Title

Inside and Outside the Family Album

Making, exhibiting and archiving the photograph in the South African National Gallery and the National Library of South Africa

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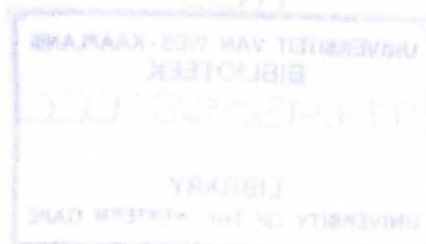

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

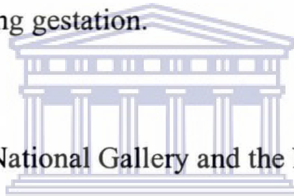
"The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory."

(from *The Prison Notebooks* by Gramsci)

I dedicate this work to those of us who dare to love, know and own ourselves.

I wish to thank my supervisor, Patricia Hayes, and students in the Visual History Honours course at UWC for their support and stimulating conversations about photography and history. Also my family, my partner Gerard, and colleagues in the History department for their various supportive and critical contributions to a project that has had a prodigiously long gestation.

Thanks to the South African National Gallery and the National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, for permission to reprint photographs.



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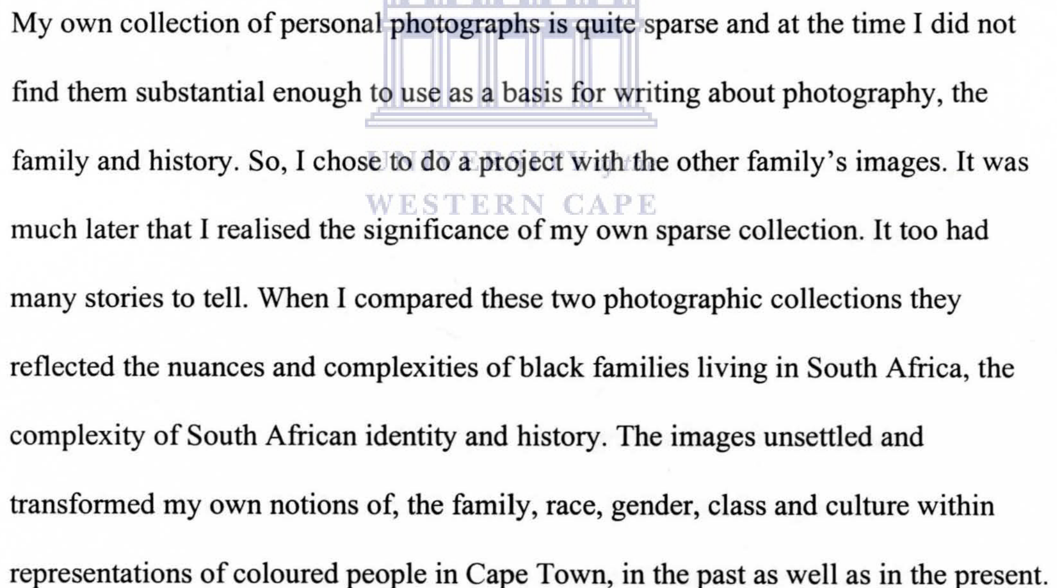
INTRODUCTION

Crowded Frames, Crowded Meanings

One of the first things that reached me about photography was how a photograph tells a story or stories. This experience is perhaps most common when viewing personal photographs. A few years ago I was looking through a vast number of personal photographs, of a family I knew well, and was struck by how all the photographs (in albums, framed or lying loosely about) were part of a particular family narrative. Even without the storytelling, which accompanied my viewing of the photographs, I could still 'read' bits and pieces of the family history (and the broader social, political and cultural histories) in their photographs.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My own collection of personal photographs is quite sparse and at the time I did not find them substantial enough to use as a basis for writing about photography, the family and history. So, I chose to do a project with the other family's images. It was much later that I realised the significance of my own sparse collection. It too had many stories to tell. When I compared these two photographic collections they reflected the nuances and complexities of black families living in South Africa, the complexity of South African identity and history. The images unsettled and transformed my own notions of, the family, race, gender, class and culture within representations of coloured people in Cape Town, in the past as well as in the present.

This experience led me to explore these and other contexts within which photographs of coloured people circulate. Looking at photographs of coloured people, in private albums, photographic collections, publications and exhibitions has led to encounters

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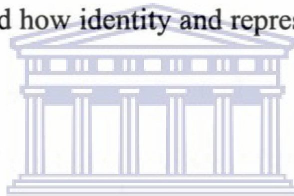
where some photographs are intriguing while others are disturbing. But it is always the photograph that provides me with the opportunity to walk through history and imagine the lives of those pictured.

The photographing of black people in South Africa for personal collections, scientific studies or for general public use dates back to the 1840s.[1] Some photographers created images, specifically made for private collections that idealised family life and notable individuals. Other photographers found it more profitable to create a series of prejudicial and shocking photographs of their black subjects. Many of these photographs were negative, insulting images of black people. In the last few years there has been renewed interest in photographs, specifically in the ways one looks at and interprets photographs and how identity and representation are constructed in photographs of black people.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I consider this thesis and my reading of photographic images of coloured people during the 1950s, in Cape Town, a contribution toward the restructuring of our perceptions of black identity and social memory.

I have chosen to write about and interpret photographs from firstly, a public exhibition and secondly, from the South African National Library archive. The narratives in this thesis are analytical and personal. Central to these narratives are the issues of photography and interpretation, subjectivity and representation. How are photographs used, how is gender portrayed, how are assumptions made from images

[1] Karel Schoeman, *The Face of the Country: a South African family album 1860-1910* (Cape Town, 1996), 13.

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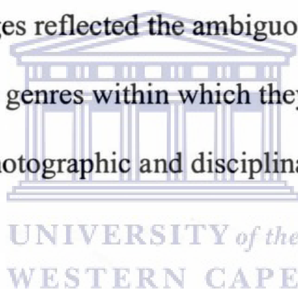
of people in class-specific roles, how does social and race consciousness inform imagery, how has colour consciousness operated in the coloured family structure, what are the implications of stereotypical representations of coloured people? Do photographs have value as evidential inscriptions of the past and as interpretations of the past?

The connections made in this thesis between the photographic image, the broader historical contexts and the location of that image within my memory make the experience of reading these photographs definable for me and I hope for the reader also. I have selected a variety of photographic imagery, from the photographs in the exhibition to those in the library archives, from the formal portrait to the most casual snapshot. The variety of images reflected the ambiguous and dynamic nature of photographs regardless of the genres within which they are located as well as my own interests in working across photographic and disciplinary boundaries.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The Chapters

Chapter one introduces key debates relating to the photograph. These debates focus on theoretical and critical discussions of the photograph and of photographic practices. The chapter is essentially concerned with the nature of the photograph and photography in a wider historical and critical context. The critical issues raised are in relation to what the photograph means and the kinds of status we give to it and why. I discuss how any photograph, by implication, involves a set of questions and ambiguities endemic to its nature as an act of representation and why this is so important to any analysis of photographs. By taking the nature of the photograph as a starting point, I argue that photographs are not simply copies of people or things.

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They are part of an energetic and continuous historical dialogue which is active, not only in the creation of the photograph, but in its subsequent social biography in the space of the gallery and the archive, past and present. This chapter, therefore, forms a backdrop to the discussions picked up again in more detail in later chapters.

In chapter two I focus on personal photographs in the 'Lives of Colour' exhibition held in the South African National Gallery in 1999. I examine how visual conceptions of identity are claimed by mostly middle-class, coloured people during the 1950s to justify a gendered and racialised cultural privilege rivaling that of supposed white cultural superiority in a period of intense social and political crisis.

I explore the complex mechanisms of these photographs and how they function in the exhibition, in the real world and within daily experience. My argument explores how the photographs and their making operate in the fluid spaces of ideological and cultural meaning also. I attempt to show how "Photographs, those visual incisions through time and space, constitute… 'little narratives', yet at the same time are constituted by and are constitutive of the 'grand', or at least 'larger', narratives'."[2]

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In my analysis I consider the photographs in the exhibition as both artifacts and representations of memory and of the past. In other words, the photographs are material objects engaged with in a social space and in real time and this is a key aspect of the ambiguity of the photograph. Throughout this thesis I argue that it is this latter aspect in the nature of the photograph which is crucial to the possibilities of re-engaging the images and opening them up to multiple interpretive possibilities.

[2] Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories* (Oxford and New York, 2001), 3.

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Chapter three takes up this latter challenge by considering photographs from the South African National library archive. Underlying this chapter is an idea of the documentary photograph and the documentary role of the camera. I interrogate the claims made for the authenticity or 'truth' of photography, in relation to social surveys and where photographs are viewed as evidence of coloured social life. By concentrating on a few 'official' photographs I offer a critical history of documentary and problematise the relationship of this specific form of representation to other debates within other fields of photographic practice, such as personal photography.

The photographs produced by the South African State Information Office in the library collection on coloured people raises questions about how photography, and in particular documentary photography, contributes to the production of archival knowledge of a particular group of people, event or period. I describe how the State Information Office photographs attempt to mark the limits of coloured identity and encourage social boundaries founded on notions of race and class in which official narratives of national belonging and exclusion are produced.

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But within the archive, and within the social-political context of early 20th century Cape Town, for coloured people at least, the limits of an imagined 'official' visual community is continually contested by photographic practices which reproduce, resist, and transform dominant images and conceptions. Therefore, I am interested in archival and popular discourses that call upon photographs to make claims upon identity, as well as with photographs themselves. I am concerned not only with particular visual practices but also with the ways in which such practices produce subjectivities and their reinvention through photography.

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Chapter three and chapter four are closely connected because I use photographs from the South African National Library archive in both chapters in order to consider both personal and social documentary photographs. In chapter four, I analyse photographs of coloured people produced by a popular photographer as against those made by the South African State Information Office during the late 1940s and early 1950s in Cape Town. The personal photographs in the archive suggest that popular photographic practices offered individuals a space in which to display, affirm and contest such 'official' narratives.

I critically explore the context of the archive and the possibilities of restoring the value of (multiple) meaning to these archival photographs, so that it becomes possible to challenge universalized representations of coloured people, of history, race, gender, sexuality, class, culture and power. I argue that such a critical practice, "…cannot be satisfied with a 'straight-reporting' model of documentary; especially in a postcolonial context, and image will have to be seen as surrounded by other images, other words, and always, other worlds."[3]

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In relation to the documentary genre, in particular, half of the photographic bind is the notion of the image as partial, selective, discriminatory, constructed and the other half concerns its realisation as document, as 'actuality'. Indeed, much of the photograph's ambivalent relationship to history rests on this notion; the constant slippage between the fiction of its images and the reality of its fictions, the incessant movement from

[3] Amitava Kumar, *Passport Photos* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 2000), 47.

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'textuality' to 'reality' as the privileged point of reference which exposes the photograph as a key arbiter of meaning and the real.[4]

Throughout these chapters I argue that by taking the nature of the photograph into account it is possible that as viewers or 'readers' of images, we can adopt a more critical practice as makers and users of the photograph. I challenge a way of seeing things that can be described as realist because we are not expected to ask how this reality, or this image, came to be - and that is the danger. By critically merging personal and documentary forms of photography I attempt to pave one possible path out of this danger.

My choice of genres, in the thesis, has been determined by the existence of a certain amount of theoretical overlap between them concerning the relationship of the photograph to reality and the context, use and interpretation of images. I argue that in this theoretical overlap, personal and documentary photographs converge to create a space where the revaluation of the meaning of the image is possible. This space lies in the 'border tensions' produced between personal and documentary photographic forms and the inherent ambiguity in the nature of the photograph itself. Within this space I challenge the limits imposed by historical categories which making personal and family photographs amateur and trivial while documentary photographs are critical professional and closer to reality. In this way, and through a close reading of the photographs, I hope to push and stretch the frames of the photograph and reveal the many layers of differing historical experiences and open up the image to the crowded meanings buried within and around them.

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[4] Scott McQuire, *Visions of Modernity* (1998), 148-9.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Meaning of a Photograph

Since the invention of the camera in the nineteenth century, everything and everyone became photographed. This became possible as a result of a number of historical processes, namely, the development of inexpensive camera technology, the relative accessibility of this technology to most social groups and the growing need to record various social spaces and social beings. In this process the photograph, in all its two-dimensional flatness, came to acquire a very special meaning in modern society. My concern here is in what lay behind the power of the photograph since its invention in the nineteenth century?

I argue that the answer lies in the very nature of photography and the particular characteristics of the photograph. It also lies in the ways in which the technology of the camera and the common characteristics of the photograph have been applied within various contexts to intensify the powerful framing photography accommodates and installs.

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The Camera and the Photograph

The essential qualities of the photographic image and its technology, the camera, has for a long time been at the centre of critical debates on the value and fascination of mechanically produced images. Jonathan Crary argues that the emergence of new models of vision "...in the early nineteenth century was far more than simply a shift in the appearance of images and art works, or in systems of representational conventions. Instead, it was inseparable from a massive reorganisation of knowledge

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and social practices that modified in myriad ways the productive, cognitive, and desiring capacities of the human subject".[5]

The camera, therefore, did not simply evolve out of some neutral space but emerged from the marriage of technology to the socio-political world and therefore established itself in a particular relation to the world. This relation and its effect demand that shifts in representational practice be critically explored and more importantly, for Crary, that the constitution of the subject, of knowledge, of discourse, be accounted for within particular historical frameworks.[6]

The camera was praised as a remarkable technological invention in the nineteenth century in Europe and the range of uses to which it was soon put, threw the contemporary relations between power and representation into sharp relief. Much of this excitement centered on the camera's aesthetic status and social use.[7] Walter Benjamin argued that the photograph is a primary example of "...the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction", that is, an image which is based on both a chemical and industrial process of production.[8]

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Heidegger's notion of technology is particularly useful in thinking about the camera as a chemical and industrial technology. He argued that any technology necessarily involves the establishment of a particular relationship to the social world.[9] In this relationship, technology forms a mechanism of enframing, which constitutes a key

[5] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge MA, 1995), 3.
[6] *Ibid*, 3.
[7] Liz Wells (ed), *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York, 1997), 19.
[8] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London, 1999), 211.
[9] Scott McQuire, *Visions of Modernity* (London and California, 1998), 4.

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part of the definition and of the task that particular technology is to perform. Here, the concept of enframing is especially pertinent to the camera because it literally frames the world. Framing photographically concerns the size and shape of the photograph but it also reflects a larger structure of aesthetics and sight and of the way we order our world. It is crucial to bear in mind how standardised the act of framing is and how it represents cultural and ideological ways of shaping the world.

Walter Benjamin, like Crary, also noted "During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence."[10] It is no accident that photography developed first and fastest in precisely the centres of the modern city because the development of the camera depended on industrial culture, not only to produce its technical apparatus, but also, and perhaps more importantly to produce its social conditions of existence.[11] Hence the camera corresponds perfectly to the demands of a society which found itself in the flux of rapid industrial transformation where components such as science and culture overlap on the social plane to effect broad economic, social, ideological and political transformations.

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The camera, by mapping the changes in these social and physical environments, also helped to change our conceptions of history and memory.[12] Therefore, as Macquire, and others have argued, the history of the camera is not simply a history of uninterrupted technological progress but one whose uniqueness is related to the camera's historical thresholds in its distinctive emergence and ongoing mutation in

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[10] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London, 1999), 216.
[11] Scott McQuire, *Visions of Modernity* (London and California, 1998), 124.
[12] *Ibid*, 126.

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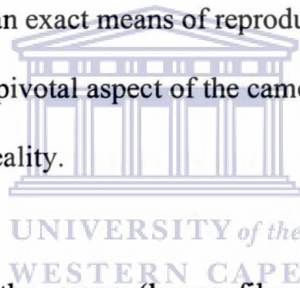
relation to the nature and form of the visual.[13] Hence, it is worth emphasing that the effect of the camera on rhythms of representation and knowledge production is profound and can thus be understood in relation to major paradigmatic shifts in modern thought.[14]

The history of the photograph, since the nineteenth century in Europe, also reveals a series of basic contradictions that have remained endemic to the photograph as image and as a means of representation.[15] This aspect of photography is underlined by the rapid ways in which the technology of the camera changed and developed. Its swift technological development reflected the industrialisation of photography, and in the cultural and ideological context reflected the very nature of the photographic image in the belief that there could be an exact means of reproducing a unique image, " a hyper-reality as it were".[16] A pivotal aspect of the camera was thus a concern with objectively recording social reality.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Changes in the technology of the camera (lenses, film, flash, hand-held and so forth) meant that developing times for prints decreased, photographers became more mobile, photography and its array of instruments became more economical, and the technology became available to almost everyone. A fundamental aspect of the photograph in the 19th century thus appeared to be its 'coming of age' at a time when particular ways of seeing, technologically, were undergoing essential changes.[17] During this process the camera also became an artificial eye which, through the lens

[13] See Walter Benjamin (1999) *Illuminations*, Jonathan Crary (1995) *Techniques of the Observer* and John Tagg (1995) *The Burden of Representation*.
[14] Scott McQuire, *Visions of Modernity* (London and California, 1998), 2.
[15] Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford and New York, 1997), 16.
[16] *Ibid*, 17.
[17] *Ibid*, 20.

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and eye of the photographer, penetrated the world in order to reveal and make known the previously hidden and unknown. The photograph, as I will argue further, thus revealed itself to be dependent on a series of historical, cultural, social and technical contexts that established its meaning, as a material object, in the world.[18]

The photograph

My discussion of the photograph will focus on firstly, the power of the image, secondly on the meaning of the image and lastly, on its value as a material object. The particular characteristics of the photograph are crucial to the argument of this thesis as a whole because it provides the backdrop to the subsequent critical discussion of personal and documentary photography.

Photography is a combination of chemical and optical processes that fix an image on to photographic paper. But this technical explanation cannot take away the fascination and awe experienced when looking at photographs. Therefore, "Like so much of its meaning, this dual aspect (the scientific and the cultural) is basic to its mode of representation."[19]

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Part of this fascination is connected to the commonly held idea that the photograph is a true and objective recording of the real world. Pierre Bourdieu argues that in order to understand this social expectation of photography to objectively record the visible world, one has to consider the relationship between the social meanings ascribed to photography and the social uses to which photography was put.[20] From this analysis

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[18] Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford and New York, 1997), 19.
[19] *Ibid*, 11.
[20] Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* (United Kingdom, 1990)

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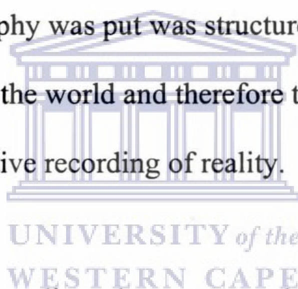
he suggests that "Photography is considered to be a perfectly realistic and objective recording of the visible world because (from its origin) it has been assigned *social uses* that are held to be 'realistic' and 'objective'."[21]

In other words, the social functions of photography correspond to a particular vision of the world, which dominated European thinking in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and which shaped the ways in which the world came to be represented. In this vision of the world that which became represented was that which was legible and which conformed to particular systems of coding and reading in the reproduction of the real. Therefore "ordinary practice subordinates photographic choice to the categories and canons of the traditional vision of the world".[22] In other words, the social uses to which photography was put was structured according to categories that organise the ordinary view of the world and therefore the photographic image was seen as an accurate and objective recording of reality.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At another level photographic realism also concerns the substantive analogical relation between the photograph and its referent. Susan Sontag was one of the first cultural critics to explore this relationship in the late 1970s.[23] In critical debates about photographic realism Sontag stressed the relation between the image and its source in the actual world. She argued that " A photograph is not just the result of an encounter between an event and a photographer; picture taking is an event in itself…After the event has ended, the picture will still exist, conferring on the event a kind of

[21] Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* (United Kingdom, 1990), 74.
[22] *Ibid,* 76.
[23] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Great Britian, 1979), 11.

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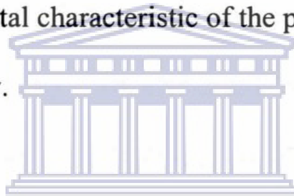
immortality (and importance) it would never otherwise enjoyed ".[24] Therefore, a crucial aspect of the power of photographic realism is the fact that a photograph exists, that one can hold it in ones' hand and this testifies to the actuality of how something, someone or some place once appeared.

Sontag thus emphasises the referential nature of the photographic image both in terms of its iconic properties and in terms of its indexical nature. This means that the meaning of a photograph is connected to the photograph articulating familiarity (familiar-looking subjects) through established aesthetic conventions as well as the photograph's unique relation to that which is in front of the camera. Together the iconic and indexical characteristics of the photograph underpin and reinforce referentiality as the fundamental characteristic of the photograph that, in turn, fuel realist notions of photography.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Roland Barthes also sought to define that which is specific to the photograph as a means of representation. He also insists that photographs, unlike other representational forms, hold a unique relation to the real. Barthes adheres to photographic reference through intensifying the indexical relationship, in an image, when he refers to photographs as physical, material emanations of a past reality.

For Barthes the photograph authenticates the past and is a material connection to it. Therefore he calls " 'photographic referent' not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph…The photograph is literally an

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[24] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Great Britain, 1979), 11.

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emanation of the referent".[25] The photograph is thus always contingent upon its referent which, for Barthes, is unique to the image because it is always *something or someone* that is represented. For Barthes meaning is located within the photographs contingency, that is, within the photograph's representation of the referent and thus meaning does not simply rest in the actuality of how something, someone or some place once appeared, as Sontag argues.

Barthes realist views goes somewhat further than Sontag's. His discussion is useful in reminding us of the contingency of the photograph and like Sontag, he draws our attention to its referential characteristics. Unlike Sontag, who relates this to a range of practices, he defines this as that which characterises the medium itself but it does not necessarily flow from this that the image is a representation without codes. On the contrary, surely the noticing of any particular detail, by a viewer, in a photograph is a consequence of the particular viewer's history, and range of aesthetic and cultural codes, which Barthes does not take into consideration.

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What Barthes and Sontag highlight is that photography allows us to *believe* precisely because of the relationship between the photograph and its referent in the real world. The social expectation of photography to objectively record the visible world is thus grounded in notions of the real and in the ways in which photographs are rooted within the real world. This expectancy of the real is accompanied by the parallel expectation of photographic truth or truthfulness and hence the dictum 'the camera never lies'. This relation between the image and the social world alerts us to a significant part of the power in the image which emanates from this sense of 'reality'

[25] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London, 1984), 81.

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conferred by photography and ideas on the truthful appearance of the image which continue to prevail today.

Analysing photographs involves interrogating the realist authority that all photographs are based on, because "...in conferring upon photography a guarantee of realism, society is merely confirming itself in the tautological certainty that an image of the real which is true to its representation of objectivity is really objective."[26] This obscures the highly mediated relations and coded characteristics of the photograph from the moment of its creation to its interpretation.

The seductive realism of photography is enhanced by another powerful characteristic of the photograph, namely, it's temporal dimension.[27] Photographs are incisions into the real world and they dissolve the solid reality of everyday perception into a series of fragmented images. These fragments dislocate time and space in that the past is transported into the present in what Barthes described as "the 'there-then' becomes the 'here-now' ".[28] In other words photographs become moments torn from the flow of time capturing subjects who will forever remain fixed and immobile.

