A Curator's Fingers: Photographers, Subjects, and *The Third Thing*

David William Cohen
Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and History
The University of Michigan

> Third things are essential to marriages, objects or practices or habits or arts or institutions or games or human beings that provide a site of joint rapture or contentment.
> -- Donald Hall, *Poetry*. November 2004.[1]

Room 49

In early September 1992, during a visit to South Africa, I found some eighty photographic negatives under a layer of dust on a concrete bunk of Room 49 of the Angelo Hostel at the Eastern Rand Proprietary Mines (E.R.P.M.) on the Reef near Boksburg. The photographs, all color, offered views of leisure, recreation, and sociability in the context of the living and working regimen of a South African mine in a time before Angelo Hostel was abandoned. And, at that moment, they did so against the prevalent images, typically in black-and-white, of the senses of confinement, exploitation, and oppression of the mine-labor and mine-compound system of South Africa over the decades from the late nineteenth century to the end of apartheid.[2]

While I was unable to sort out the identity of the photographer, or the photographer's subjects, expert assessment[3] suggested that the photographer was himself a miner and that these were pictures contracted—jointly enacted--by the photographer and his subjects. The indeterminacies of identity of the photographer and the subjects, and the sense that these negatives were *property*, opened ethical and moral issues regarding handling the found negatives produced by another individual who had maintained possession of these negatives—arguably, under his mattress—until he and his colleagues were evicted from the Angelo quarters and the hostel left as a ruin.

That nine years later I exhibited these photographs for the purposes of a talk presented at Emory University, and ten years later published an essay on

[1] http://www.poetryfoundation.org/journal/ article.html?id=146874
[2] A decade later this contrast was brilliantly demarked by the discussions circulating around the large-scale color photographs produced by Zelethu Mthethwa (2010), some of which in subject matter have a resonance with the Angelo photographs. See below.

[3] In particular, through a fortuitous conjuncture, the Sowetan photographer Santu Mofokeng offered an evaluation of them within thirty hours of the find.

Figure 1: The strips of negatives

them in a special number of *Kronos*[4], has not relieved me of *hesitation* regarding the unsettled *property* status of these images and the responsibilities taken on by the *curator* (me) through the simple fact of finding them in--and removing them from--a context in which they were lost or forgotten or abandoned.

Curation is more than a set of practices defined by technical competency, professional standards, and property rights. While ostensibly about the management of things produced by others, *curation* is itself a means of production. There is no settlement to the contingencies associated with the acts of *curation*, which entail ranges of responsibilities, only weakly delimited and scarcely predictable. *Curation* involves tactile and cerebral engagements that are continuous with those who "simply" find, view, touch, speak of, mark, and remake the presumed objects of *curation*. *Curation* complicates, renders less useful, Roland Barthes fundamental distinction—in respect to photography--among "operator", "spectator", and "spectrum". (1980, 9).

[4] David William Cohen. 2001. "The Fate of Documentation: The Ethics of Property in the Work of Visual Representation." *Kronos. Special Issue: Visual History*. 27, November: 292-303. Patricia Hayes and Andrew Bank encouraged the essay's submission to the journal.

"The control is with me"

In 1992, at the time of the visit to E.R.P.M., this finder of the negative strips was transfixed by questions of the relations of *production* among photographers and their subjects. In a "Foreword" to his 1985 collection of photographs *In the American West*, Richard Avedon directed attention to the contingencies of power located between photographer and subject in the moment of creating a photograph. Claiming a photographer's perspective, Avedon offered,

> The subject imagined must be discovered in someone else willing to take part in a fiction he cannot possibly know about. My concerns are not his. We have separate ambitions for the image. His need to plead his case probably goes as deep as my need to plead mine, but the control is with me.

Lucidly, and as an artist exceptionally, Avedon opened a space of observation and critique that complicated the very terms of "reading" of the photograph. The economy and politics of production would become a piece of the photograph itself and no reading of the photograph could ever again be seriously undertaken without recognition of those conditions of production, and here, again, Barthes reflections on photography explicitly traffic in areas away from the conditions of production. While Barthes attended extensively—and in ways productively—to the relations between the notional "spectator" (himself) and the "spectrum" ("the person or thing photographed"), he refused openings to the relations of production and to the economy of the image.[5] In a way, to get at the associations of photography to death and to loss, Barthes loses the possibility of seeing the layers of attention, work, silence, neglect, and error that constitute the possibility of the image. . .and the possibility of the text. . . as this is about more than photography.[6]

In 1985, for me, Avedon's acknowledgement of power—"the control is with me"--could be resituated in reference to the producers of historical texts and to the texts they produce. Moreover, Avedon's reflections could be extended to other cadres of experts and expertise more broadly engaged in an infinite range of production (and specifically so as these products and texts circulate so smoothly without referencing the economies and politics of their production). Indeed, Avedon's words became foundational to my own work in 1985 and 1986 on *the production of history* onwards through my 1994 text *The*

[5] With focus on the region of the Andes from the 18th century, Deborah Poole has persuasively deployed the idea of "visual economy", encompassing "the production, circulation, consumption, and possession of images." (1997: 8-13)

[6] Admittedly, Barthes predicated his reflections with the argument that photography is something unto itself that can only be understood within its own terms of reference.

Combing of History, which was in a way an extended close reading of the Avedon essay.[7]

Of course, Avedon's words opened a discussion but did not close it. Speaking of and for the experience of the subjects of his practice could not short-circuit the discussion of the ways in which subjects of authority experience domination, reframe control, and negotiate the vectors of power. As Avedon acknowledges, and as we know from historians and anthropologists working on Africa, the subject may have other "concerns" and other "ambitions". Indeed, while this is a faint acknowledgement for Avedon, for the literature on Africa's past, these other concerns and other ambitions are foundational.

Avedon's discussion was tightly bound, eight taut declarative paragraphs across but two pages: intentionality, staging and lighting, camera and subject focus, photographer-subject relationship, the nature of the portrait, control as process, the experience of the subject, the achievement of illusion. In those remarks written to introduce his photographs of . . .*the American West*, Avedon foregrounded the fraught power relations of photographer and subject. The essay's poetics, its specificity, rehearsed the formative economies of relations of authorities and subjects across a range of fields from health care to colonial governance. But there was always—at least from the moment I touched those dusty strips—the presence of a third party, *the third thing*, and this was the *curation* imparted by me, a figure quite apart from an Angelo Hostel photographer and subjects all unknown to me. My innocent and yet thickly implicated fingering of those strips has pressed forward a broader sense of *curation* and an enlarged sense of *curator*, not directly defined by professionalized criteria and specific duties, but also engaged with the often ordinary and everyday ways in which we live in the world with objects and ideas not of our own making.[8] In one moment I had strips of dusty negatives in my hand with no knowledge of their content, or their making, and, much later, I was hanging enlarged prints on a wall for others to examine. In between, ranges of responsibilities were sedimented in "acts" of *hesitation*. I could not even contemplate the Barthes position (1980:16-18)—that I could choose to "detest" these photographs. While once I sought to mine the photographs as a way of getting at the joint enactments of authority or producer or photographer and subjects, I now seek to mine the experience of curating them. Before I even knew their content, they had caught hold of me in ways that went beyond the fact of my not owning them.

---

[7] It was indeed the serendipitous discovery of the Avedon text on the eve of beginning work on a commissioned position paper defining "the production of history" that gave life and direction to the development of that "production" polemic.

[8] Certainly, this position is moved by the important work in reframing the idea, the concept, of *archive* as variously reflected in the work of Jacques Derrida, Ann L. Stoler, Verne Harris, Carolyn Steedman, Carolyn Hamilton, and Pippa Skotnes, and especially via the Archive and Public Culture Initiative at the University of Cape Town.

This essay returns to the Angelo photos, and to the piece published in *Kronos*, and resets the discussion around this third presence, constituted in the touching, collecting, examining, and exhibiting. One point is to push further the ethical dimensions of the original essay,[9] seeking to regain a sense of the *hesitation* earlier inherent in the project of reading and discussing these photos. I am moved by Kylie Thomas who in recent work has found a language of hesitation juxtaposing "constant reckoning" to "facile reconciliation".

A second objective here is to press for a more open, or broader, sense of *curation* in which all those engaged with images, things, and ideas—from first touching them, holding them in our fingers, to organizing their analysis, conservation, exhibition, and critique—are engaged with responsibilities and duties that are associated with those engagements.

And a third goal is to underline the complexities of power when "the third thing" is appropriately introduced to the equation marking the relations of authorities and subjects. The "third", as in Donald Hall's poetic, or as in J. M. Coetzee's Susan Barton[10], interrupts the austere binary, dissolves the conceit of Spectator-Spectrum (again, questioning Barthes); regains some of the complexity of experience, debate, critique within visual economy, suspending authority's privilege.

