Listening and reading: Leon Levson's 'native studies' photographs in the anti-apartheid Mayibuye archives

By Gcotyelwa Mashiqa

Supervisors: Dr Marijke Du Toit and Dr Phindezwa Mnyaka (Department of History)

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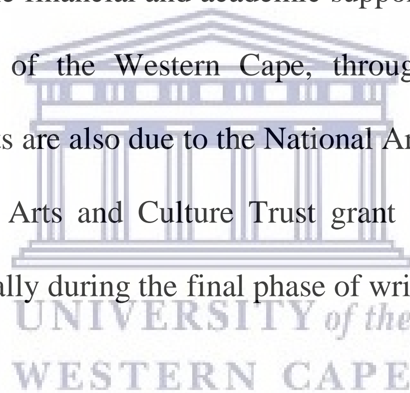

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Lastly but not least, I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memory of my grandmother, Nonkundlayakhe Eliza Mashiqa, who has carried me from the beginning of time. Ndiyabulela MaXaba.

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ABSTRACT

The thesis focuses on Leon Levson's 'native study' photographs, taken in the 1940s in the rural areas of Transkei and Bechuanaland. These photographs are housed at the UWC-Robben Island Museum-Mayibuye Archives as part of the International Defence Aid Fund (IDAF) photography collection. I am interested in the *archival glitch* of the 'native study' as located at an anti-apartheid archive and how Leon Levson has been situated at the centre of the South African social documentary photography tradition in this archive. Levson's desire was to produce a pictorial testimony of 'natives'. This thesis aims to understand what the 'native study' photographs reveal about the making of post-colonial and post-apartheid visual archives whilst considering 'listening to images' as an alternative framework for opening a space to question and challenge the very production of such archives. Importantly, I challenge the colonial and ethnographic lens that has been used to theorise and historicize this collection. I borrow from scholars whose practices are embedded in decoloniality and thus enable me to apply different knowledge systems that facilitate both unlearning and learning.

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Keywords: Listening to images, photography, native studies, post-apartheid archives, social documentary, Leon Levson

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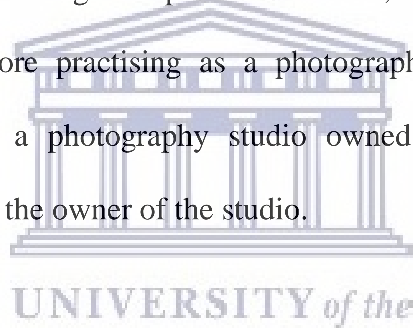
INTRODUCTION

This thesis was sparked by an essay that I wrote for an MA module in Visual History in the first semester of 2019. I then encountered Leon Levson's photographs at the UWC-Robben Island Museum-Mayibuye Archives through further research. The Mayibuye Centre was established in 1992. It consists of "multimedia collections depicting multiple facets of resistance" to the "freedom struggle waged against apartheid from within and outside the borders of South Africa."[1] Leon Levson was born in 1883 in Rogovo, Lithuania. He came to South Africa with his parents, arriving in Cape Town in 1902, then moved to Johannesburg in 1908.[2] He was a painter before practising as a photographer. He gained photographic experience while working in a photography studio owned by the Duffus brothers in Johannesburg and later became the owner of the studio.



In one of the very few studies of Leon Levson's photographs that has hitherto been published, Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool suggest that his interest in art and photography was characterised by on-going tension around the status, meaning, and content of photography in relation to art.[3] It was this tension that attracted my interest as I wondered about the contextual and historical framing and aesthetic quality of his 'native study' photographs. Mayibuye archivist Graham Goddard gave me a quick tour of the space while relaying the origin of the collections in the Mayibuye Archives in 2019. I discovered that the archive

[1] https://mayibuyearchives.org/ (accessed Feb. 14, 2021).
[2] Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool, 'Photography with a Difference: Leon Levson's Camera Studies and Photographic Exhibitions in South Africa, 1947-50' in L. Witz, G. Minkley, and C. Rassool, eds., *Unsettled History: Making South African Public Pasts* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 193.
[3] Ibid., 193.

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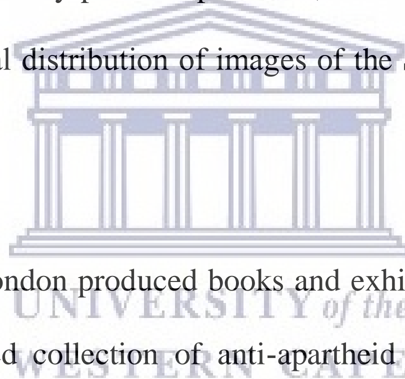
resulted from collaborations between the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF), South African anti-apartheid organisations and Afrapix photographers.[4]

Goddard explained that the Mayibuye Archives are primarily made up of the IDAF donation. He also shed light on the challenges of looking after this collection which itself is made up of different sources, with some photographic work having no provenance and creators' biographies unknown. IDAF was established in 1956 in Johannesburg, but because of its anti-apartheid activism, it was banned and set up offices in London. Its aim "was to work towards a peaceful solution to the problem of apartheid through raising and distributing funds to victims of apartheid laws, especially political prisoners, and their families".[5] IDAF played a central role in "the international distribution of images of the South African situation during the last years of apartheid."[6]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The London-based IDAF in London produced books and exhibitions for their anti-apartheid advocacy. Within this archived collection of anti-apartheid images, I came across Leon Levson's 'native study' photographs. His work was different from what I expected to find at Mayibuye Archives, given the dominance in its collections of apartheid-era social documentary photography. Whether ordinary black men at work or rural women in their traditional outfits, they have been photographed with dignity. There is a specific aesthetic that runs through Levson's photographs, in terms of their visual qualities: lighting, composition, exposure.

[4] Patricia Hayes, 'Photographic Publics and Photographic Desires in 1980s South Africa', *Photographies* 10, 3 (2017), 306.
[5] South African History Online https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/international-defence-and-aid-fund-idaf (accessed Feb. 14, 2019).
[6] Darren Newbury, *Defiant Images: Photography and Apartheid in South Africa* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2009), 10.

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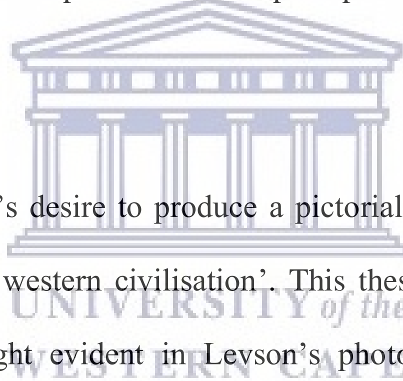
I was also drawn to their 'not belonging' effect because of the history that informed their creation, against the backdrop of the history of activism that constituted IDAF and Mayibuye photography collection. My interest in thinking about these photographs, therefore, is to consider their anomalous presence in their specific archival location and the effects and affects that are produced by this location. I consider the archival glitch of their presence in a collection of visual images that was explicitly created to constitute a post-apartheid archive of 'struggle' photography. In addition, what do his 'native study' photographs reveal about the 'making' of post-colonial and post-apartheid visual archives? How were his images and exhibitions constructed to show and speak to Levson's intentions? How does Levson's collection create tensions and disrupt our cerebral perception of the archive as an orderly structure?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I investigate this photographer's desire to produce a pictorial testimony of 'natives' before their culture is influenced by 'western civilisation'. This thesis therefore also explores the theoretical and historical weight evident in Levson's photographs. I ask whether these photographs by Levson could be thought of as an embodiment of colonial photography, that imagined the African subject as the specimen in some exotic investigation or racial experiment.[7]

This thesis however also addresses and examines not only the visual aspects of the images but also other ways that a photograph can tell history.[8] I have sought to surface alternative histories and voices of the photographed that have been silenced since the dominant theories focus on the 'visuality' of the image. I investigate how photographs and their subjects can

[7] Newbury, *Defiant Images,* 3.
[8] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographs and the Sound of History', *Visual Anthropology Review* 21, 1-2 (2005), 27.

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'tell' history when one considers more than the visual aspects of the image, so as to surface alternative histories and voices of the photographed that may indeed be silenced through an approach that focuses on the 'visuality' of the image.

i. Photographs of 'native study' at an anti-apartheid archive

The photographs by Leon Levson that were selected for this thesis were taken in the 1940s in the rural areas of Bechuanaland and the Transkei. The photographs depict women adorned in traditional outfits of their 'ethnic' affiliation. The subjects look comfortable and seemingly performed for the camera. The composition of images is carefully constructed, making the subjects the main focus, while huts or trees in the background are out of focus and almost vanishing. The aesthetic quality of these photographs sets them apart from the other 'documentary' photographs in the Mayibuye Archive Collections.

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Levson's 'native study' photographs can easily be associated with pictorialism. As a photographic genre, pictorialism concerns itself with the aesthetics of the image, while documentary photography is characterised by an element of chance and spontaneity. Particularly in the South African context, the latter is associated with apartheid and telling a brutal story through images.[9] My thesis aims to investigate the inclusion of these photographs in the Mayibuye Archive Collections and what 'hidden' histories might be generated and unearthed when read along with their archival context.

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[9] See Phindi Mnyaka, 'From Salons to the Native reserve: Reformation the 'Native Question' through Pictorial Photography in 1950s South Africa', in *Social Dynamics*, 40, 1 (2014), 106-121. Also, S. Michelle Smith, 'The Politics of Pictorialism: Another Look at F. Holland Day', in *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen,* (London: Duke Press University, 2013).

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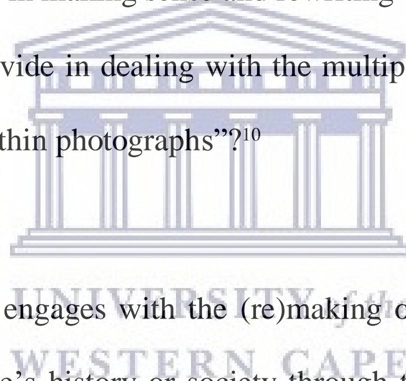
As such, I aim to reveal that Levson's excessive documentation of 'native' Africans in Southern Africa was partly underscored by the forms of extraction and plunder that were fixed features in the system of racial capitalism under colonialism. Like Minkley and Rassool, I call for a careful re-evaluation, rethinking Levson's status that frames his photographic collection as part of the visual weapon against apartheid. However, the core of my arguments is derived and anchored by photography theories that are foregrounded in decolonial scholarship. I have relied on this scholarship as I answer the following questions:

- Is the photographed subject's agency inscribed in the image during the photographic ritual in Leon Levson's 'native study' and documentary photography?
- What role do photographs play in making sense and rewriting of the past?
- What approaches can one "provide in dealing with the multiplicity of possibilities, histories and counter histories lodged within photographs"?[10]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Minkley and Rassool's article engages with the (re)making of the Mayibuye Archives and perhaps the remaking of people's history or society through the archive as they interrogate and examine the archival processes of Mayibuye with a strong focus on the photography collection. Concerning the photographs of Levson, they question the emergence and placement of Levson's photographs at the "heart of social documentary photography".[11] They consider how this was done through an exhibition held at the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town in 1996, *Margins to Mainstream*, and through the placement of Levson collection in the Mayibuye Centre.[12] Their article discusses the argument made by Gordon Metz, the former curator of visual collections at the Mayibuye Archive Collections and curator of *Margins to Mainstream*, of how the South African documentary tradition was

[10] Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 12.
[11] Minkley and Rassool, 'Photography with a Difference', 186.
[12] Ibid., 184.

