AFRICA AND THE AMBIVALENCE OF SEEING

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Introduction

LIGHT AND DARK IN THE CONTINENT

AFRICA HAS been “burdened by an excess of signs.” Over centuries, the black body in particular has come to be “literally framed by torment and bliss.”1 Too often, this stems from the outside, through the forces of “global decipherment and conferred objecthood.”2 This book is an attempt to re-imagine the excess of signs from the site of new work coming from the African continent. It takes as its starting point the relationship between African history and the “drawing of light”—the visual medium of photography—but then extends and unspools into other zones of visibility and opacity. At its core is the idea that the so-called dark continent has its own histories of light.

Writing on photography has expanded globally, and Africa is being rapidly situated within a new literature. In general, this expanding field often makes it appear that the medium can be anything to anyone. In its stories of origins, photography coalesced by the mid-nineteenth century out
of experiments with light-sensitive surfaces and chemistry, interacting with the much older camera obscura and lens technology. Driven by curiosity about the world and a passion for new modes of representation, photography triggered debates over time across literature, arts, and sciences that celebrated its promise as well as its dangers and limits. Although it coalesced out of the convergence of different fields, photography’s development has also been said to coincide with particular fields of knowledge and the rise of discrete disciplines from the mid- to late nineteenth century. These include geography, anthropology, history, archaeology, astronomy, psychiatry, sociology, policing, and the law, to name but a few. This development was simultaneous with processes of industrialization; urbanization; proletarianization; and more important for our purposes, imperialism, colonialism, and even the formal institution of slavery in some parts of the globe.

After a long twentieth century of photography and debates around it (to which we shall return), critical theory has now taken up the subject in both its analogue and its digital materializations. Not only does photography feature in the history of different disciplines and in relation to almost any subject or thing, it also has been a catalyst for different clusters of interdisciplinarity. But in the midst of this vast applicability and malleability, even as it seems to offer everything, photography might be in danger of being nothing, again (see Vilho Shigwedha’s chapter in this volume). Here, it is perhaps timely to recall Georges Didi-Huberman’s point that we might be asking “too much and too little of the image.” This is partially due to its virtual unmanageability, given its scale and the growing sense of ubiquity. Beyond that, its very mobility makes it slippery. It has an endless plasticity and capacity to become unfixed. As a medium that mediates between other mediums, it is the “medium medium.” It exhibits a “chameleonic” character.

There is something else about the medium and the fundamental questions that it generates that has led many thinkers on photography to speak of its ambivalence. Use of the term ambivalent is often the first sign of trouble, pointing, in part, to the basic problem between the promise and the effect of the photograph, between its ostensible truth claims and its unstable outcomes, or its “dual mode.” If we consider some of the larger conceptual terrains in existing photography studies of former empires—the “imperial spectacle,” the “depth” and “interiority” of colonial modes of documenting humans, African studio portraiture and postcolonial digital
surfacism (see Okechukwu Nwafor’s chapter)—it emerges that no photographs are true to their subjects but instead deploy realism to create this effect. Chapters in this book have likewise engaged ambivalence as a conceptual port of call, as they move through a series of methodological and detailed explorations of the implications of photographs and photography in their African settings. This volume actually arises from the stimulus offered by the literature on photography, which propelled our contributors eagerly into our own archives and questions about seeing and who has the right to see. If photography exceeds human intentionality, then despite being a European invention, photography in Africa exceeds any European intentionality. But the literature has also posed a limit, an ambivalence, deriving in part from the metropolitan assumptions of its writers. The question is not only one of rights—and who has the right to write about seeing—in Africa. It is also about the distribution of theory. This unites the contributors in this volume, a volume that is by no means representative of the entire continent but that draws its material from southern, central, and western Africa in line with the questions we wish to pose. Visual theory reaches a limit when it comes to Africa. What brings us together in this volume is that our location means we have to think from this limit.

New vocabularies have been sought to register the impermanence of stability and clarity in photography: its indeterminacies; its subsidiaries; its “precarious framings”; its desires; its prefigurations and postfigurations; and its metaphors, emptiness, shadows, and silhouettes. There is a general-usage notion of ambivalence that implies a generic sense of mixed feelings and operates as a kind of default understanding of the term—a “conscious sense of uncertainty.” We wish to push the possibilities further, however, by invoking Sigmund Freud’s usage in Totem and Taboo, where ambivalence is the simultaneous holding of different (even binary) positions that are perhaps irreconcilable. Two opposing ambivalent drives may exist on different planes, the one conscious and the other unconscious. They not only exist but also coexist in ways that cannot necessarily be disentangled. There is something inextricable about such ambivalence.

When the enigmatic South African photographer Santu Mofokeng says that ambivalence is what informs his work, he is gesturing toward these planes of the conscious/unconscious and, indeed, the polyvalent work that photography does. Mofokeng’s statement, which goes beyond any simple positivism, offers a crucial springboard here. In the first instance, there is
the obvious—the capacity to make things visible. But in the second instance, there is the capacity to go beyond what is obvious in the visible itself and open up something far less evident. In doing so, photography may even draw attention to our expectations about the obvious, as well as to the coterminous relationship between the visible and other things. Shawn Michelle Smith argues that photography, in fact, draws us to the “edge of sight.” This is because, paradoxically, there is the “revelation of an unseen world that photography does not fully disclose, but makes us aware of.”

Even as photography enables one to see more, it simultaneously demonstrates how little is ordinarily visible, “giving one the unnerving sense of living in a world only partially perceived.”

Partial perception also resonates, perhaps, with Siegfried Kracauer’s notion of the photograph as the “first draft of history.” Our own concern in this introduction is to hold open the potential tensions of the draft, the photograph. Allowing for its paradoxes and partial perceptions—its “edge of sight”—we foreground new lines of thought on different kinds of photographic mediations in Africa. This might include no actual photographs. This is a gesture toward the material and immaterial features that might precede how we tend to conceive of media today. Given the possible archaeologies of seeing in Africa, to consider the geologies of the image is a way to rethink the prevailing and linear histories of the visible in Africa, where the geologic is grasped more by its holes, its mines, and the lack of one final determining stratum. What we are left with instead are the various “records of actions.”

