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The Durban South Photography Project: reflections on an on-going programme of taking, finding and showing pictures in a local context

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Can a photography project portray what it is like to live in the South Durban industrial basin and not fall into the distancing conventions historically associated with much social documentary photography? How can two 'outsiders' to particular communities fashion a photographic practice that continues to think seriously about the power of the photographer to choose the subject for her camera and to render person and place into spaces of representation? These were questions that preoccupied photographer Jenny Gordon and myself when we created what came to be called the Durban South Photography Project - questions that we have continued to reflect on as our work develops.¹ Not unusually for residential areas in a city with a long history of racial segregation, residents in South Durban sometimes point to the relative lack of public availability and knowledge of 'their' histories. Especially in 'coloured' Wentworth, people have variously articulated, argued about, re-worked or rejected the often racialised and class-inflected representations of the area that do exist. How could a photographic project situated in Durban create pictures that avoided simply reproducing – that invited readings of pictures beyond entrenched ideas about people living within the boundaries of specific former 'Group Areas'? This paper discusses the strategies we devised in order to address these questions, and how we continue to grapple with them as the project enters its fourth and penultimate year.

A social documentary impulse certainly drove the project from the start in 2002, soon after I had been introduced to Wentworth² via local resident Gail Snyman's tour ('The Coloured Experience') which eschewed conventional tourist routes in order to map out the apartheid history of Wentworth in southern Durban. Snyman's tour started on the formerly 'European' Bluff before crossing the ridge that separates the industrial basin from the sea. We descended into the valley, down the street that used to mark the boundary between 'Indian' Merebank and 'Coloured' Wentworth and that skirts the Engen refinery so that, most days, chemical fumes catch at your throat. Today, residents of these suburbs live in-between two oil refineries, various chemical factories and the Mondi paper mill.

¹ When we started the project, Jenny Gordon was freelancing as a photographer and teacher of photography and based in Cape Town – I was already lecturer in Historical Studies at the University of Natal, now the University of KwaZulu-Natal, which is the institutional base of the project. Since April 2004, Gordon has been lecturer in photography in the School of Journalism, Rhodes University. Funding for the project was first provided by the National Research Foundation which still provides support. Our largest funder has been the Centre for Civil Society, and the Royal Netherlands Embassy has also provided funding for our photography workshops.

² Throughout this paper I refer to 'Wentworth' as comprising an area which is often referred to as such but also distinguished more strictly as Austerville, Merewent and Wentworth.

We were convinced that visual documentation of this landscape was important, as part of attempting to 'show' the persistence of spectacularly iniquitous apartheid planning that placed high density, mainly working-class townships right next to an expanding petro-chemical industry. Ironically, this was also urban space that offered compelling possibilities for photography. Moreover, Snyman's tour ended in her parents' home, where hand-coloured portraits of her mother's forebears grace the lounge and copious snapshots filled family albums. Inspired by the possibilities for research into popular, local photographic culture, Gordon and I decided to combine contemporary photography with historical research that would focus on (and attempt to create a digital archive) of family photographs. It was clear to us, however, that the project must cut across former group areas if we were to avoid duplicating racial categorization, and we decided to include the 'Indian', 'African' and 'Coloured' townships closest to the industrial centre of South Durban. We would start our work in Wentworth, but systematically expand the project to include Merebank and Lamontville.

We devised a project that would combine workshops in photography for local residents with Gordon's own picture-taking. Each of these two aspects would be integrated with my efforts to build a digital archive of family photographs and associated interviews. The project would culminate in one large exhibition, but it was important to us that the workshops would be integrated with local exhibitions and that Gordon's photography would also be shown locally before a large exhibition took place in the city centre. The project, therefore, has been about a dynamic process and not simply work towards a final result.

This paper provides an overview of the project as we developed it over the past few years. In the last section of the paper I discuss my recent and current efforts to do interviews with photographs as an important, indeed often central component. While this is part of, slowly, building a sound and visual archive, I see the interviewing process as key to producing 'texts' that will accompany photographs at the exhibition in which the project is planned to culminate, likely to take place in 2007. To date, a large component, but not all, the photographs have been produced (more photographs have to be taken in Lamontville). It has to be pulled together as part of work towards the exhibition that bring together a range of photographs and associated text. Hopefully this would also be accompanied (if this is not possible, followed by) a book version of the exhibition.

1. Taking photographs: Jenny Gordon's pictures in the DSPP

Portraiture and the process of establishing networks to enable picture-taking

Jenny Gordon proceeded to visit Durban for intensive bouts of picture-taking, mostly during school holidays. As project partner, I drew on personal acquaintances to organize our first visits to Wentworth. From the beginning, this involved visiting homes and taking portraits of family and, sometimes, friends.



Portrait of Gail Snyman's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Cowley.

One of my students who lived on the Bluff but grew up in Merebank, for example, agreed to take us around the area and we spent a few days visiting with his relatives and fellow members of his church. Gordon would quickly persuade people into a session of portrait-taking, while I would ask around after old pictures, spend time browsing albums and begin discussions about borrowing these in order to copy pictures.



Darryl's gran (left) with his aunt, Mrs Naidu; a portrait of the latter at 14; Darryl in Merebank.