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Bourdieu suggests that much of photography's paradoxical nature lay in its temporal dimensions. He agrees with Walter Benjamin that photographs through their temporality act in the present by capturing moments in time but suggests that they also act in ways that powerfully disrupt the real by "capturing critical moments in

[26] Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* (United Kingdom, 1990), 77.
[27] See Walter Benjamin (1999) *Illuminations*, Pierre Bourdieu (1990) *Photography*, Elizabeth Edwards (2001) *Raw Histories* and Siegfried Krauceur (1927) *Photography*.
[28] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London, 1984), 44.

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which the reassuring world is knocked off balance".[29] However Bourdieu argues that in ordinary photographic practices this power of photography is stripped away because these practices eliminate those moments-in-time that dissolve the real, by temporalising them.

In this way the radical possibilities photography's temporal dimension offers, namely to invert the conventional order of the visible world, are not actualised and photography "paradoxically ended up by impressing itself with all the appearances of naturalness".[30] Bourdieu notes that the combination of the temporal qualities of the photograph and the photograph's seductive realism seals off the possibilities of using photography to invert the systems which structure our vision in the real world and that which these systems legitimate.[31]

The third element behind the power of the photograph is highlighted by Elizabeth Edwards who emphasises the photograph's presentational form as material culture to show that *what a photograph is*, depends strongly on the relationship between the photograph and memory and how photographs are material objects of memory.[32] She explores the relationship between the photograph and memory and the ways in which the image obtains its special status as a channel of memory. Memory, she argues, is primarily directed through the photographs materiality.[33]

[29] Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* (United Kingdom, 1990), 78.
[30] *Ibid*, 78.
[31] *Ibid*, 76 – 78.
[32] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographs as Objects of Memory' in Kwint, M., Breward, C., and Aynsley, J., (eds) *Material Memories* (London, 1998).
[33] *Ibid*.

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Edwards discussion coincides with an emphasis on the meaning of the image through its cultural *coding*, *meaning* and *use* in contemporary society. Central to the argument of this thesis is her emphasis on the value of restoring *meaning* to photographs within various contexts.

She suggests that the material form of a photograph, refined by the form of its display or presentation, is central to the function of the photograph as a socially significant object. The image and the material form it assumes, exist in symbiotic relationship with each other to make meaning and to bring about the convergence of memory and remembering, " For photographs belong to that class of objects formed specifically to remember, rather than being objects around which remembrance accrues through contextual association (although they become this as well). "[34]

Edwards suggests that " in order to see what the photograph is *of* we must first suppress our consciousness of what the photograph *is* in material terms".[35] In other words, the suitability of a photographs material form is paramount to its meaning. Thus, one can say that how photographs are materially presented, that is, what they are made of, is explicitly related to their economic, social and political discourses.

The ductile nature of the photograph, as object, has received very little attention in much of the writing on the photograph, on the history of photography, on memory and the past. Pierre Bourdieu was one of the first critics to lead the way by investigating the social uses of photography and the social meanings the act of photographing

[34] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographs a Objects of Memory' in Kwint, M., Breward, C., and Aynsley, J., (eds) *Material Memories* (London, 1998), 222.
[35] *Ibid,* 223. Author's emphasis.

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determined. [36] He also considered the issue of access to and control of photographic technology to carry out commemorative acts within different social groups. Bourdieu analyses this in terms of class, gender and access to production.[37]

His discussion, according to Edwards, implies the importance of materiality but does not examine the concept in full analytical terms.[38] Similarly, she argues that, other authors have also touched on the signifying possibilities of materiality, but on the whole photographs are approached as mere content with which to activate other forms of narrative. This has often been the case in photo-therapy work and in work on family photographs and albums (as a collected form of narrative), which emphasize the content in the photograph, paying little attention to the photographs material forms. [39] Edwards therefore suggests that materiality is central to the construction of meaning in the image but this fact is overlooked in the concentration on the politics of the image. The latter focus considers materiality as an impartial support for images and nothing more and "Photographs are, in such analyses, detached from physical nature and consequently from the functional context of materiality" [40].

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The ways in which people construct themselves and are constructed by others, depends very much on the cultural form that the social consumption of photographs will take and this has been understated in relation to photographs. Photographs also mean something to people in terms of remembering, of making pasts, of engaging

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[36] Pierre Bourdieu (1990) *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* (United Kingdom, 1990).
[37] *Ibid*, chapter 1 and 2.
[38] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographs a Objects of Memory' in *Material Memories* (London, 1998), 224.
[39] *Ibid,* 225. See also Marrianne Hirsch (1997) *Family Frames*, Annette Kuhn (1995) *Family Secrets* and Jo Spence and Jo Stanley (1995) *Cultural Sniping*.
[40] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographs as Objects of Memory' in *Material Memories* (London, 1998), 225.

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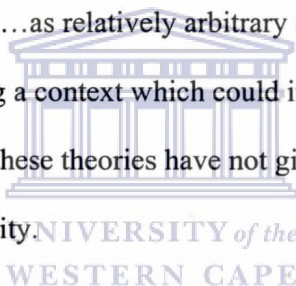
with the photograph's inherent nature and emotive qualities. Edwards highlights the fact that these issues matter to people, photographs are invokers of memory, and any engagement with them demands that the material forms of memory occupy center stage.

According to Edwards, the last thirty years has generated theories of the image (such as the work of influential writers such as Victor Burgin, Jean Baudrillard and John Tagg) borne out of semiotic, psychoanalytical or phenomenological concerns which have neglected to consider materiality in their investigations.[41] Many of these theories are connected to Marxist derived critiques of both material objects and photography. These critiques concentrate on modes of production or on the ideological control of photographs but treat images "…as relatively arbitrary signs which can be configured into a semiotic web resembling a context which could in turn be deconstructed." [42] In so doing Edwards argues that these theories have not given enough analytical weight to their discussions of materiality.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The physical destruction of a photograph attests to the power of the fusion of image and materiality, "To cut, tear, or worse, burn a photograph is the engagement of destruction with materiality: rejecting the photograph and thus the memory-value it holds".[43] Edwards also notes the many ways in which photographs are culturally treated as artifacts and as precious keepsakes.[44]

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[41] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographs as Objects of Memory' in *Material Memories* (London, 1998), 225.
[42] *Ibid*, 225.
[43] *Ibid,* 226. See also Susan Sonatag (1979) *On Photography.*
[44] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographs as Objects of Memory' in *Material Memories* (London, 1998), 226.

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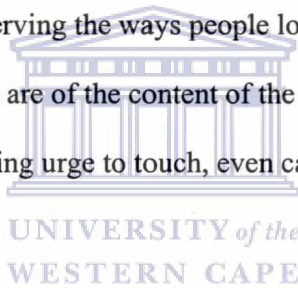
A photograph she suggests is authenticated in that it is traced off the living and attains validation in the social biography it contains. Like artifacts, photographs "…are treated in a special way, linking objects to traces of the past, the dead, a fetishized focus of devotion" in which remnants of the everyday become revered.[45] However, as with all material objects, they will return to the ordinary, this time as throw away objects, the ruins of material culture, because their meaning for the living has vanished and all that remains is a vague 'pastness'.

Another way in which Edwards considers the photograph is in terms of its sensory qualities such as touch and even smell.[46] Edwards argues that from photography's beginnings it demanded a physical engagement with a material object, that is, the finished photograph. In observing the ways people look at and describe photographs also, often their descriptions are of the content of the image but enhanced by what appears to be an overwhelming urge to touch, even caress or stroke the photograph.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For Edwards, photographs have always existed, not simply as evidentiary inscriptions but also in relation to the human body, tangible in our experience of the past, objects operating in ordinary practice and culturally connected with commemoration and remembrance.[47] Here one need only think of lockets worn around the neck, or miniature photographs attached to key rings.

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[45] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographs as Objects of Memory' in *Material Memories* (London, 1998), 226/7.
[46] *Ibid,*227.
[47] *Ibid,*228.

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Access to the past, personally and collectively, through the social act of looking at photographs is also strongly connected the materiality of the photograph.[48] Consider the viewing of albums, for example. Are they looked at by a group or individually? Are they held on one's lap or on a table? What of smaller albums? Often the latter require people to be quite close to each other especially when they are being looked at by more than two people. Larger albums, however, require lots of physical space because often they are spread out and put on show. The material forms of these albums vary in degrees of weight, smell or the scent of 'pastness', texture, decoration (embossed or not), emotions or the feelings they invoke, but they are all burdened by the mass of visual and cultural meanings contained within them.

Edwards elaborates on Bourdieu's discussion of the paradox presented by the photograph's temporal characteristics to suggest that this does indeed open up the photograph to the possibility of unsettling the 'reality' of the social world. Thus through capturing moments in time the photograph can disconcert or, to use Bourdieu's term, derealise the visible. Edwards argues that "If the photo-object engages with the body, it also retemporalizes and respatializes the photograph".[49]

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Again it is useful to consider the photo album to explain the engagement of the photo-object with the physical body. By constructing a narrative of history, through the arrangement of loose images and in the way which the viewer briefly accesses the past and the narrative structure, the album 'retemporalizes' the viewer by the physical act of holding the object and flipping the pages. The relationship between the viewer

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[48] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographs as Objects of Memory' in *Material Memories* (London, 1998), 228.
[49] *Ibid*, 230.

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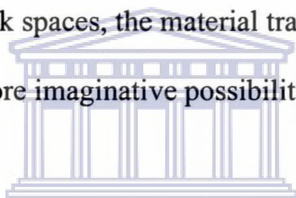
and the images is a temporary one and each viewer will experience this temporality differently - some viewers will glance briefly at some of the pages, while taking their time over others. In each case, it is the viewer who is in control of the temporal relationship when s/he looks through the album, investing it with narrative and memory, interlaced with private fantasy, fractured readings and public history.

It terms of 'respatializing', the photo-object (as disconnected images in an album for example) offers the viewer a glimpse of possible pasts. "They are transformed not into an experienced spatiality but with an imaginative and ambiguous space which the past inhabits, collected and co-located, they transform history into space".[50] As such, the album offers viewers a space in which the imaginative project of making histories is made possible, and where blank spaces, the material traces of the absence of a photo, opens the object up to even more imaginative possibilities.



On the other hand, one finds the material forms of albums (whether it is an expensive or inexpensive album, for example) resonating with the experiences contained or constructed within them, combining memory value with the materially valuable. What these albums have in common is that they are all connected in their specific material manifestations of social aspiration. This connection is made possible through the way in which the albums function as well as the suitability of their material forms. The authoritative arrangement of photographs, accompanied by text, is central to invoking and constructing memory. For this reason, Edwards suggests that the materiality of object forms should be considered for the ways in which these are implicated in the

[50] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographs as Objects of Memory' in *Material Memories* (London, 1998), 230.

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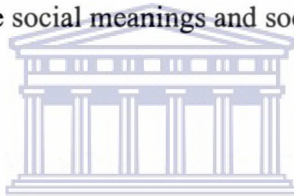
cultural processes in which they are entangled, "Form and image merge to create function, a satisfaction with the object in terms of its cultural role".[51]

Another feature of the photograph, as material objet, is its function as a generally popular object of exchange. "Materiality and physical form again set the affective tone, the emotional relationship and the consequence of things dialogically associated with these photo objects, the associations of personal and collective memory", thus reinforcing the social dimension of the photo-object.[52] Often the gift exchange is a single framed print, or a singular loose picture, it may even be a whole album. Social dimensions such as a handwritten comment on the back, how the picture is mounted, the size of the print, and the intimacy of the content in the image, in relation to material forms are central to the social meanings and social relationships declared in acts of exchange.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As exchange objects photographs thus also circulate as 'memory texts'. Edwards employ's Annette Kuhn's term, 'memory text', to refer to the social meaning of an image which can be 'read' by those viewing the photograph.[53] The image itself is the focus and how the particular 'memory text' is used is crucial to the social meaning of that image. Is the photograph stuck in the bottom of a desk draw, put in a gilded album, or framed and hung on a wall? Physical distances amongst friends, relatives or colleagues, memory and forgetting in social relations, are factors that contribute to the direction in which these 'memory texts' will travel and come to be 'read'. As objects

[51] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographs as Objects of Memory' in *Material Memories* (London, 1998), 232.
[52] *Ibid,* 232.
[53] Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London and New York, 1995), 2.

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of exchange, and as 'memory text', photographs strengthen and support networks and identities founded on the memories to which they correspond, "...positioning individuals vis- a`-vis the group, linking past, present and perhaps implying future."[54]

In my own work on photographs, as well as in the work of other writers, it is apparent that the selectors and guardians of photographs are overwhelmingly women, this is especially true of personal and family photographs. How photographs are focused on, for example framed or not, and displayed on living room side-boards or on walls, is extremely gendered. Whoever controls the exhibition of images also controls the layering of history and fantasy, and the domestic space is especially suitable to this function because it is traditionally the space of the female and hence the female 'family archivist'.[55]

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Within this space, notions of public/private, past/present, memory/emotion, collapse to become statements of group worth and success in the process of exchange and exhibition. Therefore, "The dialogic relationship between content, form and materiality create the socially meaningful object and the 'correct' expression of *rite de passage*", so that, the cultural appropriateness to the function sought is one which is carefully considered by the curator.[56]

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[54] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographs as Objects of Memory' in *Material Memories* (London, 1998), 233.
[55] *Ibid*, 234. See also Annette Kuhn (1995) *Family Secrets*, Jo Spence and Jo Stanley (1995) *Cultural Sniping* and Judith Williamson, 'Family, Education, Photography' in Dirks et al, *Culture/Power/History* (New Jersey,1994).
[56] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographs as Objects of Memory' in *Material Memories* (London, 1998), 234/5.

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Edwards touches on a few of the many material forms of the photograph in which visual meanings and memory are inseparably intertwined and linked to the question *what is a photograph*. Her approach is boldly methodological and pushes thinking beyond the meaning of the image to consider it as a cultural object existing in social relations within the experienced world. By extending more traditional phenomenological approaches to photographs, she warns us that in general the historically and culturally specific material cultures of photographs are incorporated into the analyses of photographic content.

Finally, Edwards concludes that " Objects are links between past and present, and photographs have a double link as image and as material, two ontological layers in one object."[57] Therefore, it would appear that the allure of the material forms of the photograph survives conventional chemical photography because of the persistence of the economy of photographic desires and concepts. The possibilities of the material features of the photo-object, as highlighted by Edwards, will most likely remain as long as social values and human desire for connecting objects of memory endure. It also depends on the affective tones of physical tactile quality, which construct the photograph and its status as an object of memory.

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Contemporary debates have taken up issues of the individual as viewer, the reception and usage of photographs and the nature of the process whereby photographs become meaningful subjectively and collectively. In such analyses the influence of

[57] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographs as Objects of Memory' in *Material Memories* (London, 1998), 236.

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psychoanalysis, semiotics and social history have been brought to bear on the question of what a photograph is. The key point, in relation to recent theory, criticism and practice, is that theoretical presumptions founded in varying academic fields, from the scientific to the philosophic and aesthetic, intersect to inform both the making and the interpretation of photographs. Therefore, the photograph might be conceptualised as a site of intersection of various orders of theoretical understanding relating to its production, publication and consumption or reading.[58] What is crucially at stake in these debates is how the photograph achieves meaning in the balance between its referential characteristics and the context, usage and interpretation of photographs.

I have attempted to show the key features of a photograph and the practices of photography is its ultimate dependence upon, and therefore reference to, a physical person or object present at the moment of making the original exposure. It is this index of the once physical presence that is the source of the authority of the image and thus central to theoretical debates relating to photographic realism and 'truth'. Analyzing photographs involves taking this into account as a starting point. From here the development of complex models of analysis such as, semiotics, materiality, psychoanalysis, social history, as well as the historiography of photography itself, follows.

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Within such a conceptual approach, the objective presence of the image is called into question as well as the force fields within which the photograph generates and attracts meaning. In so far as visual representations contribute to constructing and reaffirming

[58] Liz Wells (ed), *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York, 1997), 51.

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our sense of identity, the familiarity of the photograph, and the apparent realism of the image, render it a particularly powerful discursive force.[59]

Photographs are placed in categories or genres that further codify their terms of reference and status in unique ways. A 'family' photograph involves an entirely different set of assumptions from a 'documentary' photograph and this is part of the complex web of interrelationships within which any photograph is suspended. A key function of this chapter has thus been to expound on the problem of the way we understand a photograph; the shifting distinction between its function as an image and its assumed value.

Sontag and Barthes realist views alerts us to a problem in the way we understand the photograph namely its seemingly simplicity of form and function which belies an implicit problematic of sight and representation. In many ways those photographs deemed to have the most value are the least functional, and vice versa. Photographs also exist in the midst of paradox, which qualifies its status as image and object, as well as the way its meaning is sanctioned within complicating aesthetic, cultural, and ideological contexts.

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The photograph has a multiple existence which informs its multiple meanings and Clarke highlights several aspects related to this problematic, which although basic, remain integral to what we might call the hidden structure of photographic definition and discourse.[60] These concern the size of the photograph, the framing of space or its

[59] Liz Wells (ed), *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York, 1997), 52.
[60] Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford and New York, 1997), 23-24.

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shape, its surface which is always flat or one-dimensional, its color (black and white or color), and significantly, that it fixes a moment in time. The latter is perhaps the most important of these because the photograph "...isolates, preserves and presents a moment taken from a continuum".[61] Thus another dimension to the temporal nature of the photograph is revealed because we think of it as recording a moment in time, as a historical record, but a photograph stops time and takes its subject *out* of history.

In the following chapter I explore in more detail the complexity of photographic meaning. The capacity of the photograph to both reveal and conceal meaning is crucial to my analysis of personal photographs within a public context. Central to my analysis also, is the nature of photography and the power of the photograph. The photograph far from being a mirror of reality is an endlessly deceptive form of representation. It is a distinctive cultural product reflecting a culture's way with the world. In the following chapter I ask what it is that the personal photographs in the 'Lives of Colour' exhibition represent? And how does the power of the photograph operate within this representation?

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[61] Graham Clarke, *The Photograph*, (Oxford and New York, 1997), 24.

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CHAPTER TWO

Personal Photographs

> " We need to be subjects of history, even if we cannot totally stop being objects of history. And to be subjects, we need unquestionably to claim history critically. As active participants and real subjects, we can make history only when we are continually critical of our very lives".[62]

The 'Lives of Colour' exhibition and the South African National Gallery

The 'Lives of Colour' exhibition offers an exciting example of the various and layered framings to which photographs can be put. I argue that the exhibition was framed through firstly, the use of personal or family photographs. Secondly, the institutional context of the gallery added another important dimension to the framing of the exhibition. Thirdly, the interpretive stance of the viewer (my own critical viewing position included) also added to the range of the interpretive possibilities for the exhibition.

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This chapter highlights the interplay between family photography as a photographic genre and the key assumptions upon which such photography was based. I explore the institutional framing of the gallery in relation to family photography, and raise the question of the meaning of the exhibition to the viewer and to the subjects represented in the photographs.

[62] Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, power and liberation* (London, 1995), 199.

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My analysis of the 'Lives of Colour' exhibition focused overall on the question of this particular photographic representation of coloured people in South Africa during the 1950s and 1960s. Hence, it is located within coloured social identity within apartheid South Africa and the re-presentation of coloured people within the South African National Gallery. It is also concerned with the way in which memory, understanding and meaning, and the history of a particular group are constructed and reflected in the images of the exhibition.

The 'Lives of Colour' exhibition formed part of the *Lines of Sight* photographic exhibition held, in 1999, at the South African National Gallery (SANG). Under the theme, *Lines of Sight*, the SANG invited a range of curators to put on exhibit Southern African photographs. This coincided with the conference, 'Encounters with Photography: Photographing people in Southern Africa, 1860-1999', held simultaneously at the South African Museum (SAM).

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'Lives of Colour', a relatively small exhibition, shared the gallery space with larger exhibitions such as, 'The Evolution of documentary photography in South Africa as shown in a comparison between the Carnegie Inquiries into poverty'.[63] The former exhibition concerned the visual representation of coloured South Africans during the 1950s and 1960s, through personal photographs. The latter exhibition explored the visual representation of poor white South Africans or *armblankes* through their visual

[63] M. Godby, 'The Evolution of documentary photography in South Africa as shown in a comparison between the Carnegie Inquiry into poverty (1932 and 1984)' in Lundstrom, Jan-Erik and Pierre, Katarina (eds.) *Democracy's Images: photography and visual art after apartheid* (Uppsala Konsteum 1999).

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documentation in the Carnegie Commission photographs taken during 1929 and 1983, respectively.

Through personal photographs the curator of the 'Lives of Colour' exhibition, Emile Maurice, attempted to raise questions about the stories of the past, of the reliability of memory, the representation of identity, culture, gender, and the ways in which photography operates within social and political categories. In addressing these concerns he chose to exhibit personal photographs of coloured families during this time. Maurice also included some of his own personal pictures, a reflection of his commitment to a self-reflexive curatorial engagement with the subject-matter of the exhibition. Maurice thus offered the viewer a particular form of re-presenting coloured South Africans that drew on personal and family photographs.

It is important to emphasise a distinction between these two photographic categories because the former (personal photographs) is often uncritically referred to as the latter (family photographs) and vice versa. However, following writers like Patricia Holland, Jo Spence and Annette Kuhn, I prefer to use the term personal photographs above that of family photographs because our personal lives include so much more than our family lives.[64] Personal photographs, in this usage, therefore refers to all photographs intended for personal use, this includes professional studio photographs, postcards, those taken by clubs and societies, photographs of special events, special places or famous people.

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[64] Jo Spence and Jo Stanley, *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression* (London, 1995). See also Patricia Holland (1991) *Family Snaps: the Meaning of Domestic Photography* and Annette Kuhn (1995) *Family Secrets*.

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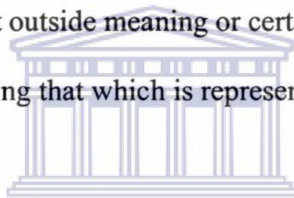
Interpreting this photographic exhibition has to take into account the constructed nature of the photograph as object, highlighted in the previous chapter. It also has to consider that the history of the photograph is "...to a large extent shaped by the characteristic ways in which photographs have been collected, stored, used and displayed. With the passage of time the original motive for making the photograph may disappear, leaving it accessible to being framed by new contexts".[65] In this chapter I emphasise that the interpretation and decoding of images are important. Simultaneously the context within which the image occurs is crucial. Images are historically based and one cannot avoid the fact that the past has attached certain meanings and symbolism to them, but this is not to say that their meanings have remained fixed in various contexts. Therefore, contrary to the argument made by Barthes, the photograph is not outside meaning or certain codes of meaning. It is not simply about looking and seeing that which is represented as Barthes would have it.



The exhibition disrupted the space of the gallery by pushing the boundaries of the photographic form as conventionally understood within the gallery system because it had as its primary source personal photographs from family albums, unlike the rest of the *Lines of Sight* exhibitions which were predominantly documentary in form. This has to be emphasized because family photographs only become placed within social reality when the images define a particular historical moment, or 'event' or personality.[66] The idea that family photographs have a limited documentary currency

[65] Liz Wells (ed), *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London and NY, 1997), 34.
[66] Jo Spence and Jo Stanley (1995) *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression*, Patricia Holland (1991) *Family Snaps: the Meaning of Domestic Photography* and Annette Kuhn (1995) *Family Secrets.*

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within historical and documentary practice, is linked to the idea that history, and the documentary, occur only within the public domain. This idea does not explore or raise questions about the counter histories that personal photographs offer and how these "…may be seen in terms which are simultaneously personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday and historic".[67]

Maurice also highlights the way in which these images, and the people they present, are embedded within various systems of discourse. Abigail Solomon-Godeau argues that individual documentary practices are themselves the residue of unique and specific historical circumstances and social surroundings which 'speak' of aims both concealed and unconcealed, personal and institutional, that inform their contexts, and more or less, mediate our reading of them.[68]

In this exhibition it is impossible not to view the photographs in relation to the various discourses and institutional systems within which they are embedded. These include particular ideas of the family, personal history, identity, culture, the social value and function of the camera, and the photograph as object, which suggest the integral connection between the social function of the family and photography's role in it.