The question of making things visible (or not) is a very old and powerful concern in the continent. The seeing subject in Africa is not the universal figure lodged in a history of vision that has been argued as variously abstracted, disembodied, and secular, which is one reason why we do not think a singular focus on photography is appropriate in this volume. In a sense, it is necessary to examine certain additional modes of making things visible (or not) alongside that of photography. These might include prephotographic and nonphotographic modes of rendering things apparent or producing analogies (see the chapters by Isabelle de Rezende and Jung Ran Forte). Deeply implicated here are the huge repertoires in the continent, with seccries and rituals of concealment built into spiritual practices, for example. Some claim to see the unseen. According to Roland Barthes, this is “the visible form of invisibility [hiding] the sacred
But the point is not simply to split away from the secular and turn to the sacred. John Akomfrah argues that any turn to the sacral or magical is already problematic because these have been “codified as an affliction of the black body” in the Western epistemological frame with its “rationalist demarcations.” The imperative is to keep them together in an ambivalent framing. To expose the problem of separating secular and sacred, one has only to think of spirit photography in Victorian England, where the industrial technology of light was put to use (in the darkroom) to prove the presence of the dead. A suggestive term here is revelation, which Michael Taussig insists is “not a matter of exposure which destroys the secret.” Such revelatory processes operate on the basis that nonlight is as important as light and that nonlight is also a “constitutive practice of power and privation.”

The term nonlight fixes on the need to widen the vocabulary around seeing and not seeing, apprehension and nonapprehension, awareness and oblivion. It is to be distinguished from darkness, “which is still an experience of photosensitivity.” By contrast, nonlight is “a formation of insensitivity” that is mediated by “historical and political abysses cast by light.” Thus, there are multiple modes of negotiating the phenomena that emerge around visibility and invisibility, light and nonlight, sensitivity and insensitivity. In the tactics played out between a state and its populace during conflict, for instance, Allen Feldman points to the “psychic effects of the surveillance grid” where “private life is lived on the outside” and “political activism . . . is correlated with privacy.” It is fascinating that new work on African social media in this volume revisits and extends the terms of this last argument, pointing to the further mutations in boundaries between such ambivalent insides and outsides, facilitated by emerging interfaces (see George Emeka Agbo’s chapter).

This book follows some of the ways photography is taking on new and dynamic forms every day on the African continent. We then ask questions about the “companions” to such photography as it mediates and references many other media or is referenced by them in its turn, whether fashion, textiles, film, art, or social media. As mentioned already, we have found it more revealing to go outside the medium itself, in the strict sense. Therefore, the volume is bookended by chapters that explicitly do this, both unmooring photography from its attachment to the camera and its nineteenth-century precollonial moment of “invention” and mooring it again in old oral and
ritual practices in postcolonial settings. This is not simply to expand the visual field, as it were. Photography becomes woven into the many existing records of actions and practices across history that we are only beginning to explore. One way to navigate this book, therefore, is to start with Rezende’s use of the notion of citation. Through encounters, the verbal images in central African oral tradition become cited in early prephotographic traveler texts. These may have an influence on actual photographic citation in the ensuing early colonial photography—around “cultural eventfulness,” to give one example. As Patricia Hayes points out in the case of northern Namibia, these events might not be understood by colonial photographers, but they represent old struggles between lineages and kings over important rituals. Indeed, then, it should be no surprise that, as Napandulwe Shiweda’s chapter shows, the recent return of Alfred Duggan-Cronin’s 1936 photographs to Omhedi in Namibia gives rise to feelings of reconnection and even joy, for the (oral) citation has (visually) come home.

For the majority of papers that do strictly engage with photography, it is not only that archives and everyday life are pervaded by photographic multiplicities and metaphors across time but also that African historiography is itself affected by these questions and what it does not see of its own encounters with seeing. It has treated its “sources” that come in different media (text, sound, and image) in a very hierarchical way, also locking them down in the past tense. But as Shawn Michelle Smith suggests, “The photograph is a forward-looking document, so to speak, anticipating a future viewer who will recognize in it a spark of contingency that cannot be contained to one temporal moment.” Shiweda speaks of the “unexpected future use” of colonial photographs, which might benefit “the subjects most closely connected to their contents” at any contemporary moment (see chapter 7).

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND AUTHORITY IN AN AGE OF POSTCOLONIAL DISTANCE AND APHASIA

Tina Campt speaks of the “dynamics of historiographical authority and visibility” with regard to race. She makes this point in relation to diasporic photographic collections. Such dynamics and authority have certainly attached to what the historiography has so far made visible about photography in Africa. Until quite recently, most work since the early 2000s has
tended to focus on colonial archives, stereotypes arising from disaster and humanitarian photography, and the redemptive qualities of African portraiture as against colonial ethnographies and Afropessimistic photojournalism. Pessimism and powerlessness have figured strongly in writings on the historical relationship of Africa with photography, given that the medium “entered Africa” at a time of rising imperialism and heightened discourses on race. Africans were positioned, as John Tagg has put it, along with the deviant and degenerate of European cities. Beyond Africa and into the diaspora, Campt stresses, “the reading of surfaces, particularly of flesh and skin, is profoundly implicated in the pernicious role photography has played in the history of racial formation.” This dark view then required a redemptive turn, as surely as the Atlantic slave trade gave birth to abolition. A preoccupation in this book, therefore, has been to try to pinpoint the binaries and radical oscillations around them that tend to mark much of the writing on photography in Africa to date.

