

Imagining Everyday Life  
*Engagements with Vernacular Photography*

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## Engagements with Vernacular Photography

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## Foreword

Artur Walther

In October 2018, The Walther Collection, with Columbia University's Center for the Study of Social Difference and Barnard Center for Research on Women, organized a two-day scholarly symposium at Columbia University on the topic of vernacular photography. Titled "Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography," that conference brought together speakers from a wide range of academic disciplines to consider vernacular representations of everyday life and to offer new ways to think about photography in relation to our political communities, social agency, and daily personal rituals.

The convening itself was part of The Walther Collection's multiyear project of exhibitions, publications, and public events focused on the history and uses of vernacular photography. Four thematic exhibitions, drawn from works in the Collection, were presented at our Project Space in New York from 2017 to 2019. These exhibitions, organized by Brian Wallis, Curator at The Walther Collection, were *The Shadow Archive: An Investigation into Vernacular Portrait Photography* (December 8, 2017–March 31, 2018); *Mistaken Identities: Images of Gender and Transformation* (April 6–August 11, 2018); *Scrapbook Love Story: Memory and the Vernacular Photo Album* (September 7, 2018–January 26, 2019); and *Destruction and Transformation: Vernacular Photography and the Built Environment* (February 8–May 25, 2019). In May 2021, we will present a full-scale exhibition on vernacular photography at The Walther Collection's museum campus in Neu-Ulm, Germany.

The goal of this extended investigation is to try to clarify the field of vernacular photography by presenting representative objects and examples, delineating its general characteristics, establishing conceptual categories, and proposing various modes of future critical inquiry. Our aim has been to identify multiple approaches to looking at vernacular photographs within an interdisciplinary field of critical investigation by reconsidering these often-overlooked photographic practices within specific social histories.

One way to understand vernacular photography, in my opinion, is as commonplace, ordinary, or colloquial photography, as opposed to aesthetically based fine-art photography. It is the common ground of photographic representations, within which individuals negotiate the essentially political

decisions that govern their self-images and their relationship to the pull of social conformity. As such, "Imagining Everyday Life" considers the vernacular photograph in several stylistic forms, archival applications, and physical formats—employing, in particular, an in-depth exploration of the serial nature of vernacular photography. Some of the broad categories examined included family photography and snapshots, photo albums and displays, ethnographic and scientific photography, mug shots and identification photographs, architectural and industrial photography, and contemporary art and photography.

To further this study and analysis, The Walther Collection has assembled key examples of vernacular photography and its applications, taking into account both the subject matter of these photographs and their materiality. While necessarily limited in scope, this collection seeks to address some of the principal uses of vernacular photography, and to experiment with unique modes of display and presentation. Such everyday photographs are typified more by their functionalities and effects within specific archives or albums than by their style or beauty as isolated objects. For this reason, we have sought, when possible, to gather small archives and series of vernacular images, rather than individual prints. These photographs and photographic objects come from a wide range of international locations, but primarily derive from North America, Europe, and South Africa. Wherever possible, we have tried to attend to the history of the production of these works, to their makers, to their provenance, and, to some extent, to their reception. In this volume, notable and representative examples from the Collection's expansive archive are presented at the end of each thematic section in sequenced portfolios, which address and respond to the discussions that precede them. These images are accompanied by extended captions that offer biographical information and important context.

This focus on personal and institutional photographs arose from my investigation, over twenty years of collecting photography, into the patterns of thought that appear integral to every culture and are manifested in the works of visual artists. The mission of The Walther Collection has always been educational: to assemble, to research, to

publish, and to exhibit photography as a crucial record of social change. In this regard, the Collection has previously published several studies on recent photography from China, as well as numerous books on historical and contemporary African photography.

For me, one of the key works in the Collection is Santu Mofokeng's 1997 slideshow titled *The Black Photo Album / Look At Me: 1890–1950*. This project, published by the Collection as a monograph, derives from Mofokeng's anthropological fieldwork and questions the meaning and significance of the various vernacular portraits he discovered, made for black working- and middle-class families in South Africa around the turn of the 20th century. Inspired by Mofokeng's research, I built a collection of significant examples of 19th-century and early 20th-century vernacular photography from and about various African peoples under European colonialism, whose depictions, as well as the circumstances of the photographs' circulation, stand in sharp relief to Mofokeng's portraits. These works, with Mofokeng's, were later included in the 2013 exhibition and publication *Distance and Desire: Encounters with the African Archive*, organized by the cultural historian Tamar Garb. In 2013 we also published a monograph by Martina Bacigalupo titled *Gulu Real Art Studio* that detailed—and reinterpreted—the economic and political conditions pertaining to the identification photographs made by Opal Denis at his studio in Gulu, Uganda. The present project is, in effect, a continuation of those earlier investigations into the vernacular. The conference papers presented here question whether an approach to vernacular representations of the common and the banal can offer new meanings regarding how we think about photography and our daily social, political, and personal interactions.

"Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography" took place on October 19–20, 2018, at the Lenfest Center for the Arts at Columbia University. It was organized by Brian Wallis, Curator, The Walther Collection; Tina M. Campt, Owen F. Walker Professor of Humanities and Modern Culture and Media, Brown University; Marianne Hirsch, William Peterfield Trent Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University, and Professor in the Institute for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality, Columbia University; and Gil Hochberg, Ransford Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature, and Middle East Studies, Columbia University.

The distinguished speakers who participated in the symposium examined vernacular photographs in their typological forms, utilitarian applications,

and regional variants, ranging from ethnographic records to criminal mug shots to family photo albums—subjects that aligned with three thematic exhibitions mounted by The Walther Collection and that served as the bases for the individual conference sessions. The Collection made its extensive archive available to all participants as they developed their presentations, inviting critical analyses and in-depth case studies. Those who explored it added thoughtful nuance to how we understand our holdings; others turned our attention to images and histories outside the Collection's scope. As their contributions show, these formats often reinforce the regulatory standards of social identity and political participation governing definitions of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, but they can also become crucial sites of social resistance and transformation. In addition, to fully represent the breadth of the Collection's vernacular holdings and conceptual approach, this volume includes a fifth section with imagery from the series' final exhibition, *Destruction and Transformation: Vernacular Photography and the Built Environment*, which took place after the symposium. Accompanied by an explanatory text from the show's brochure, the images depict subjects ranging from 19th-century urban panoramas and American vernacular architecture to anonymous industrial structures, storefronts captured for tax assessment, and colorful mid-century commercial signage.

I would first like to thank our remarkable conference co-organizers, who would become this volume's coeditors with Brian Wallis and whose care and commitment were invaluable in planning such an intellectually rigorous convening, and again as this book came into focus. I am tremendously grateful to all of the speakers and essayists who beautifully engaged with and provoked complex and generative questions in their contributions. They thoughtfully illuminated photographs in the Collection, as well as fascinating objects and histories beyond its holdings. Thank you, Ariella Azoulay, Geoffrey Batchen, Ali Behdad, Elspeth H. Brown, Clément Chéroux, Lily Cho, Nicole R. Fleetwood, Sophie Hackett, Patricia Hayes, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Thy Phu, Leigh Raiford, Shawn Michelle Smith, Drew Thompson, Laura Wexler, and Deborah Willis.

I would also like to acknowledge all who were involved in supporting and producing a remarkable two-day event, especially the staff of the Lenfest Center for the Arts and Catherine LaSota, Associate Director of the Center for the Study of Social Difference. We were indebted to several departments and initiatives, in addition to our

host and co-organizers, from across the Columbia campus: the Society of Fellows and the Heyman Center for Humanities, the Institute for Research in African-American Studies, the Institute for African Studies, and the Department of Art History and Archaeology. We were also grateful to receive generous support from the Andrew and Marina Lewin Family Foundation and from Alan Govenar at Documentary Arts.

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Finally, I express my fullest gratitude to Brian Wallis for leading the thoughtful and thought-provoking organization of this entire series, including acquisitions, research, exhibitions, and this book. He has been a trusted adviser and colleague over the last two decades, and I deeply value his passion for photography and his intellectual curiosity, which have helped to forge a path in this exciting and understudied field. This project would not have been possible without him.

## Introduction

*Tina M. Campt, Marianne Hirsch, Gil Hochberg, and Brian Wallis*

The vital questions raised in this conference about vernacular photography and visual culture have emerged at a critical historical juncture, one in which our relationship to the photographic image has changed profoundly. We are constantly confronted with electronic photographic imagery, which bears on the construction of our everyday experiences: instant access to personal and public photographs and information, extended use of photographic images as a means of communication, increasingly sophisticated techniques of photographic surveillance and supervision, and the largely invisible effect that digital images have on social organization and, perhaps even more so, on the performance of a public “selfhood.” In a political context of globalized trade and economics, ethnic displacement and diversification, and rising right-wing populism and nationalism, it is increasingly vital to assess the performative effects of vernacular images. Therefore, it is no coincidence that in organizing this conference our goals were both broad and specific: to attempt to define a field of critical inquiry pertaining to the immeasurably vast category of “vernacular photography,” and to consider the social and political implications and repressed histories those images may reveal in diverse cultural contexts.