Marianne Hirsch argues that the ideology of the family and photographic technology offer mutual support to each other at particular historical moments, thus connecting the practices of photography to the working of ideology.[69] Therefore photographic practices and conventions in personal and family photographs "…consolidate family

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[67] Annette Kuhn (quoting John Berger), *Family Secrets* (London, 1995), 7.
[68] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock* (Minneapolis, 1991), 182.
[69] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1997), 46.

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and group identity – with its dreams, fantasies and aspirations – whatever that group might be".[70]

Photography and the form of the photographic portrait, in particular, became the primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation for the individual, and later the family. By the latter part of the twentieth century, in many cultures around the globe, photography became widely available as a medium of familial self-presentation and self-preservation. Hirsch argues that this process puts less strain on family life because an illusion of family unity can be maintained through the photograph, but simultaneously it created images of family life that real families could not possibly live up to.

Critics like Celia Lury and Alan Sekula warn of the universalising practices of the camera in naturalising concepts of the family, race, culture, gender, class, and religion by rendering invisible the workings of power and ideology in the operation of these concepts.[71] Lury analyses 'The Family of Man' exhibition which took place in 1955 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She criticises the exhibition as an example of the tradition, in scientific discourse, of the arrangement of human variation. Her discussion of this exhibition culminates in the argument that exhibitions like this create a universal, idealistic family album through imposing a romanticised idea of the family on individuals across the world. Sekula calls this same exhibition "…a

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[70] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1997), 47.
[71] Celia Lury, *Prosthetic Culture: photography, memory and identity* (London, 1998) and Alan Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive' in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (Cambridge MA, 1989).

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celebration of the power of the mass media to represent the whole world in a familiar and intimate form."[72]

Lury shows how a particular concept, accompanied by the universal narrative that we are all a part of the natural cycle of life, that of the bourgeois nuclear family, becomes the universal norm. This assertion of the universality of the nuclear family is achieved through the recognition and the surpassing of natural and social difference. Even though the images are of people who are visibly different, they are united by their shared participation in the cycle of life. However, a contradiction emerges in that underlying this seeming universality are notions of difference and essentialism reinforced by photography and its images.

Photography and the photographic image became useful tools in representing the universality of human experience because of the particular qualities of the photographic medium. As Tagg suggests this is one of the leveling effects of the camera as a technology. Photography has a 'natural' communicative ability, which is why it is able to create the illusion of an unmediated, 'truthful' or realistic representation. As 'readers' of images, we not only understand this visual presentation, but we are also able to participate in it and can identify ourselves with the images without asking how this 'reality' is constructed.[73]

At various moments in the 'Lives of Colour' exhibition notions of a common humanity are certainly invoked within the context of apartheid oppression and

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[72] Celia Lury (quoting Alan Sekula), *Prosthetic Culture: photography, memory and identity* (London, 1998), 61.
[73] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1997), 49-50.

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national liberation. In this context I interpret this as a powerful political statement by certain groups within the black population about their humanity. Visualising, in personal and family photographs, and demonstrating, in one's day-to-day life, an overriding human equality was to invoke enlightenment ideas of a universal brotherhood that directly contradicted the prevailing apartheid ideologies of racial inferiority that denied humanity to the black population. Here, it is crucial to remember the political context in which difference is used to justify oppression and exploitation by naively erasing particularities and differences.

However this appeal to a common humanity in the 'Lives of Colour' exhibition also comes dangerously close to reinforcing ideas of difference and essentialism about the group being represented. It also assumes that there is a universal viewer 'out there' who is able to participate in the presentation without being asked to question the 'reality' offered up by the exhibition. This is a point to which I discuss more fully in my analysis of the photographs in the 'Lives of Colour' exhibition.

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Patricia Davison warns of the structured spaces within galleries and museums where particular concepts of democracy are at play that allows certain 'voices' to be heard more clearly above those of perhaps others.[74] The focus of Davison's concern is the

[74] Patricia Davison, 'Museums and the reshaping of memory' in Nuttal, Sarah and Coetzee, Carli (eds.) *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (South Africa, 1998). For a deeper discussion and analysis of museums and galleries see C. Rassool and S. Proselendis (eds) (2001) *Recalling Community in Cape Town*, C. Hamilton, 'Against the Museum as Chameleon' in *South African Historical Journal*, 31, November 1994, Ivan Karp and Steven D. Levine (eds) (1991) *Exhibiting Culures*, James Clifford (1997) *Routes Travels and Translations in the late twentieth century*, S. McDonald and G. Fyfe (eds) (1996) *Theorising Museums* and Tony Bennett (1995) *The Birth of the Museum*.

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ways in which "...museums institutionalize certain forms of knowledge, and perpetuate stereotypes in the name of scientific inquiry".[75] This is because the role of the museum is integrally connected to the role of memory. It means that like memory, the museum is perceived as a mediator between the past, the present, and the future. Davidson, however, emphasises that "...unlike personal memory, which is animated by an individual's lived experience, museums give material form to authorized versions of the past, which in time become institutionalized as public memory".[76] This structuring characteristic of the museum, which Davison describes, is also observed in the gallery. Galleries, therefore, are also powerful public institutions involved in the making of memory.

The legacy of the South African Museum (SAM) in the construction of the official history of 'primitive races' such as the Khoisan, has been researched well by Davison.[77] Her discussion serves as an example of the problematic involved in the role of museums as places of memory, where the past is both remembered and forgotten. Museums and galleries are spaces generally considered neutral, objective and authentic or true to reality. These considerations render the structuring power relations of such spaces, to construct and shape reality, invisible.

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This has meant that these institutions become privileged in terms of deciding which forms of cultural expression are valid for specific historical interpretations and which are not. Davison reminds us that " The ordering and reordering of objects and

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[75] Patricia Davison, 'Museums and the reshaping of memory' in Nuttal, Sarah and Coetzee, Carli (eds.) *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (South Africa, 1998)
[76] *Ibid*, 145.
[77] *Ibid*, 146.

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representations in national museums can serve to legitimate or 'naturalize' any given configuration of political authority".[78] Therefore, political motives, social tension and conflict may usher in new versions of the past, of official history, but it does not necessarily mean that the previous structures and mechanisms of power, used to represent the past, have disappeared.

However conceptual and structural shifts in these public institutions run parallel to the increasing demand for "hidden histories that had been suppressed or distorted under apartheid, a new respect for oral histories, and a call to democratize museum practice at all levels."[79] This priority is explicitly aimed at the previously disadvantaged black communities and audiences, in order to redress the historic inequality in relations of representation in South Africa.

Within the context, of places of memory confronting the weight of their own history in deciding a new future, many exhibition projects emerged which are deeply concerned with issues relating to reshaping South African memory.[80] The above outline, of the social and political imperatives cultural institutions face, serves to

[78] Patricia Davison, 'Museums and the reshaping of memory' in Nuttal, Sarah and Coetzee, Carli (eds.) *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (South Africa, 1998), 146.
[79] *Ibid*, 151.
[80] For example the eyeAfrica exhibition: 'African photography 1840-1998' at the SANG in 1998/9, and the *Lines of Sight* exhibition at the SANG 1999. The series of exhibitions which took place at the Castle of Good Hope, 1998. In 1998 also the exhibition by Pippa Skotness 'Miscast: negotiating KhoiSan history and material culture'. In 1997 Robben Island Museum is established on Robben Island. In 1994 the Sheikh Yusuf Tricentenary Commemoration exhibition. In 1993 'Esiqithini: The Robben Island Exhibition' at the SAM. In 1994 the District Six Museum was launched.

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emphasize the social and political context within which the 'Lives of Colour' exhibition is embedded.

In reshaping South African memory for an exhibition such as this, the real challenge is facing essentialist notions of race and culture in the attempt to represent the culture and history of one of the many diverse groups of South African people.[81] This is especially so when one considers that during apartheid ethnicity was used to categorize black people and these categories were then used as a basis for their exclusion from South African citizenship. Along with ethnicity, cultural characteristics have also been used to fuel and maintain racist stereotypes and assist apartheid policy makers with producing separate 'homelands' for distinct 'tribes'.

It is crucial to bear Davison's warning in mind (in thinking about museum practice as well as new exhibition projects) that within this transformation context previous structures of power and domination continue to exist in institutions like the SAM and the SANG.[82] Within the reconfiguration of institutional practices the old power relations continue to naturalize and render invisible as *practice* the institutional authority in collecting and exhibiting objects and this presents the exhibition with another key challenge (my emphasis). When exhibitions take their place in the gallery and objects become collections in museums, they inevitably become caught within the general intellectual trends and discourses of such institutions.[83] In order to subvert and

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[81] Patricia Davison, 'Museums and the reshaping of memory' in Nuttal, Sarah and Coetzee, Carli (eds.) *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (South Africa, 1998), 151.
[82] *Ibid*, 151-2.
[83] Liz Wells (ed), *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London and NY, 1997).

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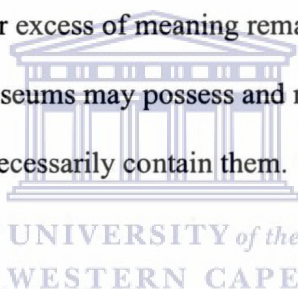
challenge such hegemonic practices, Davison suggests that " If public memory is to be more than a dominant mythology, new ways of evoking multiple memories will have to be found".[84]

Photographs, like monuments and sites, connect the past and the present because they provide clues to remembering. As I have argued in Chapter One, the tangibility of photographs as objects is particularly salient in relation to memory. As time passes, these objects or material reminders, accrue other varied meanings and in this process they accumulate different layers of memory. The above discussion emphasises that the importance we attach to the events of the past changes in relation to the politics of the present and this change is most visible in the public sphere. However, within the images of the past a surplus or excess of meaning remains, waiting to be made and remade, while galleries or museums may possess and mould memories in exhibitions and collections, they do not necessarily contain them.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Analysing the Photographs in the Exhibition

My analysis of the photographs in the 'Lives of Colour' exhibition is guided by a feeling of uneasiness, sensed in viewing this particular representation and interpretation, of coloured social, political and economic identity. This uneasiness may also be the result of a particular sensitivity I feel to this period in my South African history, culture and identity. In critically viewing the exhibition and its concerns, I am forced to ask what are the components of the exhibition's totality? In

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[84] Patricia Davison, 'Museums and the reshaping of memory' in Nuttal, Sarah and Coetzee, Carli (eds.) *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa,* (South Africa, 1998), 153.

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light of my own positionality in relation to this exhibition, I question whether I accept and keep or reject and remake this visual record of my past.

The exhibition touches my own life in a very personal and political way and central to my understanding of the exhibition is a notion of the photograph as metaphor. The use of personal photographs in the 'Lives of Colour' exhibition is perhaps also metaphoric of the framing of coloured identity. Thus it hints at the complex structuring relationship of photography to representation, to notions of identity, culture, race, gender, class, religion, sexuality, and forces us to look deep into the images that have shaped our ideas of 'colouredness'.

In such a framing context, the images raise questions about how coloured people have been portrayed, as well as how they have portrayed themselves to each other. More broadly, it questions how the past is framed; through social remembering and forgetting, through what is revealed and concealed, through that which it renders romantic, and through that which it chooses to include and exclude.

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The 'Lives of Colour' exhibition disrupts the givenness of coloured social, political and cultural identity by opening up the possibility of viewing this identity from yet another angle. By inserting these personal photographs into a critical context, such as the SANG, the question of memory is significant. Whose memories are these? Who is allowed to remember and whom not? What is being remembered and what is being forgotten? Will this version of the coloured past come to dominate and crystallize into history?

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In the post-apartheid context, outlined earlier, what are the challenges facing an exhibition such as this? Davison answers that in light of the demands of national unity, chief amongst these the celebration of cultural diversity, exhibitions such as this would do well to guard against essentialist notions of race and culture in the national climate of accepting ethnic differences.[85] Thus the exhibition is forced to confront the history of coloured identity in all its complexity in order to make sense of what its meaning in the present.

Abdoumaliq Simone similarly argues that ethnicity has generally been reexamined in a number of contexts and is no longer thought of as a fixed essence.[86] He argues that "Instead of constituting a significant difference in and of herself, the coloured acts as the most visible harbinger of the flexibility and contention to be permitted and required in the configuration of any identity in postapartheid society".[87] The reason for this, according to Simone, is because historically coloured identity has seldom been fixed, or static, instead its ambiguous and troubled nature has been central to its flexibility. [88]

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How coloured identity is to be viewed will depend on how coloured communities locate themselves in the present social reality and this depends on how questions of difference, ethnicity and identity in a multicultural, multiracial postapartheid South

[85] Patricia Davidson, 'Museums and the reshaping of memory' in Nuttal, Sarah and Coetzee, Carli (eds.) *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (South Africa, 1998), 151.
[86] Abdoumaliq Simone, 'In the mix: Remaking coloured identities' in *Africa Insight*, Vol 24, No 3, 1994,161.
[87] *Ibid*, 161.
[88] *Ibid*, 162.

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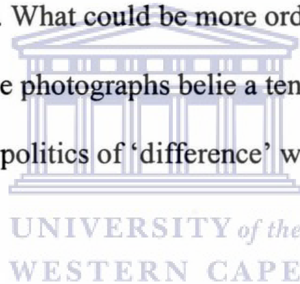
Africa are negotiated. Another challenge then, is confronting the historic hesitancy, anxiety and ambivalence at the heart of coloured identity. In the broader politics of representation and identity, these challenges are particularly pertinent to an exhibition such as this.

In the context of coloured identity and representation during the 1950s, the personal and family photographs of the 'Lives of Colour' exhibition reverberate with the history of a community wrestling with its own personal and public reality. Within this undesirable reality, these images ask to be regarded as anyone, as equal; images of smiling families on holiday, children in school concerts, young people making music, weddings pictures of the bride and groom, a proud sports team, a lonely soldier in Egypt during World War Two. What could be more ordinary and familiar to human experience, than this? Yet these photographs belie a tension between the images of 'ordinariness' and the broader politics of 'difference' within which this community is photographed.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Politics and history have set coloureds up as 'different'. These differences have been mapped in terms of language, socialisation, and geographic region. The differences, however, occurred within a space of power relations that generated inequality and hegemony amongst all South Africans. Simone defines politics as operating in such a way that where people have been marginalised from the power needed to sanction identity, they couple themselves to a 'name' or 'category' which is technically incorrect but which nonetheless makes them apparent and puts them on the political

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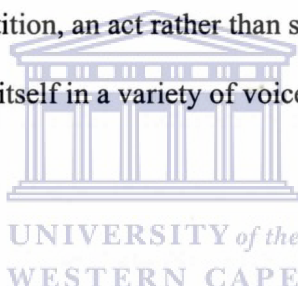
stage. Therefore, identities become sewn together from the idiomatic and the particular. Thus the community seeks to act out its right to equality, to freedom, not by making reference to its specific features or differences, but to the sense of its 'ordinariness', its universality.

The invocation of some common humanity, by coloured communities, is not an abstract notion but is specifically demonstrated in what people do, what they say, and how they organise their lives so that equality and freedom is demonstrated in the usefulness of their lives for the lives of everyone else. This process is also largely dependent on their objective conditions of existence. For Simone, identity is the particular locus through which equality is to be demonstrated.[89] In other words, equality is the purpose of repetition, an act rather than status, which must be repeated again and again, able to prove itself in a variety of voices, changing bodies and forms, and on different terrains.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The photographs

[89] Abdoumaliq Simone, 'In the mix: Remaking coloured identities' in *Africa Insight*, Vol 24, No 3, 1994, 163.

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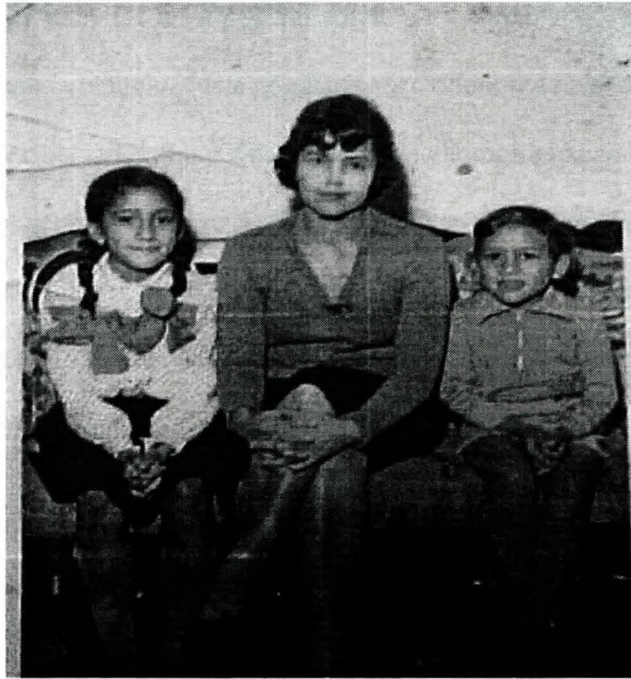

Figure 1. Squeaky Clean!

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'Lives of Colour' progresses thematically from photographs of childhood, adolescence, love, courtship, marriage, adulthood, and branches out to consider aspects of coloured social life such as, religion, music, sport, politics and loneliness. In the end it returns to the concept of the family. The exhibition starts with a series of photographs under the theme 'Offspring'.[90] Fig.1 is included within this theme and is captioned 'Squeaky Clean!' Like many of the photographs, included in this theme, this is a studio portrait taken by the infamous Van Kalker Studio photographer, located in central Cape Town. Van Kalker was established in 1938 by J.G. Van Kalker, a Dutch immigrant trained in photography in Europe.

[90] The captions and narrative text, accompanying the photographs, in the exhibition and reproduced in this thesis are those produced by the curator, Emile Maurice, and provide much of the contextual information on the subjects and the photographs. For reference purposes, from here on, read: 'Lives of Colour' Exhibition, *Lines of Sight* South African National Gallery (Cape Town, 1999).

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Van Kalker proved to be the most popular studio photographer amongst his specifically coloured clientele.[91] His popularity is evident not only in the longevity of his studio (which exists today) but also in the huge photographic archive amassed since its establishment. Blair suggests that Van Kalker's popularity was the result of his studio's accessibility to main transport routes, which after the imposition of the Group Areas Act of 1950 remained popular and accessible. Secondly, he was relatively inexpensive yet offered a good quality print. Thirdly, he was skilled at recognizing and capturing the 'essence' of the subject's personality, and sense of self.[92]

Blair hints at Van Kalker's European origins but does not give full analytical weight to how this may have influenced his work or his mixed (coloured, white and african) clientele. Her concern is with the genre of portraiture and how this provides a space to explore private and collective histories. My concern is however with the ways in which these photographs represented coloured people, to themselves, to their communities, to their society. Useful to my analysis is the description by an interviewee about Van Kalker's popularity, "…[he] provided a very high quality of work and that his customers were in fact more 'quality minded' than their white counterparts".[93]

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[91] Krista Blair, ' "*A Featherweight Portable Museum*" The Portrait Photography of the VanKalker Studio, Woodstock, 1949-1979', Unpublished Honours Research Paper (UCT, 1999).
[92] *Ibid*, 6-7.

[93] Krista Blair, ' "*A Featherweight Portable Museum*" The Portrait Photography of the VanKalker Studio, Woodstock, 1949-1979', Unpublished Honours Research Paper (UCT, 1999), 10.

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The photograph in fig.1 was taken around 1950 and belongs to Mary Maurice, who is seated in the middle of her young daughter and son. Beneath fig.1 the curator explains that having a [Van Kalker] studio portrait taken was considered a tradition for many coloured families. The narrative concludes by saying, " If you were 'coloured' and wanted squeaky clean for your children, Van Kalker was your man!" [94] The family in the photograph certainly look 'squeaky clean'. This is evident in the neat clothes they are wearing and their clean physical appearance. This description also extends to the poses they assume, the upright body posture, neatly folded hands and legs, convey an image of respectability.

Portraits were very popular when the camera was first invented and photography in turn has come to shape not only what we now understand as portraiture but also the individual and his or her relations to consciousness, memory and embodiment.[95] The history of portraiture has had ambivalent implications for the representation of the individual in the photographic portrait. John Tagg considers that "To 'have one's portrait done' was one of the symbolic acts by which individuals from the rising social classes made their ascent visible to themselves and others, and classed themselves among those who enjoyed social status".[96] This means that portraiture was rooted in the rise of lower and middle classes, in nineteenth century Europe, because of the way in which portraits allowed various social classes access to the social value offered by photography.

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[94] 'Lives of Colour' Exhibition, *Lines of Sight* SANG, Cape Town, 1999.
[95] Graham Clarke (ed), *The Portrait in Photography* (London, 1992)
[96] John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation* (Minneapolis, 1998), 37.

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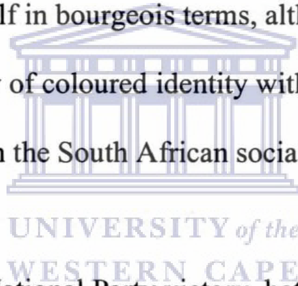
The conventions of portraiture have hardly changed since its permeation into family life. In the portraits of the 'Lives of Colour' exhibition, one can note the play of individuality against collectivity, the acting out of hierarchies and the marking of solidarity. Therefore, as Blair has suggested, portraiture created a space in which possible imaginings of the self could be realized and by virtue of this extended into the realm of representation.[97]

The Van Kalker portraits reveal how these photographs undermined the indelible privilege connected to portraiture and allowed coloured communities to renegotiate their social relationships within the broader social and political environment.[98] However I suggest that the photographs under the theme 'Offspring' do not simply suggest an imagining of the self in bourgeois terms, although it is this also. Instead, it integrally links the complexity of coloured identity with the hegemonic representational politics within the South African social landscape.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In the decades following the National Party victory, between 1948 to 1985 in particular, coloured South Africans constantly deliberated their identity. Indeed, in this period of change, a history of economic depression and intensified racial ideology at the start of the twentieth century, saw the progressive exclusion of coloureds from social, political and economic sectors. The invocation of a coloured identity offered some protection in a period where voting rights were being erased as part of the process of the apartheid government's social and political structuring. The state actively pursued the division of black communities. The process of forced removals

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[97] Krista Blair, ' "*A Featherweight Portable Museum*" The Portrait Photography of the VanKalker Studio, Woodstock, 1949-1979', Unpublished Honours Paper, (UCT, 1999), 14.
[98] *Ibid,* 14.