Sometimes, we asked around in order to find someone who could introduce us to a particular area, such as the Barracks, which Snyman had first pointed out to us (on the tour) as an example of inadequate housing and poverty right next to Engen refinery. Bernadette Saunders, who lives in the Barracks accompanied us, explaining her past efforts to start a crèche for local children.



Some of the children encountered at the Barracks and Bernadette Saunders' mother.

Gordon's requests to photograph people have been conceived as form of exchange, in which people who agree to be photographed receive pictures by way of thanks, often specially taken for this purpose, a practice that was also explicitly factored into the budget of the project. The fact that we brought copies of pictures for people to keep when we next visited certainly facilitated Gordon's efforts at picture-taking, and probably also helped her intermittent efforts to explain that she was not a journalist.



Belinda Tiffin and her mother Mary Wilkinson; the picture that Gordon chose for use on our project website and one of a number of family snapshots given to the Tiffins.

This creation of slippage and overlap between personal and family photography and pictures taken 'for the project' has facilitated the dynamic of informal introductions and portraiture. A number of Gordon's pictures are now displayed on the walls of a living room, or propped on shelves. Her portrait of elderly Hafiza Reebee, holding an asthma pump (see the discussion of portraits of people ill from pollution below), was soon inserted into a small ornate frame for display in the lounge. Because scanning of album pictures co-incided with Mrs. Reebee suddenly falling severely ill, I also (upon request) made the family a composite photograph that combines Gordon's portrait with a picture

of her husband, deceased for many decades. (Judging by their evident approval of my efforts, the combination of two pictures taken some fifty years apart make visual sense to the family, perhaps because this is how he remains in memory and how she is known to them today).



As Gordon deepened her acquaintances in the area, she also began to arrange to be taken around the neighbourhood by people who were involved in local women's and environmental organizations. This has happened through our combined efforts to work with individuals who are involved in various organizations (local civics, women's and environmental organizations) or simply active in their personal capacity, for example with organizing youth groups or caring for elderly people. Gordon's work has been informed by the conviction that she has to allow local concerns to strongly influence her photography – even as her own interests and aesthetic shape the visual images created.



Gordon took these pictures in-between sessions of our workshop in 2002, of participant Linton Solomon and friends. On the right are her portraits of Linton and his dance group as incorporated into an album he made during the workshop (albums were kept by participants).

Individuals involved in home-based health care and the local clinic committees have been particularly important to Gordon's photography. People approached by myself and Gordon have often invited us to their homes and introduced us to the homes of neighbours, family, friends or clients, or taken us around the neighbourhood streets. Regular photography workshops (discussed more extensively below) have also allowed for the cultivation of relationships and possibilities for photography in and around where people live. In fact, the workshops – particularly the mini-workshops described below

and which involved working over time with a small group of 'graduates' from our larger workshops - proved crucial for forming relationships that led to extensive photo-taking – of the participants themselves, of their part of the neighbourhood, of places and people whom they wanted Gordon to photograph.



Portraits of two workshop participants, Fieona Kahn and George Ruiters, The latter has taken Gordon along to visits in his capacity as health home care volunteer and HIV Aids counselor.

Combining portraiture with photographing the urban-industrial landscape

From the start it was clear that photographing the industrial-residential landscape of South Durban was crucial for the project. Early contact with the South Durban



View of the Engen refinery as seen Merebank . It was taken from the second floor of the new home being built by the Prodyamanda family.

Community Environmental Alliance facilitated finding viewpoints from which to photograph the urban landscape. Gordon also worked with members of the community whom she met through the DSPP's workshops and who have helped her to photograph the industry-dominated landscape as visible from balconies, windows and, more precariously, some roofs. Gordon's aim has been to create a visual record of people living and working in this heavily industrialized environment. However, Gordon

emphasizes that she is ultimately interested in people and their lives. Most of her previous projects involved taking portraits of people where they lived or worked (for example her projects on Troyville and the Mai Mai market in Johannesburg) and she has never defined herself as a landscape photographer. The DSPP is conceptualized as being, in large part, about *space* in which industry and homes are unusually combined, and how this has affected people. Gordon has therefore been searching for ways to present this urban industrial landscape as visually compelling – which sometimes necessitates moving away from people to achieve a visual scale that dwarfs or even eliminates people. As she explains, “(i)t’s a problem of getting the enormity of just how much working industry there is in that place. I come up with this problem of you can’t get enough in and the people in. And that’s a contradiction that I’m working with.”³



Taken from the same vantage point as the panorama above



The challenge has also been how to move beyond a documentation of scale to convey a sense of the drama of this landscape through photography. Gordon has attempted to take more pictures in which the landscape dominates but in which people are visible – again in order to try convey a sense of homes near industry. Through this “environmental portraiture” (in Gordon’s phrase), she has explored how to place people

³ Phone discussion between M. du Toit and J. Gordon, 5 March 2004.

in the landscape, using square format, 120 mm negatives and a medium format camera that she has previously used for portraiture much more closely focused on the human body . Her current effort to picture the landscape favours strong depth of field, framed so as to incorporate surroundings and to attempt a detailed contextualizing of the human figure.



'Angel' (right) with friends on Timmerman Rd, Wentworth.