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defined during and after apartheid. According to Minkley and Rassool this exhibition situated Leon Levson at the core of the social documentary photography tradition in South Africa, a photography tradition which was used to fight against and expose the oppressive laws instituted by the apartheid government. Importantly the exhibition also situated Mayibuye Archives as the centre of the social documentary photography genre.[13]

For Metz, the roots, and characteristics of the South African social documentary photographic tradition in the 1940s and early 1950s included Black photographers providing Black images and voice. The exhibition also included Eli Weinberg as a resistance photographer documenting the major campaigns, events, and leaders of resistance.[14] Metz considered Levson to be "possibly the first South African social documentary photographer of note" because he set himself a "specific task of documenting and interpreting African life."[15] Minkley and Rassool further critically discuss the Levson collection's locality in the Mayibuye Archives. This "places Levson's work within the trajectory of social realist historiography" so that his "photographs come to stand for the black experience."[16]

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His photographs do not necessarily require captions or explanations and are viewed "...with the trust of objectivity and reality across lines of subject, location and event."[17] Minkley and Rassool discuss the 'native study' photographs with a strong focus on images of migrant men. My own focus is on the images of women in a rural setting of Transkei and Bechaunaland. One of the main arguments highlighted by Minkley and Rassool which this thesis also reiterates is that Levson's photographs were a part of the politics and agenda of its

[13] Ibid.,186.
[14] Ibid.,188.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., 192.
[17] Ibid.

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time. They served as the backdrop and set for policy discussions around the 'native question' by scholars and government officials.[18] Minkley and Rassool's arguments showed that images cannot be read outside the context of their time since photographs can be used as "historical sources that document the past."[19] At the same time because of photographs' malleability and ambiguity, they can be used to service any narrative.

This can be quickly gleaned from the exhibition the *Margins to Mainstream,* in which Levson's photographs were juxtaposed and framed within resistance and social documentary photography. The documentary photograph is a term that is contested and ambivalent in the history of photography. The contention comes from different ways disciplines use and consider the image as truth - as evidence of something that took place. At the same time, other arguments could point to the image as merely a fragment, a glimpse into the moment captured but which does not tell the whole truth or event. In South Africa, the documentary photograph is often accorded that status because it depicts what was captured by the camera, resulting in an image recording a moment during a photographic event. This results in a photograph being termed documentary because "the image documents something."[20]

Social documentary photography in the South African context was used as a tool for social justice to expose the atrocities of the apartheid regime. Heidi Saayman Hattingh highlights this role of documentary photography in South Africa. She writes that documentary photography was first used "as a visual weapon in the fight for democracy and secondly in their contemporary role as a collective visual memory articulating public histories of

[18]Ibid., 203.
[19] Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 6.
[20] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Who is speaking thus?' Some Questions about Documentary Photography', in Photography *at the Dock. Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 167.

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apartheid."[21] In *Defiant Images*, Darren Newbury follows the arguments made by Minkley and Rassool about the inclusion of Levson's photographs in the Mayibuye Archive Collection and identified as a social documentary photographer. However, Newbury does not completely agree with Minkley and Rassool's analyses of Levson's work within the context of Mayibuye Archives and its foregrounding histories.

Even though he compares and highlights similarities between Levson's photographic style and that of Constance Stuart Larrabee and Alfred Duggan-Cronin, he is apprehensive about situating Levson's work in the 'native study' genre. Instead, he focuses more on Levson's biography and the aesthetic of his work, his wife Freda Levson, and their friend and IDAF founder Father Canon L John Collins. Newbury indicates that Levson's wife, Freda, had a strong influence and had orchestrated that Levson's photographic collection ends up in the IDAF collection and, subsequently, at Mayibuye Archives. Newbury's chapter on Levson reveals a complex relationship between 'native studies' photography and social documentary in South Africa.[22] The documentary photography genre, according to Newbury, is associated internationally with social reform movements.[23] The complex relationship might be that Levson's photographs from the 1930s to 1950s have similar aesthetic qualities to pictorial photography. The pictorial photographs were produced to be circulated and exhibited as 'works of art.' Levson's 'native study' photographs were circulated and formed part of exhibitions that he organised himself. His photographs taken in Johannesburg, of *Mine Hostels/Compounds,* can easily be situated within the social documentary photography. Having said this, most of his images in the collection have strong aesthetic qualities.

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[21] Heidi Saayman Hattingh, 'African Social Documentary Photography: Original Versus Contemporary Visual Communication Roles' (PhD thesis, University of Free State, 2011), 2.
[22] Saayman Hattingh, 'African Social Documentary Photography', 18.
[23] Darren Newbury, 'An African Pageant: Between Native Studies and Social Documentary', in *Defiant Images: Photography and Apartheid in South Africa* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2009), 18.

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Moreover, Newbury unpacks the ambiguities and contradictions in Levson's photography, as his photographs moved between "'native studies' and reformist style documentation of urban squalor."[24] However, Newbury does not resolve the complexities around the viewing and the histories associated with Levson's photographs. Instead, the reader is left to conclude whether he belongs in the social documentary or 'native study' movement.

ii. Reading and listening to photographs

My work seeks to expand on the above analyses by proposing an alternative approach of reading Levson's photographs aimed at attempting to 'lift up' the photographs from the political weight of their original intent and current location. Tina Campt's concept of 'listening to images' engages photographs through sound; she advocates that we "think and theorize images through their sonic qualities."[25] Therefore this puts a responsibility on the interpretive community to search for what has been excluded and what lies outside the frame. This evokes the desire for the unknowable, which is heightened by the photograph's frame, producing a fracture that makes us intensely aware of what lies beyond it.[26] In many ways, such photographs prove that they have a life of their own that exceeds the creator's intention, "appearing in unpredictable ways … across time and space."[27]

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[24] Newbury, *Defiant Images*, 67.
[25] Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2017), 24.
[26] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Introduction: Observation from the Coal-face' in *Raw Histories. Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001), 19.
[27] Leah Dickerman, David Joselit and Mignon Nixon, 'Afrotropes: A Conversation with Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson', in *October* 162, 6 (2017), 6.

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The term 'afrotrope' as discussed by Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson suggest new possibilities for analysis of Levson's photographs. Copeland and Thompson describe 'afrotrope' as an alternative theory for understanding and reading "how images behave under existing conditions."[28] Copeland and Thompson argue that afrotropes are also about the "visualisation of what is known but cannot be spoken and about that which cannot be seen".[29] The definition and framework of the afrotrope borrow from the linguistic concept of Mikhail Bakhtin's 'chronotope'.[30] Its attention is focused on the visual rather than the literary modes of a performative utterance.[31] It is about the materiality of an image, its formal qualities: "reproducibility and seriality… its viewing context; its life in oral histories or sonic registers… produce an afrotrope."[32] The afrotropic study of an image reveals the overlooked aspects of photographs while increasing the understanding of the visual itself.[33] It aims to 're-write' the biography of photographs (and the photographed) and to read them beyond their ethnographic meaning. Photographs are also considered as archival fragments. Since photographs may reveal something knowable, they cannot state the 'ultimate truths' nor give a whole picture of the photographic context. However, they reveal a "peculiar openness to the visible world in ways that permit access to new and surprising aspects."[34]

Edwards argues that if we only perceive photographs as expressing loss and the past, we repeat or restate the tropes of a disappeared 'authentic'. Roland Barthes on the other hand argues about the inability to fix images in the past. In what he termed as the here-now and

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[28] Ibid, 10.
[29] Dickerman, Joselit and Nixon, 'Afrotropes: A Conversation with Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson', 8.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 29.
[34] Ibid., 10.

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the there-then, Barthes argues that images bring the past and the future into the present.[35] Photographs record the burning desire to have an official record and wield ethnographic meanings. That is, "the photographic image, then, can be likened to the anthropological space in which to observe and study the way members and institutions of a society reflect their relationship to it."[36]

This reflects photography's participation in colonial expansion, in which "colonial-era photographs have continued to act as sites for the construction of personal, 'ethnic' and national identities."[37] All this activity is facilitated by the photographic archives and the capacity of photographs to generate new meanings beyond their ostensible historical purposes.[38] As we re-engage and re-read photographs, we realise that they are not just about loss. Instead, photographs stimulate renewal, empowerment and contestation. Photographs simultaneously acknowledge or symbolise loss and cultural dispossession, because of the environment in which they were archived and preserved.[39] To consider the photographed persons, this thesis looks into the notion of 'presence', described by Elizabeth Edwards as the very thing embedded in the "materiality of the photographs, into its chemistry, now its electronic bytes."[40] The 'presence' of the photograph provides us with the "possibility of witnessing a world we no longer have access to."[41] This world can sometimes be about relocating and reconnecting the archive with the people or place the images were produced.

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[35] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflection on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 76.
[36] Okwui Enwezor, 'Archive fever: Photography between History and the Monument', *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York/Göttingen: International Center of Photography/Steidl, 2008), 13.
[37] Richard Vokes, *Photography in Africa: Ethnographic Perspectives* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2012), 13.
[38] Darren Newbury, 'Relocating the Heseltine Photographic Collection at District Six Museum', in *African Arts* 48, 2 (2015), 65.
[39] Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 11.
[40] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Anthropology and Photography: A Long History of Knowledge and Affect', *Photographies*, 8, 3 (2015), 240.
[41] Ludmilla Bîrsan, 'Susan Sontag's Aesthetics of Photography' (PhD thesis, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, 2015), 5.

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Newbury states that reconnection may extend beyond sites, facilitate intersection with other memories and histories, and open the collection to new forms of agency and imagination.[42] Therefore, we can no longer ignore or resort to the notion of the 'unspeakable' when the photograph's 'rawness' or 'truth-telling' nature confronts us with what is uncomfortable.

The idea of the 'unspeakable' is taken from Georges Didi-Huberman in *Images In Spite of All*. This was one of the responses from historians reacting to the four images released to the public about Auschwitz. Didi-Huberman responded by calling the historians lazy and unimaginative as they based their view on the illegible aspects of the fours images that surfaced from Auschwitz. An SS soldier took them as an attempt to show the outside world the genocide of the Jewish people carried by the Nazi soldiers or regime. The images were not adequately composed; the camera's aperture was not set to let in the correct amount of light correctly. Therefore, this resulted in blurry and overexposed images, meaning that images were too dark in certain areas for a viewer to comprehend what is depicted or captured by the camera entirely. The book addresses the dismissive response that these images received from art historians and curators because of their unintelligibility. About not having 'enough' information to tell the story of Auschwitz. Didi-Huberman argues against this lazy thinking and urges us to read even the dark areas of the photographs as that widen our point of view and "restore to the images the anthropological element that makes them work."[43]

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[42] Darren Newbury, 'Relocating the Heseltine Photographic Collection at District Six Museum', *African Arts*, 48, 2 (2015), 65.
[43] George Didi-Huberman, *Images in spite of all. Four photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), 41.