The conference was, in part, an effort to destabilize and to reexamine existing histories of photography, and to insert into those by-now well-known narratives a series of objects and questions that have been in large part ignored or erased. We wanted not only to understand how the history of photography might look if everyday images were included within it but also to consider what the ordinary photographs that people make and use tell us about social patterns and human behavior. The authors whose essays are assembled in this volume define vernacular photography by its social and ideological uses rather than by its aesthetic features. To this end, they seek to reconsider vernacular photographs in relation to the communities from which they originated and to reevaluate the agency of the makers, compilers, subjects, and viewers of these images. Their essays probe the workings of power and ideology in the making and use of vernacular photographs, to be sure, but they also highlight the affects, touch, and sounds that shape images and the social roles they play. These

reorientations enable the beginnings of a new critical paradigm.

As they developed their research, the contributors to this conference were invited to study one or more works in the holdings of The Walther Collection. In addition, the thematic framework of the panels was determined by a series of exhibitions the Collection had organized, focusing on identification photography, portraits of gender identity, and family albums. The vernacular photographs in The Walther Collection are quite varied, but are structured by some specific geographic and temporal biases: the works are principally from the United States and South Africa, and most were made prior to 1950. Moreover, they have been extracted from their original social or institutional environments and are, in a sense, orphaned examples marooned in a modern art collection. These particulars raise many conceptual, logistical, and ethical issues about the politics of collecting and interpreting vernacular photographs. Some of these critical issues are addressed in the accompanying essays and discussions; some remain open.

What is at stake in any consideration of vernacular photography is made problematic not only by the sheer breadth and diversity of such objects and the types of social functions they define, but also by the shifting status and meanings of these images and objects as they move from one physical context to another. In one setting, particular vernacular images may be crucially valued or rich in associations; in subsequent contexts, those same images may be devalued, considered worthless and devoid of useful content or meaning. Such works require a new language of interpretation. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes, no photograph was born vernacular, as the vernacular is not a taxonomy but a critical process of evaluating everyday practices. In turn, Patricia Hayes makes an incisive and equally compelling argument that the vernacular is a taxonomy—one inflected by assumptions based on value and hierarchy.

The critical approach to vernacular photography described in this volume is rooted in an understanding of everyday life that acknowledges the value of the banal and overlooked, the boring and passive, and the significance of the quotidian, often repetitive micro-events showcased in commonplace photography. The French theorist Henri Lefebvre

described everyday life as a totality, comprised of all that is “in a sense residual, defined by ‘what is left over’ after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out by analysis.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, the idea of “everyday life” is an important lens through which individuals negotiate the essentially political decisions that govern their daily lives, their self-representations, and their resistance or conformity to political regulations and social mores. This project links the commonality of everyday life as described by Lefebvre to the ubiquitous production and distribution of vernacular photography, and views photography not as a neutral recording device but as an active mediating construction and an imagined version of a complex and contradictory present that a future viewer will encounter. Such an approach is not limited to private or family snapshots but also pertains, as these essays show, to a much larger set of images that are not at all private, including routine identification and surveillance photos, institutional records from prisons or mental institutions, and ethnographic photographs and documents of conquest.

Can a critical approach to vernacular representations of everyday, common, and quotidian practices offer new insights into how we think about photography and our daily social, political, and personal interactions? The contributors to this volume trace the evolution of the medium, amplifying Lefebvre’s distinctly 20th-century notions of the everyday, while placing their analyses of the often-violent disciplining power inherent in photographic capture in conversations with the work of theorists such as Victor Burgin and Allan Sekula. As Laura Wexler argues in her essay, the widely available technology that revealed the extraordinary within the ordinary has always already been an instrument of institutions like the state, the military, and the corporation. More recently, 21st-century vernacular photography, specifically the images we take and that are taken of us, has become data for the state and private corporations. In Wexler’s terms, it is no longer possible to see vernacular photography as liberatory or democratic; it has become “[t]he people’s archive,” which, she argues, “has evolved as a disciplinary, sometimes even a *carceral*, space. We have built a prison house of contemporary images.”<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the discussions in this volume balance this analysis of photography and the workings of ideology with attention to the affective, haptic, and acoustic dimensions of the medium. “Listening to images” involves, in Tina M. Campt’s words, touching and feeling the presence of the photographed person, and these resonances of the photographic event

open the way to new reading practices specific to the vernacular.