Of course, the contributors to *Ambivalent* are not alone in this push to complicate the field of photography studies in Africa. Recent critical interventions in African and Africanist debates directly address particular problems of genre, subjectivities, and power. Such initiatives highlight the easy dualisms associated with African portraiture, as well as the ambiguities of the notion of archive with regard to photography on the continent. Studies of studio photography have become increasingly nuanced. Based on small and hitherto unseen collections, new work is exploring concepts such as personhood, heterogeneous studio networks, and “lounge photography.” Scholars are developing new concepts to address personal and aesthetic issues from within the studio to understand the relational bonds and exchanges forged even in unlikely photographic situations. Official and colonial archives are thus receiving more exploratory treatment under the banner of administrative photography, and police, prison, and identification photographies are also being investigated. Attention has been drawn to national questions of West African publics and photographies. The relational aspects between African subjects and their photographs inspire ever more fruitful thinking, even if it is about “decay,” and new directions have extended our discussions into intermediality. Some of this new scholarship is treading the delicate line signaled by Nancy Rose Hunt, marking the frictions between recent intellectual and affective histories of the continent.
But let us pause here in a discussion that is, so far, heavily biased toward Euro-American writing about African photographs and collections. Although such work promotes and expands new archives and initiatives, there is a long-standing problem around the dearth of published work from inside the continent that might and arguably should play a part in shaping the debates. In fact, the authors and editors we have just mentioned are scholars mostly from outside the continent. Their work is increasingly careful and insightful, but we are still left with a number of residual concerns about the persistence of certain unquestioned categories and structures of knowledge. These effectively circulate around race and redemption, issues that are underpinned by the structuring of both temporality and genre. These have, at times, produced a number of straw men across disciplines in the study of photography in Africa.

To start with, in the generally held histories of industrialization and technological innovation, the “invention” and spread of photographic practices are implicated in a world that is still often divided between the old imperial metropoles and colonial peripheries. In developmentalist paradigms, there is a temporal corollary to all this whereby Africa is continually lodged in a condition of belatedness, in the “waiting room of history.” To go further, in the boiled-down version of the history of photography, the latter is “invented” in metropolitan Europe and then travels elsewhere along with the conventions that grew up around its first proliferation (namely, in portraiture), which then become adapted to local conditions. Thus, anything Africans do with photography will, in some sense, always be derivative. Unfortunately, the new scholarship that is beginning to take apart the problematic notion of the invention of photography has barely registered its most pernicious epistemological and reproductive effect, which is to perennially mark zones of the world (especially Africa) as always trying to catch up with the centers of empire. Lucie Ryzova has critically analyzed such histories of photography in terms of a diffusionist model that will always reproduce difference in a mode that is problematic. Writing about the Middle East, she argues that photographic culture is “still thought of in terms of ‘adoption,’ ‘adaptation,’ ‘response’ or at best as ‘shared production.’ According to this logic, agency (whether as technology or as cultural forms or expertise) emanates primarily from the West.”

In extremely complex and differentiated ways, no doubt, such default notions of belatedness have an intimate link to the aphasia that has
been diagnosed in former centers of empire. Elizabeth Edwards and others argue that a displacement occurs in the colonial archival imaginary to an “elsewhere.”46 The former empires tend to proceed under the assumption that these former colonial and difficult histories are of fading relevance, which undergirds the disconnection behind such aphasia.47 From their vantage point, they are unlikely to see the “lineaments of the constrained conditions” that emerge out of colonial pasts and powerfully affect the present.48 It is part of the “double articulation” of the colonial past that separate legacies accrue around the former colonizers and the former colonized.

In the zones of the “elsewhere,” former colonial subjects are essentialized and reified anew. “Fixed notions of ‘race’ and culture stubbornly continue to intersect within the multicultural, producing essentialized subject positions little different from their ideological antecedents of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”49 The black body in particular is reproduced over and over again under the sign of the “excess of signs.”

For those of us located in the elsewhere of the world, living so closely with the old colonial articulations and their reproduction, it must be said, gives rise to another unfortunate tendency. This is to regard the former colonial powers in homogenous and even monolithic terms. Theorists in the South need to remain self-critical and mindful of the pitfalls that accompany such reductive and reifying thought.

There is no doubt that we are all affected by archival and political distances that have disarticulated our postcolonial and national histories. It may be quixotic to think of reconnecting some of those histories and archives through a set of engagements around the medium of photography and larger questions of historical visibility in Africa. But instead of being simply one of the “others” of photography’s other histories and part of a “difficult” postempire history,50 the contributors in this book are seeking a new kind of conversation. It comes from a desire for a genuinely plural scholarly inquiry about our multiple and often enmeshed histories and for an engagement that is more receptive to new work coming from the African continent itself. In this vein, new critiques of the universalization of twentieth-century critical writing (notably by Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes) that has its origin in highly specific responses to Western photography of conflict—specifically, Vietnam—represent a necessary and welcome development.51
If histories of photography in Africa that carry implications of belatedness are problematic enough, they also tie in with similar positions regarding “modernity.” Consequently, when Africans walk into a photo studio in the 1960s, it might be claimed that they become modern—a quality that Europeans presumably always had, even though some of them may never have entered the photo studio and even though Africans have been frequenting studios since the nineteenth century, within a few months of the arrival of photography. In addition to being linear and somewhat unified, this narrative feeds into a number of related positions. If “modern” Africans later lost their family pictures through the vicissitudes of a long century of colonialism, including forced removals under apartheid in southern Africa, then according to such logic, would they necessarily go backward and become unmodern or premodern again? To follow this line of reasoning is, in a sense, to naturalize old colonial and apartheid assumptions about African backwardness, wherein the term modernity becomes almost interchangeable with the older term civilization. Part of the problem may lie in the depleted sense of the word modernity, given the frequency of its use to the point of being the code or shorthand for a massive cluster of historical processes and conditions. It is helpful to recall the ambivalences of modernity itself—the “polysemic richness of human reality”—where, at the same time in different parts of the world, subjects inhabit a permanent sense of unstable transition, rather than experiencing any rationalist sense of progress.

One might speculate as to what radical African thinkers would have said about these assimilationist touches in photography studies. For example, Steve Biko’s observation that blacks remain perpetual students and whites perpetual teachers would probably still hit home. In the mode of Black Consciousness thought, of course, he might easily just have said, “I’ll be photographed how I like.” More probable still is the verdict that far-reaching political work is necessary in order to bring about “a more human face.”

The approach taken by John Akomfrah, a founder member of the Black Audio Film Collective, is to leave aside overdetermined genealogies and allow for “bastard allegories” and “dangerous knowings.” He outlines a desirable and futuristic scenario that might be “formidably strange.” He calls for a situation where “bodies which would simultaneously call upon and fiercely rebuke notions of location, ethnicity and identity as a priori certainties, which ‘outside’ regimes of truth—progressive or otherwise—could
prescriptively rally to a cause.” As he insists, “Bastard allegories yes. Liberal sensibility, no way!”