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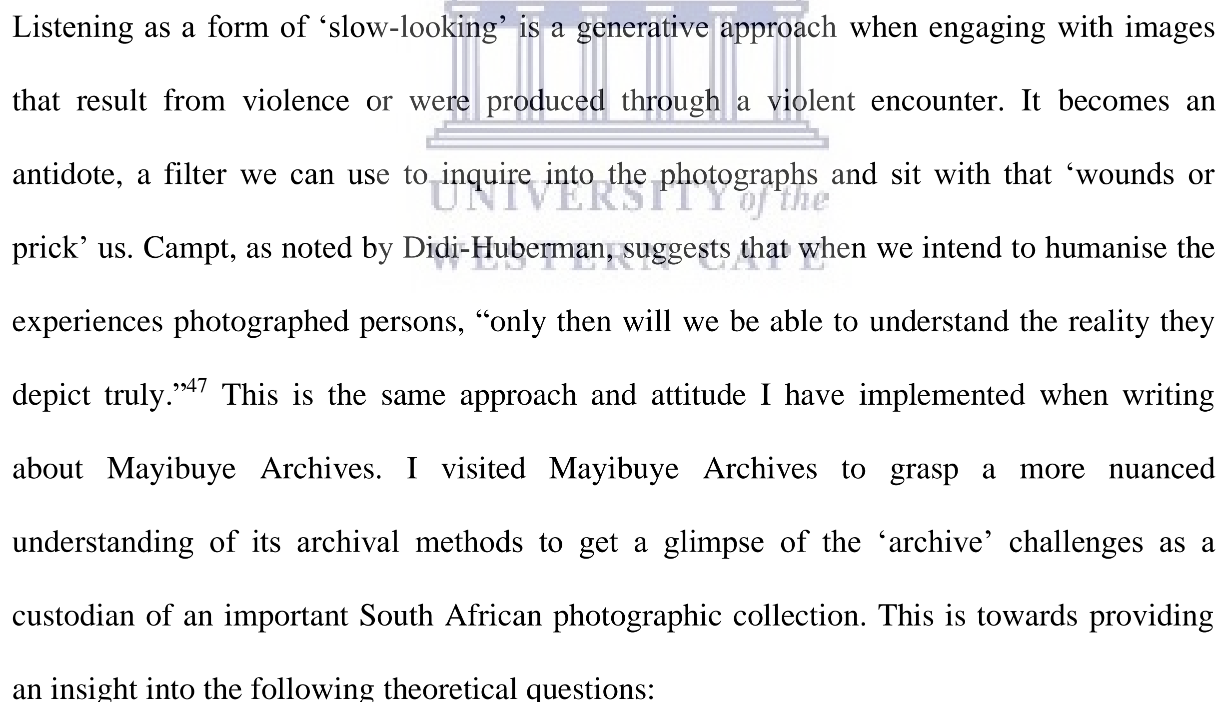
As suggested by Didi-Huberman, this way of thinking prevents us from perpetuating violence and offers us a way to serve justice to the photographed person. This justice was denied to them when still alive. In creating new meaning, Didi-Huberman proposes performing an "archaeological work" on photographs to construct what the Nazi regime intended to be invisible, "unimaginable", and "unspeakable."[44] This approach illustrates that photographs present points of fracture, an opening out; in that way, we can begin to register the possibility of a history that is no longer founded on traditional models of experience and references.[45] The histories brought into focus by such an approach are sometimes uncomfortable, painful and contain too many meanings.[46]



Listening as a form of 'slow-looking' is a generative approach when engaging with images that result from violence or were produced through a violent encounter. It becomes an antidote, a filter we can use to inquire into the photographs and sit with that 'wounds or prick' us. Campt, as noted by Didi-Huberman, suggests that when we intend to humanise the experiences photographed persons, "only then will we be able to understand the reality they depict truly."[47] This is the same approach and attitude I have implemented when writing about Mayibuye Archives. I visited Mayibuye Archives to grasp a more nuanced understanding of its archival methods to get a glimpse of the 'archive' challenges as a custodian of an important South African photographic collection. This is towards providing an insight into the following theoretical questions:

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44 Ibid., 38.
45 Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 6.
46 Ibid., 5.
47 Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 182.

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- What archival strategies and processes did Mayibuye Archives implement to produce an archive that narrates the anti-apartheid struggle?
- What histories and deficiencies are revealed during the curator's presence and observation of the Mayibuye Archives?
- What histories are subverted to generate new narratives and meanings because of archival processes?
- How do I read these images without silencing or divorcing the social production of the image, but in such a manner that I am sensitive to the photographed subject and susceptible to listening and hearing the soft vibration emitted by the image?
- How do I imagine a different narrative outside the dominant narratives that produced these images?

Ann Stoler in her book, *Along the Archival Grain* (2009) writes about colonial archives as charged sites of violent and criticize the extractive work the historians do that re-produce and maintain the violence. It is within this context that she provides an alternative framework that counteracts the inherent violence in the archives. For the work of the archive, Stoler proposes to read the archive along the grain, in order to identify contradictions and lies inherent within these structures. This enable us to re-think accepted truths about the archive, to recover material that was not intended by its creators but is evident when read closely.[48] However, my aim in this thesis is to read beyond the 'along the grain' alternative that Stoler is proposing. I have borrowed concepts and approaches that allow me to move beyond the homogenising rubrics of disciplines.[49]

[48] Ann Laura Stoler, 'The Pulse of the Archive' in *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 47.
[49] Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 2.

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For this thesis, I selected photographs of women posing for the camera in traditional outfits. Because of their anomalous features, these photographs “present points of fracture, an opening out”[50] in the context of Mayibuye Archives. Gyanendra Pandey argues that in its appearance the archive might look comprehensive, but what the official sources give us is a fragment of history.[51] In the UWC-Robben Island Museum-Mayibuye Archives, the collection is placed under the social documentary photography category, together with Eli Weinberg, and other Black and unnamed photographers. The photographs in this thesis do not fit easily into such histories espoused by the Mayibuye Archives. It is for this reason that I was drawn to the photographs, curious about the anomalies here that constituted their archival process. I have read and studied Levson’s photographic images that were included in the exhibitions to understand their contextualisation.

The *Margins to Mainstream* exhibition images have been useful to determine Levson’s location within the history of the anti-apartheid archive and what role the photographs play in the post-apartheid South Africa. With regards to the intention, Marijke du Toit warns that “attempting to deduce intention and the nature of interaction between photographer and photographed from the image itself when trying to make sense of pictures as relics from the past must in large part remain an exercise of tentative interpretation.”[52] This, therefore calls for other forms of interpretation such as ‘listening to the image’ that allows one to move beyond the photographer’s intention.

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[50] Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 6.
[51] Gynendra Pandey, ‘In Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today’, *Representation*, 37 (1992), 50.
[52] Marijke du Toit, ‘The General View and Beyond: From Slum-yard to Township in Ellen Hellmann’s Photographs of Women and the African Familial in the 1930s’ (paper presented at Archive of the History and African Studies Seminar, KZN University, October 14, 2003), 8.

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In the **first chapter** - *The Archival context of 'native studies' at a post-apartheid Mayibuye Archives* I engage with Leon Levsons documentary photography collection through Mayibuye Archives as a custodian of his collection. I have discussed the notion of the archive within the discipline of art history. This line of inquiry has allowed me to examine how archives are built or remade to reveal the contradictions and biases inherent within archival practices and the histories the archive. The discussion follows those of the visual artists and curators whose work raises questions concerning the work of the archive, researching through the archived memory and history.

The **second chapter** - *Listening to Black Futurity: The Photographs of Transkei and Bechuanaland*, analyses the 'native study' photographs through the concept of 'listening' to provide new meanings. The photo analysis chapter engages with decolonial language and thinking that transcends institutional framework of images classified as ethnographic. It sets a precedent for the subsequent chapter that presents alternative readings, writing about the vast visual archive of black people, the kind of reading that does not continue to reduce the photographed subjects into racialised type by reading the images within the lens of refusal-practice.

Practicing refusal according to Campt means to reject the terms imposed on Black subjects that are dehumanising, refusing to accept or deny these terms as truth. This chapter encourages the viewer to see the images of black people as performance of the future they want to see. They are aspiration to imagine a not yet future. This chapter provides alternative ways of interpreting and removing the 'native study' photographed persons beyond the colonial binary of the 'coloniser- camera and photographer and the colonised-the

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photographed subject’. This chapter provides possible solution to the archival and categorisation methods of Leon Levson photography collection in Mayibuye Archives.

The concluding **chapter three** - *Black Luminosity: Thoughts towards a curatorial intervention* is a theoretical intervention based on the curatorial statement I wrote for a group exhibition I curated in March 2021, titled *Black Luminosity*. The curatorial framework for the exhibition was informed by chapter two of this thesis. Even though the artworks that forms part of the exhibition included other art mediums the framework is pivotal for this chapter as it shows and provides a new framework on how we can reclaim, rehumanise and historicize the large photographic archive of Black people into global, dominant histories of photography.

The writing of this thesis first occurred in 2020 when South Africa documented its first case of COVID-19. As a result of that the President declared a state of disaster. The country was placed on hard lockdown (level 4) restrictions where all businesses ceased their operations and schools and universities closed. I wrote this thesis and completed it under the stressful conditions of the pandemic. I also wrote the thesis not just as a student but also as a practising curator. So, the line of inquiry and arguments made in this thesis emerges from the work that I do as a Black woman curator. It is important to announce myself since the arguments in this thesis are solely based on my encounter with Leon Levson's photographs at Mayibuye Archives.

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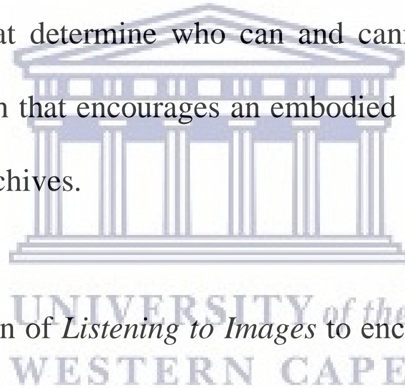
CHAPTER ONE: The archival context of Leon Levson's 'native studies' photographs in the post-apartheid Mayibuye Archives

Tina Campt asks what "kind of histories can we write [through] images when we make the photograph the centre of, rather than an illustration or documentary supplement to, historical writing?"[53] This is an essential question for my work on Levson's photography, located in the Mayibuye Archives. This chapter focuses on debates on post-apartheid archives and the possibilities offered by listening to images and listening to archives. I attempt to examine archival processes and practices that engage with questions of silences, absences, processes of exclusion and absenting that determine who can and cannot access the archive. I also propose an alternative approach that encourages an embodied experience of the photographs when you encounter them in archives.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I borrowed Tina Campt's notion of *Listening to Images* to encourage the 'seeing beyond' by focusing on the visuality of the image and how photographs in archives register through other haptic impressions.[54] Campt argues that understanding photographs as historical formation allow the images to be read not only through the linear and standardised lens of the 'biography' and the "facts of 'what we know'."[55] She asserts that considering the image's historical formation forces us to precisely examine what we believe we see in the photograph and the frameworks. She states that 'listening' is a call to refuse the ways we have been taught to engage with photographs. The photographs are much more than the objects to be gazed at by viewers. Archives became vehicles in understanding how past resources present

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[53] Campt, *Listening to Images,* 7.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.

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an opportunity to build alternative futures**.** This understanding allows us to relinquish any ideas of completeness and fixity but instead that the archive is incomplete and a fragment. Pandey's discussion about archival fragments is also helpful for thinking through possibilities for making meaning with archived photographs. In its visuality or physicality, the archive might appear complete and comprehensive, giving the impression that one can find everything they are looking for and provide answers to questions raised. However, this sense of completeness is only an illusion that masks the often complex and ambiguous process. Nevertheless, what the "official sources give us is … a fragment of history"[56] , or it contains the "potential to fragment and destabilise remembrance as recorded."[57]

The ambiguity and ambivalence of the archive might be attributed to a "series of micro-intentions entangled in active social relations"[58] as described by Elizabeth Edwards. The notion of 'total' and 'objective' knowledge is no longer associated with archive histories as the past and history are not neutral, and historians constantly re-interact with the archive. They actively create their understanding and meaning through the process of privileging certain information or histories. Gyanendra Pandey writes:

> … it will be well to acknowledge the provisionality of the statements we make, their own historicity and location in a specific political context, and consequently their privileging of particular forms of knowledge, particular relationships and forces to the exclusion of others.[59]

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[56] Pandey, 'In Defense of the Fragment', 50.
[57] Charles Merewether, *The Archive* (Cambridge: Whitechapel and MIT Press, 2006), 5.
[58] Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 7.
[59] Pandey, 'In Defense of the Fragment', 50.

