South Africa starting in the 1950s, and urban Black families were removed—from neighborhoods that had been racially mixed or were near town but deemed desirable for white people—to locations far from the city centers. As families were being uprooted in these ways, the new forms of self-imaging, the studio portraits and snapshots, were increasingly common in Black homes. For many, living under apartheid meant the mother or father worked in town for most of the week, if not even further away for most of the year. A family might be together only occasionally or during holidays. A father might return home at the end of a yearlong work contract, perform marital duties, then return to work in Germiston or Durban. On these occasions, framed, hand-colored, and enlarged wedding portraits—usually composite images culled from separate photographs—were sometimes gifted and placed high on a living room wall. These depicted within a single image a couple who were in fact likely separated by apartheid.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, as cameras and color roll film became more widely available, photography was used for less formal occasions and numerous less-skilled photographers entered the scene. A vibrant new dynamism can be seen in the snaps from this period: living the good life, mugging for the camera, and acting as if in scenes from popular movies and photo comics. It is important to remember that these “good time” images were made during the decade following the 1976 Soweto youth uprising, when there was a spike in violence in the streets of South Africa’s Black neighborhoods. People were hanging out indoors more often, because police vans were rolling down their streets. What they chose to record was their camaraderie inside domestic spaces, not the violence outside. The compilation of albums—as a kind of craft activity sometimes involving children and sometimes with annotations and words cut from magazines—dates mostly to this same period of school disruption in the late 1970s and the 1980s.

During the early 2000s, cell phone pictures brought a new relation to making, storing, and displaying private photographs, but not a wholly new relation. Though the study of smartphone use was not part of my research, I can comment briefly on issues relating to the perspectives argued in this book. First, older practices of printing out and displaying continue today alongside digital methods for imaging, storage, and dissemination. Most South Africans do not own computers, and if they are online at all it is usually via a cell phone. For the minority (about a quarter) who can afford phones

with cameras, images are made and stored in-phone, thus heightening the risk of loss if the phone is stolen—a common danger. Another peril of the digital era is thus that, as Heike Behrend found in Kenya and Paula Uimonen in Tanzania, the boundaries of private and public shift in ways that alter how one controls (or not) the distribution of images of the self.⁵ There are many more images made now, the ephemerality of these self-images has increased, and there is a shift in emphasis from home-family relations to wider friends' networks. The trend already seen in the friends-at-parties pictures of the 1980s has gained speed.

But overall in South Africa, in the current digital environment—as Gillian Rose also found for the United Kingdom, and as Nathan Jurgenson generally theorizes it—the primary functions of cohort making and boundary management for personal photography as a social practice mostly remain.⁶ Earlier pictures are reposted and remediated alongside born-digital images within new digital platforms for seeing and sharing. Groups of old-timers post copies of their paper photographs on Facebook and Instagram to recreate community groups from the past or to create new heritage clubs for the present. Online galleries are created in honor of the recently departed. With the posting of personal pictures on corporate-owned media platforms, there is a new risk of exposure of private life and a new risk posed to ownership of one's own images.

On the other hand, given that camera ownership was historically rare in South Africa's Black communities, smartphone ownership now means more control over self-image making, in two ways. First, the self-taking of amateur pictures is more common. Second, one may display one's own images alongside those from other media feeds to create an ideal panoply of the potential self. This retains the older function of creating a personal space for self-imagining. But as Till Förster notes, for Côte d'Ivoire, it also allows for more active, visible, and immediate engagement with a much larger economy of images from past and present and from a wider variety of sources.⁷