If one is to engage with the notion of modernity, it is also vital to delegitimize diffusionist narratives and seek out not just bastard allegories but also bastard genealogies. The legitimacy of being modern might have been lost and gained for many Africans under colonial and postcolonial exigencies, repeatedly. To pose the issue as one of delegitimization is pertinent to recent economic fluctuations and migrations in other parts of the globe as well. If there are layers of such lost modernities and creative rebirths, then photographic (self-)possession and archiving give remarkable access to productive anachronisms that are a feature of Africa’s history and are shared widely across the globe—and here, the insights from new African work might have something to offer everyone. Photographs in themselves have a great capacity to overturn unified, linear, and chronological ways of thinking and open new analytical spaces. The generational shock when people find their grandparents or parents looking a certain way is not confined to encounters with Santu Mofokeng’s *Black Photo Album*. Even those photographs that fill the drawers of our museums, deemed to be traditional, tribal, or ethnographic, need to be looked at anew. As some of the contributors in this volume argue, such photographs should not be left to lie fallow in the generic imprint in which they were first conceived or classified.  

Beyond the ethnographic, Phindi Mnyaka’s fine blurring of the separate categories of settler and native in the colonial port city of East London, for instance (see chapter 8), with their corollaries of official historical versus social photography, drives doubt into the heart of its assumed spatial stability and the progressive temporality of colonialism itself. Both categories, settler and native (and their photographs), are liable to ruination. And just as time ruins photographs, so the photographs ruin time.

Many photographic histories and distinctive practices around visibility and invisibility in Africa have remained under the radar. If they are apparent, they have too often been categorized and domesticated into ordering grids of knowledge that include naturalized and calcified genres. This project on ambivalence has, therefore, attempted to figure out ways to unsettle the strong residues of an imperial metanarrative of photography, introduce some disarray into the assumed legitimacies of genre and genealogy, and have an impact on wider photographic debates. We start with one possible example.
In response to negative colonial and postcolonial imaging of African people and situations, many scholars and curators are finding redemption in studio and personal or family collections. The subjectivities believed to inhere in the studio portraits are deployed to redeem Africans from their histories of objectification. Numerous authors have since sought to flesh out and give nuance to the question of subjectivities, but even though these subjectivities have earned a huge amount of attention, the very objectification assumed to be the starting point of the problem of African representation has received far less critical attention. How far does recent work on the hand coloring of ID photos in Soweto, for example, continue to rely on a polarized notion of a repressive surveillance biopolitical shot for the ID photo as its starting point? Going back to the actual Population Registration Act of 1950 in South Africa (and its predecessors) is illuminating because the project of objectification actually emerges as unstable, insecure, and extremely hard to pin down and substantiate. What would happen to the lyrical work on studio portraits and self-fashioning if one takes away the certainties of repressive state or colonial photography that stand as the counterpoint? Though this volume is not the only work to look at “the disciplinary frame” of photography in South Africa, contributors Ingrid Masondo and Gary Minkley (chapters 3 and 4, respectively) start to unravel the dichotomy so successfully and paradigmatically erected by Allan Sekula. This is the dichotomy between repressive and honorific photography that has traveled productively but critically unscathed into much of the writing on photography in Africa.

Masondo’s work on the inability to clearly fix racial classification systems on a visual template, as well as the dispersed operations of everyday racial ideas that fix and unfix themselves on the loose definitions offered by the state and its legislation, helps to coalesce another uneasiness about the easy victories claimed for its supposed opposite, African studio photography. It is strange that so much is often claimed for portraits when so little is known about their subjects. But if someone volunteers to go to a studio and enact a ritual with a compatriot who has a camera, this apparently makes the experience automatically positive. One often has the feeling that this speaks more to the desire of liberal or radical scholars for an African beauty, dignity, unified selfhood, and modernity that can be elevated above the
mundane personal or familial implications of people being engaged in the act of having their picture taken for their own purposes.

At its best, scholarly work on studio photography helps us understand how people interact with many domains of life and history through their photographs as personal and social possessions. This is where the rich work on West Africa and new work on southern Africa studios is opening new domains.\textsuperscript{64} Richard Vokes’s work on the relational and political aspects of personal photographs in Uganda is also groundbreaking in this regard.\textsuperscript{65} But at a more dubious level, some of the claims made for studio photographs demonstrate two problems. We have already mentioned the first, an assumption that so-called modernity starts with photography and that Africans enter it when they go and get their own photographs. Here, an implicit master narrative of unidirectional cultural development remains too often unproblematised, and the kinds of historicization that are possible in Africa remain limited by the narrow range of conceptual tools deployed. African playfulness and consumerist or global desires (extraversions) are very old indeed and should not be confined to a question of the advent or “discovery” of studio photography.\textsuperscript{66}

The \textit{Black Photo Album} points to many of these complexities. The central issue is the uneasiness and ambivalence that Mofokeng expresses so well when he looks at South African portraits in the 1890s: their likely bourgeois aspirations, the destruction of almost all traces of that incipient bourgeoisie by the time he was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s (thus messing with linear temporality), and the unclear meanings of race. Mofokeng is left “ambivalent about my ambivalence.”\textsuperscript{67} These “honorific” works are just as unstable and unseizable as the “repressive” ones to which Masondo’s work has pointed. This theoretical problem created by the acceptance of a naturalized dichotomy (after Sekula) has for too long left things in abeyance, and that helps to explain why one sometimes feels so uneasy about the touches of condescension in the writing on studio photographs. Too rarely has such writing dealt with the hard issues of race. This is where the work of Minkley on the “intimate event” and the “empire of liberation” can be particularly suggestive.\textsuperscript{68} It foregrounds the entanglements of liberal humanism with various African struggles, raveling up emancipatory gestures in its domesticking and politically diluting agendas. The importance of decolonizing moments in such dynamics is enormous, with frequent episodes of multiple temporalities and the simultaneity of decolonization and colonization.
within an empire (see Drew Thompson’s chapter on Mozambique). Liberation, too, has these time-space compressions. What might even develop in later political exposures are new neoliberal subjects.