In delineating the possibilities and limits of a field, the conference was not intended to argue against fine-art photography or any other practice, but rather to describe a transdisciplinary approach and a set of practices that critically and creatively adapt new terms and methodologies to address an emerging series of visual challenges in contemplating our imagined futures. To address these redefined terms, the authors acknowledge the ways in which photographic archives—from family albums to police files—have been sequestered and maintained for institutional and private uses. This means access has been restricted to specific users with personal or professional privileges, and that such access can be revoked or denied. How does making these private images public change them? Can wider access or publication be harmful or detrimental? What does it reveal about the affects, experiences, and contradictions of everyday life?

These discussions have prompted us to consider the ethical premises of the capture, collection, and interpretation of such vernacular objects. As both records and tools of everyday life, vernacular photographs are deeply embedded in social narratives and functions. When radically decontextualized from their original communities and uses, these orphaned or extracted photographs become symbols or synecdoches of the often-violent cultural displacements that resulted in their abandonment. In reassigning or replacing their original cultural function or value, do museums, collectors, and scholars perpetuate and reproduce the patterns of past cultural pillaging? What responsibilities do we have to intervene in this traffic in photographs? And, how can we reconnect these orphaned artifacts to the stories, histories, and communities from which they have been divided? What modes of discussion or display can enable such reconnection?

Recently, there have been calls for museums and other collections to reconsider the premises and historical sources of their holdings and to repatriate displaced or plundered cultural artifacts. For example, in 2018, a report commissioned by French president Emmanuel Macron urged all national museums to return objects taken illegally from former French colonies.<sup>3</sup> And last year, Tamara K. Lanier, a descendant of enslaved people represented in daguerreotypes owned by Harvard University, sued the institution for the return of the images of her ancestors. She argued that she owned them, as they were her family photos.<sup>4</sup> The challenge issued to all public and private collections by such claims is, at the very least, that they acknowledge

and engage the communal sources, social contexts, and original uses of the objects they shelter. This may require new and collaborative practices, which some museums, archives, and collections have already undertaken, involving extensive provenance research; outreach to the individuals and communities from which the objects or materials came; special loans or shared ownership; sensitive viewing or handling of objects; and, ultimately, the return of objects where appropriate.

Such issues of stewardship and interpretation pertain directly to vernacular photographs, particularly as they are often fragile and neglected artifacts portraying underrepresented, oppositional, marginalized, misunderstood, or effaced communities. In this respect, these fugitive images may offer precisely the material and methodological terms for future historical reconsiderations. It is our hope that these essays contribute productively to these critical discussions.

1 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 1 (1947), trans. John Moore (New York and London: Verso, 1991), 97.

2 Laura Wexler, “To Burst Asunder: Endurance and the Event of Photography,” in this volume, 135.

3 See Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, “The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics,” November 2018, [https://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr\\_savoy\\_en.pdf](https://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf).

4 See Anemona Hartocollis, “Who Should Own Photos of Slaves? The Descendants, not Harvard, a Lawsuit Says,” *New York Times*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/us/slave-photographs-harvard.html>.

## Photographs on the Edge of History: Genre, Time, and Conquest in Southern Africa

Patricia Hayes

My discussion around the category “vernacular” is confined to bodies of photographs from Africa in the late 19th and 20th centuries. John Akomfrah argues that Africa has been “burdened by an excess of signs ... literally framed by torment and bliss.”<sup>1</sup> All too often this comes from outside forces of “global decipherment and conferred objecthood.”<sup>2</sup> In new work emerging from the continent, some of us have been attempting to reimagine this “excess of signs” and seek out the less legitimated lines of inquiry, what Akomfrah calls “bastard allegories.”<sup>3</sup> While African photography may exceed any European intentionality, the literature on photography and visual theory frequently reaches a limit when it comes to Africa.<sup>4</sup> For those of us on the continent, our location means we have to think from this limit.