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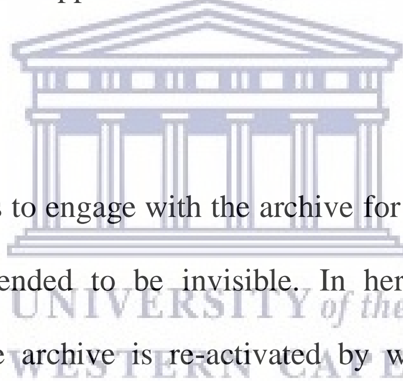
While this might call for a multi-disciplinary approach that addresses the impact of the selections and exclusions process inherent in the archival system, the idea that archives as primary sources "leaves out nothing of importance"[60] is ambiguous and requires us to challenge these dominant narratives. In the book 'Archiving against the Grain',[61] Ann Stoler calls for an 'emergent methodological shift' in dealing with the archive, that we should re-think accepted truths about the archive to recover "material that was not intended by its creators but is evident."[62] Stoler urges us to read 'along' the archive instead of 'against'; it is standard approach historians tend to adopt when attempting to 'decolonise' the archive. Stoler argues that reading 'along' de-familiarises the conventional archival approaches to expose the archival process that appear decolonial but in their core reproduce dominant narratives.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This approach allows historians to engage with the archive for the first time. It makes visible what the colonial archive intended to be invisible. In her PhD dissertation, Geraldine Frieslaar writes that when the archive is re-activated by way of intervention: listening, monumental, archived history can be dismantled to accommodate possibilities for new or alternative histories.[63] This evokes the assertion of the archive as an "active and regulatory discursive system,"[64] as discussed by Okwui Enwezor in his lens-based media exhibition statement. Enwezor explored how meaning is constructed through photography or photographic images as archival documents in the Archive Fever exhibition. Since its inception, photography has been valued for representing reality; its unchallengeable factual

[60] Ibid., 50.
[61] Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 47.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Geraldine Frieslaar, '(Re)Collection in the Archive: Making and Remaking the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF)', (PhD thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2016), 46.
[64] Enwezor, 'Archive Fever: Photography between History and the Monument', 11.

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content proves “life truly existed.”[65] Even more, black and white photographs “enhances the reality of the image, as if facts had to be translated into black-and-white as the only means to make them more forceful and expressive,”[66] as noted by Simon Njami. He further states that photography in its nature is acknowledged as being capable of documenting facts and therefore endowed with historical value.[67] Consequently, it is inevitable for photographs to be converted into archival materials as “items worthy of preserving and keeping in a public place … [and] can be consulted according to well-established procedure and regulations.”[68]

The ‘judging’ is exclusive to ‘worthy’ archival documents, but the archive system regulates bodies by setting up parameters that control who can and cannot access the archive. Bhekizizwe Peterson, in his discussion of the post-apartheid archives, warns historians and archivists that without the “grasps of ‘informal’ canons or archives, any remaking of the archives is bound to be informed by the assumptions of the official archival processes and discourses.”[69] Without self-introspection of their positionality, historians/archivists are most likely perpetuate the same violent structures of dominance and exclusion in the foundations of archives. For transformation to happen, Peterson suggests that there must be a nuanced awareness of the complex social factors and intellectual traditions that have shaped Black Africans.

Otherwise, the attempts to ‘remake’ the ‘archive’ in South Africa “may be nothing but another sophisticated strategy of ensuring the tacit continuation of the status quo – in all its

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[65] Achille Mbembe, ‘The Power of the Archive and its Limits’, in C. Hamilton et al, eds., *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002), 20.
[66] Simon Njami, ’The Value of Andrew Tshabangu’s Photography’ in *Andrew Tshabangu Footprints* (Forthwall Books, 2018).
[67] Francis X. Blouin, Jr., 'History and Memory: The Problem of the Archive', *PMLA*, 119, 2 (2004), 297.
[68] Mbembe, ‘The Power of the Archive and its Limits’, 20.
[69] Bhekizizwe Peterson, ‘The Archives and the Political Imaginary’, *Refiguring the Archive*, 30.

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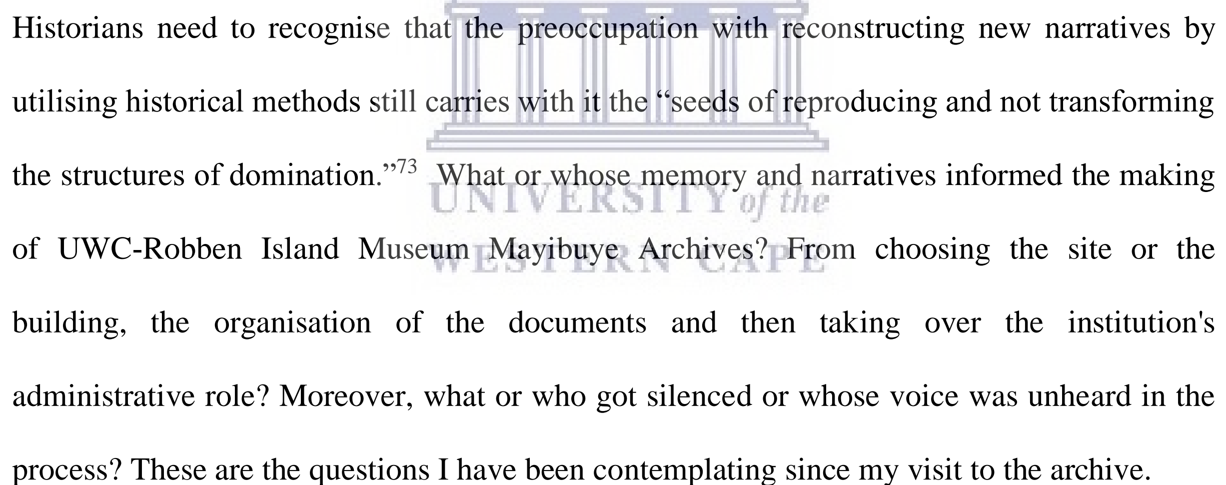
whiteness."[70] Then, what 'nuanced' technical considerations and archival processes would force new approaches to the administration (that administer) of those records in the archive? Would those 'nuanced approaches' be sufficient to address those histories with no residual traces or signs of continuity? In Jacque Depelchin's book, *Silences in African History,* he identifies the silences as generated by sheer terror, oppression, exploitation, which are the results of the state power as well as by a scientist or historian who uses techniques and methods that are part and parcel of the relations of domination.[71] He says those caused by historians are consequences of questions historians choose to ignore. The historians who are oblivious to the silences produce histories that do not challenge "currently established relations of power."[72]



Historians need to recognise that the preoccupation with reconstructing new narratives by utilising historical methods still carries with it the "seeds of reproducing and not transforming the structures of domination."[73] What or whose memory and narratives informed the making of UWC-Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archives? From choosing the site or the building, the organisation of the documents and then taking over the institution's administrative role? Moreover, what or who got silenced or whose voice was unheard in the process? These are the questions I have been contemplating since my visit to the archive.

Gabeba Baderoon also attests to South African archives being inaccessible, particularly to disenfranchised groups. She argues that the inaccessibility of the archives was the rule imposed on specific groups of people in South Africa, the colonial and apartheid archives

[70] Peterson, 'The Archives and the Political Imaginary', 31.
[71] Jacque Depelchin, 'Silences and Related Syndrome in African History', in *Silences in African History* (Dar es Salam: Mkuki Na Nyota, 2005), 2.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., 1-2.

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were sites of racial inequality and exclusionary; where Black people were prohibited from setting foot in the archives denying them a role in 'writing' of history.[74] The issue might lie with the status of the archive as a repository of classified records of the state, which perhaps the state hopes to keep hidden from the general public. In the case of South Africa, Libraries and National archives buildings were only accessible to a specific group of communities.

Institutions like archives, museums, and universities in South Africa excluded the histories of Black peoples, but black people were also physically forbidden to access some of the buildings. Mbembe, in his definition of the archive, further discussed that the archive gets its power and authority from the "system put in place to protect it from being freely accessible to the public" and by the building they inhabit.[75] The invisible system constitutes the archive inaccessible as symbolic and metaphoric power that inscribes value and importance in the people and histories it chooses to make visible. The invisible system determines who has access and who does not and what information is available to and for the public. These are some factors that inform the archival processes, as noted by Bhekizizwe Peterson.

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This discriminatory nature of the archival processes calls for a critical engagement about the 'processes' and strategies adopted in the making of the post-apartheid institutions. We need to ask who is physically excluded or censored to enter the building? What stories and archived materials are included based on the exclusionary system and whose legacies does the archive commemorate? Then perhaps we can begin to find ways that contribute to the de-institutionalisation of racism and inherent colonial hierarchies and exclusions that constitute a still-active legacy of the formation of post-apartheid public institutions, i.e., archives,

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[74] Gabeba Baderoon, 'Methodologies: Silences, Secrets, Fragments,' in *Critical Arts*, 21, 2 (2007), 279.
[75] Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and its Limits,' 20.

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museums. Importantly, when grappling with the constant erasure of Black people's experiences, what role is the Mayibuye archive playing in articulating past and current lived experiences of black people, especially those of black women?[76] In her recent book Potential History, Ariella Aisha Azoulay shows us how the 'Other' is created and maintained through the archive's inherent colonial discriminatory practices. That is, archives intrinsically lie at the border of contradictory attributes, "remembering and forgetting, ordering and disordering, including and excluding, and preserving."[77] She also notes that the classification systems were established before the institution of the archive was built.[78] Therefore, as argued by Peterson, we should be critical, as much as we are with colonial/apartheid institutions, of the methods that have gone into the formation of the post-apartheid and anti-apartheid archives.

For example, the acquisitions processes, cataloguing and interpretation of material primarily written in English inevitably excludes those who are not proficient in English.[79] The language of the archived, as argued above, plays into one of the ways the marginalised are repeatedly omitted. Even by the archives that are built to commemorate their triumphant, heroic activities. This is one and many other ways the archive is persistently violent towards certain group of people. Since Mayibuye is the home of the repatriated anti-apartheid archival material. It can be argued that the formation or 're-making' process of the archive might have been informed by the political and cultural histories similar to that of the colonial archive.

On the surface, the South African political landscape was transforming. Still, these were not yet translated into policies of re-dress in the heritage sector, nor was there any legislation that

[76] Nydia A. Swaby and Chandra Frank, 'Archival experiments, notes and (dis)orientations' in *Feminist Review* 125 (2020), 4-6.
[77] Gaeun Ji, 'Mapping the Sisyphean Archives: Archival/Anarchival Perfomativity of Repetition and Failure in Contemporary Archival Art' (PhD thesis, Goldsmiths: University of London, 2018), 47.
[78] Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Potential History. Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 168.
[79] Peterson, 'The Archives and the Political Imaginary', 32.

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enabled intense scrutiny of archives created under apartheid or colonial rule.[80] Then the Mayibuye archival structures, the material nature of the archive and processes –and by those entitled to influence the archive in its formation and content making, collecting – one would argue that they might have been the same as those of their predecessors that formed colonial-apartheid[81] archives. At its foundations, the creation of the Mayibuye Archives did not attempt to address the claims and histories that are historically synonymous with archives.[82] Instead, it has been primarily framed as a post-apartheid project of 'reconciliation' whose mission is to contribute to 'nation-building' discourses.

Minkley and Rassool's article on Leon Levson's also hints at the flawed frameworks that constitute nation-building through post-apartheid monuments. On the surface, they showed social cohesion but underneath only served those who were 'involved' in the struggle. This issue of the Mayibuye Archives is like the case of historically white schools and universities in the post-apartheid era. These institutions were forced to open their gates to Black students. However, the system that governed and informed them did not change or acknowledge black students and their socio-economic background.

Mayibuye Archives, on the one hand, is a mediated archival material memory that represents a fragment of South African violent pasts. On the other hand, it was established to participate and assist in shaping the identity of a 'new' nation-state. As has been stated by Frieslaar,

[80]Anthea Patricia Josias, 'Methodologies of Engagement: Locating Archives in Postapartheid Memory Practices' (PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 2013), 1.
[81] I prefer to use 'colonial-apartheid' because they are not distinct time periods; the racial oppression and segregation of African people started during the colonial period. The Apartheid government institutionalised and made the racists laws public. Colonialism is the father, while apartheid is the offspring.
[82] Antoinette Burton, 'Introduction: Archive Fever, Archive Stories' in A. Burton, ed., *Archive Stories. Facts, Fiction and the Writing of History* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 7.