Environmental portraiture as social documentary photography

Portraiture has a central place in Gordon's photography. As photography that tries to grapple with social injustice, her photographs are also often taken with social documentary intent. In the context of this project, much of this has to do with the levels of pollution forced upon South Durban residents. But there is a strong class aspect to the geography of the basin. Very often, the old people living in homes and flats are retired domestic workers, welders, boiler-makers, garment factory workers. Unemployment is visibly a problem – men often work on refineries far from Durban. Grandmothers are often responsible for small children. In some areas, intermittent gang-fights



Jenny, Kelly and Nicole Madden (left) and Thomas Henegan (right). Wentworth, July 2004
Gordon was taken to the house, where all of the adults are unemployed, by clinic committee member and home health care worker George Ruiters, also a workshop participant.

and drug-dealing are a fact of life. A large number of photographs were taken in and around homes and council flats (and flats formerly owned by the city council) in Wentworth and Merebank which are situated nearest to the refineries and chemical factories in order to explore and to document contexts of social neglect and poverty, certainly in the eyes of the local residents who took Gordon there. People and their living circumstances are the focus here. "I'm trying to capture their lives, something about how they experience their lives, and how I experience it when I'm there".



Children from the council flats who are being cared for by their grandmother. (I have yet to check up their names and personal details, usually written down when the picture is taken.)

As Gordon explains, however, she also tries to work with the idea of portraying people as they would like to be seen, to "incorporate how the people that I'm photographing see photography.



'Angel', Timmerman Rd, resident, Woodville Road flats, Chezelle, Hime Street Flats.

Picture-taking and poses have indeed often been worked out between Gordon and the subject of her pictures, sometimes very consciously as a deliberate presentation of self to the camera.



Antoinette Parsons on Easter Weekend, Park Raynie; A bus driver on Dinapur Rd, Meerbank.

Gordon emphasises the importance of combining her effort to explore social issues and problems identified by people living in Durban South with portraits of people in and around their homes. Her photographs of people at home focus not only on the people themselves but also on personalised living spaces. For the overall project, the contrast between sometimes bleak urban landscape and lovingly arranged interiors, often decorated with portraits of children, grandchildren, memorial portraits of deceased loved ones and religious iconography become important. It is here that the possibilities for building a collection of photographs that extend from Gordon's photography to older forms of portrait-taking open up. While many people photographed as part of the project simply do not have personal pictures of their own, examples of the Durban's rich history of studio and informal, snapshooting photography are evident in many homes.



Mr. Davis (reading his account of how he established a church) and DSPP assistant Oliver Meth; Auntie Dulcie Marncie who has also been one of our workshop participants.

It has therefore often been possible to obtain permission to copy personal photographs from the subjects of Gordon's photographs (or arrange that she takes a portrait of someone with a rich collection of personal pictures) so that a relationship between Gordon's portraiture and old family pictures is established. As I discuss more extensively below, efforts to copy pictures are also accompanied by interviews with people about their pictures that seek to explore how these are imbricated in memory-making.



Mr Cowley's photograph of himself (right) working as a welder a pipeline at sea near the Durban harbour in the early 1960s. (see the portrait of the Cowleys on page 2)

Photographing illness

From 2003, our efforts to visually portray the experience of living in neighbourhoods surrounded by heavy industry have included a strong focus on the effects of pollution on health. Medical studies, for example a study of patterns of respiratory illness amongst learners and staff at Settler's Primary School in Merebank, have shown the high incidence of asthma, and that emissions from the surrounding refineries and factories precipitate the onset of asthmatic attacks. We contacted the member of a local municipal clinic committee and teachers at Settler's primary who then facilitated a visit to the school and to the homes of families who have respiratory illnesses. Currently Gordon and I also work with a volunteer member of the SDCEA who lives on the fenceline of the Engen refinery and who has introduced us to neighbours and friends for portraiture and interviews. As with all of her social documentary portraiture, it has been important to Gordon that her photographs avoid de-individualising her subjects and that the pictures should not simply reduce them to victims.



"I like to spend time with them, and give back pictures to them so that I really know something about them when I'm taking the pictures - so that it's easier to express something about them. If you just pass by, if you're there for a very short time and you don't get to know the people, what you're taking is just based on presumption. And then it becomes just a record of what you saw... I find it very hard to take a real portrait if I'm just passing by." Gordon has experimented with how to "make sickness visual" in the case of respiratory illnesses that are not easily visible. This has sometimes involved responding to ideas of people who help arrange photographic sessions and the subjects of photography themselves. For example, the clinic committee member who organized the visit told people to have their asthma pumps ready for the picture (previous page), at other times a subject's supply of medicines to control chronic illness are held for display.

Gordon's photographs of eczema presents a particular problematic - this highly visible disease, which is very prevalent in the areas closest to Mondi and the refineries, is often

covered up in public as much as is possible. The pictures showing eczema often focus on particular parts of the body in order to respect anonymity, as discussed with people who agreed to the photographs. These pictures are much more difficult to ‘work with’ in a public context, and I discuss some of these difficulties in the final section of the paper.