From Beneath a Layer of Dust[11]

September 1992. I was in South Africa. . .this was my first visit to the country. During that trip, I visited two gold mines. One, Vaal Reef #9, belonging to the Anglo-American Corporation, was identifying itself as the largest mine complex in the world, and was then exuding the distinctive liberal and progressively reconstructed management style being projected by Anglo-American. The Anglo-American tour was a first-class tour, though our tour group was thoroughly steered through a series of selected sites above and below ground in ways that suggested we were being made to miss certain aspects that might have been thought embarrassing. The second gold mine we visited was Eastern Rand Proprietary Mines (E.R.P.M) near Boksburg in the East Rand. E.R.P.M. was then one of the oldest operating gold mines on the Reef, and was in many respects a counter-point to Anglo-American. Indeed, while Anglo-

[9] I am grateful to my partner Gretchen Elsner-Sommer for her undiminished support across two decades of work, and, in respect to the present piece, for her holding my hands to the fire regarding the question of whose these images belong to and what is appropriate and inappropriate to do with them as found materials.

[10] *Foe*. 1986, 1987.

[11] The lengthy section that follows here—some of it edited out of the 2002 *Kronos* essay--is based on a text drafted in 2000-01 for presentation at Emory University. The original text drew on notes recorded in 1992. It is now reset here as a description of "the find" of the strips of negatives from Room 49, Angelo Hostel. This section is in a sense an "extended label". Presenting it at length is a gesture to conversations over the years—especially with Sally Price, Ivan Karp, and Nessa Leibhammer—regarding the values and characters of *labels*, those guiding texts attached to objects of curation that record and conserve information on the uncovering, discovery, and disposition of found, donated, and acquired materials.

American was a shining star in the regularized touring programs organized weekly by the South African Chamber of Mines, staff members at E.R.P.M. remarked no memory or experience of tours before ours. And, in the days before our visit, we

Figure 2: Angelo Hostel 1992, our touring group

learned that they were indeed trying hard to assemble the specific equipment, properly sized and sexed, for each of the prospective visitors, all of them, or us, historians.

While E.R.P.M.'s operations had shrunk considerably from the heady years just a decade before--part of a large-scale workforce retrenchment across the South African industry--the historians found the tour an opportunity to see a goldmine "off-tour". While at Vaal Reefs the group of tourists--which numbered twenty-five--was carefully ushered from complex to complex by unquestionably articulate managers and underground bosses, the E.R.P.M. tour was a "go-anywhere" visit and the group was allowed to choose the sites in the complex it wished to visit (though the group might have been considered rather peculiar if, after all the advance effort of E.R.P.M. staff, it had chosen not to go underground to see the operations right up to the gold-bearing stope). The E.R.P.M. staff members who involved themselves in the visit were at least equally articulate, but they reflected none of the reconstructed discourse that characterized the oratory of the Vaal Reefs managers. At Vaal Reefs, one could hear discussions of "the qualities of Mozambique workers"; at E.R.P.M., one heard about "the ways Shangaan work".

For the touring historians, a further contrast between the two mine complexes lay in the respective senses of history of the two operations: at Vaal Reefs, there seemed to be no sense of past other than "before" and "after", "before" referring to the period before the effort to establish integrated facilities, such as the Oppenheimer Stadium and recreational complex; "after" referring to the last two to three years. Every facility at Vaal Reefs #9 seemed to be newly painted and the surrounds newly landscaped. Signs were freshly painted throughout the complex. No photographs or exhibits could be found on site referring to some earlier phase of development of #9 and of the surrounding company community.

At E.R.P.M. that September 3, 1992, history weighed heavily throughout the site; photographs of the founders and of the early white miners at E.R.P.M were to be found throughout the central offices. And the headquarters building itself was preserved as an important piece of early twentieth century corporate architecture. A long redundant counting room for the white gang bosses stood as a testimony to an older age of thoroughly routinized or naturalized paper work, no computerization, and full employment. The senior staff spoke of their hopes of doing something useful yet modest to mark the 100th anniversary of E.R.P.M. in the coming year. One room and an adjoining hallway at the E.R.P.M. site contained extraordinary photographs of elements of the work-process and of the compounds. The E.R.P.M. staff had also plumbed some exhibits from its "archives" (which were admittedly in wholesale disarray): documents, logs, accounting books, accident records, and photographs extending back to the early part of the century. Remarkably, E.R.P.M staff had inserted "post-it" notes into two adjacently positioned accident record books from the 1920s—the two books denoting a bureaucratic segregation--marking out for us the notorious discrepancies between "white" and "colored" accident reports both in terms of the associated detail and the compensation paid for similar injuries and loss of life. They invited the visiting historians back to open the archives further and to help in organizing and conserving E.R.P.M records.

Then, the personnel manager of E.R.P.M., who admitted that because of retrenchment he had little to do in the training and recruitment areas, arranged for Alphonse (a man between sixty and seventy years old perhaps--he was introduced to us as "a Shangaan"), for many years an *induna* at an E.R.P.M. hostel, to answer our questions on work, housing, migration "or anything else" in which we were interested. It was a most extraordinary "interview", seven historians--many steeped in oral history methodology--confronted suddenly with the "opportunity" to interview one African employee of E.R.P.M. on any subject we wanted.

But alas, we found many of our questions about the history of E.R.P.M., about the work-process historically, about ethnic tensions, about housing conditions, about migration, about management changes, about income, about the anxieties of the present era of retrenchment, not quite well expressed or well directed, but nevertheless referred to, or expropriated by, the white personnel manager who in the end answered most of our questions, while our "authentic African voice" on the mine fell increasingly silent. It was a situation both ambiguous and embarrassing as we simultaneously indulged our own mostly collective sense of "an old person, a source" and yet sought to find an early and appropriate moment for closure to relieve ourselves of the felt role of commissars at an inquisition.

For social historians of Africa of the early 1990s—our tour group was a fine instantiation of the cadre of the day--there was far greater interest in the history of the living conditions of the mine compound than in the work process of the stopes deep underground. The conditions experienced by laborers in the industrial and mining hostels of South Africa seemed to represent or express a highly redacted and intensified expression of industrial capitalism and racial domination characterizing the country from the late nineteenth century.[12] The changes in the hostel system were recognized as not only reflecting broader changes in the wider society but also constitutive of social and economic life beyond the compound. Appropriately, that day the touring historians sought to visit the living spaces of Vaal Reefs and E.R.P.M. While requests to visit a worker-hostel at Vaal Reefs #9 were met with, first, an embarrassed look, and then a negative, at E.R.P.M. we were--still later in the afternoon--able ourselves to find someone "to let us in" to an abandoned site: Angelo Hostel--part of the now closed Angelo mine--which was itself part of the E.R.P.M operation until just a few years before our visit. While the grounds of Angelo Hostel were surrounded by a fence with a locked gate, which a guard kindly opened for us, it was discovered by at least one of us that there were a number of open entrances to the old compound area; and several of us observed men taking short-cuts through the grounds.

Angelo Hostel presented itself to historians as an important site, a closed hostel that still contained some of the rubble of what was once a crowded ground. To the left of the entrance gates was located the "Angelo Cafe", its open door inviting the

[12] Moreover, the worker-hostel was the epiphenomenal site of the construction of gender, at least in conversations of the day concerning the intersections of political economy and masculinity. For those somewhat older in our group, rehearsed in the literatures on slavery and on the concentration camp, the mine hostel suggested a significant example of a “total institution” in which, via total control of the work and life of the person, the *self* disappears or is mortified. See, for example, Goffman 1961: 23, 46.

imagination of drinking and sociability. Tables and stools were located in the forecourt of the Cafe. A concrete latrine nearby retained signs of usage, stained walls and marks of dried feces. Administrative paper floated around the compound, torn, water-stained, marked up, many exemplars bearing the E.R.P.M. imprint, providing a vision of the administrative complexity upon which the operation of the compound was based. A stack of metal lockers provided glimpses of once secure and small spaces for the private, intimate, and valuable possessions of the hostel residents.

The doors of the rooms of the hostel--organized in lines and quadrants—were open, remarkably still hanging in their frames. While I took some photographs of the Cafe area and other parts of the compound, the rest of our group probed several of the residence rooms. Coming out of Room 49, Russell Ally, a historian then in the African Studies Program, University of the Witwatersrand, told me to look inside at the "calendar hanging on the wall open to June, 1989." I moved along into Room 49 and searched the walls unsuccessfully for the calendar. The room was designed for perhaps thirty workers; one could count the triple tiered concrete bunks situated around the room. At several of the bunks one could see small stickers and signs presumably left by the last residents of Room 49.