This has led in some cases to a new confluence of formerly distinct categories of images. A remarkable example was the posting of selfies on Facebook by student activists involved in the Rhodes Must Fall protests that started at the University of Cape Town in 2015 and spread to other institutions in South Africa and internationally. Rhodes Must Fall began as a movement to remove a statue of the British imperialist Cecil Rhodes from the main campus staircase, but it was ultimately a plea to complete the unfinished business of decolonization and also allow free tuition at universities, and it spiraled out into related protests against gentrification and against

corruption in government. These were young people from the “born free” and “born digital” generation—that is, they were born after the official end of apartheid in 1994, and they grew up surrounded by the effects of digital technology. Over many months, as students faced off, sometimes violently, against security forces, many posted images of themselves in medias res to their followers on social media, in a hybrid of personal private photography and photojournalism. It was as if the local studio portraits of the apartheid generation had been combined with the overseas newspaper images of the former struggle in the township streets. The young “Fallists” had known “the struggle” in pictures in history books, and now in their own pictures they were carrying forward the struggle with their own hands and on their own terms. The must-have smartphone for those who could afford it at that time was jumbo-sized, so big it could hardly fit into a pants pocket without most of it protruding. Having visible access to new technology was already a long-standing sign of status. Now, by posting selfies of themselves in a scuffle with police they could both carry their TV around and be on TV at the same time, placing them in history (and in the future) in real time.

Writing opacity and the search for a method

“We didn’t write any ‘history,’ we just took pictures.” That is how Mrs. Sophie Taukobong referred to photographs made by the generation that grew up with apartheid. Sophie is the mother of my research associate Patricia’s good friend Eddie Taukobong. She was speaking with me about her own photographs, and those of her neighbors, in relation to official histories about the deeds of famous people. Despite the fact that these personal, everyday kinds of images were in plain sight, until recently their existence was rarely remarked on by historians of South African photography. Their primary interest has been the rise and fall of apartheid through the lens of photojournalism and documentary works featuring local life for consumption by others. To a casual outside observer, the pictures shown in family homes might at first appear mundane, but they are valuable documents of how people recorded and created their own experience for themselves. What are we to make of them now?⁸

Writers on the Black American and diaspora experience have shown how personal uses of photography have historically been used by members of subjugated communities to create private zones of freedom to explore self-expression.⁹ While subjects of color are hypervisible and overdetermined in spectacular form in popular media, the complexity of their lived experience

is less often allowed expression or explored with sensitivity. In fact, family photographs rarely show the hard times. They usually show how people wish to be remembered, how they have made themselves up as photographic versions of life in order to face the world.¹⁰ This has been interpreted by some writers as conventionalizing, or even repressive.¹¹ But for scholars of the Black experience—I am thinking particularly of bell hooks, Stuart Hall, Deborah Willis, Tina Campt, and Nicole Fleetwood—family photography has also been understood as a space of imagination and possibility. They recognize its potential for making positive marks of refusal, resistance, and survival for people in historically marginalized or oppressed communities.¹² Self-imaging through photography has been a tool for self-definition that responds to, and appropriates from, but is not exactly aligned with either official state culture or mainstream media culture. In this way, too, Black South Africans, with their own images in their own hands, did not wish to be remembered merely as victims of state violence or as heroes in a spectacle of mass struggle. Their personal uses of photography show how, despite all, they had full and interesting and creative lives.

I think it is critical to ask what the subjects in the pictures themselves may have wanted. This is preferable to presuming knowledge or to projecting interpretation onto other people's pictures. My own work is motivated by the belief that rethinking the history of photography in this light is relevant. I understand that there are power dynamics involved, that there are limitations to what an older white American male like me can do, and that these identity markers and related expectations may influence the kinds of conversations it is possible for me to have with people in a place like Soweto. That said, I believe it is possible for mutual learning to come from these occasions. I also think that thirty years after the fall of apartheid—as the majority of the South African population once again (or is it “still”?) have been left to manage by their own means—it may be useful to continue to learn how people survived that earlier calamity, how they retained their sense of dignity and lived fully human lives despite the daily indignities of the forced removals, disrupted families, and structural racism they faced.