Pictures taken of residents living close to Mondi and the two refineries in order to show eczema

2. Who's take? Photography workshops as part of the DSPP

Strategies for finding workshop participants

Our central strategy to devise a project that does not simply involve an ‘outsider’ photographer taking pictures to show the world how ‘others’ live has been to devise a programme of photography workshops and associated exhibitions in South Durban. By introducing ourselves to the area via a photo-workshop – even as we began to approach people and to arrange for Jenny Gordon to take pictures - we aimed to establish her as a photographer (and myself as project co-ordinator, co-teacher and researcher) who did not simply take pictures and then disappeared from view.

Teenagers from local high schools participated in the first, Wentworth-based workshop. For the second, as part of trying to build relationships with people involved in local civic structures, we approached organizations in Wentworth (a women's organization, a local civic and environmental alliance) and a school in Merebank for assistance in sourcing people of varying ages to participate in the second workshop, held in Merebank in 2003. By this time we were also double-checking that young people from the council flats closest to the refineries were included (Merebank's legacy from the Group Areas Act is that affluent households share streets with working-class families). This because we saw our workshops as providing those who would not otherwise have the chance to take photographs with an opportunity to do so, but also because we wanted people living closest to the refineries where Gordon was already taking pictures to take their own photographs. Of course, we also hoped to forge relationships that would enable her to take more pictures.

After conclusion of our second workshop, a number of people wanted to continue with photography. For the rest of that year we worked with a small group of participants from this workshop, drawn from both suburbs, to prepare an exhibition in Wentworth that would include new work as well as photographs by Gordon. This involved a few afternoons of workshops where participants' picture-taking was reviewed and possibilities for photography discussed, and a session in which we asked the group to articulate their response to a range of Gordon's pictures that we had selected for possible exhibition. Of this group, four were in high school at the time, and the adults worked in local organizations dealing with domestic abuse, as a counselor for HIV positive people, or were otherwise active in their community. In 2004 we met with the same group to prepare for the first exhibition held outside South Durban, at the conference on Gender and Visuality at the University of the Western Cape. This July (2005) we ran the final major workshop of the project, in Lamontville. The majority of participants were grade 10 students from Lamontville Secondary, a few from another school in Lamontville. Two members of a local HIV Aids/home-based care organization participated, together with a Merebank clinic committee member who had facilitated a lot of photography for Gordon in Merebank and wanted to do camera-work herself. A few 'graduates' from previous winter holiday workshops, members of our on-going mini-workshops also participated, helping with the teaching as well as taking their own pictures. Four participants were from a local (Merewent) residence for people with physical disabilities.

'Insider' photography of the everyday

If Gordon's stints of documentary photography in Wentworth and Merebank drew her to become steadily more involved in how to convey the impact of industrial pollution, the workshops were conceived of as providing the technical know-how and inspiring people to take photographs in and around their neighbourhood and of daily life. Few restrictions were placed on the subjects of photography, although much emphasis was placed on the idea of documenting everyday aspects of one's own life or surroundings. (For example, people were discouraged from 'wasting' film on repetitive and indistinct snaps of friends at an evening braai, or group photographs of people at a function.) We introduced participants to the idea of photography as a language and to possibilities of visual documentation and self-expression via slide shows and discussion of a large

variety of photographs. Intensive practice and feed-back sessions taught participants, who worked with basic point and shoot cameras, to begin experimenting with the possibilities with photographic framing. Work-in-progress was also discussed while encouraging participants to develop distinct themes that could feature as part of the photographic exhibition, held in the library.

The result of this largely open-ended approach to possible subjects for photography - which combined introducing novice photographers to the notion of documenting everyday life and included discussions of how one might capture issues of social concern on film, has made for varied photographs and points of view. There is too little space for comprehensive discussion of the variety of pictures produced at workshops. Like Gordon, and perhaps partly as a result of discussions during the workshop, some tackled pollution and other social issues through their pictures.



Sizwe Nzama, volunteer health worker in Lamontville, took this picture of a dilapidated toilet for the July 2005 exhibition; Oliver Meth's picture of 'investigating into the premises of IOP (Industrial Oleochemical Products from Umbilo Secondary School' (Oliver Meth, 2003). Below is Lavelle Hulley's picture of 'A pathway in Jonas Road behind the Wentworth Police Station that is now a dumping area.' (July 2003)



However, is worth noting that many of the pictures have an intimacy, ease and informality perhaps, difficult for Gordon to achieve during her intermittent visits, and different from Gordon's style of often almost formally posed portraiture. Also, photographs often resulted from the picture-takers having fun capturing friends and family in and around their homes again differing from the seriousness of much of Gordon's photography.



My husband (Ronnie) asleep with our grandson (Tristan Bonhomme) in our bedroom in Hydra Road, Wentworth. Lorna McDonald (2003); My Aunt making breakfast. She stays at Mandeni, July 2005 David Mthethwa, Lamontville Exhibition 2005



Santhuri enjoying a game of soccer. "Wonder if I can bend it like Beckham" Fieona Khan (from the Gender and Visuality exhibition in Cape Town); Berryl hanging up the washing, Dulcie Marnce, Merebank Exhibition 2003.