In the back center of the room, while looking at some of these small signs (and still searching for the wall calendar), I noticed an unusual and distinctive surface effect in the dust that covered the middle bunk in one tier. The sunlight, coming through a small opening on the wall, had produced a quite remarkable "topography" across the dusty slab. I tried to take a photograph of the effect, but the daylight was too low for my slow lens and slow film. I then pushed at one of these microscopic edges in the dust, and my finger slowly uncovered the surface of a 35-millimeter negative filmstrip. The distinctive surface effect was the result of a thick layer of dust covering a number of strips of film seemingly strewn across the bunk surface. I pulled from the dust a number of them, perhaps most or all, though the failing light made it difficult to know how many strips of negatives the bunk actually contained. (The bunk also contained a certificate of achievement in a charity run in the 1980s in Pretoria, though no name was on the certificate.) I flicked dust off one of the negative strips, held it up in front of the small window, and saw that the strip contained images that appeared to be portraits of men and women in a park. I wrapped all the negatives, most still thoroughly coated with dust, in a tissue and returned to the compound's courtyard. Near our van, parked at the compound gate, I showed the negatives and the certificate to the E.R.P.M. guard. With gestures, I indicated where I found them and that I wanted to take them along with me, and the guard indicated, similarly by gesture, that he could have no objection to my taking them away. In time, these gestures of hands and their meanings came to be a core piece of the question of *whose* materials these were and what the finder's responsibilities would be in respect to these negatives.

As we left the compound of Angelo Hostel in our van, we--this vanload of historians--sought to educe a history of Angelo Hostel from our observations. Apart from Russell Ally's remarks on the observed calendar (June, 1989), there was no other information observed in the compound that would indicate opening and closing dates to the compound's life. Obviously, the skeletal history of the compound could be directly reconstructed from corporate documentation--and perhaps

memory--located at the E.R.P.M. headquarters building where the van was headed. While the door of the headquarters building was open, we could not find anyone within its various offices. . .whether to ask someone about Angelo Hostel. . .or to express our thanks to the staff for a very informative day, for which we were all exceptionally grateful.

We returned to Johannesburg from E.R.P.M. and, in the hours immediately following, I sought to reconstruct a context and process for the strips of photographic negatives that had been found. What did I know, or believe I knew, at this one moment, before I had examined all the images?

First, there were about twenty strips of exposed color negative film in 35-mm medium, most of it 100 ASA film manufactured by the Fuji Corporation. Quickly viewed, the strips appeared to contain four images each. Without counting the strips (fearing that before they were properly dusted and cleaned they could be ruined in handling them), I guessed that there were about 80 to 85 images contained in the full corpus of the found strips. They had all been found on one bunk (the middle bunk on the left side of the middle pair of tiers of bunks jutting from the wall opposite the door). The bunk was located in Room 49, close by the Angelo Cafe, and only a few meters from what was, in 1992, the compound gate. The calendar in Room 49 offered a possible closing date of June, 1989.

Second, from viewing but a few images I felt certain that the photographs were taken by a weekend photographer, perhaps one who drew additional income from portraiture, and who himself was a E.R.P.M. worker living in Room 49, Angelo Hostel. I had just a few days before--on the previous Saturday--observed a photographer outside the Johannesburg Art Gallery, taking photographs of individuals and groups in the adjacent park.

Third, it seemed possible, or most likely, that the occupant of the middle bunk had kept the photographs under his mattress; and then, in sequence, Angelo mine was closed, Angelo Hostel workers were retrenched, the worker-photographer left the hostel (and probably E.R.P.M. employment) leaving behind the negatives; the hostel was closed; and then the mattresses were removed by the company; the negatives were, in the process, left strewn across the bunk; and three years of dust settled thickly upon them, mostly obscuring them from view to those who happened through the compound yard and the rooms (for whatever purpose) after the hostel was shut.[13]

Later in the evening of September 3, following a first effort at removing the dust, I examined the negatives at a table in Keith Breckenridge's flat in Yeoville, Johannesburg, where I was staying. Under a stronger light, I looked at the photographs as texts, attempting to read clues out of them that would enlarge upon and refine the speculations concerning the subject matter of the negatives and the manner of their production. One negative image provided a glimpse of a sign in the

[13] I am grateful to Shannon Lee Dawdy (2006) who, more recently, introduced me to the archaeological concept and sub-field of *taphonomy*, which engages the processes through which a record of archaeological evidence is—through, for example, disturbance—constituted as a "social process".

background indicating that the shot was taken at E.R.P.M. Another negative image showed a sign that read "City of Blantyre Car Park", indicating a Malawi site for that photo, or perhaps that strip of photos. At the same time my then student and host Keith Breckenridge sought to organize the strips in sequences, first in terms of frame number but then also based on reading the original manufacturing data along the edges of the films. His work disclosed that the found collection of negative strips comprised strips from different film stock. He also noted that the registration

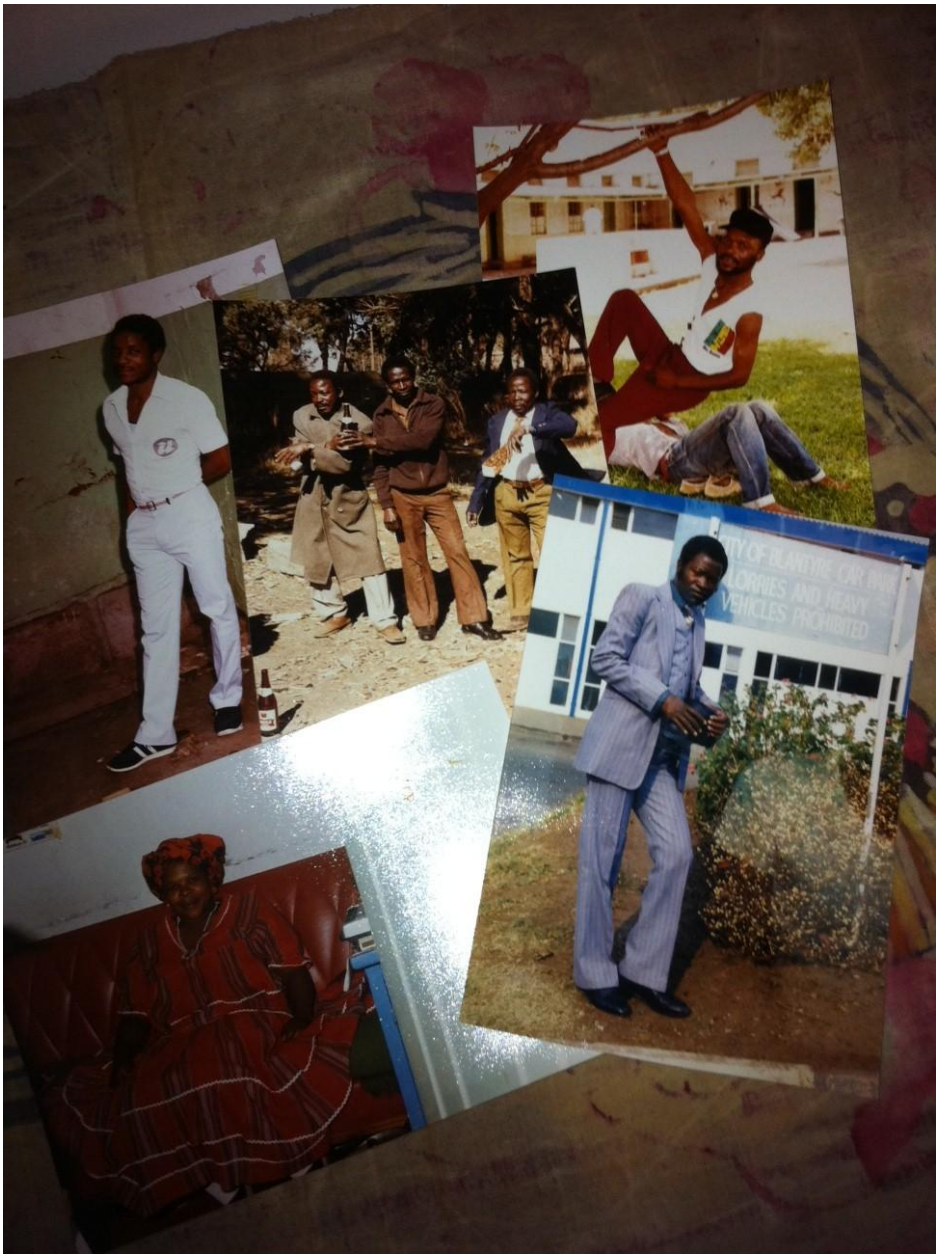

Figure 3: Some of the images

plates on one car in the photograph indicated that the photograph was taken no earlier than 1986 or 1987.