In most conventional histories of industrialization and technological innovation, the “invention” and spread of photographic practices and categories happen in a world that is often still marked by a division between imperial metropolises and colonial peripheries. This is despite all the work to problematize the notion of the “invention.” In the temporal corollary to all this, Africa is continually lodged in a condition of belatedness. According to most narratives, after its “invention,” photography and the conventions that grew up around its early proliferation, especially in portraiture, then became adapted to local conditions, “vernacularized.” This implies that anything Africans then do with photography will always somehow be derivative. Lucie Ryzova has critiqued such histories of photography as taking up a diffusionist model, where photographic culture is “still thought of in terms of ‘adoption,’ ‘adaptation,’ ‘response’.... According to this logic, agency (whether as technology or as cultural forms or expertise) emanates primarily from the West.”<sup>5</sup>

Until recently, and to put it rather reductively, most work on African photographs in the last twenty years has tended to focus on colonial archives, stereotypes arising from disaster and humanitarian photography, and the positive qualities of African portraiture, which are set against colonial ethnographies, apartheid racial identification and classification, and Afro-pessimistic photojournalism. The dark view of what Tina M. Campt has called the “pernicious role photography has played in the history of racial formation” had to

be overcome, as surely as the Atlantic slave trade gave birth to abolition and African colonization to flag independence.<sup>6</sup> As a result, some of us have tried to pinpoint the emergent binaries around the categorization of photographs, as well as the oscillations between them that tend to mark much of the writing on photography in Africa, and to seek alternative concepts.

In a book project called *Ambivalent: Photography and Visibility in African History*, the authors took the notion of ambivalence, not in the general-sense meaning of mixed feelings but rather as the co-presence of different—even polarized—planes of response at the same time.<sup>7</sup> It might even be that one level is conscious and another unconscious. We were concerned with the persistence of certain unquestioned categories in the analysis of African photographs. The latter tend to circle around objectification and redemption, issues that are underpinned by the structuring of both genre and temporality.

Let me begin with genre. In response to the negative colonial and postcolonial imaging of African people and situations, many scholars and curators have found much that is positive in studio and personal or family collections. The subjectivities believed to inhere in the studio portraits are held to transcend histories of objectification, with the emphasis on agency and resilience—qualities “produced through terms such as ‘self-fashioning,’ ‘vernacular,’ and ‘modern.’”<sup>8</sup> While these subjectivities have earned a huge amount of attention, the very “objectification” assumed to be the starting point of the problem of African representation has received far less critical attention.

To cite one example, scholars of South Africa continue to rely on the polarizing notion that the repressive biopolitical surveillance shot is the baseline for ID photos. It is salutary to go back to the actual Population Registration Act of 1950. The project of “objectification” in fact emerges as unstable, insecure, and indeed very hard to pin down and substantiate.<sup>9</sup> The 1950 act turned each racial classification into “a legal category,” but “no verbal or literal descriptions are offered.”<sup>10</sup> Strangely enough, the Nationalist government in South Africa refrained from drawing on those 19th-century disciplines and archives to provide templates detailing the specific features it wished

4 Batchen, “Vernacular Photographies,” 262.

5 Ibid., 267.

6 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

7 Batchen, “Vernacular Photographies,” 263.

8 *The American Snapshot: An Exhibition of the Folk Art of the Camera* (March 1–May 10, 1944), curated by Willard D. Morgan, and *Photography Until Now* (February 18–May 29, 1990), curated by John Szarkowski, were presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

9 Batchen, “Vernacular Photographies,” 269.

10 The ideas expressed here are ultimately derived from Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

11 See Irit Rogoff, “Studying Visual Culture,” in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 1998), 14–26.

12 See, for example, Carol Mavor, *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); and Carol Mavor, *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

13 See, for example, Tina M. Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); and Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

14 *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* was shown in various iterations at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (March 26–June 6, 2004); the National Museum of Iceland, Reykjavík (October 23–January 6, 2004); the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television, Bradford, UK (January 28–May 2, 2005); and the International Center of Photography, New York (June 17–September 4, 2005). The installations of the exhibition in Reykjavík and Bradford included added items made by local people.

15 *Suspending Time: Life–Photography–Death*, organized with Assistant Curator Yoshiaki Kai, was shown at Izu Photo Museum, Shizuoka, Japan (April 3–August 20, 2010).

16 *Patrick Pound: On Reflection* was presented at City Gallery Wellington Te Wahre Toi (August 11–November 4, 2018).

17 For more details, see Geoffrey Batchen, “Keepers: Patrick Pound and the Art of Collecting,” in *Patrick Pound: The Great Exhibition*, ed. Maggie Finch (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2017), 32–45.