Even today the lived histories of Black families in the townships are kept together through their collections of images. Through them, in the present, they might find clues for how to survive today's indignities. Thus, the leading questions that animate this book are as follows: How can life under apartheid be remembered with dignity, even pleasure? And how can the private space for self-creation and reflection be honored and protected? Here, I am following historian Jacob Dlamini, who likewise has asked, “What does it mean for

a black South African to remember life under apartheid with fondness?”¹³ The truth, he says, “is that the majority of black South Africans did not experience apartheid in its spectacular form” and that (after Lewis Nkosi) “not everything people did was a response to apartheid.”¹⁴ Ultimately my work has been motivated, too, by my understanding that thinking about photographic experience from Africa and theory from the South can be insightful for other global struggles for human dignity.¹⁵

In 2015, I published an essay, “Vernacular Recollections and Popular Photography in South Africa,” that offered a historical analytical framework for understanding the kinds of photographs that people were showing us in their homes. I was particularly interested in what I saw as positive changes in value and meaning that occurred when informal snapshots and even apartheid passbook ID pictures were retouched, enlarged, and framed as commemorative images. As the research progressed, though, I became increasingly uncomfortable reproducing what I saw as an overly monological, if not presumptively authoritative, approach to scholarly historical writing. That academic mode of description did not seem adequate for evoking either the messiness of lived experience or the multivocal conditions of the social encounters taking place around photographs. I found that the conversations in people’s homes were producing new knowledge about historical experience and uses of photography, and they were changing how I thought about the task of writing as well.

Photographs and interviews have much in common, and thinking about them together critically can be generative. Here I am using the term “interview,” mindful of both its literal etymological meaning as a mutual “seeing between” and its broader definition encompassing the kinds of informal conversations about photography I was sharing with people in their homes. Both the photograph and the interview have potential as ethical encounters where knowledge about the world is created. Patrick McNaughton, in referring to his conversations with artists in Mali, has commented that an interview is preferably not an activity that just extracts data but rather is a dialogical encounter that, when good, changes you.¹⁶ You are not just getting; you are becoming. It may even change what information you initially thought of as important or the questions you thought of as relevant. McNaughton has also commented that art and visual culture may generate conversation but cannot be fully captured by words. Images draw attention, to paraphrase W. J. T. Mitchell.¹⁷ Following Jacques Lacan, they are like a screen that wants a projection.¹⁸ Images ask for words and they create a space for encounter and discussion.

When we are speaking of images of other people, the projection of one's words and meanings onto another is laden with control, with power, so the who-what-where-when-how of the conversation with images is also relevant information. This is especially true of photographs of people. They are like social encounters repeatedly deferred and displaced over time and space between the subjects and their photographers, and again between the subjects and their later viewers. Ariella Azoulay has written about this aspect of photography as a "civil contract" that presents an opportunity for an ethical encounter, a renewing of the event of the photograph each time an image is copied or disseminated and reseen.¹⁹

Interviews in people's homes were the setting of my research. Social encounters were also embedded in the photographs themselves, since they were the residue of occasions like a party, a posing session at a studio, or a family gathering. In turn they were integrated into private networks of showing and sharing. How they were shared helped define those familiar networks. When later viewed and discussed by us they generate new social occasions. I wanted to do justice to this intersubjective richness through my method of writing. I wanted to better honor the subjects in the pictures and to carry our active engagement into its re-presentation to others, so that future readers might also feel involved in an ethical relationship with us.

While aware of the fact that images almost by definition get away from us, I am interested in developing decolonial writing strategies for rethinking such popular and private image-object forms as the global art market attempts to repackage and co-opt them as commodities. Is it possible to develop new researching and writing approaches that allow for and engage with people's desires for obscurity? How can one write in a manner that does not end up just reasserting mastery, in the guise of explanation, over the photographed subjects? The strategy I use in this text of keeping the situation of the research present on the surface of my descriptions is inspired generally by ideas coming from reflexive anthropology and critical oral history.²⁰ There the object is not to compile data points on other cultures, or biographies of important people, but to consider that how people invent stories about themselves is relevant to understanding culture and history, and to keep in mind that the researcher, once they start looking around and asking questions, cannot be outside of the story. As an art historian I am drawn to visual detail and to exploring how seeing works, as well as wanting to challenge the field itself by bringing to light critical aspects of global art and visual culture that have been passed over. What is needed is a cross-disciplinary approach, one that may use techniques from one discipline to critique the other, since

the work of decolonization should happen within the academy as well as outside—in politics and society, and inside ourselves.