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"liberation archives were deemed as instrumental in the process of nation-building."[83] Given that the intention behind Mayibuye Archives was to participate in the 'reconciliation' project and nation-building. It did not address the structural issues inherent in the work of archiving and archives. This is even though it has been profiled as an institution to "allow for the other, marginalised, the exiled, and the hidden to be brought into the mainstream."[84] What if Mayibuye is another 'rainbow' project by centering the histories of Black people but without them having a voice or power on the archiving processes and the decision on how to tell their stories? Is it another project that is created to favour and accommodate the dominant group's interests and less accommodating of anything outside of this realm?[85] This follows Truillot's arguments to focus on the archival processes as fundamental in creating a supposedly alternative archive that allows the 'possibility of multiple past.'[86]

Through the systems of control, the archive performs re-produces social and racial distinctions that maintain the colonial framework. The issue of inaccessibility of the archives is not only limited to the language barrier. It includes geographies in which most of the archives are located.[87] Like the language issue, the location of the archive further invisibilises the experiences of the vanquished. The privileges of one and the prohibitions of the other are filters that govern archives. In the process of interrogating the archive, Trouillot advises that we should not focus on "the existence of omissions or historical silences per ser, but the active *processes* of silenc*ing* (and absent*ing*) in the production of historical narratives."[88]

[83] Frieslaar, 'Recollections in the Archive', 89.
[84] Ibid., 88-89.
[85] Josias, 'locating Archives in Postapartheid Memory Practices', 6.
[86] Blouin, 'History and Memory: The Problem of the Archive', 297.
[87] Peterson, 'The Archives and the Political Imaginary', 32.
[88] Michel-Ralph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston and Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1995). Cited by Tina Campt, *Image Matters*, 36.

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The interrogation of the processes reveals the 'malfunctioning' of the archive and, importantly, the inherent discriminatory practices that only accommodate dominant sectors and groupings in society. Considering Truillot's concern about the processes of silencing, and within the awareness of the invisible system: Then what kind of processes of silencing and absenting constitute the post-apartheid archival institutions? What is the authority of the absence in affirming broad cultural and historical realities?[89] Furthermore, how has the formerly marginalized been assembled and represented in the archival holdings?

I hope these questions extend the boundaries of my enquiry and insert the problematics of the archives into the global debates on decolonisation or anti-colonisation. Nevertheless, the knowledge of the archive as a fragment does not free historians from having the desire for a 'complete' statement (archive). As stated by Pandey that desire will remain an "important and necessary part of the historiography endeavour."[90] However, it is crucial to uncover the histories/voices that historians/archivists would inevitably (intentionally) silence and omit because of personal, structural and political pressures and what histories they write.[91]

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1.1. IDAF/Mayibuye: an anti-apartheid archive

After a quick reading of the UWC-Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archives, you immediately get a sense of a 'complete' picture and history of South African apartheid. The archive is made up of the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF) collection. IDAF was

[89] Blouin, 'History and Memory: The Problem of the Archive', 297.
[90] Pandey, 'In Defense of the Fragment', 50.
[91] Burton, *Archive Stories*, 9.

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established in 1956. It aimed to work towards a peaceful solution to the problem of apartheid through raising and distributing funding to victims of apartheid laws, especially political prisoners and their families.[92] In addition, they also collected the material, banned in 1966, and continued doing so while in London until 1991. IDAF assisted photographers and activists to distribute their photographs to "major newspaper agencies, student publications, anti-apartheid movements in different countries and IDAF in-house projects."[93] Most of the photographs currently housed at Mayibuye Archives were from the Afripax photographic collective founded by Omar Badsha and Paul Weinberg in 1982.[94] The archive is divided according to departments or collections. At the Mayibuye Archives building, you find the photography collection, historical papers, and audio-visual collection.

In contrast, the Art and Artefact collection is housed at another building but on the premises of the University. The Mayibuye Centre was established in 1992. It consists of multimedia collections depicting multiple facets of resistance to the freedom struggle waged against apartheid from within and outside the borders of South Africa.[95] Of course, my interest is the Leon Levson collection's photography collection. It is important to note that gaps and silences characterise the Mayibuye photography archive just like any other archive. The Archivist Graham Goddard briefly explained that the collection comprises different entities like IDAF and individuals and photographers worldwide. He revealed the difficulties of having and caring for a collection from different sources. For example, most of the photography collections donated by IDAF came with no explanatory notes and descriptive

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[92] South African History Online. 'The International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF)' https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/international-defence-and-aid-fund-idaf (accessed February 14, 2021).
[93] Hayes, 'Photographic Publics and Photographic Desires in 1980's South Africa', 316.
[94] Ibid., 303.
[95] https://mayibuyearchives.org/collections/ (accessed June 10, 2019)

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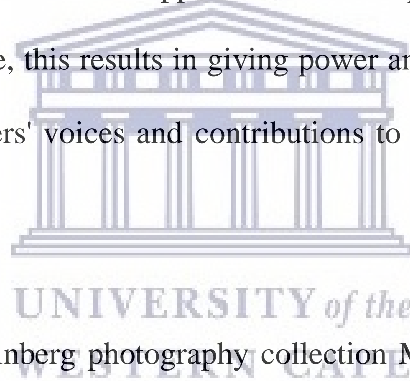
captions. That is, the photographer's name is unidentified, as well as the photographed person.

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



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

[96] Minkley and Rassool, 'Photography with a Difference', 188.
[97] Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and its Limits,' 20.
[100] Ibid., 20.

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

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

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

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[99] Azoulay, *Potential Histories,* 264.
[100] Kylie Thomas, 'History of Photography in Apartheid South Africa', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (2021), 2.
[101] James L. Hevia, 'The Photography Complex: Exposing Boxer-Era China (1900–1901), Making Civilization', in Rosalind C. Morris, ed., *Photographies East: The Camera and Its Histories in East and Southeast Asia*, (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 83.
[102] Mary Ellen Dowd, 'An overview of "Unlearning Decisive Moments of Photography" by Ariella Azoulay', *FemLENS*, January 31, 2021 https://femlens.com/blog-post/imperialism-in-photography/ (accessed March 08, 2021).

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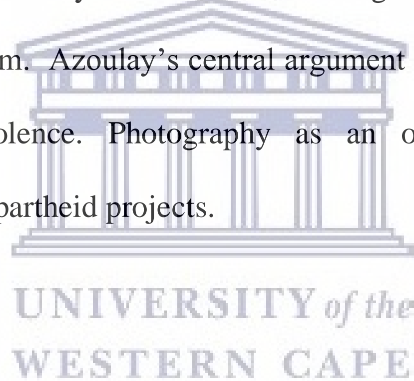
acknowledging the state power deposited into the photographer directly or indirectly.[103] Secondly, acknowledging the photograph as an 'official report' is used to advance the agenda of the ruling state privileged by the state power.

Photography as a tool of empire is directly and indirectly deposited into the photographer. In reality, the photographers continue to represent imperial power, even if they seem disconnected from the state power in appearance.[104] Azoulay writes that "when photography emerged, it did not halt this process of plunder that made others and others' worlds available to the few, but rather accelerated it and provided further opportunities and modalities for pursuing it."[105] It provided rationality for heinous crimes against certain bodies inflicted by the regime and deemed the norm. Azoulay's central argument is photography's participation in the colonial-apartheid violence. Photography as an official record or document institutionalised imperial and apartheid projects.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1.2. Listening to photographs in archives

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

[103] Newbury, *Defiant Images*, 45.
[104] Azoulay, *Potential History*, 140.
[105] Ibid., 22.
[106] Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and its Limits', 20.
[107] Campt, *Listening to images*, 72.

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

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

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

[108] Ibid., 4.
[109] Ibid., 43.

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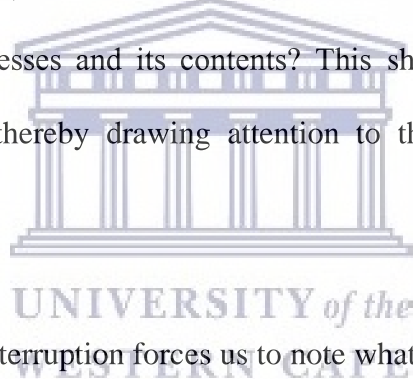
Then we must ask what happens when we not only engage the photographs based on the archival narrative or the ethnographic classification but also engage them through their haptics? "They are images touched by the subjects they capture, touched by those who view or encounter them, yet also objects that touch those who view them as well."[110] For example, suppose the researcher engaged the IDAF/Mayibuye photographic archive through the image haptic temporalities. In that case, we can ask, what can we glean from the archival processes and narratives other than what is prescribed by the archive's grand narratives? What tensions, overlaps, intersections, ambiguity are always present in the photographic archive? What if we hear a sonic glitch in our listening, like when the record has a scratch, tape loops and produces rhetorical interruption, the unintentional and audible evidence of a mistake.[111] A 'mistake' in the archival processes and its contents? This shows the archive as a messy, unstable and embodied site, thereby drawing attention to the tensions that underlie the making of the archive.[112]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The archive's sonic glitch or interruption forces us to note what often goes unnoticed or what seems to be accepted as the 'truth', which seems almost taken for granted, thus situating the archive as an experimental place.[113] In the case of Levson and the Mayibuye Archives and IDAF, the universal narrative around the archive and its content produce high sonic frequencies that deafen or silence other possible readings and meanings of the archive and the photographs in it. The traditional approach of reading images, "with its primary register is undoubtedly that of sight," results in narratives that read images as "illustrations of the history and biographies of the individuals pictured in them."[114] Using the 'sonic glitch' allow

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[110] Ibid., 43.
[111] Miriam -Webster Online Dictionary. https://www.merriam-webster.com
[112] Swaby and Frank, 'Archival experiments, notes and (dis)orientations', 6.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid., 139.

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

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

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

[115] Fred Moten, *In the Break. The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 2003), 205-210.
[116] Campt, *Image Matters*, 135.
[117] Edwards, 'Photography and History', 26.
[118] Swaby and Frank, 'Archival experiments', 9.
[119] Ibid., 4.
[120] Campt, *Images Matters*, 7.
[121] Depelchin, *Silences in African History*, 11.

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

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

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

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

[122] Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts', *Scrutiny*, 23, 1 (1998), 16.
[123] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 56.
[124] Andrew Port, 'History from Below, the History of Everyday Life, and Microhistory', 11 (2015), 108.

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

If we do, what would be our conceptual framework and parameters that can imagine the kind of archives that acknowledge the silenced, the missing, and the forgotten? What if we employ futuristic approaches in addressing anomalies found in the Mayibuye Archives to envision a project of recovery that counter a negative historical imaginary and "silences in the historical record"?[126] An archive that centres black experience and "focuses on events that are constituted by … [how] they are remembered (archived), but also forgotten (erased)"?[127] What would an anti-apartheid visual archive look like in 21st century South Africa?

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[125] Burton, *Archive Stories*, 9.
[126] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, cited by Campt, *Image Matters*, 36.
[127] Marita Nadal, 'Trauma and the Uncanny in Edgar Allan Poe's "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House Of Usher', in *The Edgar Allan Poe Review*, 17, 2 (2016), 180.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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[129] Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 58.
[130] Campt, *Listening to Images*, 17.

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

2.1. Leon Levson in Transkei and Bechuanaland

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

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

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

The aesthetic quality of these photographs sets them apart from the other 'documentary' photographs in the Mayibuye collections. As I noted in the introduction, pictorialism[132] is a photographic genre that concerns itself with the aesthetics of the image, and the photos are manipulated (during and after) to give them a painterly quality. Pictorialism is more artistic, while documentary photography uses photojournalistic elements such as storytelling. The documentary photograph is a document that records events as they are and seemingly 'unmediated.'[133] Such that the presence of the 'native study' photographs at the Mayibuye Archives produces a moment of disjuncture or fracture in the formation and narration of the anti-apartheid collection. Images such as Levson's 'native study' photographs, once

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[131] Candice Steele, 'Theorising the Image as Act: Reading the Social and Political in Images of the Rural Eastern Cape', *Kronos*, 46 (2020), 222.
[132] See Phindezwa Mnyaka, 'From Salons to the Native Reserve: Reformulating the "native question" through Pictorial Photography in 1950s South Africa', *Social Dynamics*, 40,1 (2014), 106-110.
[133] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, ''Who is speaking thus?' Some Questions about Documentary Photography' in *Photography at the Dock. Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1991).