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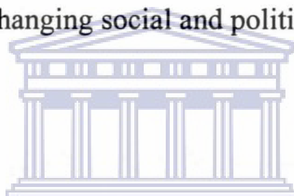
and the various Group Areas Act's (starting in 1950) destroyed any glimmer of a progressive multiracial city (such as District Six, Simonstown, Retreat and others areas represented) when it forcefully relocated african and coloured communities to inadequately constructed government townships.[99]

Simone suggests that within this context coloured people used available symbolic frameworks to demonstrate their humanity and equality.[100] He argues that available to coloured people, was the language of whites (Afrikaans and English), the sectarian ideology of the Christian religion and a series of cultural pastimes in which coloured people could participate (for example, ball-room dancing, sports clubs, music). Simone suggests that in using these symbolic frameworks coloured people could locate themselves within the changing social and political world, that is, within the modern world.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These frameworks were not however confined to coloured people only. During the 1950s and through the 1960s in South Africa many African people caught in the uneven processes of urbanisation and modernity used photography in highly creative ways to negotiate their identity within modernity.[101] Therefore, at a time when coloured social and political reality was undergoing profound changes the

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[99] Krista Blair, ' "*A Featherweight Portable Museum*" The Portrait Photography of the VanKalker Studio, Woodstock, 1949-1979', Unpublished Honours Research Paper (UCT, 1999), *86-88.*

[100] Dr Abdoumaliq Simone, 'In the mix: Remaking coloured identities' in *Africa Insight*, Vol 24, No 3, 1994, 166.

[101] For a discussion on this see Dorothy Driver (1996) 'Drum Magazine and the spatial configurations of gender' in *Text, Theory, Space*, Okwui Enwezor (1996) 'A critical presence: Drum magazine in context' in *In/Sight. African Photographers, 1940 to the present.*

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contradictions implicit in a group of people caught between various contexts and discourses is visually realised in the photographs of this community.

I argue that the 'popularity' of the Van Kalker studio – his 'Squeaky clean' portraits were part of a process whereby coloured people could visually demonstrate their humanity through visually demonstrating their modernity. Van Kalker promised coloured communities an image of the civilised, respectable, light skinned, middle class coloured family. For some these images challenged the hegemony of the white, racialised imagination. Therefore the 'squeaky clean' photographs as well as others in the exhibition do not simply suggest an imagining of the self in white bourgeois terms instead it suggests that coloured people used these very terms as a basis for their inclusion in a society which sought to exclude them.

Simultaneously these photographs highlight the painful complexity of the politics of representation within segregated black life where the knowledge that socially and politically blackness is de-valued within systems of race, class and gender (established and maintained by white supremacists thinking) make intervening and transforming cultural identity and representation extremely difficult.

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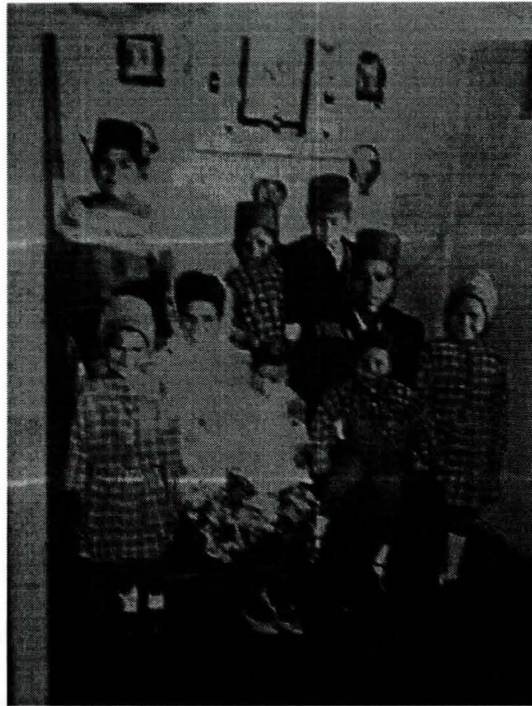

Figure 1.2 Abdullah Kamar, his wife, and seven of his nine children

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In fig.1 and fig.1.2, the positioning of the mother is central in achieving the 'Squeaky clean' image because she represents that universal notion of motherhood; the love of a mother for her children and the evidence and guarantee of that love, in the appearance and care of her children. In fig.1, the mother is centrally positioned in order to achieve this image of well-cared for children.

In fig.1.2, the mother figure is standing in the left- hand side of the photograph and is positioned above that of the father (who is seated somewhat off center) and the younger children. This is a photograph of Abdullah Kamaar, his wife, and seven of his nine children. The image and narrative emphasise the notion that caring for one's family is a labor of love.

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The narration, beneath the photograph, explains that regardless of the expenses involved in raising this many children, for Kamaar, lots of children were seen to be a poor man's riches. The image and narrative collude in the idea of familial pride and pleasure by showing that even poorer families could afford 'Squeaky clean' and so there is no real difference between the family in fig.1 and fig.1.2, and families in general.

In Fig.2 a young ballerina gracefully sails through the air in a photograph captioned 'The Magic Rose school play' in front of a magical backdrop. No doubt the production of this play involved hard work, months of planning and costly preparation. The photograph attests to this achievement. In fig.2 there is nothing in the photograph itself which shows that this school was banned from participating in sporting events organised by the Western Province Primary School Sports Board.[102]

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[102] From 1948 onward government domestic policy was directed at enforcing race separation in every conceivable sphere. This most definitely included sport which had to accord with the policy of separate development. In schools the national sports policy dictated that no mixed sport was allowed as well as mixed inter-school competitions. For a fuller discussion on the history of sport in schools see Keith Baden Powell, 'School Sport and Political Change' Unpublished MA Thesis, UWC, 1990. P. Kallaway (ed) (1986) *Apartheid and Education*, Tom Lodge (1987) *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*.

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Figure 2. The Magic Rose school play.

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The narration explains that the school principal staged this play in the Joseph Stone Auditorium, considered a 'no-go venue' by anti-apartheid activists. Anti-apartheid activists boycotted the designation of separate civic and community spaces into 'coloureds only' by the state and such venues were blacklisted in the communities. In considering the text and the image, I am left wondering; what makes the acting principal of Silverlea Primary school go against anti-apartheid sentiment and stage his school play regardless of the fact that in the long run, his pupils were banned from participating in western province sports? In the cultural moment of this time, in which the photographs are taken, it appears that there exists a familial ideology, an image to live up to, an image shaping the desire of individuals living in a social group that surpasses the context of apartheid. Hirsch argues that, "photographs locate

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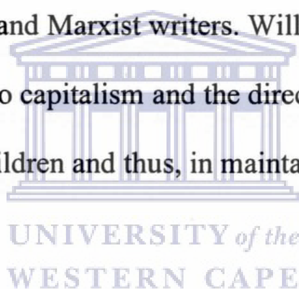
themselves precisely in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of family life".[103]

Judith Williamson suggests that the ways in which photography is used in schools reinforce the narrative and imaginary powers of photography to represent an ideal family. We need only think of our own primary school experiences, in particular, to see the possibility of considering 'the school' as a particular type of family also. Judith Williams argues how the rise of family photography –both photographs of the family and the situating of photography within the family- is not an innocent event, but part of the powerful production and reproduction of the bourgeois family form.[104] Williamson explores the crucial functions of the family, as institution, and emphasises its documentation by feminist and Marxist writers. Williamson's work focuses on the economic value of the family to capitalism and the direct ideological role the family plays in the socialisation of children and thus, in maintaining the status quo of the family unit.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For Williamson, education works alongside the family in repressing children and guiding them towards their proper role in society – school and college photographs depict this with their family-like groupings. The use of family photograph formats in school photography enables family values to be more easily accessed.[105]

[103] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1997), 8.
[104] Judith Williamson, ' Family, Education, Photography' in Dirks N, Eley G, Ortner S (eds), *Culture/Power/History* (New Jersey, 1994), 236.
[105] *Ibid*, 243.

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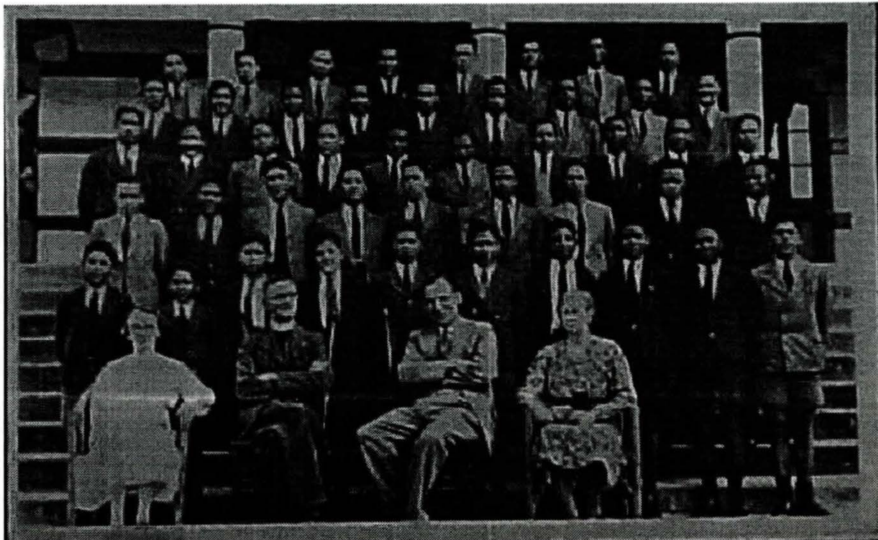
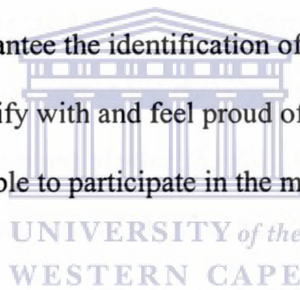


Figure 2.1. School Days: English Only Please!

This kind of photography, see fig.2, and fig.2.1, is especially important in the public sphere where it is used to guarantee the identification of the audience and the subject. Therefore, we are able to identify with and feel proud of the subjects of these photographs, because we are able to participate in the memory of social life, offered by these photographs.



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However much these photographs reproduce and represent liberal bourgeois values and aspirations, it does not mean that this representation cannot be read in a political way. If having a well staged play, with children in lively costume, colorful props and competent staff who put it all together and a proud audience of parents and relatives, define one as 'coloured', then how could one not want to be coloured? The broader anti-apartheid movement may object to separate government sanctioned cultural institutions, but for the principal and community of Silverlea Primary school, this play is an affirmation of the cultural and educational potential of the coloured community in the face of arduous circumstances.

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The family-format school photograph in fig.2.1 is of Cyril Smith's senior class. The narrative explains that Cyril's parents decided to send him to an English-medium school in Cape Town, as opposed to a school in Johannesburg where coloured pupils were taught in Afrikaans. The narrative also informs the audience that Cyril left South Africa in 1950, "...when the Communist Party was banned" and he later "died in England, where he lived happily among English-speakers for two decades or so".[106] Cyril Smith's school photograph tells a story which goes deep into the political realities of living in apartheid South Africa. It is a story that is also intimately connected to his identity as a black person in South Africa.

Fig. 2.1 attests to how "The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves".[107] The narrative accompanying the photograph is instructive; that Cyril died happily amongst English-speakers in England, is an indictment of white South African society which denied him full citizenship rights on the basis of his race, and ironically it is in white British society that he finds acceptance. By implication it highlights the role his parents played in helping him along the " path to becoming a 'civilised man'".[108]

By universalising human experience, and embracing the myth of the global human family, Cyril Smith and other subjects in photographs in the exhibition captioned 'Emigration', 'England Calling'/ 'Last Look', can cross the ocean and join in the idea of the global human family, regardless of race, class or gender. It did not matter where

[106] 'Lives of Colour' Exhibition, *Lines of Sight* SANG, Cape Town, 1999.
[107] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1997), 7.
[108] 'Lives of Colour' Exhibition, *Lines of Sight* SANG, Cape Town, 1999.

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one lived, the "pervasiveness of these conventions opens the family image and album to the possibility of broad-based identifications and affiliations".[109]

In fig.3 a photograph is inserted into a greeting card sent to the Maurice family by John and Norma Warries. The couple left Cape Town and immigrated to London during the 1950s because Norma's family was unhappy with her decision to marry John on the basis of his race. The narrative does not explicitly state that John is coloured and I am left to assume that Norma is white. The narrative also omits any reference to the question of racialised sexual politics, in South Africa, at the time.

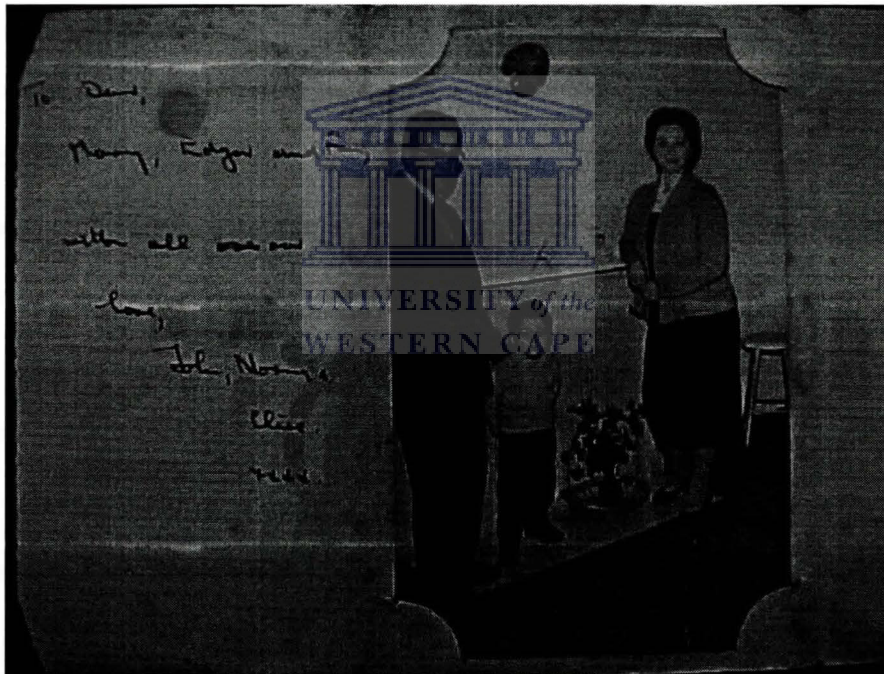

Figure 3. Emigration

[109] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1997), 47.

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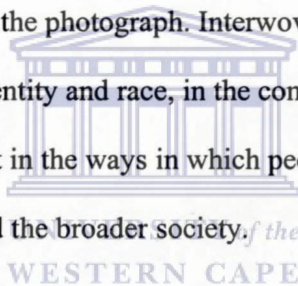
The apartheid government forcefully conveyed the attitude that miscegenation was unacceptable, obsessively banning and hunting down those who transgressed the interracial sexual boundary. In the eyes of the puritan apartheid government coloureds were seen to be the unfortunate accidents of the unholy and unspoken relationships between their white forebearers and the black indigenous population. This long history of inter-racial sexual affairs tarnished the purist aspirations of the Afrikaner government and complicated their responses to coloured people.

Underlying this representation of the happy, family living in London is the reality of the discriminatory and racialised sexual politics in South Africa. Ironically, in the image, the couple's race and the reality of interracial sexual relations is effaced by the 'non-racist' image offered in the photograph. Interwoven in the image, fig.2.3, are the sensitive issues of family, identity and race, in the context of apartheid South Africa and the complexities inherent in the ways in which people of mixed ancestry represent themselves to themselves and the broader society.



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Viewing personal photographs can be a fairly mundane activity, yet in this everyday visual catalogue there is an instant when a frame opens onto a scene of fascination, that captures the eye and grabs the mind, filling it with questions or simple enjoyment. In the entire exhibition there are four photographs, in particular, which most forcibly open up a questioning of meanings for me. One such photograph, fig.4, is under the theme 'The Great Outdoors'.

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This photograph, fig.4, taken in 1956 at a popular camping site in Kommetjie by Edgar Maurice, depicts his children seated on the bonnet of their family car parked alongside their canvas tent. The photograph is followed by another camping picture, fig. 4.1, is captioned 'Edgar Maurice CA 84061'. In fig.4.1, the mother, father and youngest sibling are included in the photograph. The narrative text beneath these photographs inform us that the Maurice family took camping very seriously and continued these family outings even after their eviction from their family home under the Group Areas Act of 1964.

Figure 4. The Great Outdoors.

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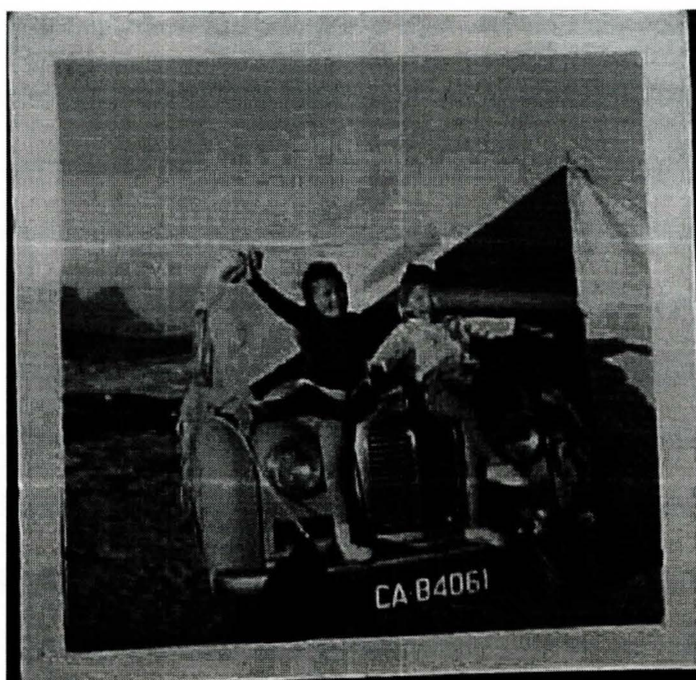

Fig. 4.1. Edgar Maurice CA 84061.

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Fig. 4 and fig.4.1 represent a basic stereotype, that all coloured families enjoyed a holiday at the beach, owned a car, and consisted of a small, happy nuclear family. This representation masks the very real social and economic differences existing between coloured communities. Jo Spence argues, in relation to photographs of working class communities, that the working class, " As a generic term it is perhaps misleading because within the working class itself there are many hierarchies of power and earning capacity, as well as sexual and racial oppression".[110] Therefore, such representations form part of a narrative in which universal human experience is concentrated on as opposed to unseen or unrecognised elements of working-class experience.

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[110] Jo Spence and Jo Stanley (ed), *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression* (London, 1995), 39.

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Despite the fact that apartheid had produced a layer of middle class coloureds made up of state employees, professionals, business people and teachers, the system had done little for the majority of coloureds who experienced everyday life conditions no better than that of many urban africans.[111] In my own family, differences existed between my immediate lower working class family, my middle class paternal grandparents, my single-parent lower working class maternal grandmother, and my mother's upper working class adoptive parents. To me this representation does not show a realistic image of coloured communities. Coloured people were not a homogenous group and very often coloured communities were highly complex and contradictory. However in the exhibition certain social customs are codified as the 'reality' of coloured life. Popular photographic practice lends itself precisely to the assumption that this is simply a record of the day-to-day world of the coloured family.

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For ideological and economic reasons this constructed narrative glamorises the experiences of the coloured middle class, for the Maurice family and other coloured families. The narrative accompanying fig.4 reminds us "…that canvas tent made for some of the most cherished memories of childhood" and "…so, thanks to the *adventurous* and *exploratory* spirit of their parents, a love of nature was *cultivated* at an early age in the son and two daughters of the family".[112]

[111] Ian Goldin, "The reconstruction of coloured identity in the Western Cape", in Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido (eds), *The politics of race, class and nationalism in twentieth century South Africa* (London and New York, 1987), chapter 6.
[112] 'Lives of Colour' Exhibition, *Lines of Sight* SANG, Cape Town, 1999. My emphasis.

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It is no coincidence that the technology of the hand held camera contributes to the 'adventurous' and 'exploratory' spirit of the parents. As a result of the booming photographic mass market, the means for self-representation became available to almost everyone.[113] Personal photographs became defined by these markets as amateur, and meant to illustrate exciting holidays, days at the beach and happy family events.[114] The 'snapshot' in its standard mass produced size, is redolent of its assumed 'everyday' significance. Despite the ideology of home as the heart of the family, most personal pictures are in fact, of time spent away from the home. This coincides with the increased mobility and social status of families. The inclusion of the family car in fig. 4 and 4.1 and the caption added by the curator is indicative of this shift.

The development of such informal picture-taking meant the arrival of an element of 'instant fun' offered by camera advertising.[115] This refered to firstly, the fun in taking the picture, as that process which takes place 'before your eyes' and secondly, the fun within the picture, the smiles and happy moments frozen into an object that creates, yet another, systematic representation of childhood and family life. In earlier family images it seemed enough for the family members to be presented to the camera, as in portrait photographs, "...to be *externally* documented; but now this is not enough, and *internal* states of constant delight are to be revealed on film. Fun must not only be had, it must be *seen* to have been had".[116]

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[113] Judith Williamson, 'Family, Education, Photography' in Dirks N, Eley G, Ortner S (eds), *Culture/Power/History* (New Jersey, 1994), 238.
[114] Patricia Holland, ' Personal photographs and popular photography' in Liz Wells (ed), *Photography:A Critical Introduction* (London and New York, 1997),133.
[115] Judith Williamson, 'Family, Education, Photography' in Dirks N, Eley G, Ortner S (eds), *Culture/Power/History* (New Jersey, 1994), 238-9.
[116] *Ibid*, 239.

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The family in the 'Great Outdoors' photographs definitely 'look' like they are having 'fun'. However fraught with anxiety and ambivalence the reality of personal and public life may have been, in certain aspects of coloured life, "Personal pictures are made specifically to portray the individual or the group to which they belong as *they would wish to be seen* and as they have chosen to show themselves to one another."[117]

Fig.5 and fig.5.1 are exhibited under the theme 'Love and Marriage' with fig.5.1 captioned, 'In-laws Prefer Gentleman'.[118] These photographs were taken in 1962, in Rondebosch, Cape Town.

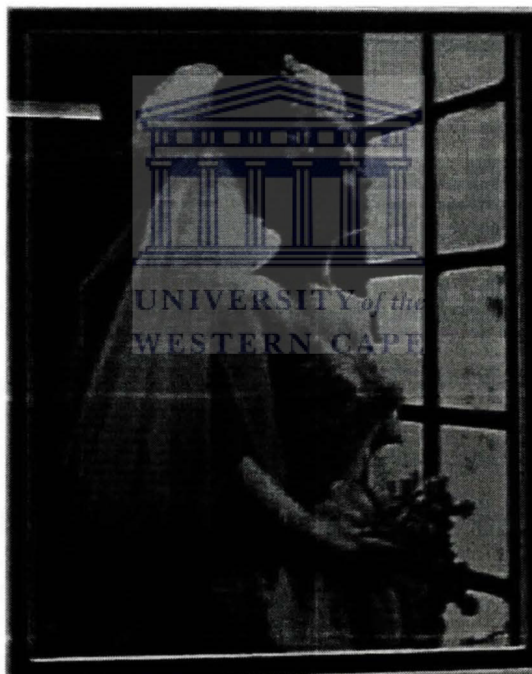
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Figure 5. Bride of the Month.

[117] Patricia Holland, ' Personal photographs and popular photography' in Liz Wells (ed), *Photography:A Critical Introduction* (London and New York, 1997), 107.
[118] 'Lives of Colour' Exhibition, *Lines of Sight* SANG, Cape Town, 1999

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Figure 5.1. In-Laws prefer Gentlemen.