The scholarly literature addressing the intersection of vernacular, portrait, and family photographs, including in Africa, is now quite broad.²¹ Specifically for hints toward a more equitable approach to the method of writing, I have looked to Zeynep Gürsel's work with family portraits found in Turkish state archives of Armenians forced into exile.²² Her method of "looking together" attends closely to image details and aesthetics, interpreting and remembering alongside subjects or their descendants, interrogating the bureaucratic context, and layering these many multiple voices, subjectivities, and time frames. Especially when the information is coming from personal encounters, her style of writing becomes intentionally more affect-laden and more multivocal in presentation. Something similar occurs in Olga Shevchenko and Oksana Sarkisova's groundbreaking study of state repression and family photographs from the former Soviet Union.²³ I consider my own writing allied to the approaches modeled by Gürsel, and by Shevchenko and Sarkisova, while also exploring ways to allow photographed subjects even more space and even more authority in leading the way of our discussions about their pictures.

Part 1 of this book creates and enacts a model for performing what I think of as "writing opacity."²⁴ Throughout, while respecting subjects' rights to opacity in processes of self-knowing, I myself try not to hide behind that other kind of opacity often assumed by academic authors in order to claim authority. Though not wishing at all to make it about "my story," I do leave my own doubts and trials and errors out there and in the mix, and the reader can see places where my ways of seeing were challenged. The problems of opacity and privacy indicated to me by the subjects themselves led me to investigate the history and theory of rights and the law as they intersect with practices of portrait photography in Africa. Since much of that later research was done in libraries, my tone shifts into a more citational and analytical mode as I discuss those issues. When I turn to the role of advocate in part 2, my own voice becomes more prominent.

How a narrative is related is as important as its contents, and I hope that readers will appreciate the attention given here to the play of the poetics of language and visual storytelling. Years ago, Michael Taussig taught me that when the way a story is creatively told can magically conjure for the reader the feeling of being there, this is a powerful method for sharing and showing human experience. It is a way of doing theory beyond just writing about theory.

In this book I am attempting to both illustrate and enact Édouard Glissant's idea that allowing for an opacity of ourselves to ourselves, as well as respect for the opacity of others, may facilitate more open forms of human relation.²⁵ Thinking, performing, and advocating for opacity through my own writing can, I hope, have a positive effect. To approach photography like this is to understand that its images do not merely illustrate the lives of subjects; rather, subjectivity and subjection are themselves created by, lived through, and contested both in what subjects make of their own images and in how they choose to share them. It can be a way to explore the texture of experience on the microhistorical level while honoring the dignity subjects wish to claim through the creation and collection of images of themselves.

Pictures are always embedded in and emerge from other images, texts, and multisensory layered experiences, and as W. J. T. Mitchell says, there are no purely visual media.²⁶ So we should also ask, What are the sounds and what are the textures of family photography? What are the material aspects of photographs in South African homes, and what are their conditions of handling and use and circulation?²⁷ What patterns, repetitions, and silences can we hear in family photo collections, pictures on the wall, and individual albums?²⁸ There are image types and iconographies that repeat, invert, or call and respond to each other across the stories shared in this book, and these create a rhythmic register that I hope can make other forms of relation possible, besides looking at other people's pictures at a distance. I am also proposing and modeling a shared space for listening to the actual subjects in the pictures and what they have to say for themselves. This crucial sonic dimension, the sound of the human voice of the subject in the picture, is sometimes remarkably absent in studies that foreground the sonics and haptics of photography.