Pages from Fieona Khan and Marchello Anthony's hand-made albums (Merebank 2003, Wentworth 2003 Exhibitions)

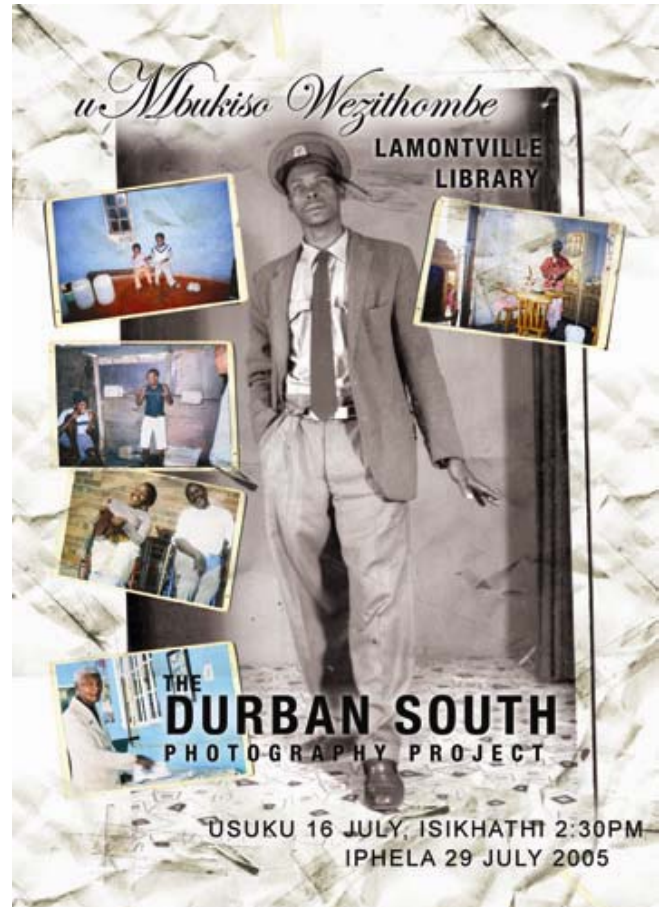


3. Exhibiting Photographs: dynamics and strategies

A programme of local exhibitions

From the start, the project was planned as incorporating a programme of exhibitions integrated with the process of producing photographs, as opposed to culminating in one exhibition, held away from where pictures were taken. Instead, we held three workshops-cum-exhibitions in Wentworth and Merebank in the first two years, always in the local municipal library, chosen as an accessible venue frequented by many people from the area. It was also only by the third exhibition that a selection of Gordon's pictures were exhibited alongside pictures by workshop participants. The idea was to plan a programme of exhibitions that would 'spiral outwards', over time to settings further away from where the pictures were taken. (By the second year of the project however, a website also made pictures available on the internet). While exhibitions were advertised in city newspapers and the Mail and Guardian, the exhibition openings were conceived

of as primarily aimed friends and family – whoever participants wanted to invite to the opening. Because we chose to exhibit in the library, regular patrons also saw the exhibitions.



Combining text and image and inviting audience input at exhibitions

If participants were invited to experiment with possibilities for visual communication, they were also asked to provide captions for all pictures, including family snapshots and studio portraits contributed for display together with the workshop-produced pictures. Captions were typically short – as the organizers, we placed no restrictions except to urge that as far as possible, people should be named and that the caption should indicate where the photograph was taken. The results were usually brief, often humorous captions that also often reflected the relationships of family and friendship. A few participants provided longer, more informative captions that discussed issues of social concern.



From the exhibition in Merebank, 2003: My room where I live in the informal settlement area, Lamontville. Innocent Mbonambi (Merebank Secondary School). Pigeons who have made a home for themselves in an incomplete repair done to the this flat in Hime Street, Wentworth. Lorna McDonald.



From our exhibition for the Conference on Visuality and Gender, 2004: Fieona posing with her outfit on Eid. "I wonder if I'll roll my eyes anymore they'll leave me alone". Santhuri Naidoo, July 2004; My family in the '80s when my dad still had an Afro. Fieona Kahn.

Hand-made albums were conceived of as made for the participants themselves, not simply as display items. There were therefore no prescriptions as to captions or written explanations, and albums varied – a minority worked text into their albums, most didn't.



A visitor to our exhibition in Austerville Library (Wentworth) of December 2003.

Inviting comments from exhibition visitors

At this first exhibition, a small book for visitor's comments, ruled with columns for 'comments', 'name' etc., was placed in the venue. This proved unsuccessful – while people often spent some time looking at the pictures, only one or two brief expressions of approval or praise were written down. For the second exhibition, we experimented with large sheets of unruled paper, taped to tables, and asking different questions inviting comments and criticism. This proved an effective strategy to invite comments and new sheets of paper were provided several times as praise, ideas, and more rarely, curses and criticism filled up the available space.

One visitor pronounced the exhibition irrelevant: "What has this got to do with the price of bread and milk?" A few boys, apparently shown to be smoking dagga in a picture offered curses: 'You all must not mind our business. F... you and your mother!' Most comments, however, praised participants. A number of teenagers reveled in enthusiasm: Hi, my name is Keshnee from grade 12.: I find these pictures so interesting that it blows my mind". The novelty of an exhibition that focused on their neighbourhood and which had their friends amongst the photographers found much favour: "Hi, I'm Haley from P.R. Pather Secondary School I do know a lot of the people here on the photos. I really think they did a great job..." Several local visitors emphasized that the fact of visual representation of their suburb was unusual and affirming, also given photography's association with remembrance: "I think this exhibition is great cause it acknowledges us about Merebank and the surrounding areas". "Good representation of all culture groups of Merewent region. This should be now documented in the form of a photographic journal, published as a form of a reminder of this area for this generation and the generation to follow". "I am 66 years of age, this is as very good idea of the old photo's, and also for the new ones which the next generation will someday view. So dear Public, please support this very exciting project". Visitors also commented on the inclusion of old family pictures: "My name is Cedric Valentine. I strongly feel that the pictures are fabulous. It explores the different cultures and the way people behave in and live in society as a whole. The old pictures are eye catching and demonstrate the old way of living, a very simple life style."