The repressive or “disempowering” state ID photograph, with its unexamined parameters, is the negative against which the positive self-fashioning studio photograph can be measured and celebrated. As such, it represents a kind of straw man that, as long as it is not closely scrutinized, enables at least one side of the dichotomy to function freely and sometimes uncritically. It has not escaped certain perceptive curators’ notice that, indeed, the two sides of the coin sometimes look the same.

But there is second straw man in photography studies, specifically in South Africa, that several scholars have tried to address. This is the tendency to collapse social documentary and the politically or socially driven photography during the antiapartheid years into a crude form of photojournalism or, simply put, struggle photography. It is often argued that the more “exploratory” photographers have magically transcended this genre in the art galleries since apartheid. In other words, photography has moved from circulating on paper to the gallery wall, and the split between politics and aesthetics has been reproduced in the aftermath of apartheid. And as the political was left behind with its “sledgehammer” photographs, the aesthetically frustrated have been able to blossom. Current writing on contemporary photography has become more subtle, often acknowledging the legacies of engaged photography—though usually without examining the latter closely. The problem of straw men that enable the fabrication of dichotomies and continue to service them is one that still bedevils photography studies in Africa, and it is largely related to the ongoing overreliance on genres and categories that need to be interrogated or dismantled.

CATACSTROPHE, SOVEREIGNTY, AND THE “NOTHING” PHOTOGRAPH

Moving away from the studio, there is another example of how contributions to this volume might raise new questions for critical theorizing about photography. Ariella Azoulay’s work on the “social contract of photography” and the “political ontology of photography” has opened an array of new questions for the medium. Azoulay’s turn to historical photographs is especially welcome. Her work points to the huge critical potential lying
in photographic archives that so often remain overlooked and neglected, their readings constrained within the limits of institutional classification and disciplinary boundaries.

Auzoulay insists that we should think in terms of the “event of photography,” with the producer or the photographer no longer at the center of attention. Instead, she shifts the focus to those dynamics beyond the immediate frame and time of the image. Photography, she argues, is much more than the pressing of the shutter button on a particular scene. All the participants in the scene enter a new set of possibilities, which do not end when the photograph is produced. This is how a “civil imagination” can be activated for those who view the image afterward, in response to what is depicted in the photograph. This civil imagination, argues Auzoulay, is plural, heterogeneous, and beyond national or social boundaries: “The space that extends between them [the copresence of individuals at the time the photograph is taken], and subsequently the space that extends between them and the spectators of their photograph, is a political space where human beings look at one another, speak and act in a manner that is not solely subordinate to disciplinary constraints, nor to ones of governance.”

In these political relations that are made possible by viewing photographs (the political ontology of photography), there is the potential to confront injustice. Where the camera has been present, it continues to have effects. This has the potential to draw in future spectators who will engage in a civil contract of photography and read history anew. Auzoulay’s arguments are drawn from and directed at the questionable and often hidden aspects of the foundation of the Israeli state and its ongoing occupation of Palestinian territories. Though Auzoulay’s work is grounded in this history, it also encompasses claims to the general and the universal.

Many of the features raised by Auzoulay—atrocities, expulsion from citizenship, dispossession from land and modernity—are familiar to certain parts of Africa, especially those parts of the southern African subcontinent affected by apartheid and its militaristic response to the perceived “Total Onslaught” of communism, “terrorism,” and decolonization during the Cold War. South Africa, with its rich history of photographic activism and postapartheid positioning of photography as art, demonstrates another facet of Auzoulay’s critique, the split between politics and aesthetics.

But what happens in the “event of photography” if the citizens feel ambivalent or negative about being photographed and the results thereof?
Such equivocation finds no adequate place in this schema. A striking phenomenon emerging from research on South African photography is the way the black subjects of photography (and especially their succeeding postapartheid and postcolonial generations) often express a deep dislike of the ways they have been represented. Here, we refer to documentary and critical photojournalism from the antiapartheid era to which viewers outside the country responded in vital political ways that brought crucial pressure to bear against apartheid. But inside South Africa, the subjects belonging to groups represented in social documentary photography (sometimes called third-person photography) often forcibly reject black-and-white images of their so-called social conditions, with their bleak associations of poverty, misery, and ugliness. Santu Mofokeng has mused on the irony that nobody in Soweto ever expressed a wish to have one of his black-and-white photographs of township life in the 1980s in their home.

This raises certain questions for Azoulay’s work. There is a need to go beyond the negativity and political morality of Susan Sontag and even Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s more distinctive critique of documentary photography, both of which see the social distances between the photographed and the photographer, as well as the photographed and the viewer, as almost inevitably problematic. But in transcending these inhibiting frameworks, how does Azoulay avoid the pitfalls of the recursive liberal and distanced subject that Minkley foregrounds in his work on the “intimate event” in South African history and photography? We are back in the same problematic terms of the “elsewhere.”

In Africa more broadly, the humanism of concerned photography (which is extremely heterogeneous) often slips into a powerful and more homogeneous discourse of humanitarianism. Despite impulses toward empathy or “fellow-feeling,” the latter always has as its object a less powerful and racially different subject. Recent research highlights the way the humanitarian ground has shifted significantly, insisting on positive photographs of dignity and resilience that supersede an older emphasis on victims of disaster and crisis. The episode that Vilho Shigwedha highlights in this book, however, is from an earlier phase of humanitarianism. Specifically, he addresses the Cassinga massacre of Namibians by the South African Air Force and the Parachute Battalion in 1978. Within a few days of the air and ground attack on the camp in southern Angola that was hosting mainly Namibian civilians, photographs of the larger of two mass graves
were transmitted internationally, arousing widespread condemnation of the colonial apartheid regime. The reaction they provoked was crucial in mobilizing international solidarity against apartheid and South Africa’s occupation of Namibia, suggestive, perhaps, of Azoulay’s citizenry of photography. The members of international solidarity movements might have identified with this description, as they entered a polarized and continuing debate about whether the victims were refugees or guerrillas in a training camp. But in this regard, things become very unsettled by Shigwedha’s work with the remaining Cassinga survivors from 1978. Some of these individuals reject what is called the iconic photograph as relating in any way to their memory of the massacre: in the (translated) words of one survivor, it is “a nothing.” It is incommensurable with what people who were there remember of the extraordinary force and duration of the violence and unable to convey anything of their experience.79

Such extreme nonidentification points to a reluctance to be joined in the same political space as the viewers or lobbyists located outside the photograph. This is a failed struggle to find meaning, which must be sought elsewhere—if it is at all possible. Such mistrust represents a recoiling from any liberal humanist subjectivity: it is something else. It demands that we look harder to find new concepts.