There are silences, too, many of which are intentional on my part, because we (local viewers as well as foreign ones) cannot always know everything. We are not entitled to know everything. Insight into the dignity of the lives of others need not depend on undue or unwelcome scrutiny. For privacy, in places I use initials instead of names, and I occasionally give other signals to the reader that information is being withheld or obscured.

There is also the fact that some people are willing to say more than others about their pictures, some are more reflective about their lives, and some are better raconteurs. Some personal stories will inevitably be told more fully or evocatively. Often the details of the event of a particular photograph have been forgotten, or are misremembered, or are dramatically embellished in their telling.²⁹ I describe such moments without much commentary so the

reader may enjoy for themselves the feints, left turns, and full stops that accompany the viewing of these family photographs with their subjects.

Last, as anyone who owns or has handled paper family photographs knows, there are images that are out of focus, damaged by various fluids spilling on them or from repeated handling, or simply decayed. There are those that have been lost, or given away, or tossed in the trash. There are those about which little is known besides “this is mine.” This dark matter is part of the everyday experience of viewing photography. The narrative details of the visual image are only one aspect of the viewing context. To this we can add low-light conditions or glare that can accompany looking at photographs in a home setting. The presentation here is meant to approximate the actual viewing experience, fraught with visual obscurity and informational opacity.

The structure of this book

In this book there are two parts that show two sides of the same object, like a photograph with a pictorial image on the front and a written inscription on the back that hints at less visible things. Part 1, “Sample Album,” is composed of twenty-two short stories, each representing an encounter with photography in a family home. Part 2, “Owners of Their Faces,” considers demands for opacity and the history of privacy and copyright law.

I begin the sample album by re-creating a series of informal interviews, describing their space for the reader as if they, too, were invited into homes in a place like Soweto to look at and speak about family photographs. The selection is meant to both show a range and allow for interconnections and contradictions to be found, and they may be read sequentially or individually, according to the reader’s desire. I use creative nonfiction elements to draw the reader in. Dialogue from interviews is intertwined with close descriptions of photographs and how they are handled, alongside selected images from the family collections. I employ description also to set the scene and the mood of the encounter, to lead the reader’s eye to pictorial details that I or the subjects find significant, and to hint at pictures that are not reproduced here. Occasionally I indicate patterns of use, or style, or iconography that might be seen in common among otherwise unrelated collections. Other than blocking out the scene in these ways, I mostly refrain from commentary. Structurally, I play with tensions between the visual and verbal to show how images are entangled in people’s lives and in other images. The reader is invited into this collage of words and ways of looking, where hopefully identification can occur and the

authority of the view and voice of the researcher (me) is not hidden but also not overly dominant.

Part 1 is like a family album that has been well used, with its imperfections and obscurities. It illustrates some of the options for self-imagining chosen by those who survived apartheid, in part, through their images. My commitment is to seeking ways to speak with and alongside rather than for and about. I would like the images and the voices of the actual subjects in the pictures to speak as much as possible on their own terms.

Part 2 is a roadmap for honoring subjects' rights in vernacular photographs, following insights from South Africa. It brings together personal, legal, and historical perspectives from South Africa and from other areas in and beyond Africa to make a detailed case for respecting privacy and for ownership of the self-image, including via copyright. It comprises six short sections, each of which considers subjects' demands and legal rights for opacity, privacy, and ownership from a different angle.

"A litany for opacity" is an enumeration and discussion of anecdotes and observations describing the many and widely varied circumstances where people preferred not to share their photographs, including a range of reservations about photography and photographers. With that foundation, in "Distributed persons," I discuss how people have defined themselves by how they distribute their images. I consider perspectives on the concept of the person and the private domain, where boundaries of the self and of one's community are created via control over the sharing of one's images.

Then, starting from South African law, I trace a critical history of photographic subjects' rights in global perspective in "Copyright and portrait photography" and in "Privacy and portrait photography." I show how concerns over privacy and ownership of the self-image have haunted photography since its invention, and how they have been critical to the development of privacy rights in modern law. This is done first in terms of the history of ownership of copyright for portrait photography, and then in terms of how rights to privacy have historically evolved in response to changes in imaging technologies. Since, looking historically, we find that demands for privacy have shifted as technologies for reproducing photography have changed, I argue that today, in the context of digital dissemination, it is worth revisiting the model of earlier copyright laws, which were better at empowering subjects to control the uses of their own images.