The next evening, at a dinner party, the Sowetan photographer Santu Mofokeng examined the negatives. He felt able to suggest a few things about them: the negatives were of good quality, suggesting a photographer who had good skill with his camera, getting the light settings right and wasting virtually no shots; the camera was almost certainly a single lens reflex (SLR) assuring that a skilled photographer would get a good focus on virtually every shot; the lens was probably in the 50-55mm range, a standard lens. Supporting my own earlier thought, he also felt they were taken by a weekend photographer who made extra income from taking portraits of people in the parks, at their residences, and so forth. There were many such photographers across urban South Africa; he indicated that he was once there himself, doing this kind of work to earn something of a living. Shrewdly, Santu noted that one indication that the individual was a professional drawing income from the work was that in virtually every instance in which there were two individuals pictured in one frame, there were two shots--making it possible for the photographer to sell or supply one print to each subject.

Santu's Dilemma

Amidst the noise of a dinner party, Santu and I discussed the negatives. I indicated an interest in the questions of "archaeology" in the photographs: they presented, on the one hand, an invitation to examine practices of representation negotiated between photographer and his subjects; on the other hand, they offered an opening to the forms, contexts, and moments of leisure and sociability among individuals and small groups across a number of sites, mostly (it seemed) in public spaces. But they also provided a challenge to the viewer to understand--through close and multiple readings of the images--the craft of the photographer, and the particular circumstances, meanings, and interests which connected the life of a man in the hostel and on the mine and his life as a photographer.

We also spoke briefly about the ethical and moral issues surrounding working with the Room 49 negatives which, it needn't have been remarked, were produced by another individual, who had presumably maintained possession of the negatives until, almost certainly, he was with his colleagues evicted from the Angelo quarters. And of course if we were right that these photographs had in a sense been commissioned or underwritten by the subjects, then they too retained an interest in the images of themselves.

When I returned to Evanston from South Africa, I had the negatives professionally cleaned and printed in 5" by 7" format. The enlarged prints permitted one to make out a good deal of additional detail. The color prints allowed one to note that the photographs were taken in different seasons. Some were taken at least as far away as Blantyre, Malawi, but some were taken "as near" as the forecourt of Angelo Hostel, within a few meters of Room 49. One is taken of a figure in a bunk—it could have been in Room 49. Some appear to have been taken in the grounds surrounding Angelo Hostel at a time when the grounds were well kept. Beer bottles appear in many of the images. An observer with better eyes than mine was able to read a headline—"Attorney [Rodney] Bekwa struck off the rolls"--on a crumpled yet reasonably fresh daily newspaper, *The Sowetan*. This offered an opportunity to date more closely the moment of at least several of the images. A few pictures show

business signage in the background, and I was able to establish some more information about these sites by phoning the numbers on the signs, which established premises in Boksburg. There is a Ford vehicle with a 1985/86

Figure 4: Some more images

registration; a table aside a leatherette sofa offers up a jar of Vaseline and a cassette tape recorder; another picture includes a child's toy from Fisher-Price. And some of the photographs reflect scenes recognizable within the E.R.P.M. property and within and just outside the gates of Angelo Hostel.

In early 1992—a few months before I found the Angelo negatives--Santu Mofokeng was visiting Northwestern University. He spoke of his professional photographic practice in Soweto having two orbits. On the one hand, there was an unending demand outside South Africa for his photographs of violence, conflict, desolation, and want, but neither Sowetans nor the wider South African public were interested in such photography, recognizing the glut of these images and of the settings, events, and experiences recorded. On the other hand, Sowetans valued his family portraits and, as subjects, insisted that these conform to the subjects' idea of what a "proper" and "natural" representation of a family grouping was, seeking a century-old mode of domestic and family portraiture. Such pictures would hardly make sense to those outside South Africa. Santu's reflections echoed the testing poetics and politics of the Depression era documentarians in the United States, and of their Depression era subjects and audiences as well. Santu did not use the expression *commodification* but he was speaking about the mining of certain types of

images by those outside the community. . .mining them for their own, rather than the subjects', uses. Santu was clear that many in the community had no interest in these representations of themselves as struggling victims.

During the visit to Northwestern, Santu himself presented a series of "found" portrait images from South Africa in a show that I helped hang at the Institute for Advanced Study and Research in the African Humanities in Evanston.[14] These found portrait photographs were, in his exhibit, paired with his own photographs of Soweto. For members of the Institute and visitors, the display invoked discussions of the contrasts between the naturalized and domestic portraiture in the found photographs of black South Africans and the then present and recent photographs of Soweto and Sowetans which made their markets in the images of poverty, struggle and violence. . .far from the images in Santu's found images. My own reception of Santu's remarks was informed by the reflections of other artists, directors, and filmmakers, visiting Chicago from Africa, who also spoke of a (typically "frustrating") bifurcated global economy of African arts. Very dramatically, Kofi Agovi spoke of reading his poetry in Lake Forest, Illinois, to groups of less than a dozen, while having audiences in the thousands at home in Ghana. He, as well as others, spoke of having to offer their presentations within theoretical framings in America unnecessary and/or unwanted at home. Such discrepancies were constantly "on the table" during discussions through the years of active work of the Institute at Evanston.[15]

An Economy of Images

In January, 2001, Donald Donham and Patricia Hayes were in Ann Arbor, Michigan, participating in a conference on "the imagination of South Africa" organized by University of Michigan graduate students. Patricia Hayes moved us through the complex ethical ground of working with photographs of a southern Kalahari woman /Khanako that came out of a 1936-7 research project organized by Donald Bain. In a tour de force of historical research, Hayes, working with Ciraj Rassool, showed how these images of /Khanako have circulated from the 1930s into the 1990s, moving through a variety of contexts, marking out intense and numbing contradictions regarding the production, circulation, and usages of images of others.

---

[14] I am grateful to Adam Ashforth for introducing me to Santu Mofokeng in 1992—Adam helped bring Santu to the Institute in Evanston; to Santu for introducing me to his work, and also, during my first visit to South Africa, for taking me on his own tour of Soweto; and to Patricia Hayes, who, over several conversations has helped sustain attention to the growing body of work, and growing complexity of the work, that Santu has been producing in recent years.

[15] In an important 2009 article based on research with and on Santu Mofokeng, Patricia Hayes shows that Santu Mofokeng's views *then* were more complex and nuanced than my 1992 notes of his remarks reflect, while suggesting as well that his photography was hardly disabled by *the dilemma*. See also, Donald Campbell's commentary (2009) published alongside the Hayes article. The work of Hayes and Campbell (and see also Jon Soske [2010]) raises the question of whether the conundrum—the split between "struggle photography" and other photographic work among South African photographers—wasn't itself a trope or commodity that circulated broadly, masking the complexities and variations in the photographic economy of the late Apartheid period. Soske calls it "an art world cliché."

Donham's presentation focused on his research on a conflict in a Rand mine, indeed the same E.R.P.M. mine.[16] To illustrate the setting, Donham showed slides drawn from a series of photographs, mainly of miners in an E.R.P.M. hostel—architecturally replicative of Angelo Hostel. The photographs, in black and white, were taken by Santu Mofokeng! And these photographs of the E.R.P.M. hostel, taken perhaps five years after the closing of Angelo Hostel, reflect no resolution of Mofokeng's 1992 dilemma, between the two competing modes of representation he outlined at Northwestern. Rather they bear the very sensibility and ethic of the documentarists' project, to produce a reality both haunted and haunting, as expressed in this iconic quote, attributed to documentarian Pare Lorentz:

> group after group of wretched human beings, starkly asking for so little, and wondering what they will get. Never are they vicious, never depraved, never responsible for their misery. (Stott 1973, 58-59)

The starkness effected in Mofokeng's black and white images, the scenes crowded with men, the absence of repose, the sense of pain through the entire work-process, even the feeling of intrusiveness of the camera, dramatize the sense of confinement and oppression reproducing once again the strongest and darkest characterizations of the mine-labor and mine-compound system of South Africa. . .yet these are images produced for a research project that was not of his own making, and a research project that produced views that in a sense had already been seen. . .and many times over. In a sense, what was being produced, via repetition, were not so much images but rather the subordination of complex and variegated social experience (and one might say in "living color") to the format of the black-and-white documentary project.

More recently, a somewhat comparable effect has been noted with the pilgrimage to Detroit, Michigan, of photographers and filmmakers from around the world to document the bleakest of urban landscapes, the dramatically empty spaces, buildings in decay and abandoned, factories shut and in decay, burned out houses, and broken neighborhoods, which a source for *Vice Magazine* reporter Thomas Morton has termed "ruin porn". . . though Morton's point in his own reporting from Detroit is not so much to mark the saturation, though he certainly does this, but rather to detail the ways the documentary work is purposely corrupted, distorted, and misleading to produce images of profound urban devastation.