18 “It was their encyclopedic approach, their interest in form, object, and function, that attracted me and started my collecting,” Artur Walther, “The Making of a Collection: A Conversation,” interview by Willis E. Hartshorn, in *Events of the Self: Portraiture and Social Identity*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Göttingen: Steidl/The Walther Collection, 2010), 15.

19 See Geoffrey Batchen, “Ordering Things,” in *The Order of Things: Photography from The Walther Collection*, ed. Brian Wallis (Göttingen: Steidl/The Walther Collection, 2015), 332–39.



to affix to each racial category through the act. Instead, to quote Ingrid Masondo, “verbal imprecision is accompanied by a visual reaction to appearance.” The judgment of appearance seems to have relied on “historical common sense and shadow knowledge—where everything is visible, but unsaid.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, one is Coloured or Bantu if one appears to be Coloured or Bantu to the beholder, usually a policeman. This is far vaguer and more uncertain than is often assumed. In Masondo’s estimation, the actual ID photographs offer little assistance.

Cast as repressive, negative, and disempowering, the parameters of the state ID photograph have in fact been surprisingly underexamined. In an excursion into the early 1950 debates on identity photographs, Gary Minkley notes that “the very nature and status of photography, and of the portrait photograph to be used on the identity card ... were profoundly ambivalent for all concerned.” Nevertheless, the South African ID photo, with its connotations of repression, surveillance, and the colonial/apartheid, tends to be set apart. Minkley asks:

But what exactly does it mean to name the subjective subject wherein affective histories are “individually” lodged as residing within certain photographs, but not others? Why ... certain portraits, yet not others: in an ID pass

photograph so long as it “praises” or is made “vernacular” in subsequent self-uses, but not ... through a routinely described bureaucratic, administrative lens.<sup>12</sup>

This framing appears to dispel the racialized subject from one grouping, while lodging it in the other, set apart categorically as the repressive.

Thus, the concept of “vernacular” as seemingly benign leaves me with strong reservations. Firstly, the term “vernacular” is always used in relation to something else: the dialects that are not quite the main language, the architectures outside recognized canons, photographs outside fine art. Cannot photographs just be photographs? Can “vernacular” escape hierarchical judgment, or is it trapped like other terms such as “domestic,” “provincial,” or “local,” and locked down in a relationship with something bigger than itself? To deploy the term “vernacular” is to leave the mainstream and dominant categories intact, adding weight to the ongoing misconception of African photographs as derivative and belated. Finally, I would hesitate to apply a term etymologically derived from the Latin for “house slave” to photographic production in a continent that has itself seen so much slavery and systemic colonial racism.<sup>13</sup>

I have mentioned the word “belated” here several times, and in fact the issue of temporality in



FIG. 4.1 Crewes & Van Laun, (South African, active 1870–80s), attr., [Cetshwayo on board the S.S. *Natal*], 1879. Albumen prints mounted to album page.



FIG. 4.2 Foto Hily Lda (Mozambican, active 1890s), [King Gungunhana at the time of his arrest in Chaimite], 1895. Developed-out print.

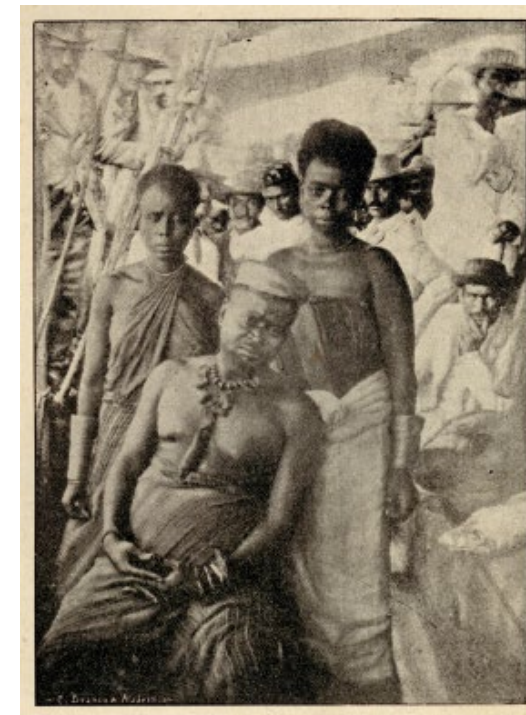


FIG. 4.3 Unidentified photographer (Portuguese), “Gungunhana and his wives aboard the steamship *Africa*, during the journey from Lourenço Marques to Lisbon,” 1895. Published in *O Ocidente: revista ilustrada de Portugal e do estrangeiro*, no. 620, March, 15, 1896.