In "I !@#%&* own Seydou Keïta," I reconsider these questions of authorship and ownership in light of works by the Malian portrait photographer Seydou Keïta, who became a global contemporary art star in the early 1990s.

The final section in part 2 highlights examples of possible best practices, given the urgent need to better respect privacy and image ownership of family photography, especially as older pictures are now recirculated in current scholarship, in the art market, and via social media.

The experimental approach to writing opacity in this book comes with obvious risks that certain grand biographical, historical, or sociological aspects may need to be set aside, left implicit, not explained, or not remarked on. Since the voicing is purposefully multiple, sometimes it becomes contradictory. Errors in memory, misunderstandings, and disagreements over interpretation that occurred in interviews are openly replicated. This is reperforming, reinstantiating, and remediating in writing how interpretation has been cocreated, and sometimes contested, in collaboration with the subjects seen in the images. Ideally, this layering of differing voices and views facilitates an ethical, responsible, and familiar relation that includes the researcher and later viewers. The place of the writer is not effaced; it is visibly open to correction so that scholarly omniscience might be displaced by authorial vulnerability. The reader is welcome to identify from their own experience with what is described, but they also become responsible, like a house guest respecting their host. They are invited into the frame, and the photographs' subjects are given space within the text to destabilize or obscure our view, or even to ask us to look away.

I hope that as you read this you may find yourself among the looks met here. The open structure is meant to welcome a spirit of participation. It is an invitation to enter respectfully and with consideration into the homes and personal stories of people who lived through and survived apartheid, as if you are there with them and with us. As they become more familiar, do they become like family? Does their image world and their desire for opacity speak to yours?

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18 INTRODUCTION

Notes

Introduction. What photography was for us

- 1 Phu et al., “Family Camera Network,” 4. Other perspectives on how to view photography through ideas of family may be read in the special issue on “Seeing Family” of the journal *Photography and Culture* 10, no. 2 (2017).
- 2 See, for example, Rose, *Doing Family Photography*.
- 3 On Sotho traditions of self-narration, see Coplan, *In the Time of Cannibals*.
- 4 Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity*.
- 5 Behrend, *Contesting Visibility*; Uimonen, “‘I’m a Picture Girl!’”
- 6 Rose, “Digital Technologies”; Jurgenson, *Social Photo*.
- 7 Förster, “Mirror Images,” 84–97.
- 8 This phrasing is in homage to Stuart Hall, one of the first to ask questions like these about private photographs of “Black life.” Hall, “Reconstruction Work,” 154.
- 9 See Campt, *Listening to Images*, 32. Her use of the term “zones of freedom” is inspired by Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 50.
- 10 Chalfen, *Snapshot Versions of Life*.
- 11 For example, Bourdieu, *Photography*; and Kuhn, *Family Secrets*. Notably, Kuhn encourages open, performative readings of those images to counteract what she sees as their repressive aspect.