This effort to make audience responses a visible part of the exhibition was continued in a third exhibition, also held in 2003, which included the work of eight participants from Wentworth and Merebank who had been invited – after expressing a particular interest to participate further – to continue with intermittent mini-workshops on photography. Again, blank sheets of paper were pasted to surfaces in the library with requests for comments. (For example, “Please tell us what you think of the photo’s and the exhibition. What do you like, what don’t you like? Write your comments below, your name and where you live.”) This was the first exhibition to also include a few panels of photographs by Jenny Gordon. Comments were often not specifically directed at her or her work as against other participants. A large number of sometimes quite detailed comments were written. As with the Merebank exhibition, visitors commented that photographs were ‘telling the unsaid history of this place’ but also – perhaps because of the inclusion of Gordon’s pictures – went on to explain that he meant ‘Agony and suffering of the community at the door step of a big refinery... surrounded all by pollution of giant refineries’. One visitor commented, perhaps, on a sense of affirmation resulting from seeing people from her neighbourhood in pictures: “I think the photo’s will show a lot of meaning to everybody in this place. My name is Ioni van Wyk. I live in [flat number provided] Hime Street.” Another visitor commented on how pictures created a space for reflection, and related to ideas for local organization:

It slows my thoughts down and makes me think a bit more clearer on how our lives are lived in our Wentworth community. through our life living in poverty in the Wentworth community, we find things to do that's going to please us and make us joyfully happy, by raising funds and arranging a concert or any thing that's going to bring the community together and have fun. The way people need change in their lives as well as the community. Wentworth, Woodville Road. N. Meth.

Our invitation at the exhibition opening that people could ask for pictures to be taken led to a number of requests for visits from Gordon. “I love the White and Black Photo’s. But I would like you to come to our area and take Photo’s of our area...”; “Wolraad Road Area’s not shown. Beverley Marais [tel. number provided]”. Some invitations, however, showed some uneasiness with the depiction of home ground: “I think the pictures were really good but people must not think Hime Street’s a bad place it’s a very nice place why don’t come take a look and see it’s over live!!!”

Other comments included commendation from a girl who had posed for Gordon (‘ Well, I think that you did a very beautiful and realistic job and I just love the way I came out; Antoinette Parsons, [address provided] Austerville. Congratulations.” In response to a picture by a workshop participant: “I think the photo was a great idea because I was in one of them. JLO”.

At the exhibition openings in 2003, audio and video text was also produced. One of the participants, Lorna McDonald, had attended a video production workshop, so we booked a camcorder and she teamed up with another workshop member to film and interview visitors to the opening of the exhibitions. Particularly at the second exhibition held in Austerville/Wentworth and in the context of familial or neighbourly appreciation of pictures, this led to impromptu speeches by visitors in praise of photographs by some participants. I also experimented with interviewing and audio taping small groups of the photographers explaining their pictures in turn. I took a few small groups of visitors to the exhibition and recorded their comments and conversations. Finally, I recorded a few interviews with visitors to exhibition openings about particular pictures.

Our most recent exhibition – and the first outside of South Durban - took place in Cape Town at the University of the Western Cape in September 2004, where the same methods of inviting written comments were used, although no audio or video interviews were tried out. In preparation for the exhibition however, I began to experiment with another way of generating comments or captions about pictures. It is these efforts at interviews/recorded discussions, since followed up outside the context of exhibitions with more efforts experiment with finding ways to draw out verbal response to pictures, that is at the centre of my current efforts to work with the photographs produced by participants in the DSPP and that needs closer discussion. I am still feeling my way into this process, and working out how the results may be incorporated into different forms of public exhibition. The following section should also specifically be read as work towards the large exhibition that we are planning.

Incorporating extracts from interviews as text in exhibitions

Partly because 79 year old Dulcie Marncé was more reticent than others to write down captions during our July 2003 workshop, I decided to record an interview with her about the pictures she had taken when planning towards another exhibition incorporating some of the same pictures in 2004. She responded to my questions by telling stories about the people in the picture and about her relationship with them. This experiment suggested to me how interviews could be used to create a more complex image-text relationship in the context of an exhibition than was involved in our usual practices of captioning, a relationship that adds a new layer of remembrance and personal narrative.

We displayed her photograph together with a short descriptive caption and a transcribed interview extract. This is a first example of how I plan to combine material from interviews with photographs at the exhibition that we are planning. (If you are reading this on-line, you can click here to open a window with picture, text and audio). The process fashioning an interview extract into this form of print textual accompaniment to a picture involves some editing so that the extracts may be read with relative ease in the context of an exhibition. As anyone who has worked with interviews will know, the spoken word has nuances that cannot be rendered into print. We hope to incorporate sound as well as printed word into the exhibition, much as is shown in the on-line format where you can click on a hyperlink under the picture in order to listen to the interview extract from which the print version has been made.