### Allegories and Extraventions

The chapters in this volume dwell on epochs before, during, and after colonialism in sub-Saharan Africa. In turning visibility itself into a problem, the contributors all reference but do not confine themselves to the question of photography. In part 1 of the book, contributors highlight the “unfixing” of both visuality and race. Rezende begins by exploring texts and oral transcripts from the Congo before Belgian colonization for their treatment of visuality, sight, and how things appear, as well as people’s apparent awareness of all these issues. She argues that visuality should go beyond the ocularcentric, and she attempts to fashion an idea of that-which-can-be-seen, which remains quite open-ended.80 This shifts the focus of study away from pictures themselves—especially photography, which has very narrowly defined parameters for thinking about the precolonial in Africa.

If, as Rezende argues, pictures inhabit texts and can be tracked in words, texts, and more, then we are not dependent on the so-called modern
media of photography and film alone; rather, we must take African senses of the visual more on their own terms, as they often were independent of technological media. This highlights the possibility of assessing oral tradition and reported speech in travel literature more systematically for their visual metaphors and “verbal photography,” which in turn opens up different epistemological frameworks. Here, seeing may act as “a non-literal metaphor for knowing.” Seeing is still knowing, “but it need not be actual, visual seeing.” This also begs the question of whether visual history can only be undertaken under the auspices of contact, penetration, and colonialism, together with the interactions they bring. Under an expansive definition of visuality, surely not? We should also note that African languages often have their own words for photography that do not stem from the strictly technological term but are rooted in older and multifarious systems of thought. When speaking of photographs, many northern Namibians use the word omafano, Luganda speakers in East Africa use ekifananyi, and Shona-speaking groups in Zimbabwe use mifananidzo, all of which are implicitly reflexive terms that draw on broader ideas of likeness.

The questioning of conventions, expectations, and boundaries surrounding photographic genres features strongly in certain chapters in Ambivalent. Intellectual and taxonomic frameworks that tended to categorize images and locate them in genres became lodged in institutions from the late nineteenth century, coeval with European colonial expansion in Africa. These genres sometimes crystallized around disciplines making use of the medium for purposes of typologization, most obviously in physical anthropology but also prevalent in various forms of amateur ethnography. These genres were sustained by photographers, their amateur emulators, and audiences, as well as by the colonial institutions that utilized and collected them, including local and metropolitan museums.

Hayes takes up the notion of the “generic imprint” to analyze the cumulative effect of repetitive photographs of different ethnic groups and “cultural eventfulness” in southern African collections. She draws particular attention to the sudden proliferation of photographs of female initiation ceremonies by South African colonial officials in northern Namibia during World War 1, which are otherwise undocumented and also unremarked in oral history. As their serial repetition renders them generic, their ethnographic categorization takes them out of history and they become “empty photographs.” Much longer time frames and dispersed fragments
are necessary to situate them in a seismic process of social reconstruction after famine, with deeply submerged gender histories and decentralized ritual knowledges. It is an opportunity to explore the “lacunary functions” of the different mediums through which historical evidence is normally constituted. In fact, the very scale of such reflex, generic photography points to something of which the other modes of evidence appear to remain unconscious.

The coexistence of opposing views—one of which may be conscious and the other unconscious—is what informs Minkley’s exploration of the ambivalence of the “intimate event” of the pass photograph in South Africa. The intimate event concept draws on Elizabeth Povinelli, whose work offers a compounded vocabulary to move across the apparent continuum (or dichotomy) between the more individuated and the collective subject, respectively. Readers may try to draw parallels with Mahmood Mamdani’s “citizen and subject,” but Minkley’s formulation carries a fraught ambivalence over into the processes of liberal subject formation and the “empire of liberation” that comes with “the frame of decolonization.” There is seemingly an exfoliation of the social skin of subjects in both repressive and honorific photography, in both the state’s ID pass photograph and in the studio portrait. Minkley points to the stark way that the pass photo is delimited as colonial and racialized and set in opposition to the decolonized studio portrait that reads a “generalized look of African modernity” into the image, when both are actually “precarious framings” that translate and retranslate a “liberal spectral presence.”

Masondo likewise writes of “unstable forms” in her investigation of pass photographs. She proposes a deployment of vision to both “expose its limitations” in terms of the Racial Classification Act of 1950 and recuperate something of the “perceptual and sensory” in a contemporary photographic exploration of fragments of the body. Masondo points out that despite its definitions of racially classified categories in South Africa under the 1950 act, all based on appearance, the state issued no descriptors or guidelines in terms of this visual identification. As the Nationalist government under apartheid failed to draw on existing disciplines professing knowledge of race, identification seemingly depended on commonsense “knowings” and forms of shadow knowledge. These appear to have carried over into postapartheid everyday life as new distinctions are drawn around non–South African migrants from elsewhere in the continent. Masondo
subjects a number of apartheid-era ID photographs to close scrutiny, looking both inside and outside these images as documents within documents, and points to a range of instabilities in the state’s apparent bid to effect a standardized regime of seeing.

Thompson’s study of photographs labeled “Chinese community” in late colonial Lourenço Marques (present-day Maputo) includes further kinds of disarray to the project of state identification. There is considerable ambiguity around the racial placement of such citizens not only in colonial society as they fall outside conscription into the colonial army, for example, but also in their popular photographic practices. Groups and individuals marked their everyday lives and growing tourist mobility in the region (during an intense liberation struggle for decolonization) with snapshots processed by studios regarded as beneath the notice of professionals. These found their way into a major photographic archive, where they occupy a minority status and do not qualify as historical photographs but nonetheless insert an intriguing and unsettling heterogeneous element into the institution and, indeed, the new Mozambican nation.