- 12 hooks, "In Our Glory"; Hall, "Reconstruction Work"; Willis, *Picturing Us*;
Camp, *Image Matters*; Fleetwood, "Posing in Prison"; Fleetwood, *Troubling
Vision*.
- 13 Dlamini, *Native Nostalgia*, 13
- 14 Dlamini, *Native Nostalgia*, 15, 14.
- 15 Comaroff and Comaroff, *Theory from the South*.
- 16 McNaughton, "Talking to People About Art."
- 17 Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*
- 18 Lacan, "What Is a Picture?"
- 19 Azoulay, *Civil Contract of Photography*.
- 20 Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*; Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli*.
- 21 In addition to scholarship in Black diaspora studies cited above, critical
works that have inspired my own project include Batchen, "Snapshots";
Pinther, "Textiles and Photography"; Rose, *Doing Family Photography*;
Langford, *Suspended Conversations*; Zuromskis, *Snapshot Photography*;
Paoletti, *Portrait and Place*; Keller, *Imaging Culture*; and Bajorek, *Un-
fixed*. Foundational texts include Pinney and Peterson, *Photography's
Other Histories*; Bourdieu, *Photography*; Chalfen, *Snapshot Versions of
Life*; Geary and Webb, *Delivering Views*; Spence and Holland, *Family
Snaps*; and Hirsch, *Familial Gaze*. Rizzo's *Photography and History in
Colonial Southern Africa*—especially "Bodies and Things," her chapter
on photography and the person in South Africa—is a powerful account
of the contradictions and the overlap between bureaucratic and personal
uses of photography. Also, a number of works in anthropology using an
interview-based methodology to explore specific global aspects of the ex-
perience of photography from the perspective of the subjects and consum-
ers, as opposed to those that emphasize the archive, the collection, or the
studio, have informed and motivated my research and writing, especially
Strassler, *Refracted Visions*; Behrend, *Contesting Visibility*; and Buckley,
"Self and Accessory" and "Studio Photography."
- 22 Gürsel, "Looking Together as Method."
- 23 Sarkisova and Shevchenko, *In Visible Presence*.
- 24 For a different approach, one based in anthropology and primarily con-
cerned with countering biometric surveillance, see Peacock, "Writing
Opacity."
- 25 Glissant, "For Opacity," 190, 192–193. Cf. Haraway, for whom allowing for
"not knowing" is critical to taking oneself and others seriously and to non-
violent relations with others, including with other animals. See the interview
with Paulson, "Making Kin"; and Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.
- 26 Mitchell, "There Are No Visual Media."

- 27 For pioneering approaches to the expanded concept of materiality for photography in the contexts of anthropology and history, see Edwards, *Raw Histories*; and Edwards and Hart, *Photographs Objects Histories*. The study of materiality is extended further into the realm of affect in Brown and Phu, *Feeling Photography*.
- 28 Sound-related interpretations of photographic archives are explored by Campt in *Image Matters* and *Listening to Images*.
- 29 For a moving analysis of generational forgetting and creative reimagining in the context of Soviet-era family photographs, see Sarkisova and Shevchenko, "Soviet Past in Domestic Photography."

Chapter 23. A litany for opacity

- 1 "I thus am able to conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity for him. To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to 'make' him in my image." Glissant, "For Opacity," 192.
- 2 See, e.g., Stokes, "Family Photograph Album."
- 3 Dr. Balie's statements here and below are from an interview with Dr. Isaac Balie, by John Pepper, Genadendal, November 5, 2014.
- 4 Behrend, "'Celebrating Life,'" 87.
- 5 This is also true for other locations in the world where historic traumas have occurred. For example, Boerdam and Martinus state, "It is striking to note, for example, how Netherlands' family albums containing photographs from the years 1940 to 1945 contain almost no references whatsoever to the German occupation or to the war situation in general." Boerdam and Martinus, "Family Photographs," 117n9. On lacunae in family pictures dating to the Soviet years in the former USSR, see Sarkisova and Shevchenko, *In Visible Presence*.
- 6 Kotkin, "Family Photo Album," 4–5.
- 7 Interview with Gladys Tau Selwane, by John Pepper and Patricia Mabusela, Chiawelo, August 3, 2012.
- 8 Interview with Tebogo Koko, by John Pepper and Patricia Mabusela, Tladi, January 30, 2013.
- 9 Bank and Qebeyi, *Imonti Modern*, 11.
- 10 Interview with Kenneth Maakoe, by John Pepper, Molapo, February 18, 2019.
- 11 Interview with Santu Mofokeng, by John Pepper, Bez Valley, January 13, 2013.
- 12 Interview with Zitusele Cele, by John Pepper and Mpho Mathebula, Empanjeni, July 24, 2014.