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

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

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

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[134] Minkley and Rassool. 'Photography with a Difference', 205.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid., 207.
[137] Luli Callinocos', *Working Life - Factories, Township and Popular Culture 1886 - 1940 - The Early Years at the Rand* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987).
[138] Du Toit, 'The General View and Beyond', 2.

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

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

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

[139] Du Toit, 'The General View and Beyond', *Gender & History*, 17, 3 (2005), 208.
[140] Minkley and Rassool, 'Photography with a Difference', 203.
[141] Campt, *Image Matters*, 6.

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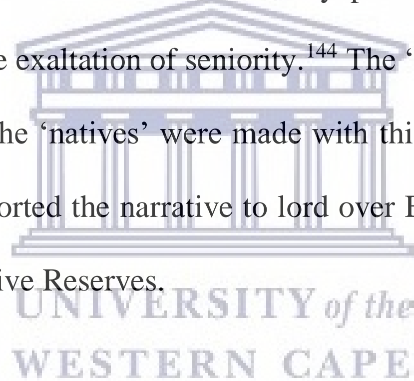
juxtaposed. Levson's photographic style and theme – like those of his predecessors (i.e., Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin, Constance Stuart Larrabee) – was produced within the framework of liberal paternalism and trusteeship[142] of aesthetically photographing black southern Africans.[143]

Paternalism and trusteeship were tools used by the Native Administrators to exercise control and dominion over the Black population while covertly treating them as 'children' and not capable of ruling themselves. "They both used the language of fatherhood, labelling subordinates as children whose welfare would be looked after by a benign father" The relative importance of the three core values shared by paternalists and patriarchs alike - discipline, benevolence, and the exaltation of seniority.[144] The 'native photography' produced by Levson from the 1930s of the 'natives' were made with this sense of paternalism. At the same time, the exhibition supported the narrative to lord over Blacks South Africans and the formation of Bantustans or Native Reserves.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As Minkley and Rassool point out, Levson's work was used to support the segregationist (SIRR) policy that enforced the Bantu Administration and the formation of the Bantu Studies of 'native' Africans that would lay the foundation for the formation of apartheid in South Africa.[145] The tension in his archive is partly the result of this confluence of the past and current historical forces. That is to say, the same photographs that were deployed to enforce apartheid's policies now re-appear as part of Mayibuye's anti-apartheid collection. The attempts to re-inscribe and articulate Levson's work within the oppositional histories of

[142] Minkley and Rassool, 'Photography with a Difference,' 201.
[143] Newbury, *Defiant Images,* 43.
[144] Diana Wylie, *Starving on a Full Stomach. Hunger and the Triumph of Cultural Racism in Modern South Africa* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 61.
[145] Minkley and Rassool, 'Photography with a Difference', 203.

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

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

[146] Newbury, *Defiant Images*, 45.

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

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

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

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

2.2. Portrait photographs from Bechuanaland and Transkei

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

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

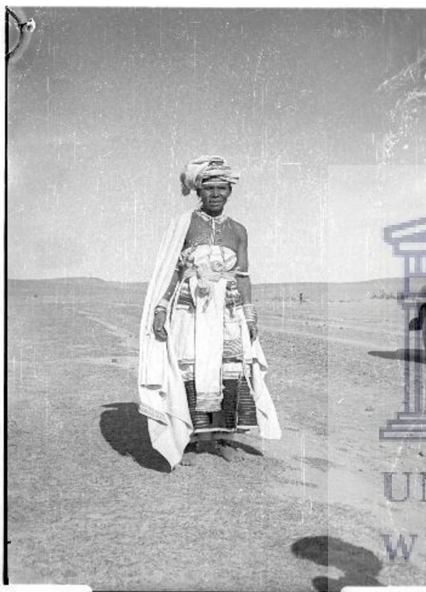

Figure 3.

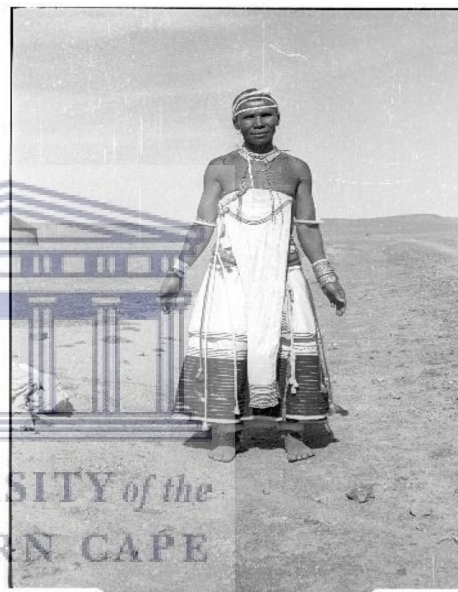

Figure 4.

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[147] Pauline E. Peters, review of *The Birth of Botswana: A History of the Bechuanaland Protectorate from 1910 to 1966* by Fred Morton and Jeff Ramsay, *African Economic History*, 18 (1989).
[148] Constitution of the Republic of Transkei, Chapter 1, 1(2), https://www.worldstatesmen.org/Transkei_Constitution.pdf (accessed 26 November 2021).

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

Figure 5.

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

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

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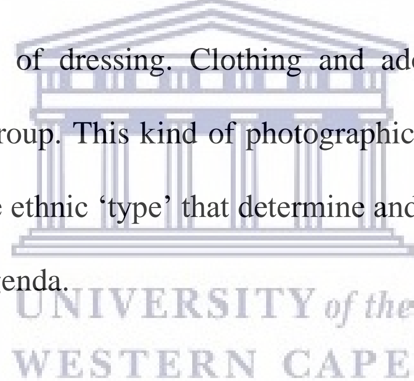
posed, the dress, and the background had to match the context. From the series of images, it is hard to tell which one was the first shot or what sequence they should be viewed in.

The image's story starts with Figure 3, from right to left. She is photographed in different poses in all three of the frames, showing her outfits from different angles. It almost feels like the person was not a focus. Instead, her attire was the focus of the photographic event, as if to show what constitutes her 'ethnicity' is her dress, cape/throw, and accessories, head beads, headscarf, beaded necklace, and wrist bangles. She is bare-footed, a sign of being 'backwards', 'primitive', or *ubuqaba*. I am reminded of Santu Mofokeng's photographs in *The Black Album* with the visual archive of a Black elite who have converted to Christianity and adopted a 'western' way of dressing. Clothing and adornment details in this view constitute a particular ethnic group. This kind of photographic visuality innately reveals the role clothes play in creating the ethnic 'type' that determine and support the racial hierarchies of the colonial and apartheid agenda.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Maybe these were taken at a road as part of Levson's visual documentation of his travel as a tourist photographer. Levson might have also borrowed random elements from Alfred Duggan-Cronin and Constance Stuart Larrabee's ethno-photography and classifications in terms of composition. This is indicated by the image captions "which assigns a racial typology to the subject."[149] The issue of typologies used when describing these images dominated the philosophical meaning that could have emerged from the possible interpretation of the photographs. As noted by Edwards [historical] photography has been

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[151] Kevin Coleman, 'Practices of Refusal in Images: An Interview with Tina M. Campt', *Radical History Review*, 132 (2018), 214.
[152] Minkley and Rassool, 'Photography with a Difference', 193.

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

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

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

[153] Newbury, *Defiant Image,* 15.
[154] Ibid., 15.
[155] T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

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

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

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

[156] Lorraine, O'Grady, 'Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity' in Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 174-187.
[157]Azoulay, *Potential History,* 134.
[158] Santu Mofokeng, *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl Verlag, 2013), 70.

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

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

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[159] Newbury, *Defiant Images*, 15.

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Figure 6 Figure 7

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

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"Smoking a cigarette may be compared to making a poem…". That is the opening sentence of Richard Klein's second chapter, *Cigarettes Are Sublime,* also the book's title.[160] Klein alludes to the charm, desire, or sensuality of smoking a cigarette. Klein's analysis posits the act of smoking to be like reading poetry, thus allowing one to dream of the possibilities unrealised.[161] That is, cigarettes encourage one to think about the future or be in the future momentarily, but not in a 'fairy-tale. Using Didi-Huberman's language of imagination[162], the cigarette is then not just a proof or a prop in this case if we are to use Klein's analogy of cigarettes as poetry. In the context of this photographic event, the woman in Figure 6-8 - is figuratively introduced to one of the aspects of the 'modern' world. The cigarette becomes a signifier of the 'new' world or culture that is slowly coming to the 'native reserves' or rural and has arrived. The gentleman's western apparel and wristwatch add to the production of a

[160] Richard Klein, *Cigarettes Are Sublime* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 51.
[161] Klein, *Cigarettes Are Sublime*, 52.
[162] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Atlas, or The Anxious Gay of Science* (Cambridge: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 3.
[162] Didi-Huberman, *Atlas, or the Anxious Gay of Science*, 7.

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

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

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

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

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

[163] Didi-Huberman, *Atlas, or the Anxious Gay of Science*, 7.
[164] See Candice Steele, 'Theorising the Image as Act: Reading the Social and Political in Images of the Rural Eastern Cape', *Kronos*, 46, 2020.
[165] Newbury, *Defiant Images,* 16.

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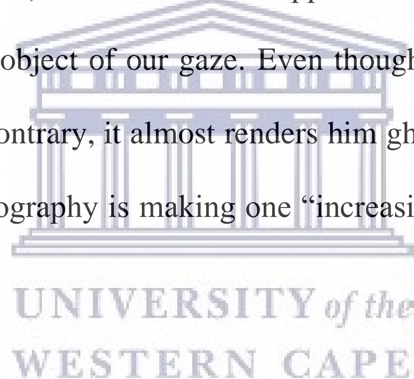
I hear the distant sounds of *uHadi* and playing far away, signalling the presence of those who have departed but are still with us through the evocation of the songs and dance. I hear the song because the distant mountains and hills echo the sound of the alive people and those who became our ancestors.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

This cinematic view takes place behind a backdrop of three huts–one without the thatched roof at the far left of the image– indicating other homesteads similar to the one photographed. Likewise, in the cigarette portrait, it is the woman's appearance–her outfit with a cigarette in her mouth–that makes her the object of our gaze. Even though he is noticeable, her' helper' does not distract him. On the contrary, it almost renders him ghost-like: invisible but present. One of the many traits of photography is making one "increasingly visible as "race" and the other increasingly invisible."[166]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The photographed woman and the supportive 'actor' in the 'movie-like' moment highlight the disparities between time and history. This scene sharpens the focus on time and the historical moment in which this photographic event occurred. The presence of the supportive actor was not spontaneous nor by chance. The photographer had intended this interaction to happen. Perhaps Levson wanted to depict the initial influence of western civilisation? The gentleman's western apparel and wristwatch add to the production of a different cultural identity in which the medium of photography further perpetuates.

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

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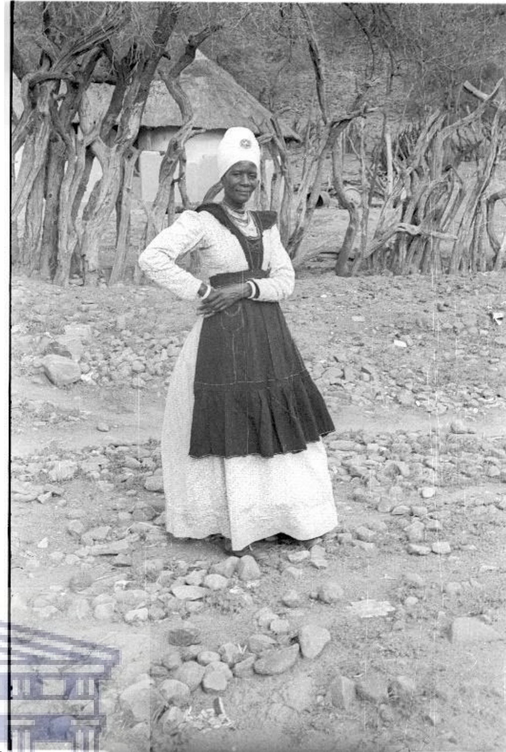

Figure 9.