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The narrative tells the story of Lionel Smith who returns to Cape Town after World War Two, where he was an officer in the English army. He marries Isabel Smith, formerly from "the Frenchmans of Walmer Estate" in what appears to be a lavish affair. The photographs are of a high quality, they are well composed and aesthetically pleasing, the work of the professional photographer Anne Fisher. At this time the photographer entered the photograph into the "Bride of the Month competition in the Cape Times". In describing the context and content of the image the narrative is punctuated by the phrases "picture of the eligible bachelor", "big catch for any young woman", and "civilised gentleman who spoke the Queen's english".[119]

[119] Lives of Colour' Exhibition, *Lines of Sight* SANG, Cape Town, 1999

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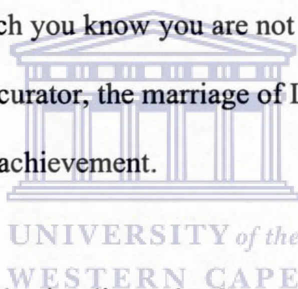
The dominant mythology and preconceptions shaping these images are not hard to miss. The ideas, conveyed by the narrative and image, are part of the naturalised order of gender, class and race difference. Therefore, the family encourages girls/women to 'see' themselves as potentially socially mobile, "beauty and passivity being the path to romance with the 'right' man who would offer us the ability to 'transcend' our class backgrounds" through love and marriage.[120]

This model idea of what 'woman' and hence, 'femininity' ought to be is not confined to the cultural context of coloured families in the 1950s and 1960s. Instead these ideas exist today also and continue to find their visualisation in personal photographs because personal photographs, "...those partial mirrors where the masquerade of appearing to be something which you know you are not is viewed as a high achievement".[121] Thus, for the curator, the marriage of Lionel Smith to Isabel Smith represents one such celebrated achievement.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The photograph and narration also implicate the Group Areas Act (1950, 1957 and 1966 respectively) in the construction and stratification of the coloured population, not only along race lines but class as well. The more well off and stably employed coloured population secured better housing in Rylands, Surrey Estate, Bellville, Strand and Walmer Estate. No doubt, the separation and ghettoization of coloured people from african, indian and white communities along race and class boundaries had a profound impact on coloured identity, but even greater was the separation and

[120] Jo Spence and Jo Stanley (ed), *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression* (London, 1995), 154.
[121] *Ibid*, 156.

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ghettoization of coloured people, along the same divisions, from other coloured people.

Hirsch's concept of the familial gaze reminds us that "…the familial gaze situates human subjects in the ideology, the mythology, of the family as institution and projects a screen of familial myths between camera and subject".[122] This familial gaze, even though I do not belong to any of these families in the exhibition, acts as a screen which allows me to recognise and attempt to contest my embeddedness in familiarity, in coloured identity and coloured history.[123]

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Figure 6. Front Door with Shadows.

[122] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1997), 11.
[123] *Ibid*, 11.

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The last few photographs I want to consider are those of Mary Maurice. In fig. 6, she is photographed standing in the doorway of her home in Plumstead, before the family was evicted to Wynberg under the Group Areas Act. The caption beneath the photograph reads 'Front Door with Shadows' and takes us back to the "days when milk in glass bottles was delivered to your house".[124] There are more photographs of this family, in the same setting, respectively captioned 'Front Door With Hydranges' and 'Front Door, Daughter and Stoep'. Father is nowhere to be seen in these 'Front Door' images, presumably he is the photographer.

Figure 6.1. Front Door, Daughter and Stoep

Unlike the formal portraits of the Van Kalker studio, these photographs, fig. 6 and 6.1 are done outside the studio. The family standing outside the house is a dominant theme in personal 'amateur' photography, " Whether the house was a cottage, one of a

[124] 'Lives of Colour' Exhibition, *Lines of Sight* SANG, Cape Town, 1999

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terraced row, or stood alone in varying degrees of detached splendor, the front door became a point of congregation when its inhabitants were photographed".[125] The popularity of the front door photograph, in family albums, is partly due to the identification of the individual with his/her material possessions. More importantly, front door photographs associate the individual and an important social space, 'the home'.[126]

In fig.6 the individual is a woman, 'the woman of the house' so to speak. Implicit in the image and caption, "days when milk in glass bottles was delivered to your house" are racist, sexist and class assumptions about women's sexuality and labor. These assumptions also point toward an absent black 'other', that of the milkman – who was often male, african, and part of the underpaid urban african workforce. Perhaps the front door images argue for a metaphor of passage between spaces, given the context of the impending Group Areas Act, or perhaps they show that families liked asserting the importance of their property by indicating that it could be divided into more than one space: leisure and work. It may also be the attempts of parents to record 'mother' and children, who were afterall the family's center (much like the home) and its future.[127]

The deeper truth may be that the photographs in fig.6 and 6.1 attest to the plurality of agendas within the representations. As clichéd as these representations may be, "...what is represented is an archetype of visual memory, that is, the key data needed

[125] Philip Stokes, 'The Family Photograph Album' in Graham Clarke (ed) *The Portrait in Photography* (London, 1992), 196.
[126] *Ibid*, 196.
[127] *Ibid,* 198.

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to summarise an entire [family] experience".[128] Therefore, photography demonstrates a powerful quality in its ability to actualise the typical appearance of those sample slices of time, which make up one's memories.

Fig. 7 is captioned 'Taking Care of Memories' and was taken at the end of the world war two in present-day Sri Lanka. This photograph is mounted close to the end of the exhibition space. The young man in the picture sent it to his family during his time away from home.[129] The photograph reminds the viewer of the value of memories and *photographs as memory.*

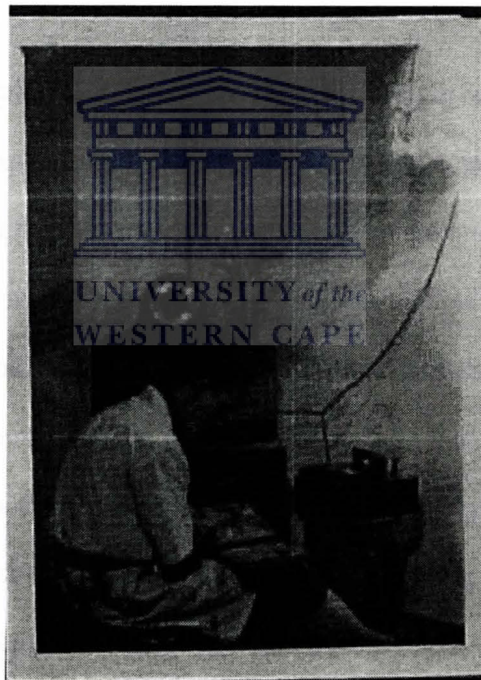

Figure 7. Taking Care of Memories.

[128] Philip Stokes, 'The Family Photograph Album' in Graham Clarke (ed) *The Portrait in Photography* (London, 1992), 200.
[129] The young man pictured is Lionel Smith also in fig. 5.1. Thanks to Tina Smith for pointing this out to me.

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The 'Lives of Colour' exhibition was not simply an exhibition of family photographs. The content of this family album as it is disclosed to inspection reveals a plurality of meanings. In this representation of coloured personal photographs, the more complicated arena of photographic representation and organised cultural evidence coincide to produce witnesses to a period in history inflected with repressive state politics, and enormous social, cultural, and economic upheavals. Identity, in the exhibition, is certainly familial in the sense of the family as the site of ambiguity and anxiety surrounding coloured identity in South Africa. The exhibition invites me, through reading the photographs, to recognise myself in it, and this is an act of identity as familiarity to me.

The exhibition places personal photographs into a narrative context and thus they become meta-photographic texts open to the work of contestation. The images both expose (think of Isabel Smith's wedding photographs) and resist (as in the photograph of Norma and Anne Warries) the conventions of personal and family photography and hegemonic family ideology. Therefore my discussion has focused in similar terms on how these images are embedded in narrative contexts. In this context of meta-photographic textuality the photographs are able to disrupt the familiar narratives about family life and its representations, thereby fragmenting the hold of a conventional and monolithic reading of coloured reality.

My analysis of the exhibition has attempted to show that the photographs and their subjects are subject to changes in particular historical, cultural, social and economic circumstances as is the lived reality of family life. What appears to remain constant, at

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least in the cultural moment of the exhibition, is the existence of a family ideology, an image to live up to, an image shaping the desire of the individual living in a tense, ambiguous social group defined as coloured. This myth, or ideal of the image, dominated middle class coloured lived reality even though it existed in conflict with that very lived reality and was ruled by different interests. More important though is that the representation, the myth of the image, survives by means of its narrative and imaginary power, a power that the curator in the 'Lives of Colour' exhibition through his use of personal photographs was able to tap.

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CHAPTER THREE

Documentary Photography: The National Library of South Africa Photographic Archives

> " Although it is tempting to view a collection such as this one from afar, through the long lense of history, these pictures disallow such distancing. Only incidentally do they illustrate the vast sweep of change; instead each one offers a glimpse of an isolated encounter, a frozen moment in the lives of two human beings: the person (or group) whose image we see and the person who took the picture."[130]

The National Library of South Africa Archive [131]

One of the most exceptional features of the 'Lives of Colour' exhibition was that family and personal photographs were finally recognised as somehow worthy of a place (albeit a small one) in the South African National Gallery, a public art institution. That these photographs were of coloured people is also of significance.

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[130] Nancy Hathaway, *Native American Portraits: 1862-1918* 'Photographs from the collections of Kurt Koegler' (Chronicle Books 1990) quoted in Michael Aird, *Portraits of our Elders* (Australia, 1993), 1.

[131] The National Library of South Africa's picture collection was compiled in the late 1990s after the consolidation of the library's holdings which took place in 1986. The sequence within which these photographs are filed is the so-called 'PHP sequence'. This filing code refers to a collection of photocopies, photographs and negatives of images of Southern African people, places and events from the mid-1700s through to the 1900s. There are four Main subject sequences which are used: Cape Town, Other Places, General Subjects and Portraits. The first is the biggest sequence and is further subdivided in various ways; suburbs, for example, Sea Point; streets, for example, Adderly Street; subjects, for example, public transport, social life, water supply, employment and so forth. It is within the first sequence that CT. Black people, CT. Coloured people, CT. Malay people and CT. Indian people appear. It is from this sequence that I have selected the photographs analysed in this chapter of my thesis. A fascinating aspect of this collection is how many images challenge the categories/sequences within which they are placed. This collection is located in the Research Section of the library. The main holding of the library is its Iconographic Section.

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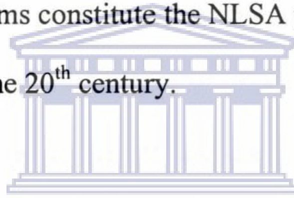
The exhibition propelled me toward investigating a broader range of images of coloured people in Cape Town during the 1950s. I remembered seeing such photographs in the photographic archives of the National Library of South Africa (NLSA) on a previous visit.

The NLSA photographic archive is smaller than the South African National Archives situated in central Cape Town also. The latter represents the longstanding classificatory system associated with any national archive. The NLSA photographic collection is small and uneven. It contains a variety of photographic forms, such as, portraits (private and public), studio photographs, official state photographs, photographs from newspapers, photographs taken in and by mission schools. Together these various photographic forms constitute the NLSA picture collection on coloured people in Cape Town during the 20th century.



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The nature of such a haphazard collection raises certain implications for the process of contextualising, historicising and theorising its contents. In the 'Lives of Colour' exhibition the curator provided a powerful context for all the photographs but in the NLSA many of the images lack contextual information. There are few original captions to the images or information indicating where the photograph was taken, by whom it was taken and for what reasons. This kind of information is central to mapping out the various elements constituting the continually shifting social biography of the photo-object as regards the nature of its production, distribution, selection and interpretation, all of which are crucial to the dynamics of representation.

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For example, photographs donated by private individuals from private albums will have a different range of connotations to those donated by a state agency. Similarly, these photographs would have circulated among different audiences who would have had a different understanding and interpretation of the image. In the NLSA "These archival processes have simultaneously created the visual archive but also undermined it, engendering a body of visual material but ripping apart the contexts in which it arrived at the institution."[132] Therefore the photographs raise questions about the archive and what happens when images become placed within its filing cabinets. Is meaning restored or removed from the photograph and the subject?

In the same way that I have attempted to analyse, in chapter two, the personal photograph, its ideological underpinnings, its privileged representational modes and conventions, and its social functions, so too a similar description of these documentary photographs is crucial. This means that my analysis and interpretation of the images is contextualised and historicised within the archival context. The starting point of this analysis is always the very nature of the photograph because, as I have argued in chapter one, this is the site of the photograph's ambiguity.

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I call these photographs 'documentary' because they are located in the photographic archive section of the National Library of South Africa where they are catalogued as a specific collection of photographs, namely, 'C.T Coloured people'.[133] Secondly, the

[132] Patricia Hayes, Jeremy Silvester and Wolfram Hartmann 'Picturing the Past' in Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid and Razia Saleh (eds), *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town, 2002), 117.
[133] NLSA, 2002.

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photographs are stored in steel filing cabinets, the more fragile ones are placed in plastic sleeves, and filed under captions such as 'C.T Coloured people: education' or 'C.T Coloured people: living conditions. Squatter Camp' and 'C.T Coloured people: social life - dancing'.[134] The images, in the collection, are also from various contributors, the State Information Office, missionary societies and philanthropic institutes, newspapers, and donations from private individuals.

How such random and varied images come to constitute coloured social history is an important aspect in thinking about the supposed unity of the photographic archive and coloured social history. It appears, at the very least, that common to all these contributors is a general sense (albeit a problematic one) that the pictures contribute to an understanding of coloured social life and history during the 1950s and would therefore serve the library and the public well.

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As such the photographs enter the library as 'evidence'; evidence of coloured social and political history. The word evidence can be traced to 'documentum' a medieval term for an official paper.[135] From its early imperial roots the word evidence meant a document of an unquestionable and truthful nature which was supported by the authority of the law. Documentary photography, as a genre, has customarily rested within a similar frame of authority and importance. This has been the most apparent definition of this form of photography and the category is used precisely as evidence of past events. This description further engages the historical significance of the

[134] NLSA, 2002.
[135] Liz Wells (ed), *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York, 1997), 63.

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image, endowing it with the status of a truthful and objective account (or representation) of what has happened.[136]

Searching through the photographs on coloured people in the steel cabinets of the library is a curious experience; the files of pictures are mostly of people no longer living and very few people are identified by name. Some of the photographs are formal and candid, captioned and uncaptioned, crisp or faded and torn, wispy fragile fragments of lives. These lives have been put on the historical map by the photographers, and again by the NLSA archive, and yet again by my inquiry, raising questions about the truth and falsity of the subject's place in the world.

The captions provided with the photographs in this chapter are not my own but those of the NLSA photographic archive. I retain them to give the viewer the same provocative experience of 'reading' into a picture that I engage in. The life history of the first photograph fig.8 is unclear to me. The second photograph fig. 8.1 comes from a Cape newspaper and was taken at around the same time as fig.8 which illuminates something of the social biography of the first photograph. Two of the images, fig. 9 and fig 9.1, were taken by a photographer working for the South African State Information Office.[137]

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The latter was a South African government department that existed between 1955 and 1964.[138] The State Information Office was located in Pretoria, with a branch in Cape Town, and worked alongside the then Department of Foreign Affairs to produce

[136] Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford and New York, 1997), 145.
[137] NLSA, 2002.
[138] *Ibid.*

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visual and written information on South Africa. This information covered white South Africa and white South African life in the form of description, travel, and art publications, aimed mostly at European immigrants and the white South African ruling classes.[139] The State Information Office and the Department of Foreign Affairs produced a joint publication called the *Digest of South African Affairs* which covered social and political affairs inside the country from the white Nationalist government perspective.[140]

Solomon-Godeau emphasises that in the 19th century, almost all of photography was what would later be described as 'documentary'.[141] Since then shifts in the meaning of the documentary and documentary practice meant that it became defined either in

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[139] Some of these titles are *Thuis in Zuid-Afrika / At Home in South Africa*; and *Land in the Sun*. The first book is explicitly aimed at Dutch people living in Holland. It provides an 'objective' account of the prosperous lives of Dutch families living in South Africa. It goes as far as providing the address of the South African embassy in Den Haag so that people can contact the Minister of Interior Affairs, Dr. T.E. Donges, should they have any questions about immigrating to South Africa. The second publication is a small hand-book of sorts which tells the story of South Africa "of what we have been doing since our ancestors from Europe brought civilisation to the Dark continent 300 years ago". The dates of publication are not printed in these books. However, it is clear that they are all publications of the State Information Office. *Thuis in Zuid-Afrika/At Home in South Africa* was printed by Cape Times Ltd in Cape Town.

[140] See Volume 1, No. 1/2/3/4/5/ 1954. For example in the May 1954 Vol. 1, No. 2, some of the major articles covered are 'Facets of the race problem' and 'Slum townships debate continues'. In June 1954 Vol.1, No. 3 'Native squatters welcome move to modern township' and 'Separate voter's role proposed for Coloureds'.

[141] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Who is speaking thus? Some questions about documentary photography.' In *Photography at the dock. Essays on photographic history, institutions and practices* (Minneapolis, 1991), 169.

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terms of 'evidence' or in terms of its connection with particular kinds of social investigation or as photographs that are used in a polemical and propagandist context.[142]

The photograph itself has from an early age been understood as being able to record an objective image of events with an assumed truth that painting and drawing could not assert with equal authority.[143] This was part of a deep, and falsely held, notion about the camera's sincerity as an instrument of recording. Clarke suggests that "The trace of the past, the mark of historical significance, clings to such images where the event is privileged as a significant moment of all time. They are literal records of a history otherwise unavailable to us".[144] As documents these photographs, in the NLSA, reveal a world that would otherwise be concealed and to that extent, they are important and suitably 'documentary' photographs.

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The twentieth century saw technical advancements in camera technology, growing numbers of illustrated magazines, increased sophistication of photo-editors and photo-essays, and the public hunger to see images taken from real life. Documentary photography became a tool of education in the hands of a number of photographers who believed that their images could offer people facts about the social world in which they lived. Thus, " the putative power of the camera to be an unmediated form of communication is applied to a genre which is now held to be able to transcend the

[142] Liz Wells (ed), *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York, 1997), 63.
[143] Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford and New York, 1997), 146.
[144] *Ibid*, 146.

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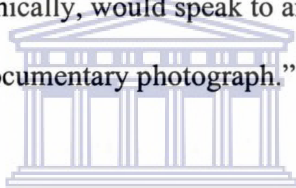
discursive structures of any particular form: imposing rather than creating meaning; disempowering the reader or spectator from acts of interpretation."[145]

In other words, people in these particular documentary photographs become used purely as subjects, appropriated within a symbolic framework of significance as declared and determined by the photographer. This kind of photography declares its meaning in relation to a highly charged and specific set of visual strategies, and codes of reference in which the subject, like the history, is subsumed into a larger symbolic role and meaning. This means that such photographs are carefully constructed to suggest particular sentiments, emotions, and often the photographic space is highly charged and controlled.[146] In such images, "The subject is seen as iconic, so that the ideal documentary image, ironically, would speak to an assumed universal condition. It is part of the myth of the documentary photograph."[147]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The beginnings of a paradigmatic form of documentary photography can be traced to twentieth century America where some of the most definitive documentary photographs were made.[148] Simultaneously many of these photographs reflected the

[145] Liz Wells (ed), *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London and NY, 1997), 78.
[146] An example of a definitive American documentary photograph and photographer who established such terms of reference is Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1934). Lange's response is characteristic of 1930s documentary photography where the photographer establishes the terms of reference in which the subjects are photographed. Lange creates a highly charged emotional text dependant on her use of children and the mother with the mother in the central position, the absences of the father, the direction of the mother's 'look' all add to the emotional and sentimental register through which the image works. As Lange admitted, she wasn't interested in 'her name or her history.' See Therese Thau Heyman 'A Rock or a Line of Unemploymed: Art and Document In Dorothea Lange's Photography' in Dorothea Lange (ed), *American Photographs* (San Francisco, 1994), 59 – 61.
[147] Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford and New York, 1997), 153.
[148] See Graham Clarke (1997) *The Photograph* and Liz Wells (1997) *Photography: A Critical Introduction*.

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problematic nature of the documentary image as a truthful recorder of events. This latter aspect is particularly important to my analysis of the NLSA photographs.

During the 1930s America was experiencing a deep economic and social crisis, the effects of which were felt most deeply by Americans (farmers and workers) living in the rural South and South West. Roosevelt's government set up an agency, the Farm Security Administration (FSA), to provide help to those experiencing the crisis most severely. The FSA's Historical Section employed photographers to record the worst affected areas of the Depression. Photography became an important recorder of extensive social detail because " the social and economic crisis of the Depression had to be represented".[149]

John Roberts suggests that the American Depression in 1929 and the influence of European factographic culture changed the social functions of American photography.[150] He argues that the project of the Farm Security Administration (1935-39) and the work carried out by its photographers, steered documentary photography into an archival role. In other words, the FSA photographers [151] linked American photography, via the work of Lewis Hine, (ironically Hine considered his own photographic practice as social and political work), to an earlier reformist and functionalist description of the photographic project as a continuous, unfolding social archive.

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[149] Liz Wells (ed), *Photography: A Critical Introduction* London and NY, 1997), 81.
[150] John Roberts, *The art of interruption: Realism, photography and the everyday* (Manchester and New York, 1998), 79. By 'European factographic culture' Roberts refers to especially, British, but also German and European traditions of industrial culture and their connection to the photographic document.
[151] Roberts refers here to photographers like Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and Ben Shahn.

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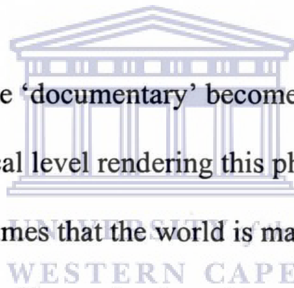
Thus the 'social problem' framework of photographing subjects emerged and the documentary came to carry with it particular political inflections, that of welfare, reform, and social education, that were separate from earlier photographic notions of reportage and recording the American everyday. The example of the FSA highlights firstly, a very different kind of social intervention for photography, and secondly, endorses the documentary as an archival practice. Roberts also emphasises that "the FSA embodies…the unprecedented use of the photographic archive by the state to produce forms of ideological consensus".[152] Hence, the representation of the Depression could be controlled by the state and re-presented to the nation as a national and human tragedy rather than as the failure of the democratic state and its elected officials to protect the interests of the poorer or working classes.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For viewers of these images the 'documentary' becomes equated with a kind of common sense on an ideological level rendering this photographic form inaccessible to critical interrogation. It assumes that the world is made up of facts that can be transmitted to everyone, to all of humanity, in a clear and simple way, free from the perplexing codes by which narratives are organised. The photographic term 'documentary gaze' is derived from this idea that 'the facts speak'.[153] During this period, however, it is predominantly people from the poorer classes who are caught in the 'documentary gaze', that is, who are caught in a way of looking that transforms

[152] John Roberts, *The art of interruption: Realism, photography and the everyday* (Manchester and New York, 1998), 81.
[153] Liz Wells (ed), *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London and NY, 1997), 77.
The term 'gaze' is a familiar term used to describe a particular way of looking at, perceiving and understanding the world. In the context of documentary photography it describes the way in which acts of looking and recording, under certain conditions and in relation to certain groups of people, are not neutral, disinterested or innocent. Instead it contains and expresses relations of power and control in the ways in which certain groups are represented.

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them into facts. As facts the images are not challenged because these facts impose meaning on its subjects at a single click of the shutter.