> The problem is it's reached the point where the potential for popularity or "stickiness" or whatever you're supposed to call it now is driving the coverage more than any sort of newsworthiness of the subject. There's a total gold-rush mentality about the D right now, and all the excitement has led to some real lapses in basic journalistic ethics and judgment. Like the French filmmaker who came to Detroit to shoot a documentary about all the deer and pheasants and other wildlife that have been returning to the city. After several days without seeing a wild one he had to be talked out of renting a trained fox to run through the streets for the camera. Or the Dutch crew who decided to go explore the old project

[16] Forthcoming, 2011.

> tower where Smokey Robinson grew up and promptly got jacked for their thousands of dollars' worth of equipment. The flip side is a simultaneous influx of reporters who don't want anything to do with the city but feel compelled by the times to get a Detroit story under their belts, like it's the journalistic version of cutting a grunge record. [17]

In 1992, in Evanston, the point Santu was making—and he was raising these questions for a year-long seminar on "the politics of representation"—was not so easy to make, or accept, for he had an audience whose attentions to South Africa were dramatically shaped, if not also sharpened, by those images of poverty, struggle, and violence, such as have been so prolifically mined in Detroit in the first decade of this century. That black South Africans would hold dear portraits of kin seemed not so strange—after all, distinctions between private and public spheres had currency. In 1992, what was provocative was Santu's speaking "from the inside", so to speak, as he asserted how members of the "community" had little interest in the representations of their victimhood. He was telling us that the most precious referents *we* had to "the struggle" in South Africa were rather more like tools of further victimization than documentary records of such. His position confounded notions of "solidarity" while also laying out the situation of the photographer, himself, within a conflicted, doubled, economy of images that seemed to offer no third possibility. Those dark and disturbing photographs from the Apartheid era could never be seen the same way. The tension that Santu's position evoked would anticipate the themes of discussion of Zwelethu Mthethwa's large-scale color photographs of social life in post-Apartheid South Africa. Mthethwa would seem to offer a resolution of Santu's 1992 dilemma.[18]

"The gentlest of predations"

But what of the Room 49 Angelo Hostel photographs, in color, taken perhaps in jointly enacted productions between worker-photographers and their subjects, in and around the hostel and the E.R.P.M. site and vicinity? What do we make of this opportunity to consider the visual constructions of leisure, recreation, and sociability in the context of the living and working regimen of a South African mine, to see the

---

[17] From August, 2009, *Vice Magazine:* http://www.viceland.com/int/v16n8/htdocs/something-something-something-detroit-994.php?page=1. See also, http://www.onthemedia.org/transcripts/2009/09/25/06. In a recent piece, "Motown or Ghostown? Ruin Porn in Detroit," Eli Rosenberg inventories some of the recent ventures, responses, and debates relating to the imaging of Detroit. http://www.theatlanticwire.com/opinions/view/opinion/Motown-or-Ghostown-Ruin-Porn-In-Detroit-6632. Jennifer Guerra, on a recent radio report, surveys the same ground: http://www.michiganradionews.org/post/photographing-so-called-ruins-detroit. But she also introduces a group-- http://www.cantforgetthemotorcity.com/--that is attempting to answer, via photography, the ruins trope. On the first page of their site is a color photo of a young man and woman in an embrace with a petrol station in the background.

[18] http://www.aperture.org/exposures/?p=6468. I thank Patricia Hayes for having introduced me, in 2001, to Mthetwa's photographs. In a certain way, but more from an interior and an intimate South African position, Jacob Dlamini 2009 has entered this conversation regarding the then and now, the authentic and inauthentic, and the vectors of memory and myth across the transition from Apartheid. I am most appreciative of Stephen Sparks and Nafisa Essop Sheik for putting this book in my hands.

mine-system as polychromatic? Do we have in this juxtaposition an opening to questions of representational authority? Have the subjects in the Room 49 photographs already intervened into Santu Mofokeng's dilemma, shifting the ground toward new ranges of images—for example, the heralded color images produced by Zelethu Mthethwa[19]--not clearly conforming to the naturalized genres of individual and group domestic portraiture and unsettling the commodification of stark images of oppressive experience? In Ann Arbor, Donham affirmed that these were Santu Mofokeng's photographs, not his own. But what does it mean to associate images with and not with a scholar, with and not with a photographer?

In a mid-1970s essay, Susan Sontag wrote that

> For more than a century, photographers have been hovering about the oppressed, in attendance at scenes of violence—with a spectacularly good conscience. Social misery has inspired the comfortably-off with the urge to take pictures, the gentlest of predations, in order to document a hidden reality, that is, a reality hidden from them [the photographers]. (1989: 55)

"The gentlest of predations. . .". . .Sontag must not have noticed the deep pain evinced in eastern Kentucky surrounding the documentarists of American poverty, as drawn out by video-maker Elizabeth Barret in her 2000 video work *Stranger with a Camera*, which concerns the killing of Canadian filmmaker Hugh O'Connor. In 1967, a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation documentary crew led by O'Connor traveled to eastern Kentucky to record what they saw as "appalling poverty". O'Connor, with long experience in documenting the Third World, was seeking to record the other side of prosperity in the United States. According to his CBC producer Colin Low, they wanted "to show the contrast between the lives of miners and the American dream." Late one day, as the crew drove through the small community of Jeremiah, Kentucky, O'Connor found what others later called a "photo opportunity". . .Mason Eldridge, a miner, black from coal dust, had just come home to his family from the mine. Before Eldridge could wash up and change his clothes, the crew asked him to sit in his porch rocker with a child in arms. The crew did some shots of Eldridge and one of his children on his lap, on the porch of his dilapidated rental house. Down the road, Hobart Ison, the owner of the rental property, heard that a crew was "taking pictures of your houses and naked children." Ison drove over to his property, climbed out of his car, pulled out a gun and clicked off several shots, hitting the camera and then blowing a hole in Hugh O'Connor's side. O'Connor died on the spot. . .Ison—suddenly a hero to many in the community--went through two trials, eventually pleaded guilty to a reduced charge of murder and served but one year of his ten year sentence. Ison never publicly uttered any remorse for the killing. His lawyer later related that Ison's view was "I shot the man for what he was doing. . .setting up circumstances of ridicule."

In an extraordinary documentary released in late 2000, via POV (Public Broadcasting's Point of View series) and Appalshop (a progressive arts organization based in Whitesburg, Kentucky), Elizabeth Barret has assembled the story of the

[19] 2010.

encounter in 1967 of these two men, one with a gun and the other with a camera. At the time of the killing, Barret was a high school student in the area, a candidate for homecoming queen. She recalls in her video that on hearing of O'Connor's murder she was merely worried that the world would think of her people as hillbillies or violent. Only later, as she learned more about O'Connor's death, and about documentary projects as a member of the Appalshop group, did she come to recognize the layered complexities of the story of Hobart Ison's shooting of Hugh O'Connor. Her film weaves together her own interviews of a number of people, including witnesses of the shooting and relatives of O'Connor and Ison, as well as the commentary of Calvin Trillin (who wrote an essay on O'Connor's death and Ison's trial in *The New Yorker* in 1969), and pieces of a considerable body of documentary footage from film and television projects which attempted, from the 1950s, to represent to the nation and the world the appalling conditions of life and work in the eastern Kentucky coalfields. Here was CBS's Charles Kuralt, visiting a rural schoolhouse on a muddy road for a piece on "Christmas in Appalachia." Here was BBC following around crusader and author of *Night Comes to the Cumberland* Harry Caudill of Whitesburg, the county seat of Letcher County, which Elizabeth Barret had come to call home (Appalshop was then located just across the street from the County Courthouse and Harry Caudill's law office). Here was CBC, filming another piece in eastern Kentucky several years before Hugh O'Connor arrived, and there were the surviving shots of the O'Connor crew's work. Here was the television news footage of President and Mrs. Johnson's 1966 War on Poverty tours of eastern Kentucky. Here was a National Council of Churches documentary film, and another produced by National Educational Television. Here was footage of Robert Kennedy on a poverty tour of Hazard, Kentucky.

"An Unasked Question"

> Between me and the other world there is an ever unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy, by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. How does it feel to be a problem?
>
> -- W. E. B. DuBois (1903, 1)

Elizabeth Barret's *Stranger* enters DuBois's ethical challenge not with an answer but rather with a narrative that suggests how such a question lives in the world among those who cannot "rightly" ask the question and among those who cannot or will not answer it. *Stranger* is a well-told story of the saturation of visual representation of poverty, not simply a "harvest of shame" but a harvest of images that shamed, and it is a story of a confrontation between on the one hand a filmmaker who believed that there was something still powerful to say with a camera about the poverty of the region and on the other a local property owner who saw the filmmakers "making fun of their values and their history," a man who worked perhaps from, as Barret speaks of her own stance, "an instinct to protect my community from those who would harm it."