African history is of huge significance. If one views older African photographic collections, there is an uncanny repetition of a uniform process across southern Africa. For one, the aggressive age of imperialism in the late 19th century actually followed in the wake of tremendous internal historical upheavals led by the expansion of different Nguni kingdoms from the 1820s. These included the Zulu kingdom, the Gaza empire, and the Ndebele state. The Walther Collection has traces of two of these former kingdoms, and a third emerges from the research of the Mozambican photographer Rui Assubuji.

Regarding photographs of Cetshwayo, Hlonipha Mokoena speaks of the Zulu king’s voyage to Britain in 1882 for an audience with Queen Victoria.<sup>14</sup> Cetshwayo’s visit followed the Zulu military victory at Isandhlwana, but numerous other photographs were taken after the formal surrender of his person to the British in Natal (fig. 4.1). In 1896, as part of their determination to prove “formal occupation” of the interior of Mozambique after the Berlin Agreements of 1884–85, Mouzinho de Albuquerque led a large Portuguese military expedition to Gaza. The legendary king Gungunhana was defeated and arrested. Several portraits were immediately taken

by a commercial photographer with the expedition and, like Cetshwayo, on the ship that transported the deposed king into exile in the Azores (figs. 4.2 & 4.3).<sup>15</sup> In 1893, after the defeat of the Ndebele army in southern Zimbabwe, it is probable that similar photographs would have been taken of Lobengula, had he not disappeared into hiding. Instead, his most prominent wife, Lomadlozi, was photographed around this date and was marked as next in importance to Lobengula’s mother, possibly to stand in for the figurehead (fig. 4.4).

All of these photographs reference a confrontation with a feared enemy, with no guaranteed outcome. Both the British and the Portuguese had previously suffered severe setbacks. But once the clash was over, the camera was brought to bear—just as the sovereign was wrenched out of his normal sphere and set into a huge spatial displacement under a regime of imperial exile. The camera was put in place as a filter that regrades the captive visually and temporally as they began their passage to their final destination and isolation. Even as trouble was taken to reference their former status as kings, this was a photographic dethroning, where the sovereign passed through a film or historical membrane into “visibility.” To use a contemporary metaphor,





FIG. 4.4 W. Rausch (Zimbabwean, active 1890s), "Queen Lomadlozi next to Lobins Mother," ca. 1890. Gelatin silver or collodion printed-out print.

it was the bleep of a radar as he moved from the sovereign command of an entire nation to provincial isolation elsewhere.

There are many other examples, including Xhosa chiefs from the Eastern Cape frontier wars who passed through the filter of Gustav Fritsch's commissioned camera at the Breakwater Prison on their way to life imprisonment and ultimate demise on Robben Island in the 1860s. In almost all of these cases, and aside from Cetshwayo's visit to London, few persons had the guts to go and photograph Gungunhana, Cetshwayo, or the Xhosa leaders while they were still in power. Is this photographic portraiture accompanied by vast firepower and industrial artillery, a "vernacular" of empire?

More to the point, except in a few cases where missionaries managed to take pictures, we have a vast unphotographed: the precolonial. The royal photograph is in danger of standing in for an entire epoch, of bunching up history into a congealment of conquest and sucking out the history of everything else. The camera acts as the guillotine of the autonomous precolonial polity, the shutter coming down to remove its head in one swipe and present it for public view.

It is what photography does with temporality here that is so remarkable. To quote Giorgio

Agamben, "Every conception of history is invariably accompanied by a certain experience of time which is implicit in it, conditions it, and thereby has to be elucidated."<sup>16</sup> But it is rarely elucidated, and photography adds to the problem. In fact, photography provides an exact apparatus through which Africans are seemingly taken out of their own time and into the homogenous, linear time of the conqueror. The camera works in the spatial contiguity and proximity provided by colonial violence—to bring it into the same space—in order to effect a temporal sleight of hand. Then follows the unique spatiotemporal translocation generated by the photographic print that carries the impression that a society is made available to be looked at by those not in that space and very far away.