Figure 10

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[168] Tina Campt, 'Black Visuality and The Practice of Refusal', February 25, 2019, https://www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand/29-1/campt (accessed June 27, 2020).
[169] Tina Campt, 'Adjacency: Luke Willis Thompson's Poethics of Care', *Flash Art*, 327 (2019).
[170] Campt, *Image Matters*, 6.
[171] Ibid., 6.

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

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

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[49] Leah Dickerman, David Joselit, Mignon Nixon, 'Afrotropes: A conversation with Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson', *October Magazine*,162 (2017).
[173] Zamorano, ‘Photography and the Racialization of Bolivian Indians’, 438.
[174] Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 95.
[175] Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 93-97.

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

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

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[176] Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (The MIT Press, 2002), 216.
[177] Elizabeth Edwards, 'Objects of Affect: Photography Beyond the Image', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 41 (2012), 224.
[178] Edwards, 'Objects of Affect', 93.
[179] Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 93.

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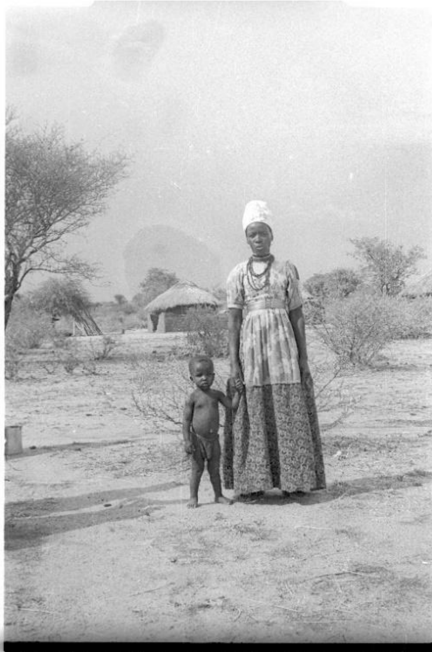

Figure 11.

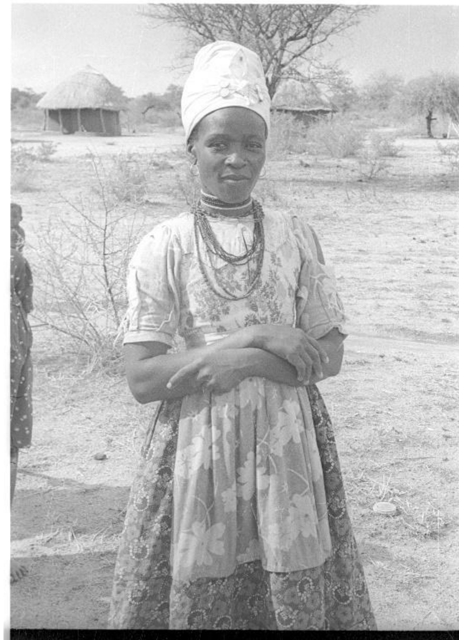

Figure 12.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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[180] John Peffer, 'Vernacular Recollection and Popular Photography in South Africa', in Christopher Morton and Darren Newbury, eds., *The African Photography Archive, Research and Curatorial Strategies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 130.
[181] Campt, *Listening to Images*, 3.
[182] Ibid., 3-4.

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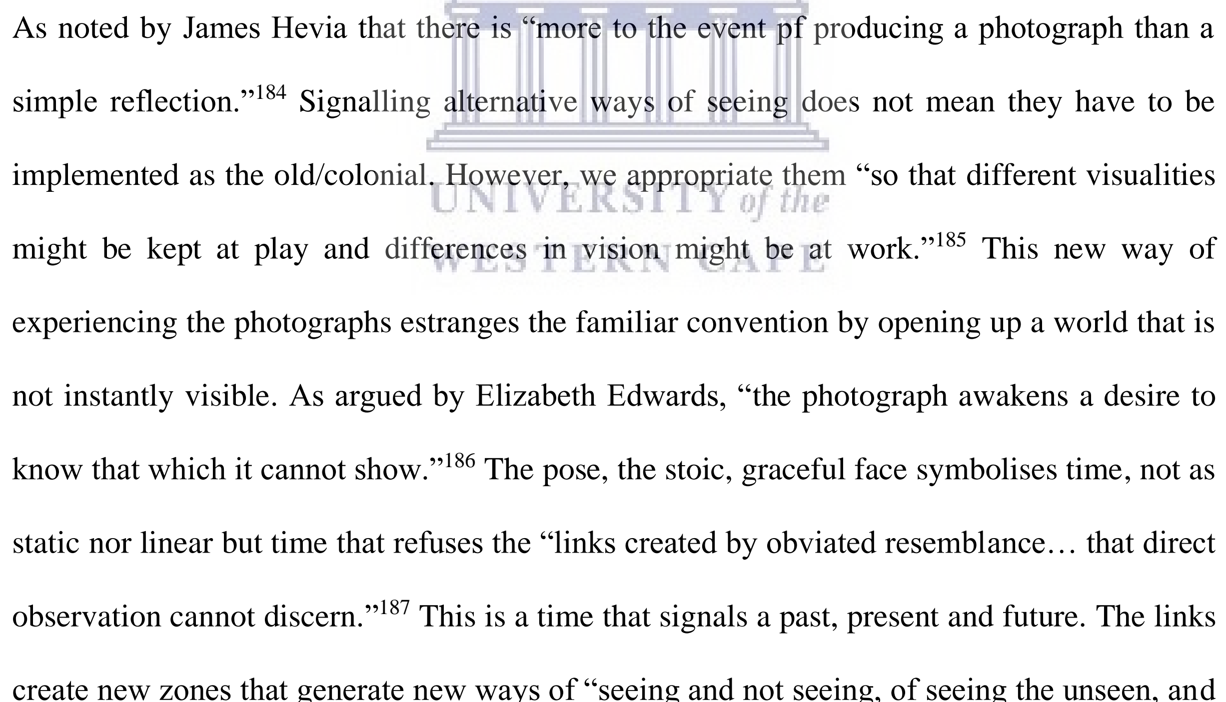
vision and perpetually “objects of the other’s gaze.”[183] I mean by double vision to indicate the double layer of the visual field at play when looking at photographs. The camera-photographer inside the scene occupies the first layer, and the second level is occupied by the outside viewer looking at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



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

[183] Simon Njami, 'Imagined Communities', *African Identities,* 9, 2 (2011), 200.
[184] Hevia, 'The Photography Complex', 80.
[185] Hall Foster, *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), xiv.
[186] Edwards, *Raw Histories,* 19.
[187] Didi-Huberman, *The Anxious Gay Sciences*, 2-25.

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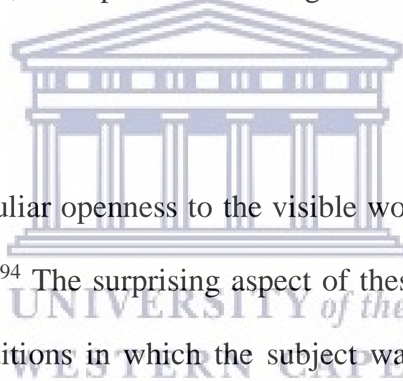
of seeing that we don't see that photography sets forth."[188] Since photographs are fragments, so is the gaze; our 'seeing' at images produces fragmented-isolated elements.[189] They are suggestive; they do not give a 'sustained and coherent argument.'[190] While they may reveal the knowable, they cannot state the 'ultimate truths' or give a whole picture of the photographic ritual's context.[191] The 'What might that be? ', the fragmented and the suggested image, is it not the indication that [highlight the shortcoming] photography as a tool that depicts 'reality', has a deficiency? Alternatively, perhaps the problem lies not with photography but a defect in the naked human eye — "how much could be seen in photographs?"[192] The minute details like the shadow in an image that the photographer fails to detect when taking a picture; an aspect of the image that could never be seen with the human eye unaided.[193]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Furthermore, they reveal a peculiar openness to the visible world in ways that permit access to new and surprising aspects.[194] The surprising aspect of these images is their highlighting the silent histories of the conditions in which the subject was photographed. Even though there is a residue of celebrating who they are, the history of the reserves speaks louder in these images, where most black people were forced to live. The apartheid government believed that the 'natives' could have their own 'land' (14%) and have their government while being intentionally excluded from their country's wealth. However, this research focuses on engaging these portraits and seeing these women beyond their social, political, and historical context.

[188] Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*, 16.
[189] Njami, 'Imagined Communities', 201.
[190] Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 10.
[191] Ibid., 10.
[192] Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*, 2.
[193] Ibid.,4.
[194] Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 10.

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

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

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

[195] Campt, *Listening to Images*, 94.
[196] Ibid., 96.
[197] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 8.

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

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

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

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

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

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[198] Campt, *Image Matters,* 6.
[199] Ibid., 97.
[200] Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 93.

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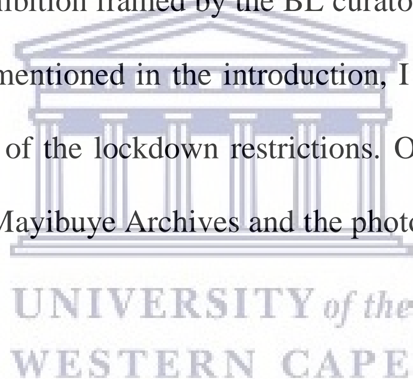
CHAPTER THREE: *Black Luminosity*: Thoughts towards a curatorial intervention

In the latter half of 2020, I was requested to conceptualise a show for a gallery to participate in an annual art fair in the USA. The request came when I was busy working on the second chapter of this thesis. The show was called *Black Luminosity* and its curatorial statement was inspired by these photographs which I was writing about and was anchored in the work of Tina Campt and Georges Didi-Huberman. In 2021, the same gallery approached me and requested if I can mount an exhibition framed by the BL curatorial statement using the works of artists in their stable. As I mentioned in the introduction, I was writing this thesis under stressful conditions as a result of the lockdown restrictions. One of the constraints was not being able to access again the Mayibuye Archives and the photograph collections I'm writing about.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Black Luminosity was about me grappling with notion of Blackness in the 'native study' photography genre and at time when there was so much violence inflicted on Black bodies during the pandemic. The 'native study' photographs in that fleeting moment reveal the quotidian violence that the Black body has been subjected to time immemorial. Conceptualising *Black Luminosity* and staging the exhibition afforded me an opportunity to use the framework of 'listening to images' which I have used in analysing and re-writing the interpretation of the portrait photographs of Bechuanaland and Transkei. This is not only for the portraits of Transkei and Bechuanaland- as I would like to call them - but for every photo or visual archive of Black people taken under the violence of the camera or the state and locked away in archives, libraries, and academic institutions. Through the framework of

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

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

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

[201] Campt, *Images Matters*, 2012.
[202] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990).
[203] Zach Blas, 'Opacities: An Introduction + Biometrics and Opacity: A Conversation 2016'. https://zachblas.info/writings/opacities-introduction-biometrics-opacity-conversation/ (accessed 28 October 2021).
[204] Kehinde Andrews, *Back to Black: Retelling Black Radicalism for the 21st Century (Blackness in Britain)* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 6.