Richard Avedon's *In the American West* began its exhibitory tour in the autumn of 1985, beginning at the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth.[20] Every site on the tour was well attended but Avedon's were necessarily positively received. There was a sense that interventions were required to protect or redeem Avedon's subjects, if not also the region of the West, from what were seen as Avedon's abusive representations.[21] Fred McDarrah published a review in December 1985 that

> There is something extremely cruel, even vicious, about posing a spastic mental patient, a crippled farmer, a one-armed knife scarred prisoner, a pathetic alcoholic derelict, all for the sake of producing sensational portraits. This is a sick collection that expresses Avedon's inner fears and terrifying nightmares.[22]

In August 1986, a Scottsdale (Arizona) newpaper published an "open letter to Avedon":

> Apparently, you had a great deal of fun slumming in the West and taking full advantage of your carefully selected freaks, attempting thereby to rob them of their dignity and by extension to ridicule the West. (Livingston 1994, 87)

On the other hand, in a preface to the 2005 republication of *In the American West*, John Rohrbach, senior curator of photographs at the Amon Carter Museum, pointed out that

> As a measure of the portraits' success, when Avedon shared his results with the people splayed across these pages, many of them voiced appreciation and pride. Together, the photographer and his subjects had succeeded in delivering piercing looks at the wear of life's struggles. (Avedon 2005)

Hesitation

As is clear, Elizabeth Barret has more to say than simply situating this as a conflict between insiders and outsiders. In looking across the work of the documentarists, she relates that some of the filmmakers "mined the images the way others mined the coal." She explores the ethical and political space suggested by the way in which many members of Ison's community rallied around him, likening what he did to "a favor". What she herself was bringing to her project was a license, afforded by her upbringing in the area and her Appalshop connections, to claim the

---

[20] Avedon's five year project for *American West* began with the sponsorship of the Museum, to which he committed himself to donating the original negatives and a set of prints. *American West* closes with an extended journal-like essay by Laura Wilson, entitled "Background" which provides views of the backstage of the Avedon project's search for subjects. Wilson states that she was hired "to do the research for the project and to help uncover photographic possibilities."

[21] It should be noted that Avedon visited each exhibition venue, helped hang the photographs, and opened himself to meetings with press and public in all the cities on the tour.

[22] Quoted in Livingston 1994, 87.

authority—and also the conflicted role—of the insider. As she looked into the worlds of O'Connor and Ison, she also saw herself as something of a "stranger": "Hobart Ison had killed a man who came on to his land with a camera; now we were the ones with the camera."

Barret's work is in a sense a progress in ethics. Reflexively, she asks some fairly straightforward questions: "what is the difference between the way people see their own community and the way others see it? Who gets to tell the community's story?" And then she pushes the questions into more difficult areas: "What are the story-tellers' responsibilities? Can filmmakers show poverty without shaming [the] people they represent? What are the responsibilities of any of us who take the images of other people and put them to our own uses?" Perhaps the most vexing challenge to the documentary project, and perhaps more broadly to the anthropological project, is rendered by Ronald Polly, Hobart Ison's lawyer:

> It doesn't matter whether they intended to ridicule, it is how it came out to the people who were being filmed and even if the people who were being filmed didn't recognize it, because they didn't feel the sense of pride that Hobart Ison did, that still doesn't justify it or authorize it. . .what went on that day was not all Hobart Ison's fault.

Of course, Elizabeth Barret's shrewd remark about the mining of images and Hugh O'Connor's destroyed body and camera and Susan Sontag's gaze at the "gentlest of predations" are connected to a deeper history of documentary photography. Indeed, in *Stranger* one finds intertextual moments stretching back to the 1930s documentarists in the materials that Barret sifted in assembling her documentary. The images of Kentuckian Goldie Johnson in a 1964 documentary recall Dorothea Lange's portrait of Florence Thompson taken in a California migrant labor camp in March 1936, which itself was the iconic representation for the entire corpus of the Federal Resettlement Administration and Farm Security Administration of the Depression era. In an essay published in 1988, the historian Lawrence Levine reviewed the history of the Federal Depression-era photographic projects. Levine shows six images of Florence Thompson, and we are led to understand that the one photograph, the iconic figure since known as "Migrant Mother", most fully and powerfully represented the images of the "haunted—and haunting—central figure and its frightened, helpless children" (1988: 16) an image that came to stand for an entire generation of loss, of the hungry, and of those displaced by the Depression.[23] Levine quotes from different critics who have examined the documentarists' corpus. One, William Stott, held that we actually see very little of these people. "They come to us only in images meant to break our heart. They come to us helpless, guiltless as children, and though helpless, yet still unvanquished." (Stott 1973: 58-9) Hugh O'Connor's frame of Mason Eldridge that late afternoon in 1967 was clearly joined at the hip to Lange's images of Florence Thompson. Such images flow into and out of other venues. The same "haunted—and

[23] Hariman and Lucaites (2007: 49-67) look at how the "Migrant Mother" image achieved *iconic* status, how it has travelled and been appropriated through a range of contexts. In their study of iconic photographs and public culture, the "Migrant Mother" image is appropriated (six times over) into the book's cover.

haunting" figure of the impoverished mother, as in the documentary images of Goldie Johnson and Florence Thompson, is to be found in the characterization of Loretta Lynn's (or Sissy Spacek's) mother (played by folk singer Phyllis Boyens) in the 1980 Academy Award winning film *Coal Miner's Daughter*.

Like Barret, Lawrence Levine does not leave us with a simple story. Levine points out how those within the Federal projects struggled to maintain an affinity with the ethic of the "Migrant Mother" against the interests of some of the documentarists including Arthur Rothstein and Lange herself to develop more polychromatic repertoires of images of America in the Depression era. But those images that used a camera stance from below to show esteem and stature, and those images that used posture to underline respect for the dignity of labor, were seen by some as of the Federal managers as diluting the project of representing hardship and doing so as a political project. Levine relates the story of one segment of James Agee and Walker Evans' 1941 *Let us now praise famous men*, in which Evans and Agee used photographs of a tired and unshaven Floyd Burroughs in overalls and tattered workshirt but not a picture that Burroughs wanted them to use of himself with his wife, sister-in-law, and children in a group portrait with everyone appearing clean, well-dressed, and content. Levine says, "It was a classic family pose but not one congenial to the purposes of the book from which it was excluded." (Levine 1988: 21) One writer, cited by Levine (1988: 21-22), said that, in the family portrait, this man "needs no one's pity", nor did his family, which showed their ability to be "this clean without running water or sanitary facilities, this decently dressed on this little money, this self-respecting in economic servitude, this gentle despite their hardships." (Stott 1977: 286-87).

On the opening page of the essay that frames his 1936 southern U.S. tenant farmer documentary project with Walker Evans, James Agee acknowledged, with an awkward combination of critique, humility, and condescension—rehearsing views that Hobart Ison (in 1967), Avedon detractors (1985 and 1986), and Santu Mofokeng (in 1992), were offering--the ways in which the global demand for certain images extends victimization.

> It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying, that it could occur to an association of human beings drawn together through need and chance and for profit into a company, an organ of journalism, to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science, of "honest journalism". . .[24]

Agee's text is in an important sense a meditation on *hesitation*. As he introduces the tenant farmers and their circumstances (and also his own living conditions in settling in with them—and he an Walker Evans were only with the farmers for eight weeks), Agee arrests time to describes small things and little moments. He relates profound

[24] Agee and Evans, 1941, 5. This "organ of journalism" was *Fortune*.

regrets at interrupting the everyday. He lingers over sounds within and around the shack.

> Ultimately, it is intended that this record and analysis be exhaustive, with no detail, however trivial it may seem, left untouched, no relevancy avoided, which lies within the power of remembrance to maintain, of the intelligence to perceive, and of the spirit to persist in. (Agee 1931, x)

Detail after detail, fields, crops, barns, rooms, the contents of drawers, the objects on a mantle, are subjected to endless narration and description as if Walker Evans could never seize any of this in mere photographs. He is within but constantly aware that he is outside. It is an unsettled position full of uncertainty, of hesitation, of efforts to both mark and undercut the distinctions in power between the visitors and those whose lives and tribulations they have come to record. For Agee, this is not the Avedon trope of authority and subject, but rather what he refers to as "an effort in human actuality"

> in which the reader is no less centrally involved than the authors and those of whom they tell. Those who wish actively to participate in the subject, in whatever degree of understanding, friendship, or hostility, are invited to address the authors in care of the publisher. (1941, xi)

For Agee, even "the reader" is not a settled category. He offered, in his introduction to the book, that the text was

> . . .written with reading aloud[25] in mind. That cannot be recommended; but it is suggested that the reader attend with his ear to what he takes off the page: for variations of tone, pace, shape, and dynamics are here particularly unavailable to the eye along, and with their loss, a good deal of meaning escapes. (xi)

In 1992, I opened a correspondence with staff at E.R.P.M. seeking to identify the Room 49 photographer, with a further interest in opening a correspondence with him about his work and about the recovery of his negatives that I have hoped to be able to return to him. I pursued this off-and-on for a couple of years but without success. Paradoxically, the present fact that these are simultaneously my photographs and not my photographs raises the most important question regarding these found negatives. . .the question of rights and property in the negatives, connecting issues of privacy and private property within a once occupied and now long abandoned industrial hostel to issues concerning artists' rights. Here, the practices of reading and re-representing found materials—the archaeology of "the everyday" through observing, analyzing, and using the images of others—are not innocent.