In dealing with such historical asymmetry and the repetition of such portraiture, terms like "filtering," "crystallization," and "accumulation" come to mind, rather than "vernacular." These give a sense of eventness, of density of production, of the process of putting people into history when in fact their own time is "out of joint."<sup>17</sup> This is an alternative to categories that feed the weight of a polarity, and feed oscillation. It allows us to see how photography provides "a local habitation for the political significance of history."<sup>18</sup>

1 John Akomfrah, "On the Borderline," *Ten-8* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 51.

2 Allen Feldman, *Archives of the Insensible: Of War, Photopolitics, and Dead Memory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015), 6.

3 Akomfrah, "On the Borderline," 51.

4 Walter Benjamin, cited in "Introduction," in *Photography and the Optical Unconscious*, ed. Shawn Michelle Smith and Sharon Sliwinski (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 5.

5 Lucie Ryzova, "The Image sans Orientalism," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 8 (2015): 159.

6 Tina M. Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 33.

7 See Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley, eds., *Ambivalent: Photography and Visibility in African History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019). A number of points in this essay are drawn from the introduction to *Ambivalent*.

8 Gary Minkley, "The Pass Photograph and the Intimate Photographic Event in South Africa," in *Ambivalent*, eds. Hayes and Minkley, 107.

- 9 Ingrid Mazono, "Unstable Forms: Photography, Race, and the Identity Document in South Africa," in *Ambivalent*, eds. Hayes and Minkley, 78.
- 10 The Population Registration Act No. 30 legislated the production of a population register and required that the entire population be registered, racially classified, and issued with identity documents which stipulated a racial category—Native/Bantu/African, Coloured, or White—anchored on their appearance.
- 11 Mazono, "Unstable Forms," 78–79.
- 12 Minkley, "The Pass Photograph," 107.
- 13 See Clément Chéroux, *Vernaculaires, essais d'histoire de la photographie* (Cherbourg: Le Point du Jour, 2013), 10.
- 14 Hlonipha Mokoena, "'Being Zulu': A History in Portraits," in *Distance and Desire: Encounters with the African Archive*, ed. Tamar Garb (Göttingen: Steidl/The Walther Collection, 2013), 107.
- 15 Rui Assubuj, "A Visual Struggle for Mozambique. Revisiting Narratives, Interpreting Photographs" (PhD diss., University of the Western Cape, 2019).
- 16 Giorgio Agamben, "Time and History: Critique of the Instant and the Continuum," in *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience* (London: Verso, 1993), 91.
- 17 David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 2.
- 18 David S. Ferris, "The Shortness of History, or Photography in Nuce: Benjamin's Attenuation of the Negative," in *Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 22.

## Market Transactions Cannot Abolish Decades of Plunder

Ariella Azoulay

It is hard to believe that one can truly be surprised today by the notion that millions of objects—never destined for museum display—have been looted from different parts of the world. However, the naturalization of these objects into European museums, displayed as though they were a part of European and American cultural heritage, has been instrumental in making such an assertion surprising, even implausible. The sheer quantity of looted objects is so enormous that assessing each object's discrete status is senseless as a way of grasping the meaning of the looting and its ongoing ramifications. Not all the objects that originated from looted countries were consciously or deliberately looted, of course. But even for those that were not, their acquisition was also part of the wholesale draining of entire communities of their objects and of the spiritual and material infrastructures under which their production was possible. Before their looting, such objects and structures made sense in ways that were irreducible both to imperial cate-

gories of art and to their status as props or "ethnic attributes."

The presence of these objects in foreign collections cannot be understood solely from the intentions of the individuals or institutions that acquired them, or from the distinct transactions through which they were purchased, exchanged, or endowed. To study them as discrete objects—separated from the communities, politics, and cosmologies of which they were part—is already to be caught in violently imposed imperial taxonomies, as well as to exercise imperial rights against those who opposed them and who refused (as much as they could) to interiorize and recognize them as legitimate. Moreover, this refusal should not be reconstructed as limited to objects, as though contained within that particular sphere, but should be sought after in broader modalities of objection to different imperialist measures. Such measures, as I'll discuss in the context of imperial invasions and interventions in South Africa, threaten to destroy



FIG. 5.1 George Washington Wilson (British, 1823–1893), "A Zulu Girl (Ingodusi), S. Africa," ca. 1905. Postcard published by Hallis & Co., Port Elizabeth.



FIG. 5.2 George Washington Wilson (British, 1823–1893), "Zulu Girl (Intombi), S. Africa," ca. 1905. Collotype printed on card.