The post-war period, in America, saw documentary photographers attempt to establish quiet different terms of reference for their work that would reflect the ambiguous status of documentary photography at the time.[154] They emphasised individual approaches and philosophies to their work, were committed to history and difference, to the pluralism of their subjects, to recording the complexity of every event and to incorporating a range of photographic references in their work. Many of the French photographers in Europe, such as Cartier-Bresson, were at the forefront of pushing the documentary approach into new photographic spaces and possible meanings. As a result a few American photographers also produced work that rewrote the terms of reference for American documentary by questioning its basis as a genre.[155]

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In South Africa, from the late 1940s through the 1950s, particular strands of social documentary photography began to emerge in the local *Drum* magazines. *Drum* photographs, in particular, distinguished themselves from other strands of documentary photography by defying the imperialistic conventions of the traditional documentary photography associated with colonialism. The photographs in *Drum* wrote Enwezor, " ...ably penetrate the surface of appearances to probe the psychological states of their subjects as well as their environments."[156]

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[154] Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford and New York, 1997), 160.
[155] John Roberts (1998) *The Art of Interruption,* Graham Clarke (1997) *The Photograph* and Liz Wells (1997) *Photography*.
[156] Okwui Enwezor, 'A critical presence: Drum magazine in context' in Guggenheim Museum, *In/sight. African Photographers, 1940 to the present* (New York, 1996), 185.

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In other words, the photographers attempted to capture not only the changing political and social landscape on the African continent but also the dreams and desires of people experiencing these changes. In terms of the photographs produced "*Drum* was less a voice of political consciousness than it was an entertaining lifestyle magazine covering concerts, singers, nightlife, weddings, gangsters, shebeens, beauty contests, and other social events".[157] At the same time, another strand of documentary photographing is discernible in the work of individual, mostly white, photographers no doubt influenced by the documentary form's development abroad.[158] It was much later, in the 1980s, when documentary photography redefined itself in South Africa and took the form of resistance photography and aligned itself with the broader anti-apartheid struggle.[159]

In the 1950s, in the service of the State Information Office another form of the documentary was being deployed to 'document' the social conditions of black South Africans for a more officious white audience. I suggest that the State Information Office chose to define the documentary along a notion of 'evidence' and this was coupled to the government's reform agenda with regard to coloured people during the 1950s.

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[157] Okwui Enwezor, 'A critical presence: Drum magazine in context' in Guggenheim Museum, *In/sight. African Photographers, 1940 to the present* (New York, 1996), 185.
[158] Here I refer to photographers like Leon Levson and Constance Stuart Larrabee. For a fuller discussion of their work see Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool, *Photography with a difference? Leon Levson's Camera Studies and photographic exhibitions of native life in South Africa, 1947-1950*, Unpublished Paper, South African and Contemporary History Seminar (UWC, 2000) and Christraud M. Geary, *Life Histories of Photographs: Constance Stuart Larrabee's images of South Africa (1936 – 1949)*, Unpublished Conference Paper, Encounters with Photography, (Cape Town 1999)
[159] Farzanah Badsha, 'Aspects of South African documentary photography in the 1980s', Unpublished paper submitted for the Visual History course project (History Department University of the Western Cape, 1999).

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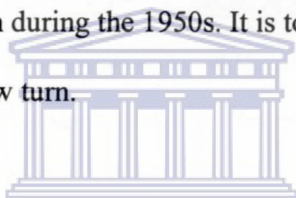
Photographically this meant *recording,* providing *evidence*, and bearing *witness* to the social problem of the country's black population. Walter Benjamin warns that when such photographs are presented as "standard evidence for historical occurrences, … [they] acquire a hidden political significance. They demand a specific approach; free-floating contemplation is not appropriate to them".[160] In other words, such photographs demand action and intervention on the part of the viewer.

The photographs in the NLSA are invaluable (not infallible) documents of a historical process of representation of black people in South Africa. This process involves what is *in* the photograph as well as revealing what is often not *in* the photographs, namely the state's ambiguous and contradictory response to the problem of specifically coloured people in Cape Town during the 1950s. It is to these photographs in the archive of the NLSA that I now turn.



In my analysis, photographs and photography "… are embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns of general behaviour, in forms of transmission and diffusion, and in the pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them".[161] Therefore, the photographs are not unproblematic 'sources' to be used by the historian. Photographic discourse raises the crucial question: what do these photographs do? How have they come to exist in the archive, how do they inflect their context rather than simply reflect it, do the photographs animate meaning or discover it, and where does the viewer have to be positioned in order to accept it as real or true?

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[160] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London, 1999), 220.
[161] John Tagg, quoting Foucalt in *The Burden of Representation* (Minneapolis, 1995), 119.

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Analysing the photographs: 'CT. Coloured people'

Figure 8. CT. Coloured People: living conditions. Squatter Camp 3.9.1949

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Fig. 8 is recorded in the National Library of South Africa under the caption " C.T. Coloured People: living conditions. Squatter's Camp 3.9.1949".[162] The positioning and attire of the two white males suggest that they are government officials. A piece of land covered in bush and sand divides the men and the squatter camp and its invisible inhabitants. It separates them also as those who observe and that which is observed (the landscape). The act of photographing from an elevated angle in this picture fits perfectly into the lines of technological progress, scientific objectivity and reasoned detachment with which the state chose to clothe its power while the image appears to confirm the 'Squatter Camp' as a visible sign of degradation.

[162] NLSA, 2002.

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Fig.8 can also be likened to that of a landscape or panoramic photograph, given the sweep of the sky and mountains in the background and the vast expanse of bush and sand in the foreground. As such it implies that the act of looking belongs to a privileged observer so that in one sense the photographer of the landscape is invariably an outsider.[163] A panoramic view suggests control and possession by the eye, seeing the land from a single viewpoint. This is an appropriate form of depicting this social space as it retains a colonial perspective of looking out over the land, surveying the land and what it offers, namely the 'Squatter Camp', as evidence.

The practice of photographing such a scene from such a vantage point, corresponds to the concern for realism by documenting the social conditions of this space so that it becomes part of a larger recording and revealing of social and economic conditions on the Cape Flats. The photograph thus reveals to an assumed official, privileged, white audience those areas of the city otherwise invisible to white experience. It is through the photographs that they are allowed to see, to bear witness to, a world they would not otherwise see.

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However, this realist context also gives way to an imposed ideal frame of reference: the perspective of the two white officials (in the photograph) and the presumably white photographer. It is a perspective that regards the 'Squatter Camp' and its concomitant connotations of overcrowding, filth and impoverishment as incongruent to a vision of a planned, clean, productive and modern city. This perspective is maintained in the photograph at the expense of the invisibility of the people inhabiting

[163] Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford and London, 1997), 73.

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this space. The squatter camp is privileged by the eye of the camera because of a preconceived idea of what this space might or should be.

For this space and the people occupying it, to be incorporated into the city, the image and the experience of it demands that the state respond to the squatter camp in a very specific way. As a space at the edge of the city, the Cape Flats (as the mountain in the background suggests) accumulated various layers of meaning and representation that shaped the government's response to how it would deal with the problem of the squatter camp. Minkley and Rousseau suggest that the naming of the Cape Flats as 'the Native Crisis' during the 1950s meant that those who occupied it had to be removed and the area be renamed and refashioned in order to belong to the apartheid city in different ways.[164]

The South African Bureau of Racial Affairs (SABRA) and the Broederbond (a secret organisation of the National Party elite) were responsible for formulating state policy to address this 'crisis'.[165] They suggested that the solution to the 'native crisis' lay in the total segregation of africans into various 'nations' with each 'nation' forcibly relocated in fragmented 'homelands'. They also insisted that the same policy be applied to the vast number of coloured people in the Western Cape.

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On the question of separate homelands for africans, the National Party received unequivocal support from its members. However, the Party was divided on the issue

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164 G. Minkley and N. Rousseau, 'The native crisis in Cape Town', SAHS Conference, Rhodes University, June-July 1995.

165 Ian Goldin, *Making Race: The Politics and Economics of coloured identity in South Africa* (South Africa, 1987), 78.

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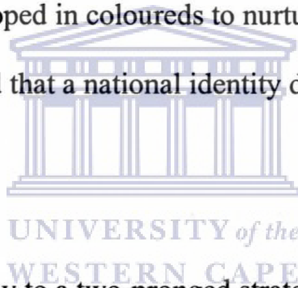
of the 'coloured problem'. Within SABRA this issue led to conflict between Stellenbosch academics, led by Erica Theron, and the Pretoria group, led by W.W. Eiselen. The ambiguity of the Nationalist administration's concept of coloured identity was reflected in the imprecise definition of coloured people in the Population Registration Act of 1950, which declared coloureds to be all those who were not defined as 'White' or 'Native'.[166]

In the Cape, during this time, coloureds posed a unique problem for the white Nationalists. They shared a common language (Afrikaans) and a historical homeland (the rural areas of the Western Cape) and many shared a common ancestry (although this was never publicly admitted).[167] Many Nationalists claimed that a sense of pride and achievement must be developed in coloureds to nurture the growth of a coloured nation (it was widely recognised that a national identity did not yet exist amongst coloureds at this time).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However, these debates gave way to a two-pronged strategy to resolve the 'coloured problem'. The national party, recognising that identification is firmly rooted in material experience, embarked on a plan to restructure the social, political and economic world inhabited by the people they defined as coloured.[168] Interlocking legislation was also introduced which served to segregate coloureds and break their links with people defined as white, native or asian. In 1950 the passing of the

[166] Ian Goldin, *Making Race: The politics and economics of coloured identity in South Africa* (South Africa, 1987), 78.
[167] Gavin Lewis (1987) *Between the Wire and the Wall* and Ian Goldin (1987) *Making Race*
[168] *Ibid*, 79.

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Population Registration Act, the Immorality Amendment Act and the Group Areas Act blocked off all possible avenues of coloured absorption into especially the white but also the african population. It was not long before the apartheid governemtn introduced complete segregation in the Western Cape.

The inhabitants of the Western Cape were forcibly re-populated through the delineation of people into the categories coloured, african, indian and white by the state. Demarcated racially named coloured and indian housing estates became the place of coloured and indian people and named the 'Flats', african spaces became the 'Township' and white spaces, the 'Suburbs'. It somehow escaped the planners of such racialised urban planning that there was really no difference between the 'Township' and the 'Flats'.[169]

Fig. 8.1

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It is significant that during this time the *Cape Standard*, a local newspaper, published an article with a photograph of similar content to Fig.8. In Fig.8.1 the image and the text, in the newspaper, work together to fix the reality of the scene. The reality being that these children, given their surroundings, will never amount to useful citizens. The focus on these coloured children, surrounded by bush, and the boy on the right in particular, enter the figures into a point of a complex typology as to how space (in terms of land) and race is suggestive of the impossibility of citizenship.

[169] Gary Minkley and Nicky Rousseau, 'The native crises in Cape Town', SAHS Conference, Rhodes University, June-July (1995).

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These nine children all appear to be well and sufficiently fed. The big boy on the right, however, had just been discharged from Princess Alice Home and with proper care and attention might fully recover. In his present surroundings it is difficult to believe that he will ever get well and grow up a useful citizen.

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Figure 8.1.

It is not too far-fetched to imagine the photographer arranging the group of children so that the attention of the viewer is directed at the boy on the right who "*might* fully recover…and grow up a useful citizen".[170] Stripped from the complexity of their individual terms of existence, the children become stereotyped and convey a stereotypical representation of their conditions of existence to an audience ignorant of the lives imaged. We are not told the reason why the boy on the right spent time in

[170] *Cape Standard*, 1951, NLSA. My emphasis.

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Princess Alice Home (later called Princess Alice Hospital) and the article implies that he has suffered malnutrition of some sort.

In this photograph, far from being a 'witness' to the scene, the photographer is often a director in the way the scene is depicted. The language in the text of the newspaper is suggestive, "These nine children all *appear* to be well and sufficiently fed. The big boy on the right however..." In the photograph the children are used purely as subjects.[171] They are appropriated within a symbolic framework of significance as declared and determined by the photographer and the writing of the journalist (who may be the same person) and the newspaper editor.

Absent from the newspaper article are the names of the children, moreover they are not photographed in front of their homes but in the centre of a path lined with bush. Within such symbolic registers (poorly dressed children, untamed environment) the image and text (words like 'appear', 'however', 'discharged', 'proper care', 'useful citizen') work together to construct a particular reality. In particular the boy on the right is presented to the camera as a symbol larger than the actuality in which he exists. He is viewed as a subject, as iconic, so that this social documentary image speaks to the assumed universal condition of black people living on the Cape Flats who "In his present surroundings it is difficult to believe that he will ever get well and grow up a useful citizen".[172]

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[171] *Cape Standard*, 1951, NLSA. My emphasis.
[172] *Cape Standard*, 1951, NLSA. My emphasis.

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In contrast to this photograph depicting the social squalor of the squatter camp are the photographs of educational reform mediated through a discourse of social welfare particularly the upliftment of coloured children through education. During the 1950s many influential individuals within the state reasoned that some sort of social reform would promote the development of a coloured middle-class who would stimulate the birth of a coloured nation (or working class) who would work for improvement and upliftment *within* the system of apartheid.[173]

This of course did not happen largely because the system of apartheid was an inherently contradictory one. The vision of a white heartland within which black workers would be drawn from peripheral areas on a purely temporary basis was unsustainable.[174] The biggest problem facing the state in the twentieth century was the process of economic development and the associated socio-cultural change, that is, modernisation and as a consequence, accelerated urbanisation even without the distraction of keeping the black population in their place.

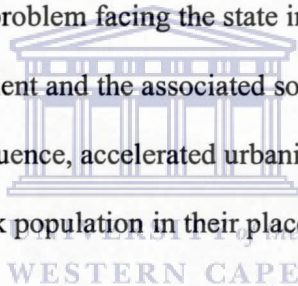
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Fig. 9 and Fig. 9.1

Here the state's documentary approach to coloured people is of a particularly paternalistic and moralistic kind. A number of the images in the archive are about the social conditions of housing and education amongst the coloured population. I have selected two photographs from the NLSA collection on education but there are, no doubt, many such images in the State Information Office archive in Pretoria as well.

[173] Ian Goldin, *Making Race: The Politics and Economics of coloured identity in South Africa* (South Africa, 1987), 79.
[174] David M. Smith (ed), *The Apartheid City and Beyond: urbanization and social change in South Africa* (London, New York and Johannesburg 1992), 7.

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The subjects are, once again, children who are photographed within a frame of care and restraint. They became the objects of immense state attention and through these images are transformed into instruments of knowledge to be used by the State

Information Office, local state planning and administration, and the state controlled media. Photography becomes complicit in this spreading network of knowledge and power. The coloured children as part of this social survey approach are made into objects of study, made docile and forced to yield some essential truth; separated and individuated; subjected and made subject.[175]

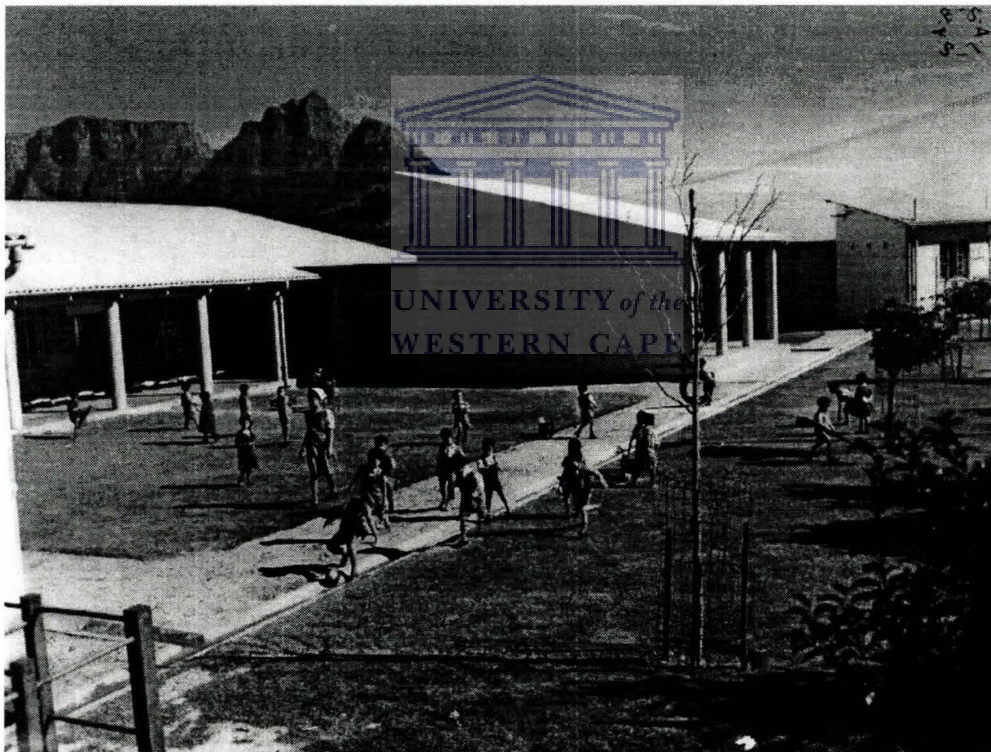

Figure 9. photo no.uc. 360.

[175] John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation* (Minneapolis, 1995), 74.

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Figure 9.1. photo no. uc. 367

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Fig. 9 and Fig. 9.1 were both taken by the State Information Office, which had offices located in Pretoria and Cape Town, as well as internationally. My research in the NLSA photographic archive revealed a vast amount of coloured housing and education photographs (above those of leisure time for example). This suggests that the state especially as well as various reform and philanthropic and missionary institutions identified these as priority areas in the separate development and upliftment of coloured people within the Afrikaner nationalist state.[176]

[176] The Lieberman Institute in Woodstock, Cape Town, was one such philanthropic organisation addressing, in particular, the needs of coloured children.

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Fig. 9 is marked on the back by the caption "photo no.uc. 360" and Fig. 9.1 "photo no. uc. 367".[177] The photographs construct these state-funded nursery schools as 'normal', 'healthy' and 'modern'. By implication the children are constructed as the fortunate beneficiaries of such benevolence. The children are photographed within a framework of social and educational reform with a particularly moral vocabulary, one in which the images of coloured children are exploited for the separatist socio-political intentions of the Nationalists. This is achieved through the photographer who reports visually on the 'healthy' state of coloured education and coloured children.

The captions printed on the back of the original copies and the visual strategy is telling. A specific 'reading' of these images has been constructed for a specific viewer or audience and much of this is produced through the deliberate use of obvious codes and symbols. In Fig. 9, the mountain and open skies provide the backdrop to the "Healthy open-air scene…in Cape Town", the "Modern buildings are a feature of this school" rising above the playground and fixing the "coloured children" firmly within the modern white apartheid city.[178] The visual strategy incorporates space, light and air, in order to efface the state's apartheid intentions. The ancient mountain in the background is perhaps the only witness to these intentions and the futility of the attempts of white settlers to control the land and erase the black population in the Western Cape.

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By means of its magnetic realism photographs offer unique properties of symbolic possession which fed into the need to collect and catalogue the city of Cape Town and

[177] NLSA, 2002.
[178] NLSA, 2002.

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its black inhabitants.[179] The power of the camera to record, to classify and to witness meant that it is entrusted also with delineating social appearance. This power is based on a notion of 'the observable' because the photograph, aesthetically and technically, has a unique and distinctive relation to that which appears in front of the camera. "Modernism aimed to produce a new kind of world and new kinds of human beings to people it" through the eye of the camera.[180]

In Fig.9.1, the tables and chairs, plates of food, uniformed children and assistants, and the white female nun, are the dominant visual codes in the photograph and this works together with the text to create a specific reading of the image. In this 'reading' the racist social reformist and paternalistic intentions of the state come together in the text, "Three meals a day…provided for coloured children" as well as in the image, the obedient children and the white female nuns supervising the scene in the background. Read against Fig.8 and 8.1, the state can make a case for the need for coloured separate development within the white state and simultaneously, for the modernising of the city supported by visual evidence provided by the technology of the camera. Hence, healthy well-fed coloured children will, with the help of the state, possibly become useful citizens.

However, in my reading of the photograph, it is the shoeless feet of one of the children in Fig. 9.1, sitting at the far right table, which subverts the administration's presentation of how well coloured children (and by implication the coloured

[179] Scott McQuire, *Visions of Modernity* (London and California, 1998), 191.
[180] Liz Wells (ed), *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York, 1997), 26.

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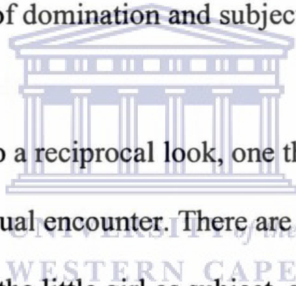
population) are treated by the white apartheid government. It undermines the attempt to present clean images and 'evidence' of the nutritional and educational services they administer because bare black feet have always been considered uncivilised. The State Information photograph is highly styled with staged images of children experiencing the spreading government influence on the progress and development of coloured people. Against this, the little girl, in the left front corner of the photograph, peers directly into the lens of the camera and unsettles this framing in a powerful way through her 'look'. She (the subject) looks at an object (the camera) which is also a subject (the photographer) looking (back) at an object (the little girl). In this exchange of looks the little girl is both "self and other(ed), both speaking and looking subject and spoken and looked at object: …subjected and objectified" and as such, looking entails relationships of power, of domination and subjection.[181]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But the little girl's 'look' is also a reciprocal look, one that engages me and thus I look at the photograph as a mutual encounter. There are three of us involved in the photograph. Myself as subject, the little girl as subject, and both of us as objects of this inquiry, the photograph. When I face her image, her look, I am reminded of James Baldwin who wrote more than thirty years ago, about being called a nigger: " If I am not what I've been told I am, then it means that *you're* not what you thought *you* were *either*! And that is the crisis".[182] Confronting this crisis in the image involves divesting of the stereotypes and clichés, concerning coloured people, which are an important part of the process of representation.[183]

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[181] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1997), 9.
[182] James Baldwin 'A Talk to Teachers' (1963) in Lucy R. Lippard (ed), *Partial Recall. Photographs of Native North Americans* (New York, 1992), 17.
[183] Lucy R. Lippard (ed), *Partial Recall. Photographs of Native North Americans* (New York, 1992), 17.

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Fig. 9 and Fig. 9.1 can be read as providing 'evidence' for the state of its reformist agenda in relation to coloured people in the Western Cape, albeit a contradictory one. Indeed, this agenda is socio-politically, economically and culturally underpinned by the state policy of apartheid. These concerns are particularly reflected in Fig. 9 and Fig.9.1, both are representations of nursery schools but it appears that coloured people are included in the social landscape of Cape Town only within state controlled settings, such as the nursery school in this example. The text accompanying Fig. 9.1 is instructive, the children are "...coloured children of working mothers" who are allowed in the city by virtue of their mothers labour power and "return home in the evening".[184] But where is home? Where do the mothers work? And where are their attitudes in this representation?

When such images become accumulated and amassed in the archives of the state and the library they amount to new re-presentations of certain groups within society and society at large. Within the practice of photography these discourses overlap and coincide. But more important is the site where they worked together and on each other, the site of the construction of separate 'nations'. In this context knowledge and truth, of which the photographs become guardians, become inseparable from the attempts to overpower and control the black population. But the photographs are also eloquent witnesses to the contradictory nature of the state in its responses to the 'native crisis'.

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[184] NLSA, 2002.