---

[25] In a "foreword" to the 1960 edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Walker Evans offered a remembrance of James Agee in 1936, when they undertook their project in Alabama. "The talk, in the end, was his great distinguishing feature. [Agee] talked his prose, Agee prose. It was hardly a twentieth-century style; it had Elizabethan colors. It rolled just as it reads; but he made it sound natural—something just there in the air like any other part of the world." (vi)

Hesitation keeps open the question of the performance of this writer's responsibilities relating to the "finding" and "removing" of the Angelo negatives from the site of their discovery, and of making use of them at different points in time.[26] Hesitation refuses the opportunities afforded by the judicial position that Hobart Ison was simply guilty of murdering a filmmaker who came onto his property. It makes possible a layered and productive re-hearing of Santu Mofokeng's dilemma. Hesitation offered James Agee moment to rework his commission, to talk and to write at length without achieving a closure, to find an ethical position through stopping to view, and to try to speak of, the most innocent things. Hesitation allows an image to take hold of us, not necessarily through the *punctum* of Barthes, but in different ways, through questions about the production and circulation of the images, about the ethical status of the work of the photograph, about the possibilities that others have different or additional readings and responses.[27] The image may offer itself as a sort of fixture, open to (replicable, testable?) close analysis and thickened description, but it is the uncertainty of the representational project, its unreconcilability in its web of economy, that sustains the possibility of that image's continuing work, of its living in the world.

Where do we stand, to look at these photographs, among the positions of Hugh O'Connor, seeking one more set of powerful images to construct an argument; of Hobart Ison, who shot a man for the images he was recording, setting up, as he said, "circumstances of ridicule"—in a situation where "they didn't want you on their land without their permission"; of Elizabeth Barret, "what are the responsibilities of any of us who take the images of other people and put them to our own uses?"; of the CBC producer Colin Low, "A camera is like a gun, invasive, exploiting, not always true"[28]; of the 1992 Santu Mofokeng trying to find a professional practice between two powerfully established modes of representation; of a worker-photographer who may have thought a reasonably secure site for things of value was constituted in the space between his mattress and the middle concrete slab in a tier of concrete bunks?

---

[26] Again, I am grateful to Gretchen Elsner-Sommer for foregrounding this question, and also to Lorena Rizzo who in a note has sought to place this "find", this claim of a "find", in a broader setting of archaeological and other removals of "images, objects, left-overs, and belongings" from sites such as Angelo.

[27] I am thinking here of Danny Herwitz's remarks, in an Archive and Public Culture Workshop in Cape Town, on the profound importance of "stages" in working through questions, issues, and problems. This can be glimpsed in the way Elizabeth Barret works through a narrative of ethics in her search for ways to represent the murder of Colin Low; and it is most clear in how Odette attends to the problem of her Editor's presuppositions in Jean-Luc Godard's *Comment ça va?*, discussed briefly below. One may see it in the progress of Santu Mofokeng's work, and also in the ways that folks have learned to "read" that work. And Danny is emphatically correct in identifying the importance of stages in the "hesitation" that I have attempted to make productive in my serial engagements (at nine-year intervals approximately) with the strips of negatives found in the dust of Room 49.

[28] One has to note Avedon's remark, in his Foreword to *American West:* "All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth." In his 1978 film *Comment ça va?* Jean-Luc Godard offers a peroration on the fictions of the photographic image. See Cohen 2009, 281-84.

A Republic of the Staircase

As Hayes has shown in her 2009 essay in *History and Theory* it is hardly possible to study—to work toward understanding—the trajectory of Santu Mofokeng's photography without reference to a shifting visual economy, without reference to Santu's own and specific appreciation of this shifting global economy of images. In 1992, Santu Mofokeng complicated his project. . .one might say that complicating his photography was his project. In doing so, he necessarily introduced "the third thing", an economy of images that conditioned the possibilities of his work and the reception of it. As with Agee, the listener and reader are implicated, held to have responsibilities in the disposition of these questions of how representation works. Elizabeth Barret, through resisting resolution, through hesitation to resolve core questions of insider/outsider, the exploitation of images, or the guilt or innocence of Hobart Ison, has constituted a third position on the image that is neither that of the operator, spectator, or spectrum (to hang onto Barthes still one more time). . .though in constituting this position she is motivating all three of these and no one of them. But again, Barret presses home the question of the responsibilities of those who take pictures and those who put them to use.

More obviously, the critical locations of interpreters such as Patricia Hayes and Roland Barthes constitute a third space that is neither one of production or consumption of the photograph but nevertheless becomes a piece of visual economy as images and critical literatures circulate, draw additional readings, and then take on meaning. A more open sense of *curation* would hold that all those engaged with images, things, and ideas—from first touching them, holding them in our fingers, to organizing their analysis, conversation, exhibition, and critique, to participating in the debates circulating around them. . .even in hesitating to do so—are engaged with responsibilities and duties that are associated with those engagements. In *Comment ça va?*, Jean-Luc Godard creates a stage for examining the indeterminacies of texts and images, yet also the responsibilities of those whose fingers touch them. Here we have the setting of a Communist Party publishing group in Paris in which the Editor (Godard) is attempting to produce a realist video documentary on how a socialist press operation actually works. The film is largely a cross-examination of the Editor, of his presuppositions and practices, by an assistant, Odette, who counters, interrogates, virtually everything that the Editor attempts to introduce into the video and every defense he presents for doing whatever. Like Agee, Godard's Odette makes central the responsibilities running among author, subject, and audience. With a preternatural sense of a visual economy, Odette connects different layers and multiple sites of production, with a recognition of the simultaneities and the indeterminacies of production and representation. In the face of everything that the Editor has brought to this project of documentation, Odette rejects objectivity as "a crime" and presses the Editor to accept that "technique", celebrated as central to the practice of professionals, is something that does profound violence to knowledge. From the site of the left-wing publishing house, the Godard film, via Odette, constructs an alternative space, and an alternative radical politics of representation, interpretation, theorization, and narration. (Cohen 2009, 281-

85) Intervening in a naturalized narrative, much like J. M. Coetzee's introduction of Susan Barton to *Foe* (1986), Odette is Donald Hall's "Third Thing" making possible a way of living, Hall's rapture, upturning, or suspending, authority's privilege. There is no story without the Third, only authority.

On April 20, 1862, *The New York Times,* published a remarkable review of an exhibit of photographs of a Civil War battlefield at the Matthew Brady gallery on Broadway.[29] The review opened with a poetics of everyday Broadway in the context of a civil war at hand producing its casualties.

> The living that throng Broadway care little perhaps for the Dead at Antietam, but we fancy they would jostle less carelessly down the great thoroughfare, saunter less at their ease, were a few dripping bodies, fresh from the field, laid along the pavement. There would be a gathering up of skirts and a careful picking of way; conversation would be less lively, and the general air of pedestrians more subdued. As it is, the dead of the battle-field come up to us very rarely, even in dreams. We see the list in the morning paper at breakfast, but dismiss its recollection with the coffee. There is a confused mass of names, but they are all strangers; we forget the horrible significance that dwells amid the jumble of type. The roll we read is being called over in Eternity, and pale, trembling lips are answering to it. Shadowy fingers point from the page to a field where even imagination is loth to follow. Each of these little names that the printer struck off so lightly last night, whistling over his work, and that we speak with a clip of the tongue, represents a bleeding mangled corpse. It is a thunderbolt that will crash into some brain—a dull, dead, remorseless weight that will fall upon some heart, straining it to breaking. There is nothing very terrible to us, however, in the list, though our sensations might be different if the newspaper carrier left the names on the battle-field and the bodies at our doors instead. We recognize the battle-field as a reality but it is a remote one.[30]

---

[29] Franny Nudelman (2004) has drawn attention to this newspaper account, or review, of this exhibition at Brady's New York gallery of battle-field photographs taken at Antietam just one month earlier. She quotes only briefly, 106-7, the section of the review transcribed here, but also see 113-15 and 199-200 where she reflects on how the photographs might have been read by their contemporary viewers and also on how this might be difficult to extract from such newspaper accounts. I acknowledge with appreciation Franny's drawing me to the original *Times* article and for her thoughts on the history of photographic representation of war dead.