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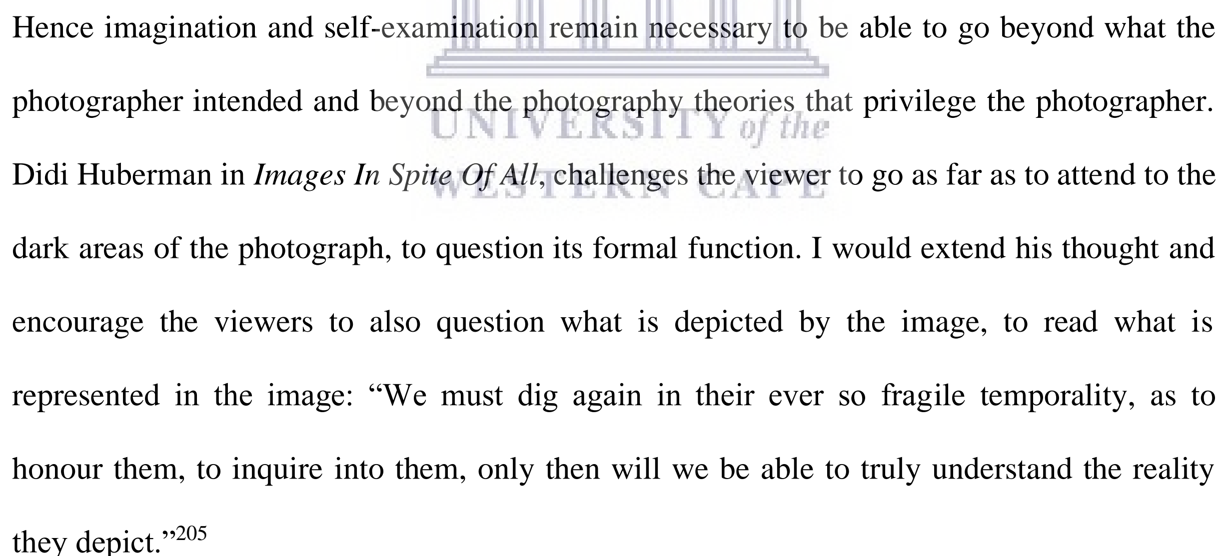
Keeping Glissant's notion of opacity the back of my mind while completing my thesis, I wanted to encourage the viewers, including myself to slow look at what can easily be glossed over about these images taken in the Transkei and Bechuanaland, and in addition to investigate what we have been conditioned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



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

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

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

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appearance. In this context black, refers to the dark, opaque surface of the artworks. The opaque-ness or blackness of the artwork becomes a site of critique; to unmask methodologies and modes of production that generate paths of knowledge and 'authoritative forms of visuality which function to refuse Blackness itself.'[206] *Black Luminosity exhibition becomes a space of refusal; refusing the narratives and terms given to us*[207]*, deconstructing the clichés and stereotypes. In addition, Blackness as a praxis of refusal continues neither as utopic nor autonomous, and neither pessimistic nor futuristic, but uses 'negation' as generative.*[208]

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

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

[206] Campt, 'Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal', 2019.
[207] Ibid.
[208] Ibid.
[209] Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*, 16.

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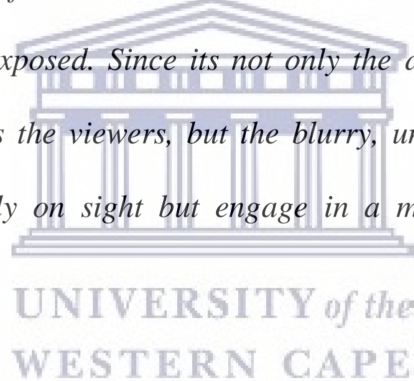
others. He then encourages us to not perpetuate the same violence, and instead apply imagination as a new method of 'looking' since photographs do not replicate reality but through imagination make visible worlds and realities that are not detectable to the human eye.

> *Using this photographic practice more broadly in the varied modalities, the blackened or abstracted artworks become the optical unconscious of the artwork. Meaning that even the unintelligible areas of the image are part of the phenomenology of the artworks making. Therefore, the dark areas of the artwork require the same effort from the viewers as the areas of the image-artwork that is readable or perfectly exposed. Since its not only the distinctly defined areas of the image that can address the viewers, but the blurry, under/overexposed that offer a chance to not only rely on sight but engage in a multi-sensorial reading of the artworks.*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The *optical unconscious* in the context of the exhibition was alluding to the minute details, like the shadow in an image, that the creator-artists themselves fail to detect when making the work; an aspect of the work that is hidden or invisible to the human eye. As argued by Walter Benjamin it is the part of the photographic event that is not "consciously controlled in the making, circulation, and viewing of photographs."[210] In a similar tone, Shawn Michelle Smith in *Edge of Sight* writes that the optical unconscious is the revelation of an unseen world that the photograph does not fully disclose but makes us aware of it in its invisibility.[211] Likewise, when discussing the photographs of enslaved people of Caribbean descent Krista Thompson

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210 Walter Benjamin, *A Short History of Photography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
211 Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*, 6.

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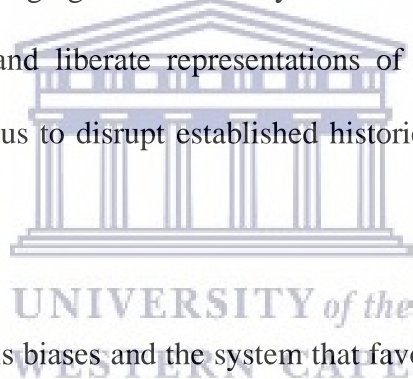
argues that ‘invisible’ sometimes is not by accident or chance, but that there is concerted effort to render something invisible or absent.[212] The absences can be revealed through listening to the quiet vibrations emitted by the photographs. Then photographs reveal a peculiar openness to the invisible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

The *Black Luminosity* curatorial statement as a framework to view these photographs complicates ways of seeing. It brings to the fore the biases entrenched in the way we have been taught and conditioned to see. Thus, seeing becomes means attending to the frequencies of the photographs. In this manner, the concept of listening becomes a site for learning and un-learning, a site for acknowledging non-western systems of knowledge and understanding and importantly to ‘uncode’ and liberate representations of Blackness from the colonial construction of race. It allows us to disrupt established histories and open up new potential associations.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Levson’s photographs reveal his biases and the system that favoured him as a white man and how race, in the case of Mayibuye Archives and IDAF seemed to be a determining factor in the selection, creation and the formula that constituted Mayibuye Archives as an anti-apartheid archive. My thesis therefore encourages viewers to be mindful of these ‘neo-liberal’ rigid and racially biased modes of reading and remind us that the archive is made up of the archivists’ worldviews. It is a call to read alongside the archival grain and rethink the established narratives about the archive and Levson’s photographs in order to recover the material and histories that are intentionally excluded or made invisible.

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

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

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

[213] Dickerman, Joselit and Nixon, 'Afrotropes: A Conversation with Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson', 6.
[214] Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 6.
[215] David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 2.

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

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

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

[216] Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 3.
[217] Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 1.
[218] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 2007), 262.
[219] Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', 10.
[220] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 76.

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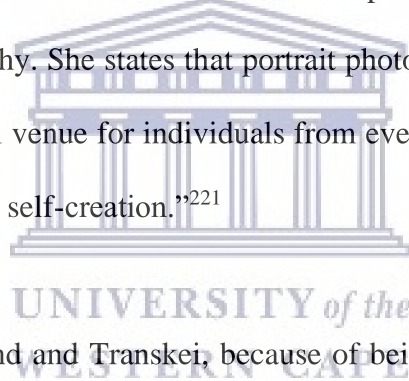
dismissed. In turn, these violent histories inherent in the ethnographic photographs of Black subjects are not re-produced repeatedly.

Listening therefore, does not produce a fixed or 'single story' interpretation but an interpretation that is in flux and expands the frames of critique. I have discussed in the previous chapter that the photographer does not have complete control of the photographic event, but that the anterior of the photograph creates a room for the photographed person to perform for the camera and decide how they would like to be seen. They self-fashion their own world and renunciate the photographer's desire and reclaim their personal image. Candace M. Keller in her essay *Visual Griots* attests to the power of self-actualisation that is embodied in portrait photography. She states that portrait photography plays a critical role as a "personal, social and political venue for individuals from every social class to express their agency, self-determination, and self-creation."[221]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In the Portraits of Bechuanaland and Transkei, because of being framed 'native study' they are not immediately read the photographed women as having agency and the power to determine how they would like to be seen since the photographs were not produced at their own request nor for their own personal archives but were made for the intentions and desires of the photographer. Reading them as portraits situates them outside the violence of the ethnography in which they were produced. Firstly, portraiture in art or visual history is seen as the highest form of representation whose power lies solely on the subject. Portrait photography creates a space where one can imagine who they wish to be. A space of fluidity and ambiguity. Secondly, as argued by Campt, I wanted to create 'new' modalities of

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

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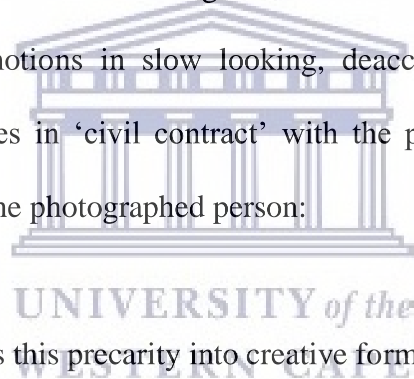
perception where images speak to me through the speculative curatorial intervention. As also noted by Azoulay, "the possible encounter with the photographed people who, through the photograph, are co-present with the spectators in the event of viewing the photograph."[222]

I want to prompt Mayibuye archivists to consider this methodological shift to not only prioritise the evidential nature of the photographic collection but the context in which they were produced and what the photographer intended to frame within it. 'Listening' as a methodological shift does not mask or dismiss the trauma or violence of the photographic event. But what I am suggesting is that this new way of viewing affords me the opportunity to slow down my thoughts, consider them alongside the emotional response elicited by the images, to examine those emotions in slow looking, deaccelerated time, to come to a response-action that participates in 'civil contract' with the photographed. That is, seeing myself and my community in the photographed person: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> is a gaze that transforms this precarity into creative forms of affirmation. It repurposes vulnerability and makes it (re)generative. In doing so, it shifts the optics of 'looking at' to an intentional practice of looking with and alongside.[223]

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

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[222] Ariella Azoulay, 'Getting Rid of the Distinction between the Aesthetic and the Political', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27 (2015), 7-8.
[223] Campt, 'Adjacency: Luke Willis Thompson's Poethics of Care'.

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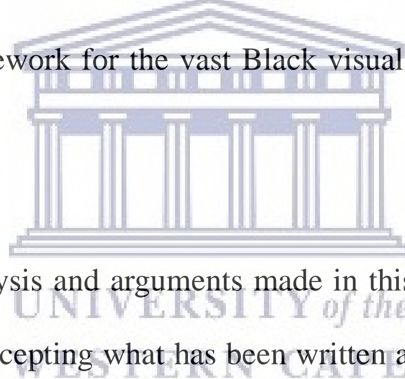
Listening demands the "work of maintaining a relation to, and connection with another."[224] Listening refuses the colonial framework that assumes the photographer as the brain or sole creator of the image and the subjects as a passive participant. Instead, it situates the photographed person at the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

As a result, I read the moment before the shutter closes as the moment when they signal and conjure up a world that even not the speed of light could capture. It is listening to these quiet images, in slowing looking that I see how they use the photographic event to write their own history and emancipate themselves from the shackles of the real world. *Black Luminosity* is a curatorial and theoretical framework for the vast Black visual archive that is out there in in the world of academia.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As I conclude, I want the analysis and arguments made in this thesis to contribute to a new scholarship that is no longer accepting what has been written about these images. These new frameworks challenge colonial epistemic power that surrounds the reading and historical writing of the photographic images.[225] I wanted to show that we can write about the photographic image of Black people outside the photograph's coloniality without having to re-traumatise or re-wound ourselves. In *Decolonising the Camera: Photography in Racial Time* Mark Sealy states that there cannot only be one cultural perspective on reading the image in the history of photography.[226] Sealy calls for a decolonial approach that challenges photography's colonial legacies by applying different knowledge systems that facilitate unlearning and learning.

[224] Ibid., 3.
[225] Mark Seally, *Decolonising the Camera: Photography in Racial Time* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2019).
[226] Ibid.

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

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

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