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The photographs are suggestive of photography's complicity, in the hands of the State Information Office photographers, in delineating, recording and classifying South Africa's black population into particular types or categories of human beings. Sekula has referred elsewhere to this process as the 'mapping uses' of photography.[185] Tagg describes such documentary photographs as part of a process of examination which depends on procedures of objectification and subjection, in which the lives of ordinary people are transformed into accounts, 'C.T. Coloured people: education', into writing and/or into photographs.[186]

These photographs, some of which are now in the South African National library, belong to a complex set of discourses whose origins and limits I can only begin to explore within the space of this chapter. I suggest that they were part of a system of 'truth' that exercised a particular historical power that depended on the convergence of a number of historical conditions in the 1950s. The place where that 'truth' spoke and its power evoked was the state and its agencies, as well as local urban planning and government administration departments. I suggest that what these photographs had to do was make present the position of coloured people inside and outside the white city. In doing so many factors came into play, class interests, financial gain, concerns for hygiene, commercial and industrial anxieties, racism and many more as apartheid would prove.

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[185] Alan Sekula quoted in Liz Wells (ed), *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York, 1997), 33.
[186] John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation* (Minneapolis, 1995), 96.

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> "Like the state, the camera is never neutral. The representations it produced are highly coded, and the power it wields is never its own. As a means of record, it arrives on the scene vested with a particular authority to arrest, picture and transform daily life; a power to see and record; a power of surveillance that effects a complete reversal of the political axis of representation…This is not the power of the camera but the power of the apparatuses of the local state which deploy it and guarantee the authority of the images it constructs to stand as evidence and register a truth". [187]

The framing of coloured people through the technology of the camera was used to map a racial identity on the one hand, in one domain, and civil identity, in the other. This strategy could readily be applied in the controlled environments of local state planning and administration departments and agencies. However, in its formation the camera has played a duplicitous role in the 1950s. While modernity and industrialisation promised white economic prosperity and the possibility of political and cultural redefinition, it did so on the back of the social dispossession and cultural dislocation of South Africa's black population. If the camera opened up new possibilities to the apartheid state it also offered the dispossessed and displaced a powerful means to overcome distance and absence and the possibility of stitching together the pieces which life under apartheid split apart.

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It is to these possibilities that I turn in the following chapter where I explore further the contents of the NLSA photographic archive in order to challenge the documentary authority of the photographs and the archive more rigorously.

[187] John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation* (Minneapolis, 1995), 64.

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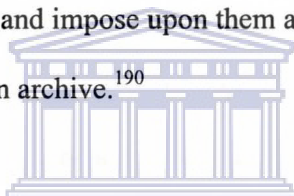
CHAPTER FOUR

The Personal Photograph: Outside the Family Album

> "The truth of history is performed when we take the risk of making history rather than assuming it to belong only to the past"[188]

The National Library of South Africa Archive

Like the South African National Gallery the National Library of South Africa (NLSA) is a key institution shaping the ways in which we view and understand photographs.[189] Alan Sekula argues that common to most archives (museum archives, commercial archives, family albums, libraries and so forth) is that they group together images of a very different kind and impose upon them a homogeneity that is a product of their very existence within an archive.[190]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This unity of the archive becomes imposed by ownership of the objects themselves and by the principles of classification and organisation by which the images are structured. Therefore, "…in an archive, the possibility of meaning is 'liberated' from the actual contingencies of use. But this liberation is also a loss, an *abstraction* from the complexity and richness of use, a loss of context".[191]

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[188] Elizabeth Edwards quoting Walter Benjamin in, *Raw Histories* (Oxford and New York, 2001), 212.
[189] See discussion in thesis Chapter Two. See also Jo Spence and Jo Stanley (1995) *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression* and Patricia Davison, 'Museums and the reshaping of memory' in Nuttal et al, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*
[190] Alan Sekula, 'Reading and Archive' in Brian Wallis and Marcia Tucker (eds), *Blasted Allegories* (Cambridge, MA 1991).
[191] *Ibid*, 116.

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The work of Hartmann et al and Elizabeth Edwards remind us that the archive is not only a place of disciplinary regulation, completeness and homogeneity.[192] It is also a "place of potential, open to new historical frames of references where photographs can interrupt dominant narratives".[193] It is thus possible to consider the archive as an active and dynamic space in which alternative voices emerge to destabilise and displace its power and authority.

In the NLSA, the idea of a literal and objective record of the past, of coloured social history, is a limited illusion. This illusion is undermined firstly because the archive disregards the whole cultural, political and social background against which these photographs were made, that is, it disregards the context within which the images were made. Secondly, at every level the photographic images, and accompanying photographic practices (personal and/or documentary), are themselves fraught with ambiguity and contradiction that undermine the belief in the transparency of the photograph and its authoritative position as 'documentary' within in the archive.

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In this chapter I argue that certain photographic practices and photographs, by coloured people themselves or by popular studio photographers, have made it possible to consider the archive and coloured social history as fluid and heterogeneous and thus open to multiple potential meanings. These images dissolve the distinctions between the subject and the viewer, and we as viewers are in the scene, entering it in terms of the life pictured. For once, the detail and the clutter of bodies retain their own

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[192] Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories* (Oxford and New York, 2001), 4. See also Hartmann, Hayes and Silvester (eds), *The Colonising Camera: Photographs in the Making of Namibian History* (Cape Town, Windhoek and Athens, 1998) 2, 8-9.
[193] Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories* (Oxford and New York, 2001), 4.

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histories and private terms of reference. The image, so to speak, becomes placed back into the world of possible meanings.

Two photographs from the NLSA archive form the focal point of my investigation. These photographs, in particular, allow me to question the power and authority of the archive and its coloured social history narrative. Here I contest the 'documentary' authority of the photographs in the archive and the latter's use as *images of*, as evidence of, coloured identity and history. Simultaneously I suggest that the photographs in the archive create a dynamic tension between the two photographic forms I have been discussing, that is, personal and documentary photographs. It is this photographic tension that enables an opening up of the complex mechanisms of the archive and creates the possibility of renegotiating meaning in the photographs.

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It is not only in family and personal photographs that the work of contestation occurs *as in* meta-photographic texts that place these photographs into narrative contexts. "Only in the context of this meta-photographic textuality and in this self-conscious contextuality…" can pictures disrupt conventional narratives about coloured people/identity and its representations, breaking the hold of a conventional and immutable documentary gaze.[194] By focusing on spectatorship in this chapter I also ask that we consider the perspectives from which we look as against the perspectives from which we are seen.

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[194] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, 1997), 8. The term gaze is used to describe a particular way of looking at, perceiving and understanding the world. In this context it is used to describe a way of looking in which power is invested with the photographer or viewer and not with the subjects in the photograph.

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The Personal and the Documentary: Border Tensions

My analysis and interpretation of the photographs involve engaging a series of complex readings relating to the image and its subjects. Victor Burgin emphasises that, " The intelligibility of the photograph is no simple thing; photographs are texts inscribed in terms of what may be called 'photographic discourse', but this discourse, like any other, engages discourses beyond itself, the 'photographic text', like any other, is the site of a complex intertextuality, an overlapping series of previous texts 'taken for granted' at a particular cultural and historical conjuncture".[195]

This statement is central to how I 'read' the photographs and underlines the problematic nature of the photographic image as both an arbiter of meaning and a trace of the 'real'. The photograph both mirrors and creates a discourse with the world, and is never, despite its natural way with things, a neutral representation. Full of meanings, the photograph is a dense text in which is written the terms of reference by which an ideology both constructs meaning and reflects that meaning as a stamp of power and authority.[196] Thus, to read a photograph is to enter into a series of relationships that are 'hidden', so to speak, by the illusory power of the image before our eyes. Against this background it is important to ask what lies behind the photograph and how do we undo the smooth surface of the image, its "pure representations", as Rugg describes it?[197]

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[195] Victor Burgin in Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford and New York, 1997), 27.
[196] Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford and New York, 1997), 27.
[197] Linda Haverty Rugg, *Picturing Ourselves* (Chicago, 1997), 234.

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Following Jo Spence, I consider the photographs as 'raw material' to work on and also as Edwards suggests, to think with.[198] The photographs in the 'Lives of Colour' exhibition and the NLSA collection, as 'raw material', have been especially eloquent and compliant as images throughout my work on them. I critically adopt this approach to move beyond debates about good or bad images and instead push against the boundaries of the images in ways that question our ways of looking at the photographs.[199]

Therefore I want to move beyond simply decoding the images to reveal a single truth and this involves re-negotiating the meaning of the images to reveal the richness of interpretation. The need for historiographical contemplation on the relationship between photographs and the way in which pasts are made in both inscription and archiving are crucial to this process. For Edwards this means that photographs "...are as much 'to think with' as they are empirical, evidential inscriptions" and thus in exploring the details in photographs one moves beyond surface descriptions, beyond the original context, beyond disciplinary actions and overarching explanatory systems.[200]

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Spence's concept also bestows a certain agency, not only to the photographs but also to those working on photographs because "Th[e] work is about having different ways of storytelling and becoming the subjects of our own histories rather than the objects of somebody else's."[201] In so doing, a context for transformation is created in which

[198] Jo Spence, *Cultural Sniping* (London and New York, 1995), 140.
[199] bell hooks, *Black Looks: race and representation* (Boston, MA, 1992), 4.
[200] Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories* (Oxford and New York, 2001), 2.
[201] Jo Spence, *Cultural Sniping* (London and New York, 1995), 140.

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there is a space for revitalising our own histories and self-definitions, in ways that are in our own interests.

In the process of reading these specific documentary photographs I have also drawn on a notion of 'looking', as an interpretive strategy, for undoing the "pure representations" of the images. By looking I do not mean to suggest a passive act of recognition but a critical notion of looking drawn from the work of theorists such as Annette Kuhn, Marianne Hirsch, Jo Spence and bell hooks.[202] From this I suggest that on the one level, the concept is one of standpoint, of political perspective, of desiring to 'look' in ways that move against the grain. It is a way of seeing black people that makes possible an integrity of being that can subvert the power and authority of the archive, of the documentary, of coloured social history and identity.

On the other level, it recognises the multiple looks circulating in the production, reading and description of photographs. In the act of photographing, a subject looks at a photographer who looks back at the subject, at the same 'time' I look at and read the photographs which inform my experience, and hence my description of the images. In such a network of looking, drawn from much theoretical work on personal photography, relations among individuals are consolidated and create an unmistakable sense of mutual recognition which, I argue, is not confined to members of the same family only. It is through such a critical concept of looking that I have been able to gain access to the images, to go beyond the surface of the image, and describe, through words, its cultural depth as an inscription of history, the past and identity.

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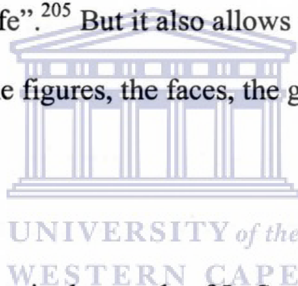
In fig.10, particularly, it is the narrative and the description offered by my grandmother, while walking through my neighbourhood, which makes it possible for me to transform and translate her memory into vision, into a photograph and hence an "image-text".[203] Hirsch argues that a verbal overlay hides the image from our view even while disclosing its structure and effect: "the multiplicity and mutuality of looking, the relational network that composes all … pictures and the stab of recognition that selects this one among a plurality of choices".[204] It is this structure and effect, (discussed by Hirsch in relation to family photography), that I explore in relation to these documentary photographs. In this way, writing the images "undoes the objectification of the still photograph and thereby takes it out of the realm of stasis, immobility, mortification – what Barthes calls 'flat death' – into fluidity, movement and thus, finally, life".[205] But it also allows *me* to participate materially, culturally, and politically in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions.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The challenge is whether or not, in the words of Jo Spence, the camera and the photograph can be used for their 'unfixing' rather than their 'fixing' qualities.[206] By replacing the regime of the gaze with the field of the look, drawn from Hirsch's theoretical work on personal photographs, I want to move away from the form of the

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[202] Marianne Hirsch (1997) *Family Frames*, Annette Kuhn (1995) *Family Secrets*, Jo Spence and Jo Stanley (1995) *Cultural Sniping* and bell hooks (1992) *Black Looks*.
[203] This term is drawn from the work of Hirsch and Kuhn. It refers to the intricate way in which an image becomes transformed and translated through narrative and description and in writing. Through this process the flat, still surface of the photograph becomes disturbed and opens up the image to multiple interpretations.
[204] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, 1997), 3.
[205] *Ibid*, 4.
[206] Jo Spence, *Cultural Sniping* (London and New York, 1995), 27.

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documentary as truthful, as evidence, to suggest a different level of mediation underlying the photographs in the NLSA collection.

Therefore, I deliberately and critically mix the idea of the documentary with that of personal photography to demand a reading of the images that firstly goes beyond their location within a single photographic genre, and secondly that does not offer a single truth. Instead, I hope to reveal the humanity of the subjects and the variety of looks through which they might be seen, for a multiplicity of interpretations and hence, to reveal photographs that record more than the transparent world of facts.

These photographs de-center the NLSA picture collection by showing the contingency of each image, its situatedness and its relativity. They leave the viewer in an uncomfortable viewing position. But it is from such a position that the gaze and ideology operating in the State Information Office photographs (discussed in the previous chapter) and the privileged foundation and position of 'the documentary' and 'the archive' can be challenged and reversed.

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My particular interest in working across the boundaries defining the personal and the documentary is in photographic 'border' constructions that combine the visual and the verbal, the private and the public, theory and practice, especially in the sites where these apparent opposites overlap and interfere with each other.[207] The conventions of both forms of photography (which are often taken for granted) create the possibility of investigating their borders along which each can be opened, subverted, and altered by

[207] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York, 1989), 119.

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the other in new ways. Therefore I suggest that, in these photographs, the site of interaction (the site at which my work on the images takes place) is between the tensions and paradoxes produced along the borders of the two photographic forms. Simultaneously it is also the site of interaction between the connected and intersecting borders of 'traditional' discourses and disciplines.[208]

The photographs: CT. Coloured People

Fig. 10 and fig. 11 are part of a picture collection donated to the NLSA by Mrs Shulamit Rozowsky in 1999 after the death of her father. Rozowsky is the daughter of Gerson Ginsburg, (1912 – 1998), who came to South Africa, Cape Town, in 1929 from Dvinsk, Poland and remained here all his life. Ginsburg's work involved the copying of photographs for studios such as the famous Van Kalker studio in Woodstock. He also worked as a professional photographer for Bridge studios in Salt River during the 1940s. He mostly took photographs of black people living in District Six, Kensington and Hout Bay from the 1940s onward. Some of his photographs have also been donated to the District Six museum in Cape Town.[209]

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It is obvious that Mrs Rozowsky believes her father's pictures have a certain historical value in terms of what it contributes to an understanding of coloured social history during the 1950s. She is not wrong in her belief. The photographs can be read archivally as traces or evidence of coloured social history but it is also possible to *read* the images against the grain and not exclusively in terms of their complicity with power and domination (as my analysis of fig.8 and 9 suggest in the previous chapter).

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[208] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York, 1989), 119-124.
[209] Information provided by the NLSA in a file accompanying some the photographer's images. NLSA, 2002.

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Such an analysis is made possible by the inherent contradictions and ambiguity in documentary photography as a practice and in the contradictory nature of the SANL photographic archive. These tensions open up new possibilities for rethinking our notions of 'the documentary' and 'the archive' and their relationship to memory and the past.

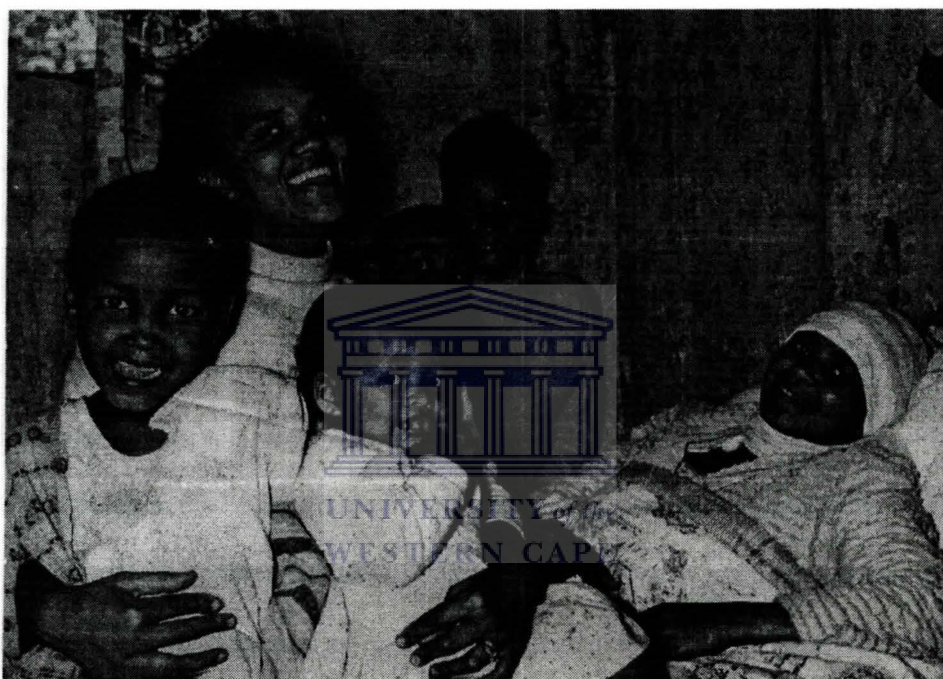

Figure 10. CT. Coloured People: portraits

This is a very old photograph, evident from the creases in the photographic paper, which found its way to Gerson Ginsburg to be copied and enlarged. Upon entering the library's collection it became catalogued as a portrait depicting coloured people. It is a happy and poignant image and conforms to some of the conventions of personal photographs. It was taken within the domestic space, a bedroom, the subjects who are women and children look straight into the lens smiling for the photographer.

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But the photograph also rests outside the conventions of family photography in that photographs of what appears to be a social visit to an ill but recovering family member, friend or neighbour are not part of the content that family albums usually constitute. If they are, extra time and care is taken into making the image 'presentable'. In this image, the young girl on the left side of the frame reveals the informal and perhaps spontaneous photographic moment; her cardigan is unbuttoned and her left shoulder is uncovered, her left arm only reaching midway through the sleeve of the cardigan. There was clearly no time to rearrange her appearance for the photograph, possibly she had been playing outside and entered the room just moments before the picture was taken.

It appears that the women and children are connected in some way but it is not apparent whether or not they are family, friends, or perhaps close neighbours. We can also assume, from the close proximity of the subjects to the camera and because the picture is taken in the bedroom, that the photographer is someone familiar or known to the subjects. The bedroom looks rather small and the walls are lined with flowery wallpaper that has started peeling in places. Perhaps it is autumn or early winter or simply a windy day in Cape Town because everyone in the photograph is warmly dressed. It may also be that the structure of the house is of a low quality and offers little protection from the wind or cold weather. The smiling woman in the left front of the photograph wears a wedding set on her left hand, the only piece of jewellery visible on her person as well as in the entire picture.

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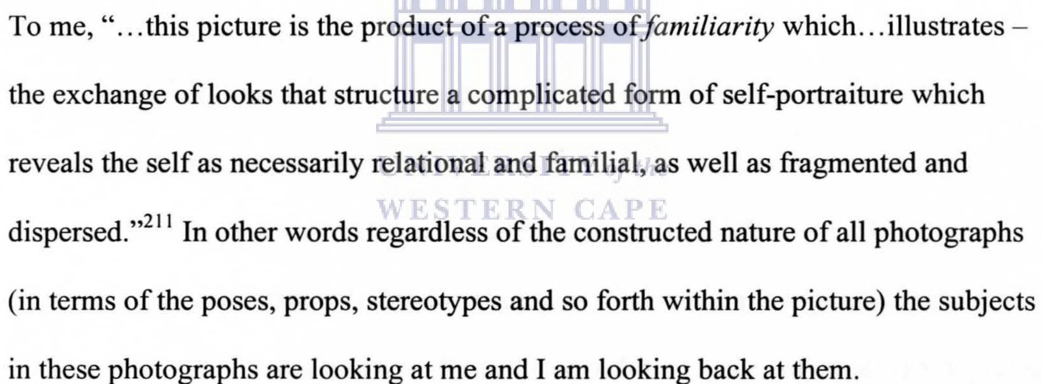
The subjects look into the lens, it is a look that engages me and invites, from me, a return look that is identificatory and affiliatory.[210] What is in this picture that touches me so strongly that I claim a familiar relation to it even though I don't actually recognise or belong to the individuals represented? Here the image of the woman holding the two young girls in the foreground on the left side of the frame with the two young boys in the background arrests me. The way in which the young girls are placed in the foreground and the young boys in the background of the picture resonates with my own family and social history. I recognise myself in the photograph and in its history. A recognition that unmasks the photograph's deep connection to me over and above the great temporal, spatial, and cultural distances that otherwise separate me from it.

To me, "…this picture is the product of a process of *familiarity* which…illustrates – the exchange of looks that structure a complicated form of self-portraiture which reveals the self as necessarily relational and familial, as well as fragmented and dispersed."[211] In other words regardless of the constructed nature of all photographs (in terms of the poses, props, stereotypes and so forth within the picture) the subjects in these photographs are looking at me and I am looking back at them.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It is from the perspective of recognising the reciprocity in the process of looking at history through images that I can consider my own personal photographs, that I can consider how this photograph foregrounds the class, race and gendered nature of my

[210] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, 1997), 73.
[211] *Ibid*, 83.

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own (and our collective) family structures. I *see* my mother, my sister, myself, my two brothers in the image, and in father's absence the male children invariably in the background too. I *see* and experience our collective crises as family, as black people, within the realm of this image.

I am tied to the image by a look that transcends my lack of visual recognition of the subjects in the photograph. But it is through this 'look' that I claim these subjects as part of the story through which I construct myself. "This inclusion is an act of adoption, an act of faith determined by an idea: an image of family: it is not an act of recognition. It is fundamentally an interpretive and narrative gesture, a fabrication out of available pieces that acknowledges the fragmentary nature of the autobiographical act and its ambiguous relationship to [photographic] reference".[212]

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This is especially true of fig. 11 in which the photograph and my grandmother's oral history prove that images that appear anonymous, meaningless or even funny (because we cannot identify them) are integral pieces of *a* life story, *a* life history, full of meaning and resonance. Using the strategies of personal photography that depend on a narrative act of adoption transforms these ordinary pieces of paper (photographs) into telling details connecting lives and stories across generations.

[212] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, 1997), 83.

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Figure 11. CT. Coloured People: social life / dancing and music

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There is no doubt that the people in this photograph are dancing; we see bodies in flexible positions, fingers clicking to the beat, a woman throwing back her head smiling at the camera while dancing with a friend with whom she perhaps also shares a cigarette. The two women who dominate the image are not dressed to the nines as a formal dance place would require. The window in the background, with the curtains tied to the sides, suggests that this is an informal setting. The young child in the foreground of the picture suggests this too. They are dressed rather plainly in patterned dresses of a similar cloth although slightly different in style. The woman on the right wears a scarf around her head, perhaps not enough time or money to have her hair done up or perhaps it is the fashion of the day. The woman on the left has curled her hair in the front and the sides are pinned down. Only the woman on the left wears a single piece of jewellery, a thin bracelet on her right arm.

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Again it is the woman in the left side of the photograph whose look engages me when I select this photograph from amongst many in the NLSA picture collection. This photograph invoked much ambivalence in me - my passionate interest and desire in the subject matter of the photograph and my inevitable distance and lack of understanding. But inserted within my grandmother's narrative, the photograph offered me a representational structure adequate to the task of memory and intersected with my own notions of private and public history.