[30] The extracts here attempt a close transcription of the digitized pages of the *Times Archive.* The images of the original are imperfect, the original pages damaged. What is presented here is a close approximation of a portion of the original.
http://www.nytimes.com/1862/10/20/news/brady-s-photographs-pictures-of-the-dead-at-antietam.html?scp=1&sq=Pictures of the Dead at Antietam&st=p&pagewanted=1

The reviewer then shifts his position of observation towards the doorway to Brady's gallery:

> Mr. BRADY has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our door-yards and along the streets, he has done something very like it. At the door of his gallery hangs a little placard, "The Dead of Antietam." Crowds of people are constantly going up the stairs; follow them, and you find them bending over photographic views of that fearful battle-field, taken immediately after the action. Of all the objects of horror one would think the battle-field should stand preeminent, that it should bear away the pall of repulsiveness. But, on the contrary, there is a terrible fascination about it that draws one near these pictures, and makes him loath to leave them. You will see hushed, revered groups standing around these weird copies of carnage, bending down to look in the pale faces of the dead, changed by the strange spell that dwells in dead men's eyes. It seems somewhat singular that the same sun that looked down on the faces of the slain, blistering them, blotting out from the bodies all semblance to humanity and hastening corruption, should have thus caught their features upon canvas and given them perpetuity for ever. But so it is. . .

For some, this is a remarkable moment, one of the earliest photographic exhibitions on the carnage of war (which of course will descend over the next century and a half through vast archives and an ennobled profession of war photographers as well as rich debates on the truth and fiction of the documentation of war, death, and despair). It seems a marvel in the midst of the Civil War that publics could visit the Brady gallery in New York, view an exhibition of battlefield dead, and find a review of the exhibit and the public's reactions to it on the front page of *The New York Times* the next day. For the present, what is remarkable here is that the *Times* reviewer does not—in a certain sense—even see Brady's photographs, at least specifically. He (I assume this is a male) attends at least as much to life as to death. What is taken in and represented is the practice, energy, economy of photographic spectatorship, not simply in standing in front of a photograph, but more so in the efforts—ascending stairs, bending over, experiencing the congestion of attendance to these deathly images. . .all this a part of the production of these images. What the *Times* reviewer insists is that his readers not lose the phenomenon of attending to the exhibit in taking in the images of the fallen dead at Antietam. And amidst other news of war and city, on the very next day, readers of page one of the *Times* could see others and themselves ascending and descending that stairway. He engages in Brady's curatorial acts through the curation of images of the crowds moving up the staircase, while refusing to dictate, intervene in, or overwhelm the acts of visitors as they viewed and associated meaning and their own knowledge with the photographs themselves. In ways that Brady did not, Avedon could not, and Barthes would not, the 1862 reviewer and his readers—a Third presence amidst a photographer and the gallery viewers--turned the experience of the Brady exhibit into a broader and

thickened social and civil act, identifying if not also animating a fresh discursive space in the midst of war, a republic of the staircase, so to speak, and giving life to a visual economy.

Bibliography

Agee, James, and Walker Evans. 1941. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Anon. 1862. "Brady's Photographs: Pictures of the Dead at Antietam." *The New York Times*. October 20, 1.

Apted, Michael. 1980. *Coal Miner's Daughter*. Los Angeles: Universal Pictures.

Avedon, Richard. 1994. *Evidence 1994-1994: Richard Avedon*. Essays by Jane Livingston and Adam Gopnik, edited by Mary Shanihan . New York: Random House.

Avedon, Richard. 1985. *In the American West*. New York: Harry Abrams.

Barret, Elizabeth. 2000. *Stranger with a Camera*. Whitesburg, KY: Appalshop.

Barthes, Roland. Trans. Richard Howard. 1981, 2010. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Campbell, David. 2009. "'Black Skin and Blood': Documentary Photography and Santu Mofokeng's Critique of the Visualization of Apartheid South Africa." *History and Theory*. 48, December :52-28.

Caudill, Harry. 1962, 1963. *Night Comes to Cumberland: A Biography of a Depressed Area*. Boston: Little Brown.

Coetzee, J. M. 1986, 1987. *Foe*. New York: Viking.

Cohen, David William. 1994. *The Combing of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

. . ..2001. "The Fate of Documentation: The Ethics of Property in the Work of Visual Representation." *Kronos. Special Issue: Visual History*. November: 27. 292-303.

Dawdy, Shannon Lee. 2006. "The Taphonomy of Disaster and the (Re)Formation of New Orleans." *American Anthropologist* 108, 4 (December): 719-30.

Dlamini, Jacob. 2009. *Native Nostalgia*. Johannesburg: Jacana.

Donham, Donald., with Santu Mofokeng. 2011 (forthcoming). *Violence in a Time of Liberation: Murder and Ethnicity at a South African Gold Mine*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

DuBois, W. E. B. 1903, **1989**. *The Souls of Black Folks*. New York: Bantam.

Godard, Jean-Luc, and Anne-Marie Miéville. 1978. *Comment ça va?* Paris: Bela Productions.

Goffman, Erving. 1961. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Doubleday.

Hall, Donald. 2004. "The Third Thing." *Poetry*. November. On Line, October 2005: http://www.poetryfoundation.org/journal/article.html?id=146874

Hariman, Robert, and John Louis Lucaites. 2007. *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hartmann, Wolfram, Jeremy Silvester, Patricia Hayes, eds. 1999. *The Colonising Camera: Photographs in the Making of Namibian History*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.

Hayes, Patricia. 2009. "Santu Mofokeng, Photographs: 'The Violence is in the Knowing'". *History and Theory*. 48, December: 34-51.

Levine, Lawrence. 1988. "The Historian and the Icon: Photography and the History of the American People in the 1930s and 1940s." In Carl Fleischbauer and Beverly V. Brennan, eds. *Documenting America, 1935-1943*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 15-42.

Liebenberg, John, and Patricia Hayes. *Bush of Ghosts: Life and War in Namibia 1986-90*. Cape Town: Umuzi.

Livingston, Jane. 1994. "The Art of Richard Avedon." In Richard Avedon, *Evidence 1994-1994: Richard Avedon*. Essays by Jane Livingston and Adam Gopnik, edited by Mary Shanihan . New York: Random House, 11-101.

McDarrah, Fred. 1985. "In Print: *In the American West* by Richard Avedon." *Photo District News*. December : 118.

Miescher, Giorgio, Lorena Rizzo, and Jeremy Silvester, eds. 2009. *Posters in Action: Visuality in the Making of an African Nation*. Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien.

Morton, Thomas. 2009. "Something-Something-Something-Detroit." *Vice Magazine*, August. http://www.viceland.com/int/v16n8/htdocs/something-something-something-detroit-994.php?page=1

Mthethwa, Zelethu. 2010. *Zelethu Mthethwa*. New York: Aperture.

Nudelman, Franny. 2004. *John Brown's Body: Slavery, Violence & the Culture of War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Poole, Deborah. 1997. *Vision, Race and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World* . (Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Rassool, Ciraj, and Patricia Hayes. 2002. "Science and the Spectacle: /Khanako's South Africa, 1936-7." In Wendy Woodward, Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley, eds., *Deep Histories: Gender and Colonialism in Africa*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 117-61.

Skotnes, Pippa, ed. 2010. *Rock Art Made in Translation: Framing Images of and from the Landscape*. Johannesburg: Jacana.

Sontag, Susan. 1977, **1989**. *On Photography*. New York: Anchor Doubleday.

Soske, Jon. 2010. "Ín Defence of Social Documentary Photography." http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/pdf/In%20Defence%20of%20Social%20Documentary%20Photography%20by%20Jon%20Soske.pdf

Stott, William. 1973. *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. New York: Oxford.

Trillin, Calvin. 1969. "U.S. Journal: Jeremiah, KY. A Stranger with a Camera." *The New Yorker*, April 12. 178-83.

Vögeli, Anna. 2009. "'They Gently Bring Back Memories of Those Events. . .': A Case Study on the Reception of Namibia Day and Cassinga Day Posters." In Giorgio Miescher, Lorena Rizzo, and Jeremy Silvester, eds. 2009. *Posters in Action: Visuality in the Making of an African Nation*. Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 153-67.

Witz, Leslie, and Ciraj Rassool. 2008. "Making Histories." *Kronos*. [online], 34, 1: 6-15. http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-01902008000100001&lng=en&nrm=iso

Young, Joseph E. 1986. "Open Letter to Richard Avedon." *Scottsdale(Arizona) Progress*. August 22.