My plan is to use a number of interviews that I did with workshop participants about their photographs to this purpose. Working with the photographers, I would expand or add to certain of their original captions, drawing from their discussion of particular photographs. In addition to these audio recordings, we have also videotaped photographers discussing their pictures and their ideas about photography, and clips from these interviews could also be used in the exhibition space. In addition to asking them to discuss pictures of their choice, we asked participants about their purpose in taking photographs – whether their intent was ‘documentary’, whether the pictures showed ‘truth’, whether they felt more powerful with a camera in their hand or not. Answers were thoughtful and intriguing, and could become statements in the final exhibition.

Starting in 2003, I also began interviewing visitors to the exhibitions about the photographs. Besides this effort at research into audience response at exhibitions, I also (sometimes together with workshop participants and Gordon) started to go back to some of the areas where they took pictures, in order to record conversations about the photographs. At a later exhibition, I experimented with incorporating excerpts from some of these interviews into an extended form of textual accompaniment to two photographs. (follow the link to see the picture (see [slide 2](#) and [slide 3](#)).

This was part of a larger effort to invite discussion of the pictures by people who live where it was taken, as often as possible also with people who appear in the photograph. Sometimes quite brief interviews have resulted in a 'caption quote' that brings personal relationships and, indeed, a version of the subject's 'voice' into the space of an exhibition. Olga Labuschagne, looking at the portrait of herself, her grandson and a friend of his, talked about her hospitality towards his friends, which led her to remember her childhood as an 'orphan'. ([See and listen to slide 4, another example of how I plan to combine image, audio and text in an exhibition](#)).

As I worked out an interview approach that uses pictures as a central component, my questions were more consciously aimed at exploring the memories, ideas and feelings prompted by pictures, for example for the subjects of those pictures. At times an interview elicited a response that adds an emotional depth and shows the complex ways in which people sometimes relate to a portrait of themselves. In response to my question as to what she 'saw' when looking at a picture of herself, I showed Mrs. Govender a portrait of herself holding an asthma pump in her hand, taken approximately a year previously by Gordon, asking her what she saw and felt when looking at a picture of herself. She explained the sadness that this picture held for her, taken at a time of illness. This picture-text-audio combination that I have put together ([see/listen to powerpoint slide 5](#)) is an example how looking at a picture and also listening to and reading the words of the person in the photograph spoken while *she* was looking at that picture alters point of view. Here, Mrs Govender's words (as edited and extracted by myself) add a layer of personal narrative that articulates her feelings about her illness, that touches on familial relationships while also dealing strongly with the present and past of South Durban, providing individual perspective to the theme of pollution.

Interviews in which I show people some of Gordon's photographs, asking open-ended questions about what they see, have sometimes, unexpectedly, prompted reminiscence. During an informal interview with two elderly Wentworth residents (I was accompanied by a workshop participant who is good friends with them) and looking at the picture of a park near their homes, Mrs Louis, better known as Auntie Baby, began to talk about the gardens of her childhood in Clairwood, and to remember segregated public parks on the Bluff. ([See and listen to slide 6](#)). Interviews about family and personal photographs have been an important aspect of the project and of exhibition preparation. Mrs. Louis' memories of Clairwood led to a second interview during which we browsed through her collection of snapshots from her childhood, and it in the context of an exhibition, it be possible to juxtapose her picture of standing in a Clairwood garden with Gordon's photograph of the park.

Browsing through photograph albums have sometimes resulted in a verbally abbreviated indication of family relationships, but often leads to rich reminiscence and reflection. My interview with 80 year old Mrs. Mari, for example, makes for difficult choices as to what

'excerpt' to choose for a caption. As with a number of interviews, I started with a life history interview – in itself rich material for combination with a portrait - and progressed to listening and asking questions while she paged through her album. It contains the studio photography and family snapshot present in many Merebank personal picture collections, but also had a picture sent to Mrs. Mari by a photo journalist of the former at a demonstration against Mondi. This picture elicited a various responses as I asked more questions. She was reminded of other pictures of activism in Merebank and related how she had heard that these were traveling the world. She compared memories of that day with the fellow activist who had accompanied me to the interview and who had also been there as to what had been happening, explaining what had been happening beyond what one could now see within the frame of the photograph. She explained the political context of the demonstration. She reminded that she was illiterate and could not read the poster that she held. Finally, she answered my question about what she feels and thinks when she looks at the picture today – and this is what I have currently chosen as an extract. (see the slide 7).