In the chapter on the iconic photograph of the mass grave at Cassinga from the 1978 South African airborne attack on the Namibian camp in Angola, the assumed capacity of a photograph to actually represent is called even more deeply into question. Interviews with survivors of the massacre led Shigwedha to argue that for those viewers who were not there, such photographs situate them at the “outermost periphery of excruciating realities.” The violence at Cassinga was such that its “silhouette” “eclipses” any capacity in the photograph to convey the extreme experiences of a victim or survivor to those outside the event. Where Masondo speaks evocatively of the apartheid state’s visual efforts to “brand” its subjects racially, Shigwedha concludes that for survivors, the iconic photograph of Cassinga constitutes a “roasting” of the evidence, leaving the “subject in ashes.”

The chapters in part 2 of this volume explore the oscillation and repositioning of meanings, resonating across the surfaces and depths of what is seen and unseen. Shiweda’s recirculation of Alfred Duggan-Cronin’s photographic studies of “the Kwanyama” among descendants of the very people depicted at Omhedi in 1936 demonstrates that genealogical and kinship interests completely outweigh generic concerns. Such recirculation raises many of the questions that Edwards noted concerning the shift in “social expectations that cluster around photography, as what was technically
The scanned photographs provoked joy at the recognition of individuals, as well as generating discussion around cultural loss and decay. Omhedi served as a colonial showpiece of indirect rule in northern Namibia. The performances of tradition in Duggan-Cronin’s time for the edification of white visitors—especially the staged efundula, or initiation ceremony, at the Windhoek Agricultural Show—may well be a “bastardisation of African culture.” But the revelations of these same photographs, despite the inauthenticities of indirect rule, foster something between revival and performance, once again. Such ironies and surprises offer a series of bastard versions, no less. Photography is doing much more labor than imagined, and this labor is more “strange” than anyone expected.

Some authors in this volume directly address existing genres and the problems of their continued naturalization and acceptance, at times coining new categories (such as “empty” and “shitt” photographs) to emphasize the effects of problematic classification. Others, however, completely transcend the mundaneness of all such categories. They pose larger institutional and historical questions and put them into completely new configurations. Mnyaka, for instance, brings the vastly differing collections of the settler and doctor-photographer Joseph Denfield and the black photojournalist Daniel Morolong—both working in East London in the 1950s and 1960s and published by the same newspaper house—into unexpected, anachronistic conversation through the medium of the historically uncertain spaces they photograph. Both are haunted by uncertain temporalities and a sense of ruination, though in markedly different ways. Such writing disrupts what Akomfrah calls those “a priori certainties, which ‘outside’ regimes of truth—progressive or otherwise—could prescriptively rally to a cause.” In other words, Morolong does not simply become the antidote to Denfield. The segregated genres associated with both are left in disarray.

If the space of the studio was loosening up and spilling over into the street and into the hands of amateurs in colonial Mozambique (see Thompson’s chapter), the migrations of the studio in postcolonial Nigeria are radically more spectacular as new modes of generating images take hold. In Okechukwu Nwafor’s chapter on fashion and photography in Lagos, where dress practices around aso ebi proliferate, the old studio is dismantled and its practices reassembled in the computers of Kingsley Chuks and other fabricators on the new digital platforms. The speed and scale of this
economy evoke the “prodigal sensibilities” and “subversive flamboyance” of which Akomfrah speaks, as well as their “riotous play with boundaries” through new textile backdrops on-screen that edit out the material space of the photographic event. A recursive question surfaces as the old studio is undone and the computer appropriates its function, and that is whether the digital turn is a revolution that redistributes, on the one hand, or a displacement that actually reinforces old studio methodologies, on the other. But there can be no doubt that something electrifying is going on around this engagement with digital photography, and it opens massive new ground for consideration and analysis.

The play on polymorphous dynamics in Nigeria is taken further in Agbo’s contribution on digital photography, which ventures into the zone of social media, political dissidence, and war. This zone is seething with activity, its users resourceful in the face of power cuts and resource scarcity. As Boko Haram launches visual attacks via the internet, soldiers and civilians fight back immediately in the exact same domain, with pictures of the same things but all attached to markedly different claims and positions. Agbo refers to this as a new mode of war. Unlike the 1978 analogue photograph of Cassinga that continues to divide a former liberation movement from the old apartheid security forces, such newness comes from the convergence of visuality and the technology of insurgency because it results in a much more intensified participation in the production and scrutiny of the image. Agbo’s work may well be another indication that Africans left the redundant frame of “torment and bliss” long ago and that, like everybody else, they work compulsively and imaginatively in the autogenetic fabrication of their own signs.

To many, the digital would appear as a culminating point and an excellent place to conclude a collection of essays on photography, visibility, and African history. But there are older paradigms on the continent that continue to resonate. Instead of finishing with the arc of technological and rational “progress,” we remain intrigued by what people bring to it—the layer of detail they add, such as the Facebook activist who wants to believe Boko Haram insurgents are like vampires, unable to look at images of themselves on-screen. We therefore depart from the technological and close our chapters with another kind of power and a widening of the aesthetic frame in Forte’s work on Mami Wata and vodun practices in Benin. It offers a timely reminder of the importance of keeping explorations of visuality
framed around notions of density and presence, depth, interiority, opacity, and concealment and, beyond that, possible epiphanies and revelations.

In Forte’s chapter, the notions of likeness that are created by reflections in mirrors and waters are not just about “showing and seeing” but also about the concealment of a “beneath and beyond.” Forte points to the parallel trajectories of photography and Mami Wata iconography in academic writing on Africa, and she argues that the latter’s image has tended to be isolated from the ritual practices associated with the vodun pantheon into which Mami Wata was absorbed. Mami Wata, of course, has different modalities from photography and builds on older traditions that predate the latter’s invention, giving rise to its own great iconographic diffusion. However, Forte reminds us that it is crucial to consider ritual processes and the distinct acts and spaces of creation around the vodun shrines that allow communication with the deity, instead of reducing things to art objects. Gods become visible, as it were, through spirit possession. Mural paintings that have their origins in two-hundred-year-old Dahomean bas-reliefs and appliqué cloth become the “witness to dancing bodies,” but ultimately, they remain decorative. Photography can mediate images of these scenes—the medium medium—but it is marginal in vodun. Knowledge is not equally distributed, and the overly visual rubric is limiting. Instead, Forte urges a reflection on religious practices that will allow us to “think visuality, aesthetics and materiality anew, starting from the body, secrecy and the invisible.”