While walking through the neighbourhood in which I live, Wynberg, my grandmother in one of her most vivid adult memories recognises a street and recalls moments in the late 1950s when she made regular visits to this part of town.[213] For most of her young and adult life my grandmother lived and worked in the white suburbs of Kenilworth (and later Steurhof and Diep River) as a domestic worker for various wealthy white families. On weekends, which were usually half or full days off work, she would sometimes meet up with her friends and together they would go to what was called the 'Hops' in Wynberg. These were what I think of today as house parties, where black people could come together and dance, socialise with friends and basically have some fun times together.

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She told me that the Hops were popular because they could not afford to walk into any dance club or hall and even if they could, the best places were whites only. Seeing this photograph I can picture my grandmother at the Hops. I imagine her meeting her girlfriends, sharing with them dreams and ideas, dancing to the tunes of the time. Later under a bright night sky they walk back to the bus stop in little groups, laughing

[213] Personal conversation with my grandmother, Edna Peterson, Wynberg, Cape Town, 2002.

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nostalgically at the memories of an afternoon already beginning to fade in the return to the world of work.

I am fascinated with this interpretation (I am sure there are many) of the image, by the weight of its narrative possibilities in relation to its own unassuming character. There is nothing in the photograph that indicates its connection to my grandmother's experience or to a collective experience (as suggested by the caption in the archive: 'Coloured people: social life/ dancing and music'[214]). However, this photograph may be one place where individual experience is unearthed even though the SANL collection aspires to a collective identity and unified history of coloured social life. I do not know much more about the context of this photograph yet I can read and interpret it by recognising my grandmother in it, by "...an affiliative look through which [I] am sutured into the image and through which [I] adopt the image into [my] own familial narrative".[215] It is a look that moves me because of our history, my grandmother's memories, and because of the way my own sense of particularity is structured.

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Therefore, what I see when I look at this photograph is not what you see when you look at it, only my look is affiliative, only my look enters and extends the network of looks that have constructed the image in the first place. Other readings of the image may well be the result of such an affiliative look also. However, this is only possible when the viewer critically adopts a way of looking that dares to transform images,

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[214] NLSA photographic archives 2002. Caption by the NLSA.
[215] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, 1997), 93.

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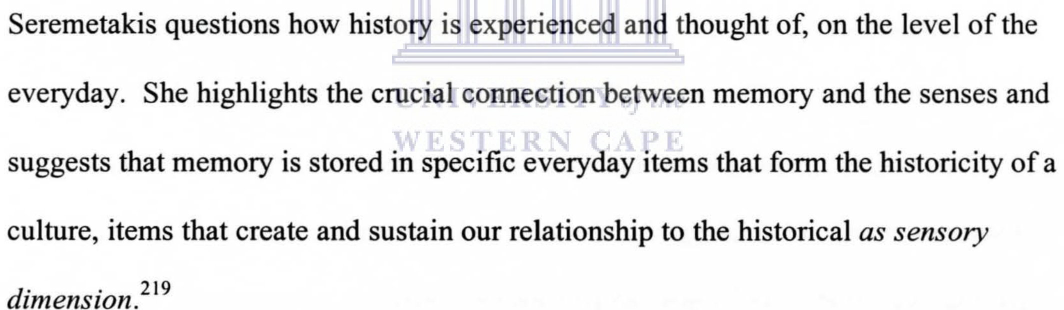
shift paradigms, change perspectives and ways of looking at coloured people that does not impose a monolithic and totalising gaze.[216]

There is another crucial dimension to my participation in fig. 10 and fig. 11. It concerns the play between the senses and memory brought about by the ways in which the generic experience of everyday life is transmuted into photographs.[217] My grandmother did not actually see the photograph when she shared with me her memory of going to the Hops in Wynberg; it was only much later that I showed it to her.[218] However, at the time of her telling it to me, her story became a moment of vision; it became the photograph that I had been working on. This raised a crucial question in my mind; how did this experience with my grandmother undo the stillness of the photograph for me?



Seremetakis questions how history is experienced and thought of, on the level of the everyday. She highlights the crucial connection between memory and the senses and suggests that memory is stored in specific everyday items that form the historicity of a culture, items that create and sustain our relationship to the historical *as sensory dimension*.[219]

[216] bell hooks, *Black Looks: race and representation* (Boston, MA, 1992).
[217] Nadia Seremetakis (ed), *The senses still. Perception and memory as material culture in modernity* (Chicago, 1994), 3.
[218] My grandmother responded to the photograph with a smile. It was not the Hops of her memory but she could identify with the dancing women and share in the memory of her own dancing days, now long gone with the coming of age and arthritic joints.
[219] Nadia Seremetakis (ed), *The senses still. Perception and memory as material culture in modernity* (Chicago, 1994), 3. My emphasis.

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This sensory dimension can be triggered by substances, spaces, and times to produce what Seremetakis calls "stillness" or "resting point[s]".[220] For Seremetakis, "*Stillness* is the moment when the buried, the discarded, and the forgotten escape to the social surface of awareness like life-supporting oxygen. It is the moment of exit from historical dust".[221] What lies beneath the social surface are the "...entanglements of everyday material experience" which are hidden by a social structure based on dominant cultural codes that prescribe zones of inadmissible social experience and cancelled meaning – a structure of silence.[222]

Simultaneously, however, social formation and transformation occurs unevenly. In this unevenness, "There are islands of historicity, discontinuous punctures...[that] emancipate sensory experience from the social structure of silence".[223] In the material culture of historicity there are moments when what was previously imperceptible was in fact always there as an element of the material culture of the unconscious. Seremetakis does not explicitly refer to photographs as an article of material culture but her analysis is pertinent to photographs also. Indeed, she describes the sensory dimension of historicity and politics in visual terms, suggesting "It can be a moment of vision".[224] Photographs, as Elizabeth Edwards has argued elsewhere, are material objects and taking Seremetakis's argument further, are material objects imbued with sensory memory also (one need only think of the ways in which people look at photographs, talk about photographs, touch, tear and even smell photographs).

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[220] Nadia Seremetakis (ed), *The senses still. Perception and memory as material culture in modernity* (Chicago, 1994), 12- 13.
[221] *Ibid*, 12.
[222] *Ibid*, 12.
[223] *Ibid*, 13.
[224] *Ibid*, 14.

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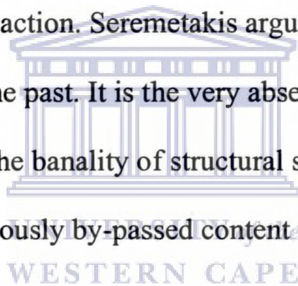
Therefore, I suggest that photographs, like things, spaces, gestures, and tales, also signify the perceptual capacity for what Seremetakis calls "elemental historical creation".[225]

In that moment of what Seremetakis refers to as stillness when my grandmother shares her memories with me and I translate this memory visually, "…an entire past sensory landscape was translated into a present act; and in the course of doing so, one sense educated and enculturated the other. This was an involuntary process, a moment of sensory stasis where one sense became the meta-narrative of another through memory".[226] In this process my grandmother's story became a meta-commentary on the photograph through her memory, and my absence of such a memory that resulted in a shift to the sensory and to action. Seremetakis argues that "…these moments release hidden substances of the past. It is the very absence of referents, surfaces and textures that lifts them out of the banality of structural silence imposed by a culture or social order and allows a previously by-passed content to be released as history".[227]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Seremetakis argues that this is also a political moment where the political is experienced on the level of the senses and history and politics converge giving rise to a new or alternative perceptual landscape.[228] In terms of my 'knowledge' of coloured social history and my grandmother's narrative, the photograph embodied the invisible past of my grandmother's life (and by implication mine) and came to represent for me a way of rendering her present in my absence. It is an imaginary historicisation of her

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[225] Nadia Seremetakis (ed), *The senses still. Perception and memory as material culture in modernity* (Chicago, 1994), 13.
[226] *Ibid*, 17.
[227] *Ibid*, 17.
[228] *Ibid*, 14.

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life-path and an event that is inaccessible to me as direct experience. The object, that is the photograph, through my grandmother's narrative is thus invested with sensory memory that allows a previously hidden content to emerge as history, "The object invested with sensory memory speaks".[229]

For me, there is indeed a sensory connection between myself and the photograph that completes the photograph in an unexpected and nonprescribed fashion precisely because I am also the receiver of the unintended historical after-effects of the photograph's presence.[230] The power and intensity of such a historicisation is overwhelming.

The encounter between myself and these photographs also raise a crucial question about the nature of the connection between photographs, memory and oral history. The combination of these elements, as my analysis of fig. 11 suggests, is capable of powerfully retemporalising and respatialising the photograph when the photo-object engages with the viewer. As emphasised in chapter one this characteristic of the photograph contributes powerfully to the authority of the image. The viewer is in control of this temporal relationship when s/he looks at the photograph and invests it with memory and narrative interlaced with private fantasy, fractured readings and public history.[231] The photograph also becomes respatialised. For the viewer this

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[229] Nadia Seremetakis (ed), *The senses still. Perception and memory as material culture in modernity* (Chicago, 1994), 13.
[230] *Ibid*, 11.
[231] See thesis Chapter One, 14.

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means that the photograph is transformed into an imaginative and ambiguous space within which s/he can glimpse possible pasts.

Hayes et al suggest that " When the photograph moves out of its stored archive space, it is as if energy is released."[232] Indeed, the photographs, fig. 10 and fig. 11, have been brought into new proximity with me, the viewer, becoming resocialised at a particular moment in time through a dynamic and uneven process. My analysis of the photographs in the NLSA reveal that "Memory is not a passive storage system. Nor is the archive, and neither memory nor the archive should be fetishised for the imputed truths they carry: memory's emotional/popular truth, on the one hand, and the archive's objective bureaucratic truth on the other hand."[233]

This chapter highlights the complexity of the photograph and its mechanisms. Edwards suggests that photographs are "...more ambiguously dynamic as they function in the real world, and within daily experience, not merely in some imagined or reified theoretical world."[234] Kracauer emphasises that the close-up view, because of its richness of detail, allows us to understand that which evades broader more comprehensive and totalising views.[235]

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[232] Hayes, Silvester and Hartmann 'Picturing the Past in Namibia: The visual archive and its energies' in Carolyn Hamilton et al, *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town 2002), 104.
[233] *Ibid,* 123.
[234] Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories* (Oxford and New York, 2001), 3.
[235] The term totalising, draws on the work of Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York, 1989), 62. It points to the process by which historians (and writers across the social sciences) render their materials coherent, continuous, unified, but always with an eye to the control and mastery of those materials, even at the risk of doing violence to them. It is this link to power, as well as process, that the adjective 'totalising' is meant to suggest.

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Therefore, "Photographs, those visual incisions through time and space, constitute such 'little narratives' yet at the same time are constituted by and are constitutive of the 'grand', or at least 'larger' narratives".[236] In historiography also many of the 'grand' narratives of science, progress and politics have lost their credibility and 'little' narratives, situated in the experience of individuals, have re-emerged. Consequently, I have looked at specific photographs, specific acts of photographic involvement, collecting, displaying and intervening. In my analysis I have drawn on, and across, the boundaries that define documentary and personal photography.

In considering the NLSA collection as an album in itself, not one organised chronologically from birth to old age, each photograph offers a different view, a different exposure, to a similar series of issues and questions. "The family album, shaped through its own particular perspective, is the most basic of image texts, and the novels, exhibits, archives, we analyse are in some sense published and aestheticised family albums".[237] Hence my concern with modes of representing coloured social history and identity during the 1950s in the NLSA is simultaneously concerned with both personal and documentary photography. In the context of the NLSA the photographs, regardless of genre, are themselves contradictory and paradoxical but in the archive they are presented in the bare style of documentary realism which as a representational strategy conceals the ideological and representational politics surrounding the images.

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[236] Siegfied Kracauer quoted in Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories* (Oxford and New York, 2001), 3.
[237] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, 1997), 11.

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Hayes et al emphasise that photographs lend themselves to fixed and open readings, therefore, "Meaning is derived from the reading of visual imagery at many levels, one of which is almost purely sensate and subjective, harking back to an embodied, nonlinguistic experience of being which is a fundament of perception. This innate ability to lend cohesion to the world of appearances also gives rise to what has been termed elsewhere the optical or ocular unconscious, where meaning, language and vision become conflated."[238]

Re-engaging and repositioning these archival, documentary, photographs within this thesis (in many ways an album also) opens them up to the multiple debates concerning visual communication, the past, ideology, evidence, truth and reality as well as to multiple interpretations and readings.

Photographs challenge traditional forms of narrative by calling into question essential assumptions about the nature of the past, of memory, of reference, time and selfhood. In this relationship identity is inextricably bound to the image.[239] The photographs are not simply about *'CT. Coloured people: portraits'* or *'CT. Coloured people: social life/ dancing and music'*, as the archival captions suggests. Neither are the images simply evidence in terms of the documentary – what people wore and how they lived. Instead the photographs in fig. 10 and fig.11 are the site of a fluid and dynamic re-negotiation of the past, and thus they are ineffably of the past and of the present.[240]

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[238] Hayes et al 'Picturing the Past in Namibia: The visual archive and its energies' in Carolyn Hamilton et al, *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town 2002), 49.
[239] See Jo Spence and Jo Stanley, *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression* (London, 1995) and bell hooks, *Black Looks: race and representation* (Boston, MA,1992).
[240] Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories* (Oxford and New York, 2001), 231.

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I know that when I look at these photographs it resonates with something inside of me. Fig. 10 and fig. 11 that I love so much are both about poor black women in seemingly 'ordinary' and 'everyday' settings, but " When I face this image, this black look something in me is shattered. I have to pick up the bits and pieces of myself and start all over again – transformed by the image".[241]

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[241] bell hooks, *Black Looks: race and representation* (Boston, MA, 1992), 7.

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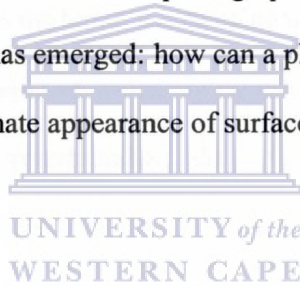
CONCLUSION

Entangled images, entangled histories

> " If the past becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history, then all photographs will re-acquire a living context instead of being arrested moments" [242]

In this thesis I have explored the complex role of the photograph in representing coloured social and cultural history in Cape Town during the 1950s. In my analysis the ambiguous nature of the photograph, the relationship between personal and documentary photography, the public context of the South African National Gallery and the National Library of South Africa photographic archive have been crucial. From this a basic question has emerged: how can a photograph with its apparently unimportant and indiscriminate appearance of surface be meaningful in historical terms?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The starting point as always is with the nature of the photograph because this is the site of its ambiguity. Firstly, a photograph is a fragment of time and space dislocated from the flow of life from which it was distracted. All photographs represent past time and stand in the present as a link to the past, that is, photographs bring the past into the present moment, the "there-then becomes the here-now".[243] This temporal relationship is crucial to both photography and historiography and " It is like having

[242] John Berger (1980) quoted in Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 13.
[243] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London, 1984), 44.

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two streams of time running together, the past and the present, with the sudden insight that memory is part of the present."[244]

As a result the photograph in many ways denies history, that is, it denies an objective, disinterested recording of the past. Photographs juxtapose what we think we know of the past (from official archival sources and personal memories) with an alternate representation that questions the epistemological nature of historical knowledge. The ambiguous and discontinuous nature of photographs have thus become instruments of historical analysis and simultaneously a result of that analysis, that is, a result of challenging the notion of continuity in history.

For historians who adhere to the latter notion of history, photographs lack constraining narratives and contain too many meanings because of their inherent ambiguity, randomness and minute indexicality. Kracauer suggests that "In a photograph a person's history is buried as if under a layer of snow".[245] For Kracauer photographs are incredibly resistant because like history they do not lend themselves to being dealt with in any definite way and "In order for history to present itself, the mere surface coherence of the photograph must be destroyed".[246] In other words the spatial appearance of the object, the 'moment in time' has to be destroyed to open up the image to the near infinite possibility of new meanings it contains. Thus "Through the photograph's points of fracture, the rawness, we can begin to register the

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[244] Hayes et al, 'Picturing the Past in Namibia: The visual archive and its energies' revised' in Carolyn Hamilton et al, *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town, 2002).
[245] Siegfried Kracauer, 'Photography', translated by Thomas Y. Levin. (Originally published in German in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 28 October 1927). In *Critical Enquiry* 19 (Spring 1993), 426.
[246] *Ibid*, 427.

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possibility of a history that is no longer founded on traditional models of experience and reference."[247]

Secondly, the nature of the photograph also places upon it the burden of revealing truth. Photography is grounded in the real world regardless of its coded character. Because a photograph is the product of light reflected off an object onto paper and chemically inscribed a powerful relationship exists between the photograph and the referent. We expect and believe the photograph to be real and truthful and unmediated in its creation and interpretation. As I have discussed in chapter one, photographic inscription is not unmediated but culturally circumscribed by ideas about what is significant at any given time and context. Edwards emphasises that this inscription itself becomes the first act of interpretation in any historical source and that the photograph as a unique historical source is no exception. But because of the relationship between the photograph and the real "…we are lured into a pattern of expectancy inappropriate to the true nature of a medium, which is simultaneously fragmented, unarticulated, and resistant, yet challenging."[248]

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Furthermore photographs are active in private and public spaces or fulfil personal and collective functions. How photographs are read as historical sources also depends on the ways in which photographs move from one space to the other. For example, family photographs are read in ways connecting the images to the lives they are

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[247] Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories* (Oxford and New York, 2001), 6.
[248] *Ibid*, 9.

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extracted from. In this 'private' reading meaning and memory are anchored to the images more closely. When photographs are read as 'public', as in the 'Lives of Colour' exhibition and the national library archive, the photographs are removed from the 'private' context and meaning becomes free-floating, externally generated and read in terms of symbol and metaphor. Therefore "…meanings are not necessarily in the photographs themselves but in their suggestive appearances within different contexts, as people and things decontextualised within them are transposed within the culture of viewing."[249]

The nature of the photograph is intimately connected to the relationship between photography and history also. Both photography and history constitute fragmented, selective, illustrative and suggestive relations rather than a fixed and coherent argument. Both are concerned with the partial nature of historical inscription and understanding, the ultimate unknowability in holistic terms, despite the appearance of knowability upon which photographic hopes are placed. " If neither can state ultimate truths, they can both reveal 'a peculiar openness to the visible world in ways that permit access to new and surprising aspects'".[250]

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Walter Benjamin constantly engaged photography as a metaphor and allegory for history and memory and conceptualised history in the language of photography. For Benjamin memory is broken down into images and not stories. Therefore he saw the

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[249] Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories* (Oxford and New York, 2001), 8.
[250] *Ibid*, 10.

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role of the historian and the photographer as similar; to set in focus both the jagged pieces and the materiality of the past as manifestations of unique experience which can reach into the future.

Edwards takes this further and argues that photographs are unique historical sources because they can be integrated with other ways of articulating the past and because they can suggest an *experience* of the past.[251] Therefore, photographs "…have the potential for performing histories in ways in which perhaps we least expect, when they are used not merely as evidential tools but as tools with which to think through the nature of historical experience."[252]

In this thesis the relationship between photography, oral history and textual representation lend further support to this assertion. Including all these historical sources within my historiographical frame highlights the dynamic relationship between them, as I suggest in chapter four. In this relationship these forms converge and create a space characterised by mutual influence and exchange.

At the same time positioning the photograph at the centre of this relationship challenges the nature of historical sources and their constructions of the past as well as showing that all historical evidence is, as Edwards suggests, already an act of interpretation with a unique social biography. Secondly, it highlights the unique relationship between photographs, as historical sources, and viewers of photographs

[251] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photography and the performance of history', *Kronos*, November, 2001, 22. For an interesting elaboration of the ways in which the past can be experienced in the present through the photograph see also Hayes et al 'Picturing the Past' in Carolyn Hamilton et al, *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town, 2002), 121.
[252] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photography and the performance of history', *Kronos*, November, 2001, 29.

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in mediating the past. Photographs offer viewers a powerful route to memory and the past because of the very nature of the photograph and the direct sensory impact images have on viewers. Meanings are created when the photo-object and the viewer are engaged in social interaction with each other. In this process "Photographs are painful, not only in their content matter sometimes but sometimes in their truth-telling, their performance of histories, their reality has a painfulness – a rawness."[253]

The dynamic relation between photographs and viewers does not end at the door of the gallery or the archive. In this thesis I move beyond the surface level of appearances in the exhibition and the NLSA photographic archive so that " if it can be recognised that histories are cultural projects embodying interests and narrative styles, the preoccupation with the transcendent reality of the archives and documents should give way to dispute about forms of argument and interpretation".[254] This is because the photograph has the potential for critique in particularly those spaces to whose representational practices it has so potently contributed to, such as the family album, the gallery and the archive.

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My intention has been to point to the differentiated and sometimes fortuitous nature of the photographs constituting the 'Lives of Colour' exhibition and the NLSA archive as a series of micro-intentions, as much as a universalising desire to represent an unchanging narrative on coloured people. In so doing I point to the complex and blurred discourses that constitute personal and documentary photography within systems of visual culture. In this process I suggest that we avoid an overly monolithic

[253] Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histo*ries (Oxford and New York, 2001), 6.

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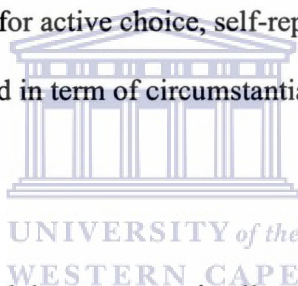
conception of photographic realism to suggest that not all realisms necessarily play into the hands of authority be it that of the family album archivist, the state or the archive. Instead some of this will take ambiguous forms as visual documents which require that we act in ways which cancel out authoritative images and texts. Indeed within the public space of the gallery and the archive, photographs and photographic re-engagement are also potentially sites of self-reflexive critique.

I have argued that the photographs, the exhibition and the archive are in themselves cultural objects with their own unique social biographies and reconceptualisations. Inserted within this thesis the "…photographs are about empowerment, repossession and a different and perhaps, contesting articulation of history which …[which] refers to a general human capacity for active choice, self-representation and deployment of strategies, always historicised in term of circumstantial and structural possibilities and constraints."[255]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All photographs, personal and documentary, in all contexts, private and public have the potential to enrich the nature of historical experience. Photography remains a powerful recorder of social space and this means that all photographs carry with them this characteristic of the medium; they are evidentiary inscriptions. But, more significantly, photographs can connect the viewer to memory and history in an unpredicted, direct and dynamic way because they "reconstitute the complex spaces

[254] Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histo*ries (Oxford and New York, 2001), 5.
[255] *Ibid*, 12.

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which make up and are made up by history".[256] When photographs are used as tools to think through historical experience, it is the latter characteristic of the image in particular which open up a space to articulate other histories and historical experiences outside of dominant historical methods.

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[256] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Essay' in Jorma Puranen, *Imaginary Homecoming* (Oulu, 1999), 61

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

'Lives of Colour' Exhibition

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Fig. 3. Emigration

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Fig. 5.1. In-Laws prefer Gentlemen

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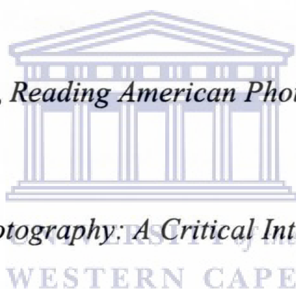
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