Even a cursory reading of the literature on interview and oral history methodology makes clear that any presentation of 'voices' as unmediated is disingenuous and problematic. The dynamics of conducting these interviews, as always, involve complex interactions in which my questions and responses help to shape the answers and the narratives that result. The interviewing therefore involves fairly complex processes of authorship on my part, even as they also involve different forms of facilitative and collaborative work (as when workshop participants have gone along with me to interviews and have participated in the conversation). That said, an exhibition that strongly incorporates this form of textuality (by presenting a number of photographs together with interview extracts) would work very differently from one that simply presents short descriptive captions and a few statements as to its purpose and main themes, as is conventional for many photographic exhibitions. Texts with interviews as their origin could enable a layering of conversation, memory-making, personal narrative and arguments about (for example) contemporary social and political issues. This form of audio and print textual accompaniment to the pictures is crucial for bringing in the many and often contradictory meanings that South Durban residents make with the pictures, when prompted to do so by my questions. Working with interviews may enable us to avoid an exhibition where text simply functions to present political perspective and historical narrative through a voice that claims authority. However, we are planning to structure the exhibition (for example in terms of how the photographs themselves are edited and arranged in relation to each other) into a strong focus on environmental injustice. The idea is that interview extracts would add layers that move the exhibition beyond, enter into conversation with and even contradict this thrust.

The process of intervention on my part also extends to the fashioning of print text out of audio interviews, in ways that extend beyond the fact of choosing an extract from a sometimes lengthy interview. According to my current thinking, the print form interview extract that accompanies pictures at the exhibition need to be relatively simple and compact. Gordon and I have an on-going conversation about how much text will work in an exhibition space. While I am careful to transcribe exact wording and turns of phrase of a recorded response to my questions, the print extracts that accompany the photographs also leave out some of the conversation, so that the length does not become overwhelming. Currently, I am also leaving the questions themselves out of the print version, again because faithfulness to ideas of showing the researcher at work

seems to create a visually messy and awkward caption in the context of an exhibition. Moreover, as with various of the interview extracts presented here, and while I certainly want to experiment with some print extracts that incorporate dialogue, I have thus far edited some participants out of print captions at the exhibition, also to avoid visual clutter (an example is the extract in which Mrs Louis remembers Clairwood).

4. Making posters for use by local anti-pollution, environmental organisations

Besides planning towards an exhibition, we are also involved in incorporating photographs into other formats for public display and circulation. In 2004 we began discussion with the South Durban Environmental Alliance about the possibility of producing posters using Gordon's photographs that could be used for advocacy and environmental education. The first posters were simply single photographs from the series of 'asthma portraits', combined with a descriptive caption that provided some personal detail and a 'slogan' workshopped with the organizations. This year, we approached a local environmental researcher and activist to assist us to work out questions of audience and the context of use for a series of posters.

In addition, we agreed to work with Groundworks and the SDCEA to produce posters for two events, the Corpse Awards in Durban and the Petroleum conference in Johannesburg. We arranged to work with final year students specializing in graphic design at the Rhodes school of Journalism, presenting them with concept posters and a range of photographs. We selected the best designs and worked with the students on revisions, fine-tuning which pictures were combined, slogans used and providing them with extracts from interviews to include. The first set of posters name polluters in South Durban as part of the Corpse Awards initiative, which handed out a range of prizes (for leaking in a public place, for the most sustainable catastrophe, etc) to specific companies. (Copies of these posters have also been presented to the SDCEA who intend to use them at various events while also develop the series of posters in the next few months). The posters assert, through deliberately dramatic pictorial collage and combinations of image and text, causal relationships often denied by industry in South Durban and which has been the subject of carefully objective scientific presentations by the environmental organizations because multinationals take much trouble to refute claims of links between industrial emissions and illness.

The posters were the subject of much discussion as to how words and image could be combined for effective communication whilst attempting to avoid a process of de-individualisation. We included very short extracts from more complex interviews conducted by myself in which the persons who had been photographed or family members responded to questions of what they see when they look at the photographs (the first poster below), or simply provided more information about the illness (the second poster). With the third poster, design student Lyndal Beeton incorporated portraits into a familiar scene of everyday domestic labour and combined this with word play so that humour moves the attribution of causality beyond simple presentation of a victim of pollution towards asserting an active 'airing' of industrial pollution as an issue by residents. (see slides [8](#), [9](#) and [10](#), noting the 'next' hyperlink at the bottom of the screen).

We have categorized pictures of people with illness of any kind as needing thorough discussion and a formal system of permission for public use. Using forms designed for this purpose, we have explained the possible public uses of these pictures and have also returned to re-confirm that people are comfortable with our use of the pictures once we decided to design a series of posters. We have designed 'consent' forms that explain the purpose of taking photographs that seek to document illness. The forms allow people to specify whether, how and for what specific public purposes the photographs may be used – for example, to specify anonymity or personal identification. While people with respiratory problems have all chosen to impose no restrictions on the use of their portraits, it was agreed from the start that pictures of persons with severe eczema would be taken so that they could not be identified. Under these conditions, the people photographed and their families agreed - in fact some felt strongly that the pictures should be used for public action against pollution. But because photographs of exposed skin, even as this wish for anonymity is respected, may well be read as referring back to forms of exposing and exploitative medicalised imagery or other forms of race or gender-exploitative image-making, has been difficult to decide how to use the photographs as part of a set of imagery that publicize the effects of pollution without re-inscribing exploitation. One strategy that we will explore is to talk to people about their experience of having eczema, as well as more generally about themselves and their lives. Thus far, members of Groundwork and SDCEA, the environmental NGO's who have participated in a mini-workshop where we presented rough versions of posters and who would be using the posters, have responded positively to the attempt to make a poster that uses pictures of severe eczema. However, this is still work-in-progress and at an early stage, and would particularly benefit from discussion (slide 12)