On this note, though we earlier pointed to the “citational” possibilities of the image across media in different chapters, it is obvious that the essays in this book are by no means oriented in one direction. A number might appear to offer contradictory rather than complementary positions. The chapters do not provide any unified set of interpretations regarding how African subjects relate—or have been related—to questions of visibility and photography over time, repeatedly unsettling any comfortable theoretical position. Thus, though Shiweda asserts that the recirculation and restitution of ethnographic photographs is full of meaning to Namibian citizens and used to elicit memory and reconstruct “tradition,” Hayes holds up the category as empty. Similarly, though Rezende makes a case for an “idea and desire for photography” that precedes and exceeds its technological promise, giving rise to a “tyranny of photography,” Shigwedha goes to another extreme with the “nothing” photograph from Cassinga. And though
Nwafor presents an urban population in Lagos that thrives on conspicuous display in a culture where social power is emblazoned on the surface. Forte proposes that secrecy and occlusion have been important across generations in West Africa and that power resides in depth.

The presence of such diverse formulations should not disturb us. A significant tension is predictable between what photography ostensibly offers—what Edwards calls its “realist insistence” or Sekula’s “folklore of photographic truth”—and what it so uncertainly and plurally delivers. One small example is Shigwedha’s “polarized versions” born at the first photographic readings of the Cassinga mass grave. But photography is only part of a much larger economy of light, nonlight, and their conceptualizations in the continent and beyond. And here, we cannot escape the language of light, that “materiality without matter.” As Jacques Derrida asked, “Who will ever pronounce its meaning without first being pronounced by it?” The language of light is a “transhistorical formulation that is difficult to bypass.” Though one has to take account of haptic media that go beyond the visual, these essays on photography and visibility in Africa already attest to the massive range of meanings in the continent that play out between technological and historical modes of apprehending things (or not) that are a symptom of the very pervasiveness of light. The point is that, especially in its extraversion, African history encompasses all these manifestations of use and meaning in terms of people’s fascination with the visible and what is outside of that, which go through many declensions.

This is why we chose to start with a rubric of ambivalence (in Latin, ambì, meaning “both,” and valence, meaning “strength”) to leave open the original sense of “simultaneous conflicting feelings” that attached to the term when it was first coined in the early twentieth century, so that psychologists could distinguish these feelings from any simple equivalence. Thus, there are cultures of the surface and the depths; there is extroversion and introversion; there are photographs that hold everything and nothing, that are full and empty; there is realism that is understood as truth, lie, and/or obscurantism at the same time—all of these indicate a most unsurprising and polymorphous set of reactions and creativities and possibly new aporias. Though some secrets and practices will always remain recessed and remote and though the new visible signs will no doubt create their own areas of blindness, we launch this book in what is certainly a new age of excess.


5. As part of this ferment, art history ceded ground to visual culture. See Lisa Bloom, ed., *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), introduction.


17. Recent work drawing on Walter Benjamin’s concept of the optical unconscious is opening new approaches to the question of photography, while also highlighting its shifting formulations. The technological processes of photography could “reveal aspects of existence that elude our conscious grasp.” Benjamin was struck at different stages by the “microstructures” that emerge through the close-up that expands space and slow motion that extends movement. See Smith and Sliwinski, Photography and the Optical Unconscious, 8. Our inquiry here is not into the optical unconscious as such, but it probes partial or ambivalent perceptions and broader questions of visibility and invisibility.


44. On aspects of this problematic, see Érika Nimis and Marian Nur Goni, “Images à rebours: Relire les histoires officielles,” *Cahiers d’études africaines* 230, no. 2 (2018): 283–300. Among authors critical of the notion of invention and pointing to the historical contributions of North African and Chinese savants to the sciences underlying photography, see Silverman, *Miracle of Analogy*; Heike Behrend,


50. The term other histories comes from the title of the excellent volume edited by Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, Photography’s Other Histories (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); the term difficult histories comes from Edwards and Mead, “Absent Histories,” 21.


52. In this regard, see also Chika Okeke-Agulu, Postcolonial Modernism, Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).


57. Biko, I Write What I Like, 47. Felwine Sarr echoes this in Afrotopia (Paris: Éditions Philippe Rey, 2016), 12, where he argues that Africa suffers more from a
“lack of thought and a production of its own metaphors for a future” than from the lack of an image (our translation). For a study of the photographs of Steve Biko, see Krista Blair, “‘In the House of My Father’: Samora Biko, and the Burden of Memory—The TRC, Trauma, and the Representational Limit in Post-apartheid South Africa” (master’s thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2002).


59. See the chapters by Shiweda, Hayes, Thompson, and Mnyaka in this volume.


72. Azoulay, Civil Imagination, 53.

73. See Patricia Hayes, “The Colour of History: Photography and the Public Sphere in Southern Africa,” in The Public Sphere from Outside the West, ed. Divya Dwivedi and Sanil V (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 147–63. Such critiques have happened regularly in postgraduate classes on visual history since the late 1990s. In protest actions in South Africa in 2015, especially the Rhodes Must Fall campaign at the University of Cape Town, students raised objections to social documentary photographs on permanent display in the university, on the grounds of dignity.


81. Several art historians take this point about African senses of the visual much further than we can here. See Susan Vogel, Baule: African Art/Western Eyes (New York: Zone Books, 1999).
32  Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997); Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi, Senufo Unbound (Milan: 5 Continents, 2015).


83. For an extended discussion, see Shigwedha, Aftermath of the Cassinga Massacre.


87. Akomfrah, 52.


91. Feldman, Archives of the Insensible, 8.

92. The notion of recession or recessed power comes from Feldman, Archives of the